

Mech 3391

Chapter 3391: Making A Difference

Ves did not expect that at the start of fabricating the final expert mech of this round, he would derive a major insight on the nature of expert pilots.

A comparison between two substantially different expert pilots produced many layers of contrast. By analyzing which aspects Joshua and Jannzi differed from each other, Ves was able to derive several new guesses and obtain tentative proof on his theories.

He thought back on how expert pilots worked. They essentially derived their might from their extraordinarily high willpower.

Yet willpower was not a neutral or abstract existence.

Unlike other forms of energy such as heat or electricity, willpower came in different flavors and could not exist in complete isolation. It was a phenomenon that was derived from a living mind and also depended on that relation.

The implication here was that every expert pilot derived their strength on how much they were willing to fight for a cause!

Whether their goals were self-centric or for the greater good, each of them had to find a reason to fight, and they did not pursue it like normal people. No, these powerful warriors had to go above and beyond normal soldiers and develop an extreme obsession towards their respective goals.

If expert pilots wanted to grow stronger, then they needed to strengthen their willpower. One of the ways to do that was to become more devoted to fulfilling their cause.

This implied that one of the growth processes that expert pilots had to go through was to shed more parts of their humanity so that they could more easily sharpen their willpower.

It was a lot easier for someone to dedicate himself to a cause when he harbored no other distractions!

"What a mystifying existence." Ves whispered to himself.

The connection between high-ranking mech pilots and extraordinary swordmasters implied that the latter served as a model for the former.

When Ves thought about swordsmen who dedicated their entire lives to perfect their swordsmanship, it was natural to think that those who shed almost every other

distraction such as love, fear, doubt and hesitation could display greater might than those with muddled heads.

According to this theory, Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Stark should be experiencing faster growth than Venerable Tusa and Venerable Joshua.

After all, compared to the two male expert pilots, the two women no longer lived any meaningful personal lives. In every waking moment, they constantly thought about what they could do to further their cause and pursue greater strength.

It was also a coincidence that these two expert pilots happened to be the only ones who possessed masterwork expert mechs in the Larkinson Clan!

The combination of more extreme dedication and access to masterwork expert mechs meant it was already doomed that Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Stark would grow a lot stronger. Becoming an ace mech was a lot more in reach for these two expert pilots than the overwhelming number of their peers.

Did this make a more grounded expert pilot Venerable Joshua weak?

If Ves viewed him the same way as Venerable Jannzi, then Ves would just sneer and think that the expert pilot deserved to be weaker.

The problem was that Joshua was a lot more important to Ves than normal! Not only were they friends of sorts, they also worked well together. Out of every other expert pilot, only Joshua was able to align perfectly with his design philosophy.

All mech designers dreamed of obtaining the services of an expert pilot that could utilize the full potential of their mechs!

Therefore, Ves was unable to accept the notion that Venerable Joshua was weaker and had less growth potential.

"Conviction doesn't determine everything." He told himself. "There are many other factors that ultimately determine the strength of an expert pilot. The power, quality and fit of his expert mech also plays a huge role!"

The effective performance of a mech pilot was inseparable from his mech. This relationship remained the same no matter the strength level of the pilot in question.

At the expert pilot level, the expert mech had to be adapted to the unique strengths and capabilities of its partners.

Universal, open-ended expert mechs didn't exist because such machines simply couldn't align to the unique force of will produced by different expert pilots.

Ves' eyes lit up as he grasped this key detail.

Assuming that someone like Venerable Joshua suffered from a handicap compared to more promising expert pilots, one of the ways in which he could catch up to the likes of Venerable Jannzi was to pilot a stronger and more fitting expert mech!

"It's up to me, then." Ves concluded as his fire burned hotter.

One of his earliest models about the strength of a mech was that it was not solely down to the machine itself. The effective performance was actually determined by interplay between the mech, mech pilot and mech designer!

Ves already understood that both Venerable Jannzi and the newly-upgraded Shield of Samar were formidable existences that possessed high potential. Together with the indeterminate support of Qilanxo, Jannzi would be able to go far as long as she did not die along the way!

What Ves needed to do was to give Joshua an even better expert mech, and he believed that his own qualities could make the difference!

He gained more confidence in his immediate goal after realizing one crucial difference between Venerable Joshua and Venerable Jannzi. "The Shield of Samar is a strong living mech, no doubt, but it suffers from one major shortcoming. The masterwork expert mech did not receive the support of a mech designer who specializes in defense."

Mech designers could only excel in a limited number of fields. No one could be good at everything and that produced many constraints, especially in organizations that only retained a limited number of lead designers such as the Larkinson Clan.

In the absence of a high-ranking mech designer who developed a defense-oriented design philosophy, Gloriana did her best to substitute this essential role.

However, Gloriana possessed a more holistic design philosophy that did not directly enhance the defense of a mech.

Rather, her ability to pursue a great degree of technical perfection allowed her to design and make better defensive structures than someone who did not excel in them like Ves. This was definitely an advantage, but not as significant as the benefits that a defensive specialist could bring to the table.

In comparison to the latest version of the Shield of Samar, the Chimera Project was designed from the ground up to complement Venerable Joshua's own qualities. His broad skill set, his ability to pilot different mech types and his open-mindedness towards different forms of life all resulted in a unique expert mech design that aimed to maximize each of these traits!

Right now, Ves focused on Joshua's compatibility with different forms of life.

As a mech designer who took advantage of this quality many times, Ves was able to leverage this capability more effectively than others.

Now that he was connected to a design network, Ves proactively sought to reach out to Venerable Joshua, who was still immersed in the novelty of being able to peek into the thoughts and emotions of various mech designers.

"Joshua." Ves called out to the expert pilot standing on the other side of the workshop.

At the same time, his summons echoed through the design network, making it impossible for the expert pilot to miss his intentions!

"Yes, sir?"

"Come over here. Stay by my side and cooperate with whatever I am trying to do. I think we can combine our strengths in a way that will produce a greater result."

Venerable Joshua looked hopeful. He did as he was told and stood next to Ves. His force of will also enveloped the mech designer, causing them both to become highly sensitive towards different aspects of life!

Ves did not even need to explain his intentions to Joshua. The design network allowed him to convey an impression of his plans.

He planned to use the coming week of fabrication work as an opportunity to perform experiments!

Just the thought of being able to derive a new innovation from this special moment stoked his passion further! Naturally, his enthusiasm infected the other mech designers through the design network, thereby causing everyone to approach their work with greater optimism!

Gloriana briefly glanced at Ves and Joshua and looked intrigued. It was too bad that she wasn't able to contribute to whatever her husband was planning. The only thing she could do on her end was to perform her own work to the best of her abilities.

A day went by as the mech designers began to fabricate the first parts of the Chimera Project.

Compared to the Shield of Samar, the expert hero mech that was designed for Venerable Joshua was considerably smaller and lighter.

There was an immense difference in mass and volume between a medium mech and a heavy mech. In addition, the Chimera Project was designed to be a fairly mobile and maneuverable machine among expert mechs, which meant that it was not too thick.

It would only take seven days to fabricate this mech, though Ves took into account that it might take an extra day due to complications such as the need to care for Aurelia.

Right now, the baby had not produced any significant disruptions to the schedule. Carrying her around made Gloriana happy. Even if she spared some time away from her duties in order to stop her baby from crying, she made up for it with renewed enthusiasm.

In comparison, both Juliet and Ketis acted fairly low-key again. They quietly worked on the parts that were directly related to their respective specialties, which was already sufficient.

The mech designer who truly had the greatest influence on the outcome of this fabrication run was unquestionably Ves. Even as he performed his duties, he went out of his way to try out different experiments in order to see whether he could achieve a breakthrough in his methods.

The only problem was that he could not completely invest all of his efforts on his trials. This was why he started off small and began to make small changes to his work approach.

The first idea that came up to him was to find a way to inject more life in his work. Together with Venerable Joshua, he asked whether the expert pilot could inject his extraordinary force of will into the parts that were being made.

The results were relatively lackluster so far. There was no inherent way to inject Joshua's willpower in any of the components and subcomponents that Ves was fabricating. It just didn't stick.

This meant that Ves had to leverage Joshua's power in a different way.

He began to draw from Joshua's force of will with the pilot's permission. Ves subsequently tried to immerse himself in it. This was harder than it sounded because the willpower of another person was not easy to embrace.

However, as Ves stopped trying to master Joshua's willpower in a forceful manner and instead tried to harmonize with it, he finally achieved a different result.

By adopting a friendly demeanor and trying to achieve greater cooperation with Venerable Joshua, Ves found out that he was able to grasp the expert pilot in a way that reminded him of embodying his design spirits!

"Joshua."

"Yes, patriarch?"

"I need you to trust me. I want us to do something that other people will probably consider stupid."

The expert pilot looked skeptical. "What are you trying to do, sir?"

Ves turned and grinned at Joshua. "Let's try out a new experiment. Pretend I'm an expert mech and try to resonate with me. Don't go full out. I don't want you to blow my head or anything. Just start out slow and see what happens."

Joshua couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Are you mad? You're not a mech! I never heard that something like this could be done!"

"There's a first try for everything! If my assumptions are correct, I think we'll be able to achieve a surprising result! I know what I'm doing here and I don't think it is as impossible as you think."

"What about a neural interface?"

"It's not necessary. Our design network already ties us together!"

Ves' proposal was so mad that not even the other mech designers could remain calm. All three of them finally had a direct taste of the clan patriarch's infamous madness!

Chapter 3392: Strange Cooperation

Venerable Joshua didn't even know where to begin.

When the mech designer he admired for so many years asked to be treated as an expert mech, Joshua blanked out for a moment.

The suggestion sounded so absurd that Joshua didn't even think it was possible. Even if he somehow managed to produce a reaction, the chances were great that something horribly wrong might ensue!

During his pilgrimage to the MTA's sector headquarters, the friendly and knowledgeable instructors over there taught him about the dangers of exposing his mind to others.

Expert pilots possessed extraordinarily strong minds and wills, which not only enabled them to resonate with an expert mech, but also allowed them to impose their mental strength on others.

Most of the time, this was fairly harmless as an expert pilot's willpower was only able to induce psychological pressure onto other people.

Although there was the potential for abuse, the MTA generally didn't mind because expert pilots were generally honorable and they weren't particularly strong outside of their cockpits.

That said, there was one particular scenario where the abnormal mental strength of expert pilots could result in fatal consequences!

He still remembered the words of the MTA instructor to this day.

"Experiments have been conducted in the past that attempted to connect the mind of an expert pilot with the mind of a mech designer. This has almost always produced fatal or near-fatal results as your willpower is too domineering for other people to handle. Your mentalities are like volcanoes while the mentalities of mech designers are akin to cities. Putting the two together will result in ruination. If a mech designer ever asks you to interface directly with his mind, then always say no. Don't do it for your own sake. Do it for the other person's sake."

Expert pilots were too strong! Even if Venerable Joshua was just a low-tier expert pilot who hadn't been able to grow his resonance strength that much, he still possessed a degree of mental fortitude that was far more dense and solidified than that of a Journeyman!

After all, people like Venerable Joshua evolved to put up a better fight against his enemies. His transformation was completely oriented towards increasing his combat strength.

In contrast, people like Ves evolved to design better mechs. While his mind and spirit were strong in their own right, as a non-combatant his chances of holding his own against the mentality of an expert pilot were awful!

Ves didn't need to remind himself of this truth. His confrontation against Saint Yila Mayorka more than a month ago provided him with plenty of proof that high-ranking mech pilots ranked at the top of their ranks in terms of threat and direct combat strength!

Just as Venerable Joshua attempted to dissuade the mech designer he depended on the most from doing exactly what the MTA warned against, a hand rested on his shoulder.

Ves looked straight into the expert pilot's eyes. "Trust. Me. I am aware of your concerns, and I am also aware of all of the ways it can go wrong. However, those scenarios you are thinking about are different from our current situation. I'm not flying blind here. I am relying on a number of assumptions that can allow us to grasp a method that can work! I

am confident that our distinct conditions will allow us to succeed where others have failed!"

The more he thought about it, the more Ves became eager to try out this latest idea! His extreme desire and enthusiasm radiated from his mind, giving Joshua a good understanding of how obsessed the other person could be when faced with a promising new possibility!

In fact, it was the first time that Ves showed this side to others in such a direct fashion. The other people in the design network such as Ketis never knew that Ves could be so passionate about trying a new experiment!

Only Gloriana possessed a greater familiarity on how engaged Ves could be. She had participated in some of his experiments in the past, but even then she never experienced his passion so directly!

Though Venerable Joshua ordinarily would have rejected this dangerous notion if he faced any other mech designer, Ves was different.

The clan patriarch was not only the object of his own obsession, but had always managed to produce one advancement after another. That gave Joshua a lot of faith in Ves.

Combined with the well-reasoned theories that Ves was cooking in his mind, the expert pilot became swayed by the possibilities.

Venerable Joshua was not a selfless person. He hungered for power as well. He wanted to become stronger so that he could not only protect Patriarch Ves against stronger threats like the Olympus Mons, but also pilot the more powerful machines that the mech designer was able to design!

Right now, an opportunity to obtain a stronger mech had come. If Ves was able to realize his current ideas, the Chimera Project might be able to catch up or potentially exceed the likes of the Amaranto and the Shield of Samar!

"I... am at your disposal." Joshua eventually said.

"Good." Ves grinned. "Follow my instructions and cautiously reach out to me. It will be difficult for you to transmit your entire will to my mind through the design network, but that will limit the potential risks that we might incur, so don't hesitate too much."

Alexandria's design network already propagated Joshua's force of will to the other Journeymen, but only to an extent. This was because the expert pilot did not actively push out his formidable strength onto others.

This was also why the previous fabrication session never produced any serious danger. When Venerable Jannzi connected to the design network back then, she mostly played the role of a passive observer.

Aside from allowing the mech designers to become more familiar with her outlook and piloting style, Jannzi basically stood around all day.

Ves did not believe that this was the limit that expert pilots could do to contribute to the fabrication of an expert mech. This was the best opportunity for him to put this assumption to the test and produce an unprecedented result!

He repeated his earlier instructions and guided Venerable Joshua to extend his force of will in Ves' mind.

Once a trace of Joshua's powerful will fell into the right place, Ves took a moment to get familiar with its power and properties.

Although Ves was exposed to Venerable Joshua's force of will often enough, those situations were different.

His formidable mental defenses blocked all of the danger and adverse effects of an expert pilot's strong willpower, so Ves did not actually experience the true depth of Joshua's power.

Now that Ves directly coaxed a portion of Venerable Joshua's force of will through his mind barrier, the risks were much greater than before!

It was similar to the difference between detonating a bomb outside or inside a mech.

Any mech was designed to resist a lot of external damage, so an ordinary bomb did not pose much of a threat against a machine.

It was a different story if the bomb exploded while it was directly inserted into the vulnerable guts of a mech. The degree of protection was not as great, so a bomb that could unleash all of its destructive potential to crucial components could easily cripple the machine!

Now, Ves was exposing himself to the same kind of effect by going through with his insane idea. Yet as he began to familiarize himself with Joshua's force of will, he tested out the first of his assumptions!

"We are similar people." Ves took the initiative to explain to Joshua. "Both of us exert our strength through life. Whether it is creating them or cooperating with them, we are similar enough to each other that we should be compatible with each other. Now try to resonate with me. Perhaps it is easier for you to imagine that I'm a biomech."

This was a huge leap that discomfited Venerable Joshua a bit, but a part of him was incredibly interested to see whether this odd idea would work. If he was able to interface and 'resonate' with Ves, what would happen?

Would Ves be able to understand Venerable Joshua on a deeper level than before?

Would Joshua be able to 'pilot' Ves as if he was a biomech?

Would they produce a fusion where they could both combine in some sort of superhuman entity?

Nobody knew what would happen, not even Ves. All he could do was base his expectations on his assumptions and hope that his logic was solid!

A minute passed as Venerable Joshua tentatively tried to resonate with Ves.

He was in no hurry to exert all of his strength in case it was dangerous, but the more he tried to grasp onto Ves, the more he found himself unable to resonate with anything.

When Ves saw that Joshua was unable to produce a result, he was able to guess what was wrong.

"You need to latch your will onto something in my mind. Let me guide you to the source of my strength." He said.

Under his guidance, Joshua's force of will slowly moved to his design seed.

Ves immediately felt an intense vigilance from his design seed. He already knew that this was an instinctive self-defense mechanism. He suppressed this impulse as best as possible in order to proceed with this experiment.

"Now, try to resonate with me. We should be able to achieve a solid result this time."

When Joshua's willpower came in touch with Ves' design seed, both mech pilot and mech designer cried out at the same time!

Joshua only experienced a relatively minor sting, so he wasn't strongly affected by the unexpected reaction.

Ves was different. As soon as Joshua tried to resonate with his design seed, he experienced a strong shock that not only repelled the expert pilot's influence, but also gave him a painful mental spike!

"Damn, it hurts!" He held his head in pain!

Even with his prior experiences of straining his mind and spirit, Ves still found it difficult to endure the strain!

Fortunately, his condition didn't last too long. Once the pain faded away, Ves quickly inspected his own condition. His design seed hadn't changed or incurred any damage, though he got the sense that it was not happy at the moment!

Ves did not become discouraged at this result. Failure was normal in experiments. Even a negative outcome provided him valuable data.

When Ves analyzed what had happened, he developed a number of theories why this attempt had failed. He also tried to figure out another approach that might yield a different result.

Eventually, Ves came up with a tentative idea.

"You're good with animals, right?"

Venerable Joshua, who was previously concerned at what he had inadvertently done to Ves, relaxed as he saw that he had not inflicted serious damage.

"Uhm, yes. I respect all kinds of life. Whether they are living mechs, the pets that roam around our ships or the 'design spirits' that help us out in battle, I've found that I'm pretty good at understanding them. I can't do much with animals, though."

Ves smirked as he summoned Blinky from his mind. "Not every animal is the same. My cat here excels at manipulating different kinds of energy. His tolerance towards your will should be greater than mine. Try to resonate with him if you can."

Blinky looked encouragingly at Venerable Joshua.

Mrow.

When Joshua attempted to resonate with Blinky, the cat behaved differently than Ves' design seed.

No rejection took place.

However, as Blinky began to experience entirely new sensations, Joshua found it difficult to resonate with the strange cat. He and the cat did not have as much in common, so there wasn't an immediate basis of cooperation.

Yet neither Ves nor Joshua gave up. As the latter got more in touch with Blinky, he was able to learn more about the Star Cat.

As his understanding of the companion spirit increased, Joshua was able to adjust his mentality and become more in sync with Blinky.

This time, a strange harmony took place between the two. The beginnings of resonance took hold on the spiritual cat!

Mrow!

Blinky's body shook and glowed as a strange force emerged from his intangible body!

Yet even as this strange experiment succeeded in arousing resonance, Ves did not experience any apparent improvements in his ability to make a mech.

It was as if this phenomenon was completely unrelated to what Ves was trying to accomplish!

"Hmmm... this is more difficult than I thought."

Chapter 3393: Modest Result

As Ves began to wonder what he should do now that he achieved a strange result, Gloriana couldn't take it any longer.

The new mother softly patted her baby who was sleeping soundly against her body. She checked to make sure that Aurelia was covered by a moderate sound isolation barrier before she opened up her mouth.

"You need to cut it out, Ves! You've made your attempt. Don't waste your time on forcing out a positive result. The more you experiment, the more you are getting sidetracked. You're not only getting further away from achieving your goal, but you're also distracting the rest of us from doing our jobs. Don't ruin this fabrication run! There's nothing wrong with adopting the same approach as before!"

Her words woke Ves up from his obsession. He became aware that he had completely stopped his work in order to focus on what he could accomplish with Venerable Joshua.

Though he was happy that he discovered a new interaction, it didn't yield any productive outcomes.

Though Venerable Joshua was compatible with different life forms and Blinky was capable of dealing with different kinds of energy, the resonance they produced was weak and incomparable to the true resonance that an expert pilot was able to produce with an expert mech.

This was not an odd outcome now that Ves thought about it. Expert mechs were explicitly designed for the purpose. Their entire design was made to enable and maximize this phenomenon.

Blinky was just a spiritual cat. He was not designed to resonate with an expert pilot at all. His insubstantial form did not contain any resonating exotics that Joshua could latch on to generate systematic resonance.

In other words, what Venerable Joshua managed to accomplish with Blinky was accidental. It had nothing to do with the benefits that Ves was hoping to obtain.

Ves rapidly thought about what was happening and what he could do to achieve a useful result. Despite Gloriana's warning, he had no intention of stopping at this point. He intuitively sensed that he was on the right track. He just needed to change the variables in order to achieve a more desirable outcome.

He put his thoughts in order and considered the current data.

When Venerable Joshua attempted to resonate with his design seed, the latter reacted with a powerful rejection.

When Venerable Joshua attempted to resonate with Blinky, both of them produced a tentative but useless harmony.

What if... Ves tried to accomplish the former but through a detour?

If Blinky acted as a medium for Venerable Joshua to channel his willpower, Ves might be able to accomplish effective resonance by commanding his companion spirit to embrace his design seed.

"This... sounds a bit iffy."

Ves already encountered an initial rejection. He was afraid that his second attempt might deal actual damage to his design seed!

The risks were too great this time. Ves could not afford to put his entire mech design career at risk just because he wanted to try out an experiment!

Though the potential payoff was big, it was not crucial to Ves. His life wasn't on the line this time, so there was no need for him to go to such extremes.

Besides, Ves lacked theoretical support for this idea. He was not able to predict what might happen if Joshua resonated with his design seed with the help of Blinky.

He let out a deep breath as he dropped his current train of thought. Perhaps the justifiable caution and concern transmitted by Gloriana through the design network had

played a role in waking him up from his crazy ideas. Whatever the case, he lost some of the extreme hopes and excitement that drove him to consider the notion of messing with his design seed in the first place.

"What now?"

Neither Ves nor Venerable Joshua had a solid idea on how to proceed. Though the latter kept resonating with Blinky, absolutely nothing happened aside from making him glow a bit brighter.

If he wasn't able to come up with an alternative idea, then he would have no choice but to follow Gloriana's advice. He was already falling behind schedule. If he continued to squander his time on one failed experiment after another, then he would lose his momentum and resume his ordinary work without the support of his previously high passion and morale.

Ves imagined that he had reached the edge of a cliff. When he looked down, he saw nothing but darkness and fog. Endless treasures might be resting down below, but the obscuring fog could also be hiding a lot of monsters!

Should he take the plunge or walk back from the edge before it was too late?

He fell into a difficult dilemma. As a consummate risk taker, it was in his nature to take any gamble he found reasonable enough. Yet right now Ves wasn't able to come up with any new ideas that could allow him to take advantage of the special conditions that were in effect at the moment.

"I need inspiration..."

Suddenly, a light shone in his mind.

"Wait a minute."

Ves withdrew the Hammer of Brilliance that was hanging on the side of his toolbelt. He looked at it with a promising glint in his eyes.

"Let's see if this works."

He did not hesitate any longer. After taking another deep breath, he lightly bonked his head with the flat side of his hammer!

Instantly, his head began to glow in bronze. Vulcan's power took effect, causing Ves to enter into a false inspired state that massively boosted his thinking in several ways!

His logic, deduction, memory, pattern recognition and many other mental capabilities experienced a significant jump!

It was difficult for Ves to describe the degree of improvement that he was currently benefiting from, but it was not an exaggeration to say he became 50 percent smarter!

As thinking improved, a lot of observations, assumptions and whimsical guesses blended together and spat out a number of promising ideas!

Ves immediately grasped onto the most promising one. "I see. Maybe there is a use for this effect after all. I'm just looking at it the wrong way. Blinky! Follow my lead!"

Mrow!

Ves directed his attention back to the production machine that he had previously been using to synthesize the luminar crystals needed to assemble the Chimera Project's mech rifle.

Gloriana and the other two mech designers relaxed when they saw that Ves had resumed his work. His mood had also stabilized after he had whacked himself with his hammer.

The atmosphere in the mech workshop became a lot more harmonious as everyone focused on their respective tasks while borrowing each other's strengths.

The only difference was that Ves did not approach his work in a normal fashion.

On the surface, he was indeed fabricating the parts that he was assigned to make.

What wasn't as obvious was that Blinky played an active role this time. While the companion spirit hadn't activated his design network, he was currently serving as a target for Venerable Joshua to produce resonance.

On its own, this resonance did not do anything. Yet Ves did not discount this phenomenon this time. He performed an additional action in the hopes of achieving a productive result.

He attempted to imprint the parts he was making with the resonance produced by Joshua and Blinky.

Ves theorized that this might induce a reaction that could cause the parts to become more in tune with Joshua. This would hopefully make it easier for the expert pilot to resonate with them when they were integrated in an expert mech!

It was not the kind of synergy that Ves initially hoped to produce by combining forces with his favorite expert pilot, but he did not look down on any form of progress.

Trying out a new idea and doing his best to add greater strength to the Chimera Project was key to increasing its combat power!

Even if this was not directly correlated to turning the expert mech into a masterwork, a solid success could do wonders in increasing his mood, thereby indirectly improving his output!

"Joshua, you're doing a good job, but I need you to do more." Ves instructed as he began to work with his current idea. "While I am synthesizing these luminar crystals, try to reach out and imprint yourself on them. They will be used to make the Chimera Project's mech rifle, so the more you can attune yourself to them, the greater the power you can exert when you fire it in battle! The best result is that you can match the Amaranto's firepower!"

To be honest, Ves was exaggerating a bit. The Chimera Project's luminar crystal rifle was smaller, weaker, less energy intensive and easier to handle. It was designed for mid-range strafing actions and high-speed dogfights. Its maximum output wasn't great but its firing rate made up for it. Even so, the variable known as true resonance could always change these properties!

Venerable Joshua became excited when he heard that he could make the rifle that his life would be depending on a little stronger.

Although he didn't understand what was going through Ves' mind and how this all worked, the expert pilot put his complete faith in the mech designer who tried so hard to make his machine stronger.

Slowly but surely, Ves produced several large luminar crystals that he would assemble into a functional mech rifle at a later stage.

When Ves closely studied the parts, he saw that they were all alive in a way that only he could make them. If Gloriana attempted to make the same parts, she wouldn't be able to impart as much life into them even if she had the assistance of a design network.

What disappointed Ves was that the crystals he made didn't contain more life than usual. Even without making use of the unusual resonance generated by Venerable Joshua, the crystals wouldn't be any weaker.

"This can't be. There has to be a difference!"

Ves took a closer look at his recent output. When he extended his spiritual senses and examined their living qualities, he eventually perceived a subtle difference.

Their spiritual character was a little different. When Ves compared them to Joshua's signature, he developed the suspicion that they had become a bit more aligned to the expert pilot!

Could it be that he had managed to accomplish his objective? Would the changes to their spiritual character allow Venerable Joshua to resonate with them to a greater degree?

Ves wasn't sure about this conclusion, but he had a hunch that this was definitely a positive change!

"It's working." He grinned as he presented his thoughts in an optimistic light. "We've come up with a new way to improve a mech. Stay focused and keep resonating with Blinky while thinking about making all of these parts more familiar with your willpower. I will explain what each of the components I'm making is supposed to do while I make them. That way, we will both achieve the greatest possible cooperation!"

The expert pilot grew more hopeful. "I'll try my best to keep this up and be of use. It has always been my dream to help you make my mech stronger!"

The two proceeded to work alongside each other without any further incidents. Ves was already satisfied with the results he achieved and did not think it was fruitful to chase after further nebulous rewards.

He instead directed most of the benefits he gained from bonking himself with his hammer towards his more routine work.

Several days passed by as both Ves and Joshua maintained their good vibes.

As time went by, Joshua found that it became easier for him to maintain his resonating state with Blinky. After all, the companion spirit was much smaller than a mech and did not contain any resonating materials that transformed energy into other effects.

The more Venerable Joshua channeled his power through Blinky, the more he became familiar with the spiritual cat. At some point, he began to develop his own ideas...

Chapter 3394: Living Sword

Ketis inspected the giant mech sword that she had just forged and completed with great attention.

She hadn't actually made many swords for mechs throughout her relatively short career, but she had been preparing for this job for many years.

As both a wielder and a maker of swords, her comprehension and feel for swords was different from any other swordsman mech specialist.

She had dedicated her entire life to designing the best sword-wielding mechs, and just like many of her like-minded peers she trained and practiced in swordsmanship until she could actually hold her own in battle.

That wasn't unusual.

What made her different from other mech designers, even the highly-focused purists from the Heavensword Association, was that she had actually succeeded in becoming a swordmaster!

While there were Apprentice Mech Designers who managed to break through with their swordsmanship in the past, they turned out to be pretty unexceptional at designing mechs. Due to how their extraordinary willpower fundamentally altered their mentalities, they could no longer exert their creativity, ingenuity and intellect in pushing their design philosophies to the next level.

As for the more common situation of mech designers breaking through to Journeymen, they eventually devoted less time to keeping up their swordsmanship. No matter how hard they trained, they made no substantial progress once they hit their physical limitations. It was impossible for them to transform their willpower and take their first true step of becoming a sword god!

As far as she and everyone around her knew, Ketis was the first human to break this barrier. Through unconventional means, she had become both a Journeyman and a swordmaster, thereby enabling her to enter the ranks of a small group of elites who wielded the might of two different extraordinary professions at once!

And they happened to feed and synergize with each other in a wonderful fashion as well!

Since her remarkable double breakthroughs, she constantly tried to find ways to take advantage of the interplay between her two professions.

She used her technical expertise in swords and swordsman mechs to optimize her swordsmanship. Although traditional Swordmasters disdained science and engineering and relied instead on their exceptional willpower to make reality bend to their demands, Ketis held a slightly different stance towards this approach.

In her opinion, traditional swordmasters were too stubborn and ignorant. They never participated in any basic science courses at all since they had to devote so much time to practice and refine their techniques every day.

By understanding proper natural principles, Ketis could achieve the same results by spending just half of the effort of other swordmasters.

It was as if everyone was using their own arms to carry a heavy crate from one location to another while Ketis performed the same task but with a simple wheelbarrow. The amount of energy she needed to expend became much less because she actually bothered to use her mind!

Aside from using her unique advantages to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the sword styles she came in touch with, she also used her background as a swordmaster to improve her ability to design and make mechs.

In her occasional exchanges with Ves during their working hours, Ketis gained a deeper understanding of the properties of both expert pilots and swordmasters.

What made people like herself as well as Venerable Joshua stand out was how they were able to distort reality according to Ves. Through the operation of their unnaturally high willpower, they were able to bend the conventional laws of nature and even override them with their own ideas on how reality should work!

Of course, the degree in which they could accomplish this was rather tentative. Ketis learned later on that this capability only truly lived up to its promise at the level of an ace pilot or a sword saint.

Venerable Joshua still had much to go before they were able to develop their own domain fields, but that did not stop Ketis from doing her best to close the gap!

To the young Swordmaiden mech designer, Joshua occupied a unique position in her life. He was not just another client like Venerable Tusa. His importance was on par with Venerable Dise who she saw as a sister.

As her boyfriend and the person who captured her heart, Ketis sought to give Joshua the greatest possible advantage that she could provide!

The first step to doing that was pairing the Chimera Project with the most suitable mech sword. She actively collaborated with Gloriana to design a melee weapon that fit the preferences and needs of both the expert mech and the expert pilot!

It was difficult to settle for a single configuration as both of them were so versatile. The Chimera Project's adaptable nature allowed it to function as a formation breaker, mid-range harasser, distant marksman, a closer-ranged duelist and many other conceivable roles. Some of these situations asked for different kinds of swords.

In the same way, Joshua's multiple styles allowed him to wield different swords in different styles. Although his skill in swordsmanship barely earned him a passing grade in Ketis' perspective, it was to his credit that he could fight proficiently with the greatswords preferred by the Swordmaidens to the rapier that some Heavensworders liked to wield.

Still, Joshua could not be equally good in all sword styles and sword types. Out of consideration for the weapon he trained the most with as well as the properties of his future expert mech, Ketis settled for designing a simple one-handed arming sword.

In her opinion, the Chimera Project was already a complicated and intricate expert mech design. No hero mech was simple, and Ves applied all kinds of fanciful ideas to Venerable Joshua's machine in order to make it a little more excellent than the other Larkinson expert mechs.

"What Joshua needs is not another high-tech gizmo, but a solid and reliable partner in arms."

Ketis initially wanted to design a more elaborate melee weapon for the Chimera Project. Since the expert mech was all about adaptability, she drafted an ambitious design for a transformable sword.

Inspired by the Chiron training mech that was able to adjust its physical dimensions to increase their fit to individual mech cadets, she envisioned a sword that was solid on the outside but mechanical on the inside.

With a material as hard as Unending alloy at her disposal, she came up with ambitious plans to design a semi-modular sword system that could fold in on itself or extend its reach during battlefield conditions. A crew of mech technicians could even add or remove modular elements in order to alter the mass and dimensions of the mech sword before a battle!

However, after a lot of discussion, Ketis eventually shelved this ambitious plan. The main reason why she decided against implementing such a ridiculously versatile sword was because it was too risky at her current level of experience and expertise. She also worried about the sword breaking in the middle of a battle because it wasn't solid enough for Joshua's needs.

There was nothing wrong with a simple sword. This was why she did not feel any regret for putting down her ambitious plan and settling for a more basic weapon that could last for years even with zero maintenance.

"Joshua can already rely on his fancy crystal rifle for versatility." She reasoned. "Once he is locked in a desperate struggle against another strong opponent, his chance of winning will be higher if his fundamentals are solid. Gimmicks will only distract him and cause him to neglect the basics."

She knew exactly what kind of warrior Joshua was like, and knew that he could adequately hold his own in most battlefield situations with the standard arming sword. It was not without a reason that most mech cadets initially started to train in swordsmanship with this type of weapon.

Since the primary melee weapon of the Chimera Project did not contain any complicated elements or even any key resonating exotics, Ketis did not experience any significant technical challenges when forging and assembling the weapon.

Her previous experience with forging the Decapitator had already taught her what she should pay attention to in order to maintain a consistent level of quality.

This granted her enough room to try to strengthen the sword in another way.

During the start of his fabrication run, Ketis paid close attention to both Ves and Joshua while they were all connected to the same design network.

It was clear that the weight of this run centered around the duo. That didn't mean that she intended to do her part without any further expectations for more.

Ambition burned in her heart as well, and her desire to give Joshua an extra edge in battle grew as she became more familiar with him through the design network.

As a mech designer that also possessed the strength of a swordmaster, her ability to figure out Joshua was different from that of her co-workers.

She did not possess a strong affinity for life, but her willpower was just as powerful if not more so than that of her boyfriend.

By obtaining more direct access to Joshua's mind and will, she began to understand all sorts of aspects about him that he had never been able to convey as well in words.

What particularly caught her attention was how much vitality he possessed and how extensively he embraced life.

Her understanding of his unique strengths and his approach towards battle deepened the more she became familiar with his outlook!

"So that's how it is. To him, life is not only a partner, but also his weapon!"

Joshua didn't like to fight alone. He always sought to partner up, if not with other friendly mechs, then with his own living mech. His obsession towards them caused him to develop real means to leverage this quality in mechs to boost his effective performance and overcome more challenging opponents!

Though his defeat at the hands of the Burza Fens taught him that his fighting approach had limits, he did not lose confidence. He was determined to bring it to new heights once he obtained a living mech that could fully keep up with growing demands!

Since Venerable Joshua saw the Chimera Project as both a willing partner and a living weapon, Ketis tried her best to make the mech sword into the same!

One of the most important ways she accomplished this was by imbuing the mech sword with a selection of empowered sword styles.

This was a recently-developed technique that only a unique existence like Ketis could pull off. With the help of Sharpie, she imprinted the giant weapon she was forging with the essence of the sword styles that she had selected for her lover.

She deliberately chose to impart the sword with more advanced selections such as the Annihilator Sword Style that Joshua hadn't mastered at all. The point of them was to give the expert pilot the option to borrow power from the substantial swordsmanship expertise that Ketis accrued to perform above his own level during battle!

Although Ketis wasn't sure whether this ambitious method worked, she believed that Joshua's own strengths would allow him to turn the sword style seeds she embedded in the mech sword to come alive.

"With this measure, you'll never get outmatched by an enemy up close!"

This wasn't all, though. As the days passed by, she continued to pay attention to what Ves and Joshua were doing.

Slowly but surely, she gained inspiration from how they tried to infuse more life in the expert mech.

Seeing how much Ves and Joshua concentrated on putting pieces of themselves into the mech they were making, Ketis began to develop the desire to do something similar. It wasn't enough to imbue the sword she was making with a portion of her swordsmanship.

She wanted to give Joshua something special as a sign of her love in him. As her heart warmed at the thought of how he brought joy to her life, she spontaneously came up with a new idea.

"Sharpie, help me out here!"

She brought her considerable force of will to bear and tried to encompass the sword she had just made. After issuing a decisive command, Sharpie cut off a tiny portion of her will, inflicting substantial damage to her psyche, but she pushed through the pain and did her best to meld a piece of herself into the Unending alloy blade!

"With this sacrifice, a part of me will always fight by your side!" She declared. "Let this sword be our child who will accompany you as long as we are bound to each other!"

In response to her drastic measure, the enormous mech sword resonated with her unyielding will!

Chapter 3395: Object of Affection

Through an act of love, Ketis went above and beyond during this fabrication and sacrificed a portion of her own strength!

The price she paid was great, so much that Ves became shocked when he realized what she had done.

He knew that while the force of will of an expert pilot was strong, the person in question might suffer significant consequences once it got damaged.

What she had just done would definitely have repercussions for herself!

"What have you done, Ketis?!" Joshua grew alarmed as he found out that his girlfriend was in pain due to her actions. "I never asked you to do something like this. There's no need for you to go this far for my sake. The sword you've made is already good enough for me to rely upon in battle."

"You're wrong! A normal sword isn't enough to keep you alive. Did you know how awful I felt during the Battle of Fordilla Zentra? A single dwarven expert mech almost managed to shatter your body to pieces with a giant axe!"

"That's because I was trying to fend off an expert mech with a prime mech. I never stood a chance from the start."

Ketis scowled at the other side of the mech workshop. "You must never think that way. No matter whether you are fighting against an expert mech or an ace mech, I never want you to feel you're out of options. Since you're the kind of expert pilot who gets stronger if you can resonate with living partners, I've made sure your mech sword is one of the best of its kind. Just look at what I've made!"

The weapon, though dark and unassuming on the surface, radiated with power, love and will.

Both Ves and Joshua could see that Ketis had clearly been taking lessons from them and put her own spin on their approach.

The biggest difference between Ves and Ketis was the way in which they imparted life in their creations.

Unlike Ves, Ketis was unable to make her products alive in the way that Larkinsons were familiar with. She had to borrow his help to do so, but that deprived her of a measure of control. The swords that they could make by pooling their strengths together were not weak and possessed numerous advantages, but the problem was that they required a substantial period of growth to unveil their potential!

Ketis wasn't stupid. The short but volatile history of the Larkinson Clan was marked by numerous harrowing battles. Now that the Larkinsons were all about to enter the Red Ocean, they needed to get ready to confront more powerful opponents!

She did not worry too much about the medium term prospects of the clan. Once Ves and other prominent Larkinsons adapted to the environment of the Red Ocean and found a way to make their clan thrive, they would have adequate means to defend themselves against most foreseeable threats.

It was the early period that she was concerned about. Ketis used to live in the frontier of the galactic rim and that was just an appetizer compared to the frontier conditions of the Red Ocean!

With so many different sharks and predators roaming the dwarf galaxy, a modest-sized organization with a weak foundation like the Larkinson Clan possessed a high likelihood of bumping into a hostile superior force!

At that time, how could Joshua put up the best possible fight by wielding a living weapon that was the equivalent of a toddler in terms of growth?

Ketis feared that her boyfriend wouldn't get the help he needed from his equipment to defeat a powerful foe! Just like how the Valkyrie Prime fell short against the Burza Fens, she did not want the Chimera Project to falter in a similar fashion!

This was why she came up with her own way of making her products more alive.

Since she couldn't create new life by herself, she transferred a bit of her own life into the mech sword she had made!

While she hadn't given away much, what she had done was enough to upgrade the sword. Due to Ves' influence on the entire Chimera Project, the weapon was already alive in a sense, but the force of will injected by Ketis not only boosted this element, but also altered it so that it could leverage some of her powers and abilities!

Though she was unsure how this would actually work in practice, she possessed a lot of confidence that her sacrifice was worth it. The sword she made with her own efforts became a lot stronger than the Decapitator she made last.

Even if it wasn't a masterwork weapon, Ketis was still confident that her gift would give Joshua an additional trump card!

"I don't want you to keep struggling against more powerful opponents." She explained her thoughts to her as her damaged will compelled her to convey her intentions. "You've risked your life so many times that I'm sick of it. I'm tired of our clan needing to go above and beyond to defeat stronger enemies. As far as I'm concerned, we should be the stronger combatants in a battle! I don't want us to be underestimated. I want us to be

feared for our combat prowess, and with the help I've given you, you won't lose against any melee expert mechs!"

The object of her affection was incredibly touched by her dedication. He could clearly hear and feel the love she held towards him. The mech sword she made and imparted with an aspect of herself materialized her hopes in a living weapon that he could resonate with in a method that suited him best!

Ves, who was relegated to the side in this touching moment, was both impressed and concerned at his former student's actions.

"Ketis..." He spoke up. "You can't shrug off the damage you've done to yourself. It might take years for you to recover from the consequences of your own actions."

The woman remained unyielding. "It's okay. I'm a warrior. I can handle the pain. It's better that I get used to this sort of injury in advance rather than in the middle of a battle. What hurts me will only make me tougher."

"It might affect your work..."

"My ability to design mechs is still the same, Ves. It's not like I'm cutting pirates left and right these days, so it doesn't matter if I can't channel my sword techniques as well as before. Besides, Sharpie will bear most of the pain."

Seeing that Ketis not only understood the price of her own actions, but also accepted them without any complaint, Ves and Joshua slowly dropped their protests.

Ves placed a hand on the expert pilot's shoulder. "What's done is done. Ketis has done her best to strengthen your expert mech. What the rest of us need to do now is to live up to her expectations and make sure the rest of the Chimera Project is worthy to wield this much power!"

"I understand, sir. We... shouldn't let Ketis be the only one to make my expert mech exceptional!"

Through the design network, the participants all felt that Ves, Joshua and Ketis were much more emotionally invested in this project than the others.

To them, the Chimera Project wasn't 'just' an expert mech like the Dark Zephyr or the Riot. Ves and Ketis cared a lot about its user while Venerable Joshua fully ignited his desire to obtain the greatest possible power than an expert mech could bestow!

It was due to the combination and sharing of these strong emotions and desires that the Chimera Project increasingly went on the right track.

Ves and Ketis already came up with numerous new production techniques that put the Chimera Project on a higher starting point than the previous expert mechs.

All of these extra measures built up to an increasingly more promising and hopeful result.

Seeing how Ves and Ketis cared so much and worked so hard to improve just a single machine, Venerable Joshua felt touched in a way that he had never felt before.

He never experienced this much dedication and affection back when the mech designers made the Valkyrie Prime for him. Back then, the prime mech was just a modification of an existing mech design, which didn't require as much effort to realize.

This was different. The Design Department invested over a year of intermittent development into its design. Although the mech designers only truly became serious about completing it a few months ago, Joshua could clearly see how they all reserved the best for last!

His previous grievances about having to wait at the end of the line were no longer important. Compared to a lengthy delay, Joshua cared a lot more about piloting a mech that was developed by the people who he was close with! Right now, he felt as if he had become the luckiest and happiest expert pilot in the Larkinson Clan. Who else could receive such extravagant treatment?

The love and expectation directed towards him gave Venerable Joshua a push. He didn't want to receive their gifts without doing anything in return. He wanted to pay back all of the affection he received, and aside from doing his best to win all of the future battles he would take part in, he also sought to amplify the strength of his expert mech in his own way!

Although he was not a mech designer and did not understand a thing about the advanced engineering that went through the heads of the Journeymen, Joshua had developed his own understanding and feel of life!

He piloted almost every single mech designed by Ves. Aside from competition mechs and custom mechs designed for other mech pilots, Joshua had already familiarized himself to the variety of living mechs that the clan patriarch was able to conceive.

In the past few days, he resonated with a different form of life. Blinky was a highly unusual creature. Though the cat reminded Joshua a lot about Ves, he was his own distinctive existence and possessed different powers.

The more Joshua learned about Blinky just by remaining in contact with the companion spirit, the more he became inspired.

Yet that did not necessarily mean anything. Just like how resonance needed to be used in a useful manner in order to derive benefits from it, Joshua had to find a way to translate his inspiration into a plan that could allow him to fulfill his new desire!

As the expert pilot continued to think on how he could realize his new idea, enough days had passed for the lengthy session to move on to the crucial assembly phase.

When Ves briefly swept his senses across all of the parts fabricated by him and his colleagues, he noticed a small and distinct difference. The components made by him were significantly more attuned to Venerable Joshua while the ones made by the rest were less aligned.

It couldn't be helped. Only Ves was able to cooperate with Venerable Joshua to create this effect. This had led to an additional difference in the properties of different mech parts.

Ves had mostly been responsible for fabricating the luminar crystal rifle as well as the various energy transmission systems needed to support the ranged combat operation of the Chimera Project. This meant his efforts mostly granted Venerable Joshua an extra advantage in ranged combat.

The melee capabilities of the Chimera Project shouldn't be any weaker, though. Now that Ketis had also made a remarkable move, the expert mech's combat effectiveness was no longer as uneven as he feared!

"Now, all we need to do is to combine these strengths into a single frame." Ves smiled.

Venerable Joshua looked on as the mech designers began to operate the heavy bots and machinery needed to put together a mech that consisted of parts that weighed several tons.

A new life was finally taking shape! As the mech frame became more complete, it began to exude a greater presence.

The time for him to greet his new battle partner was close at hand!

Chapter 3396: Alive

A new hero expert mech was being born today. Inside a personal workshop located deep inside the Spirit of Bentheim, a ritual that combined precision engineering, heavy engineering and love had almost reached its conclusion.

After seven days of brisk and purposeful work, four Journeymen and a single expert pilot had continuously poured their efforts into making the final and perhaps ultimate machine of this design round.

For the mech designers, their time in the design labs and the mech workshops in the past year provided them with many challenges and delights.

Each of them had made substantial gains as they successively worked on the six projects. Their approach had matured, their toolboxes held more techniques and they became more adept at designing high-performance machines.

More than that, the four Journeymen also progressed their core design philosophies and developed a better understanding of the mechs they truly wished to design.

Everyone was already satisfied. Each of them would be able to translate their recent improvements into substantially better results when they embarked on their next mech design projects.

That said, their job was not yet done. They still had to assemble the final pieces into place. They also had to make sure that the parts that had already been added to the mech frame were sound and functional.

All of this demanded the undivided attention of every mech designer. They no longer swapped as many thoughts and ideas to each other as they had already completed the most challenging and influential phase of the fabrication run.

What they were doing now was more akin to consolidating their previous efforts than adding more value to the mech. It was too difficult to come up with a new way to make the end product a little stronger during this phase.

That did not stop Venerable Joshua from thinking, though.

At this moment, he still resonated with Blinky as the companion spirit roamed throughout the incomplete mech frame. Even if it appeared that this move hardly made any difference at this point, Joshua was still able to familiarize himself with the soon-to-be-completed Chimera Project in advance.

What struck him a lot about the hero expert mech was how he witnessed its creation from beginning to end.

Due to participating in the design network, Venerable Joshua became awed and excited at how closely he was involved in the birth of his own expert mech.

This was a machine that was truly designed and made for him from the ground up. It was a mech that not only embodied life to Joshua, but was also filled with the love and affection of its creators.

From Ketis, Joshua received the most intimate form of love.

From Ves, Joshua received the goodwill of the greatest mech designer.

From the other two Journeymen, Joshua received the trust and expectation of the Larkinsons who invested him with power to fight on their behalf.

Whether their motivations were rational or emotional, Venerable Joshua became continually touched by all of the effort that everyone put in a single machine.

The four Journeymen were under no obligation to go through this extent to fabricate the Chimera Project.

Yet each of them did so without any hesitation. As a rule, any mech designer always sought to serve their clients as best as possible, but it was difficult to uphold this ideal in practice.

There were many mech designers who did not provide as much service to individual clients, but the mech designers of the Larkinson Clan were different.

Everything was personal. While every Larkinson was used to treating their fellow clansmen as family, Joshua received more favor than others.

Though he was expected to repay all of the gifts and attention he received by performing well in battle, this did not require any effort on his part.

As an expert pilot and a soldier of the Larkinson Clan, he was already committed to doing his absolute best to protect his fellow clansmen and destroy all of their enemies!

This realization caused him to build a small degree of frustration in his heart. He knew more than any other mech pilot how much the mech designers worked to elevate the Chimera Project.

Compared to all of the effort and ingenuity that Ves and the others squeezed out of their minds, Joshua just sat around most of the time while passively resonating with Blinky.

Over the past several days, he vaguely gained the notion that he could do something on his own initiative.

This was a strange impulse, so strange in fact that he had buried it deep in his heart. He felt ashamed and uncertain about the notion that he could contribute to the formation of a mech by himself.

He was not a mech designer and didn't know 1 percent of all of the knowledge required to design a machine.

Others would think that he was being arrogant to the extreme for thinking that he could do better than any other mech designer!

Yet the more the Chimera Project reached completion, the more he felt that the expert mech was missing that final touch that could truly make it right for him. Joshua did not doubt the competences of the people who worked on its design, but none of them understood life and expert pilots like himself.

Not even Ves, who possessed the greatest understanding of his powers and capabilities, understood all of his facets.

Though Joshua loved all of Ves' living mechs, that didn't mean he was content to remain as a passive consumer.

He already piloted so many living mechs designed for other people in mind. Each of them had their merits, but ultimately possessed elements that prevented Joshua from embracing them in their totality.

He wanted to be more selfish this time. The mech designed exclusively for his use must not have any shortcomings that prevented him from piloting it as seamlessly as possible!

With that thought in mind, Joshua became increasingly more committed to his planned course of action.

Several strange thoughts flowed through his mind. Venerable Joshua took a lot of inspiration from the mindset and the methods employed by Ves and Ketis before coming up with his own plan of action.

He patiently waited while the mech designers completed the Chimera Project at their own pace. When the expert mech had reached its final juncture, Ves had slowly entered the cockpit in order to install the commemorative plate and add the final elements to the interior.

At this point, Ves could already tell the final result of all of his efforts and the efforts of his colleagues.

His worst fears had come true. After turning the Shield of Samar into a masterwork expert mech, Ves and the others had emptied their accumulation and started off this fabrication run at a lower starting point.

He didn't think that this was an insurmountable problem. Even if he started this race in the rear, he just had to work harder to get to the front.

Yet despite fabricating an innovative new expert mech and implementing several new solutions developed on the spot, the overall quality of the expert mech fell short of his hopes.

It didn't matter that the Chimera Project embodied its three core concepts to a higher degree than the other expert mechs.

It didn't matter that he found a new way to increase the attunement between his expert mech and its expert pilot.

It didn't matter that Ketis sacrificed a part of herself to empower the Chimera Project's mech sword.

All of that hard work just wasn't enough to overcome the invisible barriers that prevented Journeymen like himself from climbing up the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder.

Ves tried his best to suppress his growing sense of disappointment and expectation. All of his emotional commitment into the Chimera Project made it hurt all the more that he had failed to accomplish his ambitious target.

Yet regarding the expert mech as a disappointment was unprofessional and a disservice to both the machine and its user.

The Chimera Project was already strong and valuable in its own right. Ves stood by all of the design choices he made and did not regret completing it last.

In the end, the cold hard truth was that he was simply too young, too inexperienced and too ambitious to be expecting another masterwork expert mech.

"I'm too weak." He summed up with a sigh.

In the future, this challenge probably wouldn't inconvenience him anymore. Whether it took fifty years or a hundred years, Ves was certain that he would be able to climb the second rung of the ladder as easily as climbing other steps!

He was far from reaching this point, though.

As a result, the Chimera Project he poured his heart and soul into became an expert mech that was merely 'good' in terms of quality.

Its quality wasn't even high enough for one of Lucky's gems to be able to make up the difference!

In the end, it didn't even matter that his gem cat provided him with a batch of five new gems that he couldn't even identify. It turned out that he wouldn't have to play the gem lottery after all this time.

For a moment, Ves loathed the expert mech he completed. Why couldn't it have been good enough to get close to the masterwork threshold? Why did all of his extra effort failed to make a substantial difference?

"I shouldn't feel this way towards an expert mech that is excellent in its own right." Ves reminded himself.

He had no doubt that the Chimera Project would perform well in battle, but it still lacked that extra factor that allowed the Amaranto and the Shield of Samar stand out from its peers.

Venerable Joshua would be fine for the most part, but if his journey to ace pilot would doubtlessly be more arduous than Ves wished.

The only way to remedy this problem was to design another expert mech or upgrade his existing one, but these measures only gave him a chance.

"Damn."

As Ves put the final part in place, he sank in the piloting chair and tried to cleanse his thoughts.

"Huh?"

Ves looked up in surprise as he sensed the approached of a familiar figure. Venerable Joshua emerged from above and slipped inside the open entrance of the cockpit with a single, fluid maneuver.

"Sir." Joshua nodded confidently at the mech designer.

"What are you doing here? It's not time yet for you to test run this freshly-made machine."

"The Chimera Project isn't finished. Not in my eyes. It's not too late for us to perform an extra step."

Ves grew puzzled. He could sense an aura of confidence and purpose from the expert pilot. It was as if the failure to turn the Chimera Project into a masterwork did not affect him in the slightest!

"What... do you have in mind?"

"I need your cooperation for this. Can you call over Blinky?"

"Certainly."

Mrow.

The cat quickly floated back to Ves' side. The Star Cat looked puzzled why he was needed. Hadn't they just completed the Chimera Project?

Joshua didn't explain anything further. He looked at Blinky while resonating with the companion spirit to a stronger degree than he had ever done before!

Mrow?!

As the spiritual cat became surrounded by an increasingly brighter green corona, Joshua suddenly drew a foldable combat knife from his belt.

"Wait, what are you doing with that blade?"

"Trust me, sir."

Joshua resolutely cut the palm of his hand, inflicting a bleeding gash that already splattered the cockpit floor with drops of red!

"Are you crazy?!"

The expert pilot did not listen to Ves. Instead, Joshua used his bleeding hand to grasp onto Ves' wrist before decisively making another cut on the mech designer's palm!

"Ahhh! That hurts!"

Joshua moved quickly and gripped Ves' bleeding hand with his own one. The expert pilot proceed to drag over their bloody 'handshake' in the middle of Blinky's intangible body while it was affected by resonance!

"The Chimera Project is our child." The expert pilot claimed as he conveyed a powerful will through his eyes! "Let us baptize it in blood and celebrate its completion!"

Something amazing happened that caused Ves to choke his calls for help.

The blood that leaked between their palms seemed to gain power. As the cockpit floor became increasingly marked by fluids, the energies of life carried by the falling drops began to transfer to the entire mech.

Further inside the machine, the energies transferred seemed to draw towards the parts that Ves had recently made while under the influence of Joshua's resonance.

As soon as these parts received a jolt, they began to glow and resonate with Venerable Joshua!

Ves looked amazed as the expert pilot expanded his force of will and channeled as much of his power as possible.

This was difficult on Joshua as he wasn't actually interfacing with the Chimera Project. Yet despite not activating the expert mech, he forced himself to reach out to the mech that was already designed to embrace his will and found a growing response!

"It's truly come alive this time." Joshua grinned.

Ves became gobsmacked as the living expert mech underwent an unexplainable change that condensed much of its living elements into a cohesive, living consciousness.

For a moment, he felt as if he had come in touch with the Quint. Yet the Chimera Project's living qualities were a bit different. They were... stronger and more complete despite not experiencing any growth over time!

Even as the quality of the Chimera Project rose as a consequence of this mysterious improvement, the newly-birthed consciousness conveyed its very first word.

Alive.

Chapter 3397: Complete Life

What was a living mech?

Many people in the Larkinson Clan had different answers to this question.

The mech pilots who piloted the Bright Warrior and many other mech models designed by Ves possessed the most intimate contact with living mechs. By interfacing with them day after day, most often with the same mech, they began to learn that living mechs were different from the other machines they piloted in their careers.

Whether it was the training mechs they piloted back when they attended a mech academy or the budget mechs that every rookie started to pilot when they joined an organization at the bottom of the hierarchy, mechs were mostly machines to them. No matter how well they were designed or how much money it took to build them, each and every mech functioned like a tool. They did what they were supposed to and did not influence the decision of their pilots.

For four centuries, this had been the central paradigm of mechs. A machine is a machine and must always be harnessed by their human owners and controllers. Any mech that did not fit this definition was a potential threat as it could always go out of control at any time.

Although modern mechs were so complicated and packed with different functions that it needed to be supported by an army of algorithms and sub-AIs to control all of its systems, the mech industry always made sure to adhere to a hard limit to the autonomy of any given mech.

As long as the mech pilot stopped making the decisions that only humans should be making, a mech was no longer a mech in the eyes of the mech industry. It was a battle bot that was driven by cold hard logical programming instead of warm-blooded humans!

The MTA had always taken a repulsive stance towards excessive automation. Not only did it go against the Association's goal that technology must strengthen humans that used it, automation also posed a grave security threat.

It was much easier to subvert the control of AI-driven battle bots than induce mech pilots to betray their leaders!

While the CFA held a more accepting stance towards automation, mechs were different from starships. The difference in scale and complexity allowed mechs to become war weapons that were closely tied to humanity's own evolution and advancement.

Under this regime, a mech designer like Ves had to bend to the rules and play the same game as everyone else. He had always studiously abided by the fundamental principle that humans should always master their own technology instead of the other way around.

Admittedly, Ves had been pushing the limits imposed by the MTA. Starting from the X-Factor, he slowly explored and deciphered the phenomena that made certain mechs more impressive than others despite sharing the same design.

He slowly came up with the concept of a living mech and had continually refined his methods until he could design and make one in his sleep!

Not only that, but Ves took the idea of leveraging living entities to empower mechs a step further. After receiving the direction of his mother, he began to look outside the mech for additional sources of power and soon developed a side branch where he employed design spirits to provide more support to the mech pilots that entrusted their lives to his products.

Nowadays, these features had become the core selling points of his mechs. Whether it was his commercial mech models or his unique expert mechs, all of them were defined by the living elements that Ves imparted in their design.

Starting from the beginning, each and every mech he designed in succession became a little more stronger and sophisticated in these aspects. The spiritual foundations of his mech designs became stronger and more structural. He continually added new design spirits to his collection while his existing ones grew stronger on their own accord.

Yet no matter how much Ves improved in these areas, he had never broken the rule that a mech should gain so much autonomy that it was able to wrench complete control from its mech pilot.

The Devil Tiger came closest to reaching this point, and some might even argue that it had already crossed the line. However, Ves made sure that it could not fully function without a mech pilot.

Although Ves entertained notions about breaking this taboo, he had no intentions of acting on these thought experiments. There was no compelling reason for him to go this far because he actually agreed with the MTA for once.

"Humanity should never let technology dominate their lives."

Of course, as a mech designer, he held a professional interest in preventing the rise of battle bots. There would be no market for mechs anymore if consumers began to dispense with the trouble of training mech pilots and preferred to make use of more convenient war weapons.

However, Ves was not completely ignorant of the greater trend of humanity's evolution. Starting from the adoption of ever-greater warships, human civilization had indeed been following a dangerous road.

He simply could not agree with the CFA's vision of the future and would much rather help the MTA win the ideological struggle that might very well determine the course of humanity's future

This was why he felt rather mixed at this time.

With his bleeding palm pressed against Joshua's own injured hand, the drops of life that soaked the cockpit floor had acted as a catalyst that prompted the just-completed Chimera Project to undergo a profound transformation!

Although the mechanical elements of the expert hero mech remained the same as before, Ves could see that its spiritual foundation had reached a higher level!

It was not entirely unfamiliar to Ves. He had already encountered something similar in both the Quint and the Shield of Samar.

These two living mechs stood out from the rest by possessing greater and more conscious forms of life. Though they had their differences, their most exceptional aspect was that they were fully alive like any human being and could think like any other fully sentient being!

In fact, Ves also suspected that the Ouroboros that he had designed during one of his previous Mastery experiences also reached this height.

This was different from most of the living mechs he designed today. Though he called mechs such as the Ferocious Piranha and the Valkyrie Redeemer alive, in truth they were only half-conscious.

They weren't really active when the mechs were dormant and only came alive when the machines were activated. The living mechs only possessed faint control of themselves and still had to work together with the mech pilots to achieve the greatest influence.

This wasn't necessarily a bad thing to Ves. He deliberately designed his mechs to build up a symbiotic relationship with their mech pilots in order to generate positive synergy. Mechs existed to complement mech pilots, nothing more.

The Quint and the Shield of Samar had broken this original design intention. By borrowing the exceptional power of the breakthroughs of their respective pilots, they absorbed enough energies to become a higher order life that possessed greater potential but also greater danger!

Though there was a chance that either the Quint or the Shield of Samar might betray their owners one day, Ves didn't take it too seriously. The two exceptional living mechs were firmly in his grasp and they had already grown alongside the Larkinsons for so long that it was inconceivable that they would turn their coats!

Ves also knew that it was beyond his means to make more higher order living mechs like these. The circumstances that allowed them to evolve to a higher state were not replicable. If he wanted to increase the amount of mechs like these in his arsenal, then he could do nothing but wait until his expert candidates broke through while piloting an ordinary living mech.

Suffice to say, this was a slow, unreliable and uncontrollable production process. He predicted that he would have to become a Senior or Master before he was qualified to pursue this matter further.

It therefore came as a complete surprise to Ves that Joshua of all people found a way to make a breakthrough in this aspect!

At the very start of a mech's existence, Joshua's improvised blood ritual somehow triggered a transformation that caused the Chimera Project to turn into a higher order living mech!

Ves thought that this wasn't possible at his current level of strength. He assumed that the Chimera Project would have to leech off the energies released by another breakthrough in order to become an existence at the same level of the Quint and the Shield of Samar.

He was wrong.

All it took was a smaller trigger to transform the spiritual foundation of a mech from a half-life into a full life.

As the Chimera Project settled into its new mode of existence, Ves sensed how much it had grown from its previous state.

The same building blocks were still there. The mech had not grown stronger because it gained more building blocks, but because it rearranged the existing ones in a much more clever way.

It was just like gathering all of the materials that formed a human body. If Ves just piled up the different substances into a single box, nothing useful would come out of it due to the complete lack of structure.

By binding certain organic materials together into a single-celled organism, he could make an initial form of life, although it was so weak that it couldn't even think for itself.

By combining a greater amount of materials to form a larger form of life like a mouse or a rabbit, the living element became smarter, more capable and more aware.

By using up all of the materials at hand to create a new human entity, only then would Ves have the option to create a completely new sentient form of life!

The Chimera Project now belonged to the last category, having jumped to it by transforming its entire spiritual foundation so that everything was being utilized and nothing was being wasted!

It was a much better utilization of spiritual resources than what Ves was able to accomplish before!

Right now, his head was filled with questions and uncertainties. What were the principles behind this mysterious transformation. How was Joshua of all people able to come up with this innovation? Would Ves be able to decipher the mechanisms behind this profound change and apply it to any of his subsequent mechs?

By now, Joshua had withdrawn his bleeding hand. He calmly retrieved a small first aid gadget from his toolbelt and covered his wound with a special foam that sterilized and closed the wound.

The expert pilot silently reached out and performed the same procedure on Ves' palm.

Ves woke up from his thoughts after he received this treatment. He looked incredibly confused at Joshua.

"How?"

The expert pilot responded with a knowing smile. "I had a hunch."

The explanations could wait for later. Right now, the state of the Chimera Project was of greater importance. Ves had to secure at least one success before he could chase after other goals.

He shakily withdrew a pouch from his hidden pocket. He opened it up and dropped five lustrous gems onto his healthy palm.

He stretched his hand to his brother in arms.

"What... do you want me to do?" Venerable Joshua questioned.

This time, it was his turn to look confused!

"Choose one of these gems. Which one attracts you the most?"

Joshua wasn't sure why this was important, but he did not want to keep Ves waiting. He fell silent for a dozen seconds. He didn't feel anything special about any of the gems, so he decided to pick the one with the most attractive color in his eyes.

"This one." He pointed to the aquamarine gem. "It's the most colorful one."

"Great choice."

Ves carefully put the remaining gems in his pouch before approaching the front of the cockpit.

He quickly withdrew a multitool from his toolbelt and pried the jewel that functioned as the main startup button from its socket. He then proceeded to put the aquamarine gem which happened to share the same shape in its place.

"Let's go outside and watch." Ves said as he already floated out of the cockpit.

The mysterious transformation that the Chimera Project had just undergone had somehow increased the quality of the mech.

Although it hadn't turned into a masterwork straight away, it had come close to the masterwork threshold.

It just needed a gentle push to get over the edge, and Ves just provided one!

Chapter 3398: Distant Point

The four Journeymen had all grown a bit numb at this point.

This was far from the first time they fabricated a masterwork mech. In fact, when it came to expert mechs, half of the ones they made had climbed the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder.

A success rate of 50 percent was unprecedented among Journeymen as young as them! Each of them was sure that the galactic mech industry would become shocked if they learned about this explosive accomplishment!

Ves even suspected that this was why Master Willix and her faction within the MTA weren't in a hurry to issue another batch of masterwork certificates to the Larkinson Clan. Their success was too astonishing. Journeymen simply weren't supposed to be able to make so many masterworks in a short amount of time. They definitely shouldn't even be able to make masterworks out of expert mechs, which was supposed to be a much harder challenge!

While a single unexpected success could easily be dismissed as a fluke, a string of three masterwork expert mechs was definitely a pattern! Even the stupidest humans would be able to figure out that the Larkinson mech designers grasped a secret method!

Ves needed to have a good talk with Master Willix after this. He could not allow the public to know that the Larkinson Clan possessed three masterwork expert mechs, which was more than most small states possessed!

When Ves and Joshua floated out of the cockpit, the remaining three mech designers didn't exactly know what happened inside.

Alexandria's design network was still in effect, but the connections had become a little frayed after maintaining it for so long. The two 'blood brothers' also didn't feel the need to share their inner thoughts to the others.

However, that wasn't important at the moment. All Gloriana cared about was that she had succeeded in making another masterwork mech!

From what she had observed from the outside, she already figured out that Ves used a gem to push the Chimera Project across the masterwork threshold. She had expected him to do that when she noticed that the mech suddenly grew stronger and more cohesive all of a sudden.

While Venerable Joshua ignorantly looked on as the Chimera Project comprehensively transformed in a different and less familiar sense, the four mech designers kept all of their senses focused on the expert mech as it fully settled onto the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder!

This was the sixth time that Ves witnessed such a profound change. The more he elevated his work to this level, the deeper he came to understand the nature of mechs and what it took to make them more exceptional.

He was already familiar with some of the subtle changes. He had already studied them before and figured out as much as he could at his current level of perception and understanding. There was no need for him to waste further time on observing these known processes.

Ves instead focused his attention on the other subtle changes that he could only sense at this special time as recordings were never able to convey the complete picture after the transformation had taken place.

What he was particularly interested in was determining how his design philosophy affected the quality of a mech.

What Joshua had done earlier provided him with greater evidence that improving the spiritual design of a mech directly increased its overall quality!

The implication here was that Ves might be able to pump out masterworks on a regular basis if he could impart each of his mechs with better spiritual foundations.

In fact, this rule didn't only apply to himself. This was probably the case for many other mech designers whose design philosophies enabled them to inject their own intangible elements to a mech or mech design.

As long as these mech designers figured out how to improve the application and utilization of their design philosophies to a certain degree, the quality of mechs would automatically rise and thereby allow them to climb the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder over and over again!

This was a much more reliable and systematic approach than striving for greater mechanical perfection as was the case for some of his earlier successes. This was a brute force method of making masterworks that could only be achieved through luck and serendipity.

"I see. I understand."

Each time he created a masterwork mech, his eyes opened a little more. Ves had already created more masterworks than many Seniors and even Masters had been able to make throughout their entire lifetimes.

The ability to make a masterwork mech did not depend on purely piling up a lot of knowledge and skill. Experience helped, but the true factor that allowed mech designers like Ves to make strides in this area was to increase the utilization of his existing craftsmanship abilities!

Designing a good mech wasn't the end of a mech designer's work. Only by realizing it into a concrete form would a new mech design truly become complete.

Knowing how to produce a better machine and how to maximize the potential of an abstract design rounded out a mech designer.

It turned out that Ves had reversed cause and effect.

His mech affinity did not increase because he made a masterwork mech.

Instead, it was more accurate to state that his exceptional efforts in trying to improve his mech craftsmanship naturally increased his affinity for mechs!

Each substantial increase improved a given mech to such an extent that they turned into a masterwork.

Mech affinity was ultimately a reflection of how much he intuitively understood and mastered the true nature of mechs. Perhaps other mech designers had other means to advance this personal trait, but Ves had always managed to increase his affinity by trying out new solutions.

After six successive increases, he was vaguely able to sense that he was approaching an invisible point.

Although it was still too far for him to figure out anything more, Ves was able to guess that if his mech affinity continued to improve, he would eventually be able to undergo a metamorphosis in terms of his own mech craftsmanship!

During all of this time, Ves had constantly gripped the handle of the Hammer of Brilliance.

Just as he was able to derive numerous new insights from the Chimera Project's masterwork translation, Vulcan was also watching the marvel of craftsmanship reach a more transcendent state.

Vulcan's perception and outlook towards mechs was different from that of a human. He was much more attuned to the concept of craftsmanship and was able to derive completely different benefits from witnessing this precious occurrence.

Finally, the masterwork transformation came to an end. The Chimera Project had not only come alive in the truest sense of the word, but also reached a transcendent level of quality that already turned it into one of the most special mechs of the Larkinson Clan!

Venerable Joshua felt inordinately pleased that he had the privilege of piloting the best living mech that Ves had developed up to this date!

"It's truly complete now." Gloriana stated while hugging her oblivious baby against her body. "Aren't you impressed, Aurelia? Mommy and daddy managed to make another masterwork mech this time!"

"...buuu..."

"Oh, you're so precious! You're much cuter than a masterwork!"

Now that the excitement had died down, everyone was thinking about their latest harvests. No one was in the mood to do anything further, so Ves instructed everyone to reset the mech workshop and stow the completed expert mech until they were ready to hold a testing session.

While everyone wearily shut down all of the active machinery and cleaned up the loose equipment and materials, Ves slowly walked up to Venerable Joshua.

The man of the hour and the recipient of this great success had never strayed too far from his new machine. Even now, Joshua was communicating and getting to know his exclusive living mech. Ves even had the illusion that a sense of harmony had already emerged between the two fated partners.

"Joshua?"

The expert pilot turned around. "Yes, sir?"

Ves gestured towards the impressive expert mech. "The Chimera Project needs a proper name. What do you think we should call it now that it has come to life?"

The expert pilot turned back to his expert mech and seemed to discuss the matter amongst themselves.

Though the Chimera Project was a brand-new existence, it was not an ignorant and unknown living mech. Four Journeymen as well as a single expert pilot had all invested their energies as well as a piece of themselves in the expert mech, allowing them to shape its personality and outlook in a certain range.

The living expert mech possessed the highest degree of intimacy towards Venerable Joshua, as it should. It was natural for the new machine to discuss its own identity with its human partner.

"Everchanger." Joshua eventually said.

Everchanger. It was an odd name and one that conveyed a surprising amount of meaning.

"...Who came up with this name?"

"We both did." Joshua responded. "Originally, my mech was fine with calling itself the Chimera, but I thought that sounded a bit boring. It's an impressive mech and deserves

to be known as such. After a bit of brainstorming, we settled on a name that it can carry with pride once we grow stronger."

Ves was afraid that Joshua and his new mech would copy Venerable Dise's naming sense, but fortunately that wasn't the case.

Although Everchanger was a name that carried an unusual flavor to Ves, it truly had the potential to become as legendary as the Ouroboros one day.

Although the Ouroboros was ahead by a century, the Everchanger started off with a much more impressive foundation. Ves believed it was not impossible for the latter to catch up to the former given enough time!

When Ves shared the new name to the other three mech designers, no one had any objection to Joshua's choice.

From today onwards, the Everchanger became a permanent part of the Larkinson Clan's heritage of masterwork mechs.

The Quint, the Amaranto, the Shield of Samar and now the Everchanger became the crown jewels that cemented Ves' rule over his own people!

As the Journeymen prepared to leave the workshop and enjoy a long and well-deserved rest, Ves looked questioningly at Venerable Joshua.

The happy expert pilot only had eyes for his new battle partner. "I'd like to stay here if that's okay. We both enjoy each other's company and there is so much we can learn from each other. I've waited so long for this. Please allow me to enjoy this moment."

Ves reluctantly nodded. "You can stay, but don't activate your new expert mech just yet. We need to follow all of the safety protocols and minimize any chance of accidents. While I am sure the Everchanger doesn't mean any harm, we can't predict what will happen if you interface with it for the first time."

"We understand, sir. We're not in a hurry."

It was quite remarkable how the Everchanger was fully conscious and active even if its systems hadn't come online. Its powerful and highly-structured spiritual components had fused into a living entity in its own right, and did not need to rely on the support of the physical frame of the mech or a connection to a mech pilot to maintain its existence.

Ves even suspected that the Everchanger's existence had moved closer to that of Qilanxo.

If the physical mech ever got destroyed one day, the spiritual entity known as the Everchanger might be able to transcend its mortal limits and become a design spirit!

Of course, that was just a guess. Ves didn't think about it any further because he didn't want to lose any of his higher order living mechs! Only when they remained intact would they be able to provide the greatest possible value to him and his clan!

Most of the lights in the mech workshop shut off, leaving only a single pool of light that illuminated the Everchanger and Venerable Joshua.

The two belonged together.

Chapter 3399: Orders of Life

The completion of the Everchanger marked the end of the current round of design projects.

While Ves and Gloriana unofficially had to complete one more expert mech for Venerable Brutus, it was not a part of the lineup of the Larkinson Clan, so it didn't exactly count.

Besides, the lead designer of this project was some distant Hexer Master Mech Designer. Ves and his wife only played the role of contributing mech designers this time. Aside from lending their design philosophies and unique expertise, their input on the overall direction of the expert rifleman mech was fairly limited.

Ves didn't mind. It was nice to let others do the bulk of the work this time. No matter what, a Master Mech Designer was able to impart significantly greater benefits to any mech design, so Venerable Brutus would definitely obtain a more powerful machine.

It also helped that the Wodin Dynasty committed a lot more hex credits in its development than with his previous expert mech. Brutus' standing within the dynasty had risen meteorically now that he was accompanying his sister and the Larkinson Clan to the Red Ocean. The Hexers no longer treated him as an ordinary good boy!

The day after completing the Chimera Project, Ves and his wife woke up feeling completely rested and content.

After teasing Aurelia for a while, Ves headed to his office and reflected upon all of his gains from the latest fabrication session.

"I've succeeded against all odds, Lucky. Isn't that great?"

"Meow." The gem cat unenthusiastically responded as he lay on the desk and flipped his tail just a single time.

With everything that had happened yesterday, it was hard for Ves to remember that he had accomplished the most important goal that he set for himself.

By turning the Everchanger into a masterwork mech, he put Venerable Joshua onto the fast track.

While any expert pilot would be happy to use a decent expert mech, there were limits to how much an inferior machine could foster their growth.

The insufficient quality of an ordinary machine would eventually hamper an expert pilot's development and make it a lot harder to break through to ace pilot.

Masterwork expert mechs didn't suffer from this problem, at least according to Master Willix. The second rung of Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship roughly corresponded to expert pilots, which meant that the two belonged to each other.

When both the mech and pilot were exceptional to the same degree, they could further each other's growth.

Just like Venerable Jannzi, Venerable Joshua's growth rate had now become supercharged now that he received the support of a sufficiently powerful expert mech.

Both of them possessed a realistic chance of advancing to ace pilot, and they didn't even have to wait until they grew as old as Patriarch Reginald Cross to reach their bottlenecks!

All in all, the expert pilot that aligned most closely to Ves' domain and design philosophy obtained an unlimited future after this success. That was the most important result. Everything else was a bonus as far as he was concerned.

That didn't mean that Ves ignored his bountiful harvest.

He specifically set aside time for himself to process and integrate all of his recent innovations, insights and discoveries.

Hours passed by as Ves took a lot of mental notes while reviewing the footage of the fabrication run. He studied what he had done and how the Everchanger improved as a response. He also paid special attention to the blood ritual that Venerable Joshua performed on his own accord.

After thinking about it, he was able to reconstruct the probable logic behind Joshua's move.

"The key is Blinky." Ves realized.

Mrow?

The companion spirit exited Ves' head and floated around the office.

"Yes, you played a key role in helping the Everchanger evolve to a higher order living mech!"

Venerable Joshua resonated with Blinky for many days during the fabrication run. The constant exposure allowed him to gain a greater understanding of the nature of spiritual life forms.

At some point, he came up with a revolutionary idea.

What if his living expert mech turned into an entity that was closer to Blinky?

This was what Joshua set out to accomplish. Though he knew nothing about mech design or spiritual engineering, his intuition and feel towards life was not inferior to that of Ves!

Although their outlooks towards life were slightly different due to their different backgrounds and progression, their stances were similar enough for them to be able to cooperate.

"Resonance and alignment are the building blocks." Ves theorized Joshua's unusual method. "They are the necessary elements for Joshua to exert his influence. If he doesn't possess a connection to the mech, he wouldn't have been able to induce any transformation."

The key was Joshua's force of will.

Ves recalled that this was the basis of an expert pilot's power! Without an empowered will, an expert pilot was unable to distort reality!

"I see now."

According to his guess, the bloody handshake that Venerable Joshua performed wasn't a mysterious magic ritual or anything like that. It was just a psychological trick that helped him channel and exercise his force of will in a special manner.

Perhaps the blood shed by two life-oriented individuals played another important role, but Ves assumed this was just the trigger. What really mattered was that Joshua was able to exert his force of will in a special way that distorted reality by upgrading the life order of a mech!

Ves tried to figure out the requirements of this method and how easy it was to replicate it so that he could make more higher order living mechs.

Obviously, Venerable Joshua's cooperation was necessary, and so was a normal living mech.

Ves wasn't sure whether the mech in question had to be attuned to Venerable Joshua. If so, then this imposed a lot of limitations on how many higher order living mechs he could make.

"What else is required?"

Could Venerable Joshua perform this transformation alone or did he require the cooperation of Ves and Blinky to perform this major step?

Ves thought deeply about it and couldn't come up with a solid answer.

He intuitively felt that Joshua wasn't capable enough to upgrade the life order of a mech by himself. The expert pilot wasn't a creator and didn't specialize in this aspect. This was something that Ves was good at, but as a Journeyman, he could only do so much.

In short, Ves possessed the method but not the power. Joshua possessed the power but not the method.

Only by working together and pooling their resources together could Ves and Joshua make a mech that was far beyond their individual level to make!

Ves' eyes lit up as understanding finally dawned upon him. "In the end, we accomplished the impossible by relying on the power of synergy!"

They could have never pulled this off if even one of the requirements weren't met.

There had to be a living mech.

The living mech possessed enough building blocks to possess greater potential for life.

The mech designer was capable of creating new life.

The expert pilot was capable of bending the rules of reality related to life.

The expert pilot was able to resonate with the living mech.

The expert pilot needed a way to trigger the transformation.

As long as Ves was able to meet these conditions in a future project, he was curious whether he could replicate the outcome. If so, then he might hold the shortcut to progressing his design philosophy!

"Creating a mech that is more alive than before isn't necessarily the key to helping me advance to a higher rank." Ves reminded himself. "What is actually important is how I can take advantage of this to push the synergy and cooperation between man and machine to the next level!"

Creating a powerful living mech was not his end goal. His true purpose as a mech designer was to serve mech pilots, so any ground-breaking inventions had to feed back into his ultimate ambition.

He would have plenty of opportunity to figure this out by observing Venerable Joshua and the Everchanger in action. Their unprecedented mutual cooperation would serve as an ongoing experiment to Ves. Hopefully, the pairing would provide plenty of research data in the coming years!

After making this determination, Ves focused on the nature of higher order living mechs.

He realized that he needed to come up with a more systematic framework to classify different forms of living mechs.

One living mech wasn't the same as another living mech. His earliest Marc Antony model was technically a living mech, but it was a rubbish one that hardly possessed any added value!

"So far, I have three confirmed living mechs that have reached the highest order that I know of." He muttered. "The Quint, the Shield of Samar and the Everchanger definitely stand above the rest."

The Devil Tiger and the Ouroboros had potentially joined this exclusive club as well, but Ves wasn't able to confirm this suspicion. Even if they did reach the highest life order that he knew of, he would never admit it to anyone.

All of his other living mechs had not reached this order. The Dark Zephyr, the Riot and the First Sword were clearly 'less alive' when he compared them to his masterwork expert mechs. To him, there was a clear and obvious difference in life state between the two groups.

There were other living mechs that were even weaker than his regular expert mechs. Most of them were based on his older and weaker mech designs. The further he went back in his career, the less life his products contained.

When Ves looked back on his entire body of work, he began to group them under four different categories.

"The degree of life in a mech can be classified in at least four orders. The zeroth order is the starting point and describes any mech with no signs of life."

He decided to start with zero instead of one because such a mech wasn't alive in the slightest.

This didn't necessarily mean that such a machine was weak. Many mechs designed by other smart and powerful mech designers did not possess a drop of life, but they could easily demolish his Bright Warriors and other living mechs in battle!

The MTA's cutting-edge first-class multipurpose mechs, the overpowering Olympus Mons, the innovative Charlemagne and the unkillable Belisarius were just some of the examples that mechs didn't need to be alive for them to be strong!

The zeroth order was simply a means for Ves to classify his own work. It did not set any norms or assumptions that living mechs were stronger than non-living mechs. He would have to be incredibly arrogant to believe that every other mech designer in existence was useless!

"If the zeroth order contains no life, then the first order possesses the beginnings of one."

These were the mechs that for some reason or another contained the beginnings of an X-Factor, which meant that other people could also make mechs that belonged to the first order under special circumstances.

Ves himself assigned his earliest mech designs to this order as well. His virtual mechs as well as the variants of other people's designs possessed enough life to make a difference, but not enough for it to be a strong selling point.

The second order was when living mechs truly started to kick into gear. Starting from the Desolate Soldier, every mech that Ves had designed up until now possessed roughly enough life to develop a half-conscious personality.

If Ves left out the influence of design spirits, then second order living mechs were able to nudge their mech pilots and provide plenty of subtle assistance!

They also possessed greater growth potential. When they partnered up with the same mech pilots for many years, they could grow in a direction that allowed them to provide even greater assistance to their partners.

However, no matter how much growth a second order living mech experienced, it was hard for it to jump to a higher order. They needed a powerful external injection in order to upgrade their life order by another step!

Currently, the third order was the highest life order that Ves was able to realize. It described a mech that was not only alive, but also conscious and fully equal to any other sentient life form.

It was not 'alive' in the way that a bacterium or a mouse was alive, but it was a true living entity that was capable of exercising logic, reason and emotion!

Their influence over their physical mechs went against common sense and they were able to work together with their mech pilots to an unprecedented degree!

Third order living mechs were the ultimate products that Ves could strive for, at least for now. While it was easy enough for him to guess that even higher orders might exist, he couldn't even imagine what that would be like. They would have to be substantially more remarkable than the Everchanger!

When Ves mentally listed out the four different life orders, he suddenly realized that it sounded awfully familiar to Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship.

In fact, knowing about this theoretical model may have unconsciously influenced Ves to create a similar scheme.

"Then... does that mean I can publish my own theory one day?"

His eyes lit up. This was definitely a promising idea! He just needed to come up with a catchy name for his new theoretical framework.

"How about... Larkinson's Orders of Life?"

Chapter 3400: Entrenched Mech Designer

The days after bringing the Everchanger to life brought a much-needed time of rest and relaxation.

The Design Department had mostly turned from an active workplace to a study hall as most assistant mech designers showed up in order to learn.

The eager students exchanged their Larkinson merits to borrow valuable textbooks or receive personal instruction from one of the Journeymen. They exchanged ideas with each other or challenged their rivals to brief and simplified design duels.

Ves spent a bit of his time on the people he had neglected as of late. His all-consuming focus on his expert mech design projects had caused him to fall out of touch with the current situation of the Design Department.

More than half a year ago, a large batch of Apprentices joined his ranks. Each of them hardly had the opportunity to get in touch with the lead or head designers, but that was not a problem as they mostly received guidance from the earlier batches of assistants.

So far, none of the mech designers stood out from the pack. Miles Tovar, who Ves had designated as a Journeyman candidate, had made no appreciable progress despite his best efforts to progress his design philosophy.

The aerial mech specialist even went out of his way to exchange his precious Larkinson merits to receive repeated instructions and advice from Juliet Stameross. Despite the fact that she was a Hexer, she knew more about aerial mechs than any other Journeyman in the clan.

Though Miles benefited considerably from Juliet's expertise, Ves could clearly see that his spirituality had remained virtually the same. It did not improve in quantity or quality.

Whatever he was doing, it wasn't working.

"Strange." Ves commented.

He talked a few times with Miles to figure out what was wrong.

The former member of the Tovar Family of the Bright Republic might have enjoyed a privileged upbringing, but he knew the value of hard work. He hardly took any breaks and consistently spent his time on deepening his foundation, designing new aerial mechs and even went down to the lower decks to try his hand at fabricating and repairing mechs.

Nothing worked.

His lack of progress stood in stark contrast to Ketis, who used to be a Journeyman candidate alongside him. Ever since she broke through, she fully shed her marginal role as an assistant and turned into a worthy and equal contributor.

Though her accumulation of knowledge and experience still fell behind her peers, she had proven herself to be worthy enough to become the definitive authority on swords and sword-wielding mechs in the Larkinson Clan!

Ves found it to be a pity that his clan did not gain any other Journeyman in the last year. Despite employing over 150 assistant mech designers, of which 25 of them possessed spiritual potential, none of them rose above their station.

The only progress that Ves had observed was that 5 more Apprentices developed spiritual potential since he last surveyed them. He had no idea what caused them to become spiritually active one day, and that frustrated him a lot.

Without deciphering the trigger or underlying reasons behind their subtle transformation, he was unable to perform targeted research into replicating this process.

In any case, even if the assistants gained spiritual potential, that didn't necessarily mean they were guaranteed to become Journeymen.

Ves thought back on his own breakthrough and also what Ketis had gone through to obtain her own chance.

He came up with a tentative theory why Miles and possibly many other promising mech designers in the Design Department stagnated.

It was enough of a reason for him to call over the struggling Apprentice Mech Designer.

"What do you require, sir?"

"Sit down for a moment." Ves instructed and waved to the chair beside his workstation.

When Miles attentively sat down while maintaining a proper posture, Lucky glided down on his lap and asked for pats.

"Meow."

As the man relaxed a bit, Ves began to share his theory.

"I can feel how badly you want to become a Journeyman. You certainly have the drive and diligence to become one. Your knowledge base is solid enough and your dedication to our profession is undeniable. It's just..."

Miles looked uneasy as he petted Lucky's metallic back. "Just what, sir?"

"I can only speak anecdotally, but... you need to stop acting as if you're working in a normal office."

"Pardon?"

"Mech design is more than engineering. It's also a creative art. Do you understand what I am trying to convey?"

The former Brighter wasn't stupid. He only needed a single nudge to understand what Ves was trying to say.

"Are you suggesting that my approach is wrong and that I should act more like a struggling artist?"

Ves softly chuckled. "I guess you can say so. I wouldn't put it that way but it is an apt description of what I think will help your case. You see, back when I was in your shoes, I did not just sit around doing regular stuff. I went out of my way to explore new opportunities, see new sights and experience plenty of thrills, some more life-threatening than others. If there is one thing that our former home state is right about, it's that plucking mech designers out of their comfortable labs and dumping them into warzones is a great way to shake them up and force them to experience new stimuli. I believe that is the key to their subsequent success, assuming they survive their ordeals."

Miles looked rather taken with the theory. "So I should start acting like a Brave."

"There's a reason why I support gutsy mech designers." Ves smiled. It was nice to talk with smart people, and most mech designers tended to fall into this category. "I believe I have said enough to push you into what I believe to be the right direction. In my opinion, you are so entrenched in your ordinary routine that you simply won't be able to make a drastic change due to all of the inertia you are stuck in. You need to become exposed to strong stimuli in order to break you out of your current shell."

Though Ves did not provide any proof that his theory was true, Miles already decided to commit to it. What he was currently doing yielded no results. Instead of repeating the same activities that produced the same results, it made more sense to adopt a different pattern.

At least then he had greater hopes of obtaining a different result.

"I'll think about it." Miles gratefully said. "There is not much I can do while I remain attached to our fleet, though. I can't possibly follow your example and go on a dangerous adventure. I'm not a fighter like Ketis either so I won't be dueling any swordsmen anytime soon."

This was indeed a problem. If the Larkinson Clan was based in a fixed location, it was fine if its members went on an excursion.

However, since everyone was based in the fleet, it was not as practical for people to go about their way, especially when the Larkinson Clan did not linger in a fixed region.

"I'll see about organizing a number of exciting activities once we reach the Red Ocean and stabilize our situation." Ves promised. "I'm already thinking about holding tournaments and giving limited approval for certain fleet elements to go on independent tours. Some of these ideas are only viable in the long term though so don't wait on us to give you the opportunities. Find them yourself. If our clan doesn't offer you enough stimuli, then try and seek them out on the galactic net. There is an entire community of mech designers out there that you can challenge, collaborate or exchange with. Just do something different."

With that, Ves dismissed the Apprentice. He sent a brief message to the Black Cats to keep a closer eye on Miles.

If the frustrated Apprentice made actual progress, then Ves wanted to know everything Miles had done in order to catch his own opportunity.

"I really hope you'll succeed. We could always use more Journeymen." Ves whispered.

The mech legions all needed a lot of new mech models that were tailored to their own strategies and mech doctrines. Four Journeymen couldn't possibly meet the huge demand in the short and medium term.

"If we have double the amount of Journeymen, then we won't be so swamped with priorities."

The Larkinson mech designers not only needed to meet the demand from the Larkinson Army, but also design numerous new commercial mech designs in order to create more revenue sources.

Although Ves hadn't paid much attention to the LMC lately, he was vaguely aware that its monthly sales were starting to slide. The excitement surrounding established models such as the Desolate Soldier, the Doom Guard, the Ferocious Piranha and the Crystal Lord Mark II was dropping. They had all reached market saturation in the Yeina Star Cluster a few months ago as the most eager customers already got their hands on the new machines.

The competition hadn't been sitting still either. Even if third-class mech designers had less options available than their second-class counterparts, they could still be inventive if they needed to be. Not only did they design competitive alternatives that could give the LMC mechs a run for their money, the mech industry also came up with targeted counters.

Ves wasn't sure whether it was worth his time to keep designing third-class mechs. He might delegate that responsibility almost entirely to his design teams.

What he was certain about was that the Larkinson Clan's growing pile of debt necessitated a drastic increase in income. The easiest way for Ves to address this problem was to enter the second-class mech market.

He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin as he leaned back on his chair. "It's been a long time since I designed a mech that is meant to sell. I have to come up with at least one cash cow in order to alleviate the worsening financial position of my clan."

This was an interesting challenge to Ves. Unlike designing a mech for his clansmen, he needed to take a larger, more eclectic and more diverse clientele in mind. All sorts of people who came from many different states and cultures were potential customers to him. What he needed to do was to focus on a broad target audience and develop a new mech concept that strongly appealed to their needs.

This was pretty hard even for Ves. While he had a lot more options available than a few years ago, all of this choice slowed down his decision-making process. He had to make a careful consideration on what he was willing to add to his commercial products and what he should reserve for his clan.

For example, it wouldn't take a lot of time for him to publish the second-class version of the Ferocious Piranha, but right now it functioned as one of the key mechs of the Flagrant Vandals and a few other mech legions that deployed light mechs.

It would cheapen their advantage and their special identity if their signature mechs were sold en masse to the public!

"This is why the Larkinson Army needs at least 21 exclusive mech series."

At least Ves had already made a head start in fulfilling them with models such as the Transcendent Punisher and the Eternal Redemption.

For now, he wanted each mech legion to obtain three exclusive mech models which they could base their essential strategies around.

Once the Avatars, Sentinels and other mech legions received their core mechs, Ves was open to expanding their mech roster with additional mech models that added more flexibility and options to their fighting approach, though this could wait until later.

Just thinking about how many projects all of this entailed already gave Ves a headache.

Should he relax his own rule and become more open to hiring external Journeyman Mech Designers?

Although it would be a lot more difficult to guarantee their loyalty, they provided immediate value to the Larkinson Clan... Perhaps Ves should explore this idea further.