

The Mech 4981

Chapter 4981 Spiritual Transformation

After years of research, work and design accumulation, Ves finally managed to create a new masterwork mech!

Though Ves had high hopes for the Ghost Project and already felt that he had a good chance of elevating the quality of his expert mech, his wife had a different opinion!

The reason why Gloriana looked absolutely gobsmacked at the moment was because she had already started to write off the possibility of turning the Ghost Project into a masterwork mech.

Her internal model of mechs heavily emphasized the physical qualities of a mech. In her opinion, a mech that was worthy to become a masterwork had to match the mech design as closely as possible while also making small adjustments in order to compensate for irregularities in materials and the environment.

Although Gloriana also learned from her husband that it was important to provide a mech with a structured spiritual foundation, she had always treated it as an auxiliary component. Adding it to a mech was an easy method to elevate the overall quality of a mech.

The stronger the spirituality of a mech, the less effort was needed to surpass the masterwork threshold!

However, one of the long-running disagreements between Ves and Gloriana was their view on how much weight the material and spiritual properties carried when calculating the overall quality level of a mech.

Gloriana for example believed that a masterwork mech was at least 90 percent about perfecting the material aspects of a mech.

Expanding on the spiritual foundation of a mech was definitely an easy way to score extra points, but even if it received a massive improvement that made it much more effective than before, it should not be alone to carry a mech to the masterwork state!

In Gloriana's theoretical framework of mechs, it was absolutely essential to elevate its physical and material qualities to the utmost in order to climb up to the second rung of Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship.

Although Ves fully understood Gloriana's arguments, he disagreed with her conclusion.

Their design philosophies were ultimately different on a fundamental level, and that caused the two to regard masterwork mechs from their own unique lenses.

Ves possessed an unconventional design philosophy, so it shouldn't be a surprise that his interpretation of mechs was radically different from the mainstream.

In his view, a classically educated mech designer as Gloriana put way too much stock on what mechs looked like in the material realm.

To a mech designer like Ves who spent much of his years studying how his mechs looked in both the material realm and the imaginary realm, he felt that the latter was just as important as the former!

A mech that looked visually exquisite but turned out to be a mess from a spiritual perspective was a defective product in Ves' eyes!

Perhaps it was still possible for such a mech to become a masterwork, but the people who accomplished this in the past only did so by putting in an effort that was beyond human!

These rare masterwork mech designers made it so that the material properties of a mech overpowered to such an extent that its strengths fully compensated for the weaknesses of the spiritual properties of the same machine!

According to the theoretical framework of mechs established by Ves, that was a valid but extremely inefficient way to make a masterwork mech.

There was no need for mech designers to perfect the physical engineering of the mech to such an insane degree.

As long as they did a good job at shaping the spiritual engineering of the mech, the combined scores of the two should make it so that the product had a higher chance of attaining masterwork status!

Ves theorized that whatever force was responsible for judging the craftsmanship of a mech based 50 percent of the score on its material form and the other 50 percent on its spiritual form!

Of course, Ves was also open-minded enough to accept the possibility that the spirituality of a mech was only 30 or 40 percent as important.

It was difficult to determine the exact weight of every criteria. Ves and Gloriana did not have access to enough samples to perform rigorous quantitative research on this difficult subject.

They also found it challenging to record concrete data without involving a lot of their own subjectivity in their measurements.

This was the reason why their disagreement remained unresolved for such a long time.

This was like two people watching the same drama show but coming away with different opinions on whether it was good.

Gloriana was the sort of viewer who heavily appreciated the graphics, the practical effects and the appearances of the actors of a broadcasted drama. She became incredibly stimulated when the entire show looked fantastic to her eyes, so much so that she did not pay too much attention to any other criteria!

Ves on the other hand was the sort of viewer who appreciated both the visuals and the sounds of a drama show. The experience had to look good, but it was equally important for the sound effects, the voices of actors and the accompanying music to delight his ears!

Perhaps most people did not put much weight in the aural experience of a drama show, but Ves was different.

Not only that, but he believed that the cosmos or whatever else turned mechs into masterworks applied a set of criteria that also shared a similar appreciation for sound and music!

Of course, it was also probable that this cosmic force also scored mechs by other aspects that Ves and Gloriana did not consider such as the quality of the narrative plot or the dialogue.

None of that was important for the time being.

What mattered the most to the two mech designers was that the Ghost Project's masterwork transformation may finally give the Miracle Couple a resolution to their long-running dispute!

From the increasing sense of dismay on Gloriana's face, it appeared that the proof provided by the expert stealth mech did not sit well with the female mech designer!

Ves was the opposite in this regard. His grin grew wider and wider as he observed plenty of signs that his innovative efforts to elevate the spiritual design of his Ghost Project to a greater height made the difference!

"Hahahaha! I knew I was right!"

The reason why he felt so jubilant was because he knew that the Ghost Project was not that impressive from a physical aspect!

His past masterwork mechs were much more well-constructed even if Ves and his wife weren't as good at the time.

This was because the technological sophistication of older mechs such as the original Amaranto, Everchanger and so on was not that high.

These masterwork mechs more closely matched the design and fabrication skills mastered by Ves and Gloriana.

The Dullahan Project and the Ghost Project were entirely different in this regard.

They came much closer to first-class mechs in terms of technological sophistication and material composition.

The addition of phasewater alone also made it a lot harder to fabricate a working transphasic mech!

The result of these changes was that the Dullahan Project ended up fairly sloppy.

Ves and Gloriana may have learned a lot of lessons and pulled off a significantly better job at improving the physical construction of the Ghost Project, but it should not be close to reaching the masterwork threshold at its current quality!

The only reason why it became a masterwork mech without the use of one of Lucky's gems was because the act of turning it into a powerful and more structured third order living mech massively improved its spiritual properties!

This latest advancement raised the overall quality level of the Ghost Project so much that it essentially became a masterwork mech by virtue of its elaborate and multi-faceted spiritual design!

"It's a combination of excellent features that has made the difference!" Ves guessed.

By combining the powerful and versatile Geist System, the newly forged bond between Venerable Zimro Belson and Mephisto and now a third order living mech that gained access to several promising Ascension Paths, all of these innovative additions enriched the expert stealth mech to such an extent that the cosmos would have to be blind if it did not recognize it as a masterwork!

"This..." Gloriana looked almost broken. "This cannot be... I was sure my theory was right... how can such a physically flawed mech become a masterwork..."

It was as if the qualitative transformation of the Ghost Project had nothing to do with her contributions.

She may have worked hard to prevent the expert stealth mech from ending up terrible in physical terms, but she had not been able to excel in this area due to her immature skills, her incomplete theoretical understanding and her lack of experience!

Even if her god body solution would eventually ensure that the Ghost Project's physical attributes gradually brought it closer to the masterwork threshold over time, this was not a real accomplishment in her opinion.

As Ves and everyone else continued to observe the Ghost Project as it reached a higher and more indescribable state of existence, it seemed that even the masterwork transformation was biased towards spirituality at this time!

Gloriana had another reason to feel upset about this event!

"How can this be?! Why isn't the physical structure being elevated as much as in the previous cases?!"

Ves smirked in her direction. "You should summon your companion spirit and take a peek through her perspective."

Gloriana along with Miles and Cormaunt all pulled out their respective companion spirits.

Maow...

Alexandria had been working hard in the past few days. The red spiritual cat looked much more tired than normal, but she did not need to exert much effort to witness the remarkable transformation taking place in a different realm!

It was as if the Ghost Project was bathed in a rainbow. Reality itself moved to improve and strengthen the spiritual foundation of the newly completed expert mech in ways that were both subtle but incredibly clever!

All of the Larkinson mech designers understood that this was the reason why the masterwork transformation did not affect the Ghost Project's physical construction all that much.

Its spiritual foundation was already claiming the bulk of the benefits!

"This proves one of my other theories." Ves grinned. "When a mech becomes a masterwork, its improvements are spread in proportion to its different aspects. A materially superior mech will receive a major improvement to its physical cohesion. A spiritually superior mech will receive a major improvement to its spiritual properties. Of course, the rest will also benefit, but not to the same extent."

What was weak became less weak.

What was strong became a lot stronger!

"What about a mech that is already strong in both matter and spirit?" Miles Tovar cautiously asked.

Gloriana's body suddenly shook! A daring theory suddenly entered her mind!

Even though she wanted to deny the truth, she could not argue against concrete proof.

Once she began to reconstruct her old theoretical framework in order to make it more consistent with the latest results, she immediately extrapolated the scenario that Miles had just mentioned.

The possible answers shocked her to her core!

"If a mech is exquisite enough in both areas, then it shall receive a major improvement in both areas. It will not turn into a masterwork mech that has barely climbed up to the second rung of Senfovon's ladder of craftsmanship. The mech will advance substantially further than that. If both the matter and the spirit of the machine have reached an extreme, then it is possible that it can reach the next threshold that comes after a masterwork."

This time, even Master Benedict grew shocked!

"You mean..."

"Grand work." Gloriana reverently spoke.

The entire workshop fell silent this time. Though all of the mech designers continued to track the changes triggered by the masterwork changes, a part of their minds were no longer in the present.

Instead, they were already fantasizing about what they needed to do in order to climb up the third rung of the craftsmanship ladder!

Chapter 4982 The Embodiment Of Fear

When the masterwork transformation finally came to an end, everyone still lingered in the workshop for a time.

The surprises that unfolded on the final day continually exceeded everyone's expectations.

Not even Ves could have dreamed that the Ghost Project would go through so much last-minute improvements and upgrades!

Compared to the Ghost Project as depicted in the latest iteration of its design, the expert stealth mech that they created under the influence of Ves' supercharged glow was significantly stronger!

The significance of the Ghost Project was greater than that of other masterwork expert mechs.

It proved that it was possible to make a masterwork mech through alternative means.

Gloriana's theory had become defunct. The Ghost Project was living proof that it was possible to climb up to the second rung of the craftsmanship ladder even if it exhibited obvious physical flaws and imperfections!

That was not to say that there was no point in putting a lot of effort into making the physical construction as exquisite as possible anymore.

On the contrary, its importance continued to remain high. A better physical construction meant that the spiritual foundation did not have to be as demanding.

It was already enough for Ves and his collaborators to create a third order living mech!

The huge jump in quality between a second order living mech and a third order living mech meant that it should become easier than ever for Ves to collect additional masterwork certificates in the future!

Ves confirmed so many theories that he felt he lifted the veil that obscured the secrets of masterwork mechs to a much greater extent.

Although he was still far from being able to fabricate masterwork mechs on demand, he had made a lot of progress towards attaining this ambitious goal!

If Gloriana's most recent guess also happened to be accurate, then Ves may have figured out the requirements of making a grand work as well!

Just the thought of it sent shivers through his body.

Ves and Gloriana happened to be 'lucky' enough to witness an artifact that was most probably a grand work with their own eyes.

When Ketis abruptly clutched the Heavensword in her hands and channeled its enormous might, Ves and his wife managed to make a lot of observations that enriched their vision!

While Gloriana conducted an extensive study and analysis on the Heavensword's impressive physical design, Ves on the other hand focused primarily on its vast and even more elaborate metaphysical properties!

The Heavensword happened to score extremely well in both aspects. If this ancient artifact could truly serve as a typical representation of a grand work, then perhaps it may very well be possible for the Miracle Couple to combine their respective strengths and realize the impossible!

Of course, they were way too far away from reaching this point. Ves was much more interested in increasing his success rate in making masterwork mechs.

He understood that the Ghost Project was still an exception rather than the rule. Its spiritual design was much stronger and more complex due to the addition of the Geist System.

There was no way for Ves to mass produce this key part. The necessity to harvest the head of an existing expert pilot and artificially keep it alive was not only a taboo, but also a massive pain!

The only chance that Ves could obtain a result that was partially as good was to develop a simplified and downgraded version of the Geist System.

Just as how Master Benedict Cortez realized his design philosophy by developing the mass producible Endex System based on his Original Energy Bridge System, Ves could pursue a similar approach to his work.

As long as the mass production version of the Geist System still retained a sufficient amount of power and utility, it may even be innovative and useful enough for Ves to realize his design philosophy based on this successful research result!

Ves would never do that of course. He had much greater ambitions in mind. He did not struggle for many decades like Master Benedict, so he was not desperate to attain an easy solution that could allow him to get rid of his status as a Senior Mech Designer.

In fact, he already saw much greater potential in becoming a Master by conducting further research into third order living mechs and his newly invented Ascension Paths.

For example, Ves believed that refining the living mech concept to the point where other professionals could fabricate third order living mechs was an achievement that was almost just as massive as making genetic aptitude redundant!

Ves had already managed to develop his living mech designs to the point where all of the factories, workshops and manufacturing complexes that followed his proscribed methods of fabrications could stably mass produce second order living mechs.

However, the difficulty of enabling them to mass produce third order living mechs was probably at least a hundred times greater!

Another potential research direction that could help him advance to Master was to successfully figure out a method to fabricate a fourth order living mech.

The difficulty of accomplishing this might be much greater depending on how much stronger it was compared to a third order living mech.

Ves was afraid that the gap between the two was so great that making this happen was as improbable as an ace pilot ascending to god pilot!

"We are done." Master Benedict declared once everyone had enough time to mull over what had happened and form preliminary conclusions based on their observations. "Much has happened over the course of these last five days. You will have plenty of opportunities to study the masterwork transformation by revisiting your memories and rewatching the recorded footage. You are all tired and exhausted, so I suggest you wrap up this run and take a long and well-deserved break."

The Master Mech Designer was right. None of them were in the right state of mind to do anything serious.

As the mech designers began to clean up the workshop, Venerable Zimro Belson stared up at his completed expert mech with awe in his eyes.

The frequent sensations of pain resulting from his abrupt bonding with Mephisto no longer bothered him as much as before.

In the face of a powerful masterwork expert mech, Zimro was more than willing to endure this suffering!

Ves slowly floated down to the emotional expert pilot's side.

"He is beautiful." Zimro whispered to the patriarch. "He might not be as flashy as the likes of the Amaranto and the Everchanger, but my new mech does not need to display its strength in the open."

The Ghost Project did not possess the visual flair that Ves often applied to his other high-end works.

Its coating was almost entirely black from top to bottom. There were no patterns or other visual markings that attracted unnecessary attention to the slim and rounded mech frame.

The lack of sharp edges and defined angles gave the Ghost Project a deceptively soft and harmless impression.

If other people did not know what the Ghost Project was all about, it was possible to mistake it as a particularly expensive standard mech!

It helped a lot that the masterwork expert mech did not actually give people the feeling that it possessed extraordinary traits.

Since its masterwork transformation mostly improved its intangible properties, its physical frame was not that special.

The expert mech's strong and sophisticated spiritual design also did not induce any abnormal reactions onto people.

It felt completely inert, but that was by design. Much of the spiritual design was focused towards hiding and dampening its own metaphysical presence and emissions.

With the help of Kalo, the black-coated expert mech should easily be able to pass for a scout mech!

Although Ves was easily able to pierce through this passive hiding effect due to the fact he understood it too well, another important factor was that it was currently inactive and unpowered.

Once Venerable Zimro interfaced with the mech and activated all of its potent stealth functions, perhaps not even Ves would be able to track it anymore!

Ves looked forward to seeing that happen. After all, if the Ghost Project could elude his own senses, then it should definitely have a good chance of defeating the mystical detection methods mastered by the Five Scrolls Compact!

"The Ghost Project is complete." Ves told Zimro. "It is time to drop the codename and gain a name that better reflects your new battle partner's identity as a masterwork expert mech. Do you have any suggestions?"

The expert pilot nodded. The man had been thinking over the name for many months.

Unlike Venerable Jannzi, Zimro needed no delay in announcing his choice.

"If it is permissible, I would like to name him the Phobos. I want him to become the embodiment of fear, the dagger that is hidden in the dark, the ghost that threatens to take away your life in your sleep. The threat of having it deployed against you must be stronger than its actual performance in the field!"

Phobos. Fear. Another name derived from mythology.

Ves did not have much objection to this suggestion. "Very well. The Phobos is worthy to carry this heavy name. I hope that you will do whatever you can to master it and further its growth. The challenges you will face in trying to control the Geist System will test you a lot over the years, but as long as you cooperate well enough with your new machine, I have no doubt you will truly be able to deploy an army of fiends."

The Phobos had just been born, but its strong spiritual foundation already granted him the intelligence to make rudimentary contact with Venerable Zimro Belson.

The expert pilot needed to interface with the expert stealth mech for the first time in order to truly pair them together, but the common bond they shared with Mephisto already enabled them to familiarize themselves with each other in advance!

Zimro and the Phobos did not reject each other in any way.

This was a small relief to Ves as their personalities diverged to a moderate extent. Venerable Zimro was supposed to act as the voice of reason and restraint while the Phobos was meant to be more aggressive in making use of his powerful functions.

The combination between the two opposing mindsets might produce tension, but it would also ensure that this new pairing remained sharp and in control.

"That is interesting."

When Ves examined the Ghost Project's spiritual foundation more deeply, he discovered that there was an addition that he never accounted for in his design work!

"Is that... the manifestation of an Ascension Path?"

The more he studied it, the more he felt its power and its inextricable relationship to Kalo.

To his spiritual senses, this floating spiritual manifestation that continually exerted its power onto the Phobos resembled a rune!

Yes, a rune!

Ves knew nothing about the origin, the meaning or the typography of the rune, but that did not stop him from recognizing its potency and cohesiveness!

The intangible rune that was hidden inside the expert mech's spiritual foundation functioned similarly to Lucky's gem, but Ves had the feeling that it was a more direct and fundamental application of energy and power!

He never realized that creating an Ascension Path would produce such a mystical outcome!

Ves wondered whether the appearance of the rune was a consequence of the masterwork transformation. The entire spiritual foundation of the Phobos did undergo a subtle evolution, after all. It went without saying that the three Ascension Paths must have been improved as well!

His eyes lit up! "This is exactly what I need to flesh out my Ascension Path concept!"

His first attempt to make them was so sloppy and hasty that they were bound to be flawed. The spiritual transformation of the Phobos must have smoothed out a lot of wrinkles and made them significantly more viable than before.

This meant that Ves could closely examine the changes made to the Ascension Paths and apply what he learned to develop his subsequent Ascension Paths!

"The structure and the boundaries have become a lot more elegant."

"The formation of runes makes it a lot easier to quantify the evolutionary progress of the mech."

"The Phobos is already halfway into forming a second rune."

Chapter 4983 Ascension Rune

The creation of the Phobos was a major accomplishment for the Larkinson Clan!

The new third order living mech was by far the most powerful masterwork expert mech in the clan's current mech roster.

Even though the Amaranto, the Everchanger and the Minerva had proven their worth in combat on many occasions, their illustrious battle records could not compensate for the harsh reality that their tech and material standards had fallen behind the times.

While the Phobos was admittedly not as strong in direct combat as the aforementioned masterwork expert mechs, he did not need to be. His powerful active stealth system along with all of his spiritual advancements enabled him to defeat powerful opponents before they had any chance to retaliate!

This was enough to acknowledge the Phobos as the masterwork that best reflected Ves' current strengths as a mech designer!

The Larkinson Clan would have praised the creation of the impressive expert stealth mech if not for the fact that the Phobos was supposed to be a clandestine asset!

The majority of clansmen did not even receive any notification of this impressive addition. They still thought that the Mars was the latest masterwork mech that Ves and Gloriana jointly fabricated.

However, it was pretty much impossible to hide such a massive development in certain well-informed circles.

Davute, the Friday Coalition, the Hexadric Hegemony, the Mech Trade Association and who knew what else already learned that the Larkinson Clan not only completed its long-awaited Ghost Project, but also attained a much better end result!

The implications of this were frightening.

There simply weren't a lot of expert stealth mechs in human space. The mech community considered them to be a rarity because most of the pilots assigned to this mech type simply did not possess the qualities of a demigod.

Venerable Zimro Belson was a rare exception to this pattern, and thus granted the Larkinson Clan an extremely potent weapon that far too many other parties lacked!

No matter whether they were Davutans or Fridaymen, many people who understood the ramifications of an expert stealth mech began to raise the threat level of the Larkinson Clan to a higher degree!

The most frightening aspect about the Larkinson Clan was not that it could muster up a lot of powerful mechs and raid another planet like Pima Prime, but that it could quietly eliminate a lot of enemies without leaving behind any trace!

No traces meant no proof.

No proof meant that the Larkinson Clan could essentially get away with a lot of dirty deeds!

Even if the Larkinsons built up a well-deserved reputation for honor and uprightness, no one was naive enough that it employed stealth mechs just to serve as sneaky scout units.

With so many rumors flying around, it was impossible for the Larkinson Clan to refute all of the stories.

In fact, it was more beneficial for the Larkinsons if other people knew that their chances of suffering retaliation became much higher!

Still, Ves was not entirely comfortable with exposing the existence of the Phobos before he had even completed his first serious mission.

He would have preferred to keep his new expert stealth mech hidden and use the element of surprise to utterly crush a powerful but complacent adversary!

"Oh well."

A day after the fabrication run had ended, Ves reluctantly applied to the MTA to inspect his latest masterwork mech and issue another batch of masterwork certificates.

He did not really care too much about collecting his eighth masterwork certificate, but he understood that it was a life-changing accomplishment for Miles Tovar and Cormaunt Hempkamp to receive their first award of this kind!

"I'm not sure whether the MTA will recognize their contributions, though." Ves furrowed his brows. "Their involvement in the previous fabrication run was not that much to begin with, and my insistence on taking over a greater portion of their assigned work makes them look even worse."

Miles and Cormaunt still benefited enormously even if the mechers did not award them with masterwork certificates in the end.

This was because the experience of contributing to the creation of a masterwork mech was already incomparably precious!

The subsequent masterwork transformation also granted the two Journeymen a lot of new insights and inspiration. They should make a lot of gains in their work after they digested all of the observations they made!

The same applied to Ves. The spiritual foundation of the Phobos was strong and highly developed despite being born just a day ago! No other living mech could have matched the latest expert mech on this front just after their own creation!

The only exception was the Dullahan Project, but that was a special case. The expert space knight not only inherited a substantial amount of power from the Shield of Samar, but also formed a Blood Pact with Venerable Jannzi, enabling the both of them to facilitate each other's growth!

"The Phobos has a lot of secrets."

He felt deeply uncomfortable about displaying it to the mechers. He knew from past instances that they would bring a small troop of mech designers and engineers so that they could meticulously examine and record a new masterwork mech from top to bottom.

Ves still did not exactly know why the MTA put such a high emphasis on masterwork mechs, but he had already formed a lot of possible guesses.

"Well, the MTA will find a way to examine it one way or another, so I might as well invite them and get this over with as soon as possible."

The Phobos was currently in his weakest and most rudimentary state, and Ves intended to keep him that way for the time being.

This way, the mechers would only be able to record the expert stealth mech's properties when he had only formed a single rune corresponding to the Path of the Hidden Stalker.

Ves had already studied the Phobos extensively enough to conclude that the new expert mech only needed to experience a small amount of growth to form his second 'rune'!

"If this was a roleplaying game, then the second rune corresponds to reaching the second stage of an evolutionary process."

It was similar to how the mech community divided expert pilots into low-tier, mid-tier and high-tier buckets.

The difference here was that the differentiation between expert pilots was an artificial construct.

These new 'Ascension Runes' as Ves had taken to calling them possessed a lot of depth and mystery.

Ves could tell that they had nothing to do with the Kingdom of Mechs.

Instead, he theorized that his newly created Ascension Paths had accidentally contacted a deeper spiritual rule or phenomenon that was related to these strange runes, either before or after the masterwork transformation!

Every rune had a meaning. Ves could clearly sense that the Ascension Rune floating in the spiritual foundation of the Phobos possessed intrinsic power that remained active at all times.

Ves looked thoughtful. "This falls in line with the first ability that I have outlined in the Path of the Hidden Stalker."

The main purpose of this Ascension Path was to make it harder to detect. The first ability was one of the most important evolutionary upgrades because it was meant to fool the sharp intuition of opposing expert pilots!

These powerful soldiers and warriors had honed their senses and instincts on the battlefield. Their advancement had caused them to become a lot better at detecting anything that felt wrong or threatening.

If Ves wanted to turn the Phobos into an assassination unit that could take out an enemy expert mech in a single blow, then the Path of the Hidden Stalker had to put heavy emphasis on circumventing more unconventional means of threat detection!

He did not know how much this new Ascension Rune affected the stealth capabilities of the Phobos. He would have to test his new expert mech in order to make this determination.

Hopefully, there would be a way to deactivate the Ascension Rune so that he could make accurate comparisons.

As Ves continued to study and go over the data on the latest fabrication run in his office, he began to develop the urge to give all of his other mechs access to his latest innovation as well!

"These Ascension Paths should be useful to every living mech!"

While he already decided to apply them to all of the mech design projects that he had yet to complete, he was a lot more interested in applying them to his existing living mechs for the time being!

He was deeply curious to know whether granting them access to Ascension Paths would only affect their future growth or whether it would unleash the hidden potential that they accumulated over their lifetimes!

Ves did not have enough theory or data to make accurate predictions. The only way to learn the truth was to conduct an actual experiment on an older expert mech.

He already had one powerful candidate in mind. Aside from the Shield of Samar which existed no more, there was no better machine to test out the applicability of his Ascension Paths!

The implications of this latest innovation were enormous to his design philosophy as well as the lives of every living mech.

No longer would they have to grope in the dark and figure out how to evolve on their own!

While Ves was incapable of creating a 'Kingdom of Living Mechs', his design spirits could serve as adequate substitutes!

Not only were his design spirits more alive and responsive, but they could all come up with their own ideas, ensuring that the Ascension Paths would have plenty of variety!

Besides, Ves liked it a lot better when he did not put all of his eggs in a single basket.

The Kingdom of Mechs may serve as an incredibly powerful tool for humanity, but it was also an obvious target to any serious enemy!

Ves preferred it a lot more if the keepers of his Ascension Paths were spread out across several dozen different design spirits.

Just as he was about to rise to his feet so that he could pay a visit to one of his third order living mechs, the door suddenly opened.

His wife marched inside as if she owned the place. The dismay she showed a day earlier had already disappeared.

"Ves! We need to talk!"

"Uh, what is it, dear?"

Gloriana placed her hands on her hips. "Do you remember that I told you that the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty decided to send one of its ace pilots to the Glory Seekers? She is almost here. You should get ready to meet her and take a look at her ace mech. The finest Hexer engineering went into its design. Prepare to be amazed."

"Uh, okay... I look forward to the ace pilot's arrival, I guess."

"I also wanted to discuss our latest theories on masterwork mechs." Gloriana briskly continued. "I have examined a large amount of data and conducted a thorough analysis. I admit that my theory was not as close to the truth as yours. That is not to say that it is completely correct. I am merely acknowledging that it has made a small amount of progress. I still have a chance to make subsequent discoveries that can supplement our theories further. There has to be more criteria that determines whether a mech deserves to become a masterwork. Matter and spirit are only two of the broad categories that we have identified. There should be other variables that can help us create masterwork mechs with greater ease."

Although Ves vaguely sensed something wrong in his wife's arguments, he agreed with her overall idea.

He too felt that there was way more to masterworks than just perfecting their physical and spiritual forms.

Perhaps it was fame.

Perhaps it was technological advancement.

Perhaps it was the power of love.

Whatever the case, Ves and Gloriana had to fabricate a lot more masterwork mechs if they wanted to have any chance of identifying additional key variables!

"We still have a heap of ongoing mech design projects that are close to completion, right?" Ves asked. "Those are good opportunities for us to put our latest theories and ideas to the test. Now that I have figured out how to make third order living mechs on demand, our chances of turning those future works into masterwork mechs should be a lot higher!"

Gloriana smirked. "That is exactly what I had in mind. Please prepare as best you can. The Bloodripper Project and the Greenaxe Project may not be as innovative as the Phobos, but they are still Larkinson expert mechs in their own right. They deserve a chance to excel in the upcoming war between Davute and Karlach."

Ves dropped his smile. The reminder of the fact that neither of those two expert mechs would become a part of his expeditionary fleet soured his mood.

Chapter 4984 Saintess Ulrika Vraken

A new ace pilot arrived in the Davute System!

This was a massive event as the identity of an ace pilot was just too sensitive.

In an age where the Big Two designated weapons of mass destruction as taboos, the only deterrent that most human states and powers had access to were ace pilots and their accompanying ace mechs.

A lot of people in Davute grew nervous and hopeful.

As long as the recently founded colonial state managed to rope in another powerful ace pilot such as Patriarch Reginald Cross, the probability that Davute would win its upcoming war against Karlach would rise by another few percentage points!

Unfortunately for the government, the stakeholders and the citizens of Davute, the newly arrived top-specced combat carrier ignored all incoming nails.

The vessel did not even obey the instructions and guidelines of the port system's traffic control authority.

The aggressively-named Fist of the Maiden flew straight towards Davute VII in the straightest possible trajectory, caring little about all of the starships belonging to other organizations that happened to be in the way!

The behavior of the Fist of the Maiden generated a lot of chaos and confusion among the spacers and their superiors.

Of course, the chances that the combat carrier would physically collide against another starship in the vastness of space were miniscule, so the ship's rude behavior was not that alarming.

The real reason why she caused distress was because every ship was supposed to possess a wide allotment of space.

Collisions may be improbable, but there was no reason to tempt fate. With at least a few kilometers or hundreds of kilometers of empty space between different vessels, it became a lot more difficult for ships to get exposed to accidents and more concerningly deliberate terrorist attacks.

Davute already suffered greatly during the founding ceremony that took place half a year ago.

Ever since then, Davute immediately strengthened its security regulations and invested a lot more resources into its security services!

The problem with Davute was that there were certain parties that had gained so much power, leverage and prestige that they became virtually untouchable.

The Larkinson Clan had attained this special status. Although the members of this strange organization did not go out of their way to defy the colonial state's authority, they were not shy about ignoring the rules if they became too inconvenient.

The Fist of the Maiden was not a registered vessel of the Larkinson Clan, but clearly had ties to it. That combined with the fact that she carried an actual ace pilot meant that every ship that was remotely in the vicinity of her route made sure to stay well enough away from this dangerous combat carrier!

As the Fist of the Maiden took advantage of her superdrive to rapidly traverse towards the inner system of the busy port system, her continued lack of communication became increasingly more intolerable.

The Larkinson Clan had little choice but to step forward and assuage the concerns of the government. The Fist of the Maiden and her important passengers were not trying to provoke any trouble with the colonial federation.

The Glory Seekers were simply welcoming their latest 'guest' from their home state!

It initially seemed that once the Fist of the Maiden reached Davute VII, she would descend from orbit and land straight into Kotor City.

Upon the strong urging of the Larkinson Clan, the Hexer in charge of the Fist of the Maiden eventually agreed to stop in high orbit and link up with the Glory Seeker Fleet.

"You should have agreed to the original plan and let the Fist of the Maiden journey straight to the Cat Nest." Gloriana complained to her husband as she held Aurelia and Andraste's cute little hands. "We needed to give the Davutans a reminder that we are not to be trifled with. Showing them respect is a sign of weakness."

Ves shook his head in disagreement as he held Marvaine in his arms. "We have already become too high-profile for our own good. Our expeditionary fleet is about to depart from this star system anyway. Let's not make life too difficult for Uncle Ark and the Davute Branch."

The elan patriarch and his immediate family waited in front of the hatch of their armored shuttle.

Once the vehicle successfully docked inside the hangar bay of the Fist of the Maiden, the Larkinsons could finally step aboard the Hexer combat carrier.

The familiar architecture annoyed Ves a bit, but he soon shoved those feelings aside when his eyes gazed at one of the most powerful mechs in the star systems.

·cθm Andraste immediately tried to pull away from her mother and run forward!

"Wow! It's so cool! It's thinner than the Mars, but it can hit just as hard!"

"Be patient, girl." Gloriana admonished her second daughter. "It is rude and dangerous to approach an ace mech without asking for permission. Let us meet with the pilot first."

Lucky and Clixie trailed after the Larkinsons Both cats sniffed the air and looked around in case there were any threats in the vicinity.

"Meow."

"Miaow-"

When they detected that there was no cause for concern, they started to run around and explore every corner of the hangar bay.

The Larkinsons meanwhile stopped in front of a small entourage of Hexer officers and officials.

A representative of the Vraken Matriarchal Dynasty stepped forward and began to initiate the commencement of the latest agreement between the Larkinson Clan and the Hex Federation.

"...According to the terms that we have set, the Supreme Son shall gain the limited ability to issue orders to our Saintess in combat. She shall retain the right to accept or refuse your orders based on a test that judges whether they are reasonable or negatively affects the interests of the Hex Federation. You shall also gain the right to examine, repair, modify and upgrade the Macharia Excelsia under active supervision of either the resident chief technicians or one of its main designers. You may not implement unrestricted changes to the Macharia Excelsia without the consent of our Saintess, our chief technician and one of the Master Mech Designers that still remain in charge of the project."

Although Ves and the Hexers had already agreed on these terms in advance, it was still useful for the both of them to go over them once again in order to preempt any misunderstandings.

Anything related to an ace mech was delicate. It was unthinkable for the owners of an ace mech to grant a third party so much access to such a powerful strategic asset!

Once Ves confirmed that he understood and agreed with all of the terms, the Larkinsons finally met with the powerful Hexer ace pilot that would be taking part in the coming expedition.

A relatively tall and silver-haired woman in uniform strode forward and stopped in front of Ves.

The air around her seemed to freeze as the woman's extraordinary willpower caused her to impose a feeling of desolation in the vicinity.

Despite her stiff back and her arch-typical Hexer demeanor, her eyes expressed a lot of expectation towards Ves.

"It is an honor to meet the son of the Superior Mother." The fairly young ace pilot spoke and stretched out her hand. "The Macharia Excelsia shall be in your care for the following months. In exchange, I shall terminate any human or alien threat that dares to lay a hand on you, your wife and your children."

Ves stiffly raised his own arm so that he could shake her slender but firm hand. "It is a pleasure to have you with us. Your matriarchal dynasty has not transmitted too much information about your ace mech. Would you like to introduce your battle partner to us, Saint Ulrika?"

"It is Saintess. Please use our people's form of address." The Hexer ace pilot insisted before she turned around and approached her mech. "You may examine my Macharia Excelsia as you wish. I am told that you are more than capable enough to upgrade her combat power to an impressive degree."

Ves and his family became more and more awed as they stepped closer to the red-coated ace mech.

The Macharia Excelsia was an ace rifleman mech that was built for an ace pilot who broke through during the later stages of the Komodo War.

Ves could immediately determine without reading through any documents that the Macharia Excelsia was a machine centered around high mobility mid-range warfare. It was a lot closer to the Promethea and the Star Dancer Mark II rather than the Amaranto in configuration.

The Vraken ace mech might not pack the greatest punch at range, but it could rapidly maneuver across the battlefield and attack sensitive enemy positions at uncomfortable angles.

It also appeared to be a capable dueling machine. It possessed enough mobility to maintain its distance from other ace mechs, and if an opposing machine ever got close, it could still put up a fight by pulling out its plasma sword.

"The Macharia Excelsia is a relatively simple ace mech that is largely based on what I piloted back when I was still an expert pilot." The Saintess began to explain. "The Hexfire Transphasic Positron Assault Rifle is its primary weapon. It is an energy weapon that boasts a high rate of fire and is highly effective at close to middle ranges. It can still be fairly precise at longer ranges, but it cannot match the performance of dedicated sniper rifles."

Ves nodded in understanding. The Hexfire Rifle incorporated the best Hexer tech and materials and was truly formidable, even against other ace mechs.

"How good is its penetration power?" He asked.

"It is a transphasic rifle, so it should easily be able to penetrate non-transphasic and low-transphasic defenses. It will lose its advantage when employed against enemies that are more up to standard, but my mech has a solution for that. The main resonating material of my ace mech is Menask Alloy. Resonating with it allows me to impart the damage output of my Hexfire Rifle with an erosion factor. The first strikes may not be able to deal significant damage onto a target, but subsequent attacks will continue to wear down the defenses."

Gloriana's eyes lit up. "I see! Menask Alloy allows for weak but high-frequency attacks to damage resilient enemies as long as the Hexfire Rifle continues to land its positron beams. Is this resonating ability effective against energy defenses as well as physical defenses?"

"My Erosion Fire ability can indeed take effect on energy shields and resonance shields, but it will take multiple times more attacks in order to erode the defenses to the same degree as physical armor."

That sounded a lot less useful against the most threatening opponents that Ves expected to face in the deep frontier.

Alien warships did not put that much stock into their hull armor. They relied much heavily on their multi-layered and segmented transphasic energy shields!

Nonetheless, this was not an insurmountable problem to Ves. He gazed at the ace mech's Hexfire Rifle with a critical eye.

Whether he converted it into a luminar crystal rifle or not, Ves had plenty of ways to dramatically increase the ranged combat effectiveness of the Macharia Excelsia!

"Does the Macharia have any other resonating exotics worth noting?"

"It does not." The Saintess shook her head. "The Menask Alloy plays a key role in enabling my ace mech to overcome any enemy, including first-class multipurpose mechs if it ever comes to that. What you need to know is that the erosion effect applies to the target of my attacks. This means that every ally benefits. As long as we encounter an enemy that is too strong and tough to take down with ease, I can lead the attacks and erode the target's defenses to such an extent that the other mechs on our side can materially contribute benefits. As long as we encounter an enemy that is too strong and tough to take down with ease, I can lead the attacks and erode the target's defenses to such an extent that the other mechs on our side can materially contribute to the battle by attacking the weakened defenses. That is the true purpose the Macharia Excelsia."

"That... that is exactly what we need in our expedition!" Ves gasped!

Chapter 4985 Frail Body

The fault tolerance of the expeditionary fleet became a lot higher now that the Macharia Excelsia arrived!

The ace rifleman mech was already a potent enough force on the battlefield when it was alone, but the powerful erosion effect generated by Menask Alloy made it even more useful when teaming up with other powerful assets! Its rapid-fire Hexfire Rifle could either weaken the defenses of a large number of enemy units, or break down the defenses of a more formidable opponent over time!

The Macharia Excelsia did not need a lot of babysitting as it possessed the mobility to reposition itself on the battlefield. It could either accompany other powerful assets or remain in the rear where it could offer adequate fire support without putting itself at risk.

"The transphasic flight system accelerates quickly and is good at evasion, but I am told that it cannot amplify the velocity of my machine as much as other models." Saintess Ulrika Vraken explained. "It is somewhat durable, but it is better if it does not get exposed to attacks."

Ves nodded in understanding. The Macharia Excelsia was more of a dancer and a short-term sprinter than a marathon runner.

"What about its defenses?" He asked as he took a closer look at the hexagon-patterned armor plating.

"The Frachta Armor is designed to be lightweight while still offering adequate protection. It can shrug off most weak attacks when it remains in a passive state, but it cannot tolerate too many strong attacks. I can stiffen its defenses as long as I allow my ace mech to overload the armor system with an abundance of energy. It can block much more powerful attacks in this state, but its electrical systems will quickly malfunction if I keep it up for too long."

Defense was the Macharia Excelsia's weak point. Its resonance shield and transphasic armor system simply weren't that good compared to the defenses of many other ace mechs.

This was not that concerning when fighting against masses of weaker opponents, but it became a much greater concern when confronting enemy ace mechs and warships.

"Look, papa!" Andraste yelled as she pointed up at the large and technologically sophisticated sword mounted on the ace mech's side. "It's a sword! The ace mech has a sword!"

Saintess Ulrika broke her impassive facade as she gently patted her hand onto Andraste's hair. "You are correct. It is a transphasic plasma sword to be more precise. It can inflict heavy damage when it is fully powered, and it can also apply the erosion effect onto an adversary when I resonate with Menask Alloy. The attack power of this weapon is much higher than the Hexfire Rifle."

Though Andraste thought that the plasma sword was cool, her father held a slightly different opinion.

"This ace mech is a demanding machine." Ves noted with a frown. "Its weapons, its defenses and its flight system all demand a copious amount of energy in order to maximize their performance. How long can it last in battle?"

"Not too long compared to other ace mechs" She admitted "The Macharia Excelsia is not designed to continually participate in long, drawn-out battles. It is meant to shock the Fridaymen opposition and quickly breach their lines, either by eliminating a large quantity of ordinary mech units or prioritizing the downfall of an opposing ace mech or fortress. My ace mech is literally a troubleshooter."

"Mhmm."

Ves and Gloriana examined the ace mech even further while the Saintess continued to share her insights and piloting experiences.

"Meow-"

Lucky somehow managed to climb into her arms. The gem cat squinted his artificial eyes as Ulrika stroked his back in a surprisingly tender and gentle fashion.

"One of my life's regrets was that I never had the opportunity to fight against the Friday Coalition as an ace pilot." The Saintess spoke in a saddened tone. "I may not have been able to reverse the course of the last war, but I could have made the Fridaymen pay a much greater price in the process of claiming victory in the Komodo Star Sector. Instead, our matriarchal dynasty decided to transfer me to the Red Ocean in advance."

Gloriana looked sympathetic. "It takes too much time to design and fabricate an ace mech. Besides, you are much more useful to the Hexer people if you can guard them against attacks against their new neighbors in the Magair Middle Zone."

"I have already gotten over this regret." Ulrika Vraken said as she continued to play with Lucky in her arms. "My fellow Hexers and I have already established ourselves in the Hex Federation. The only blemish is that the Fridaymen have come as well. Their colonies must be destroyed if our people are to secure our foothold in this dwarf galaxy. That is one of the reasons why I have agreed to come. As long as my Macharia Exelcia can become 10 or 20 percent better at defeating the Fridaymen, I am more than willing to fight any aliens you may come across."

Ves smirked when he heard this "Oh, I can assure you that once I am done with overhauling your ace mech, its combat performance will increase by more than just 20 percent."

He had a good first talk with Saintess Ulrika Vraken. The woman was cooperative and open-minded enough to wholeheartedly agree with this entire venture. He could have hardly asked for a better guest ace pilot.

As much as Ves wanted to dive into the Macharia Exelcia right away and begin the long process of converting it into a powerful and versatile living mech, he still had many obligations.

His expeditionary fleet's departure was imminent.

The only hindrance that prevented the expanded Golden Skull Alliance from setting off was the absence of the Spirit of Bentheim.

The factory ship was due to arrive any day.

The visit soon came to an end. As Ves finally boarded their shuttle and departed from the Fist of the Maiden, he began to form a few plans on how he could quickly elevate the Hexer ace mech's combat power in the short term.

Once the shuttle returned to the Cat Nest, Gloriana led the children away while Ves and Lucky returned to the Royal Mansion.

Both Ves and his cat grew more subdued as they went upstairs and approached a spacious room situated in a quiet wing of the estate.

"Is he well enough to accept visitors?" Ves asked.

The honor guard paused for a moment. "Ten minutes."

"That is good enough, I suppose."

As Ves entered the large and calming bedroom, his steps slowed and became lighter as he neared the main window and balcony.

The light of the local star shone down on an empty chair.

Months ago, his grandfather regularly sat here in order to enjoy the warmth and reminisce about his long and fulfilling life.

That was no longer possible.

His body degraded to such an extent that he was no longer able to walk under his own power.

As Ves turned around and approached the large medical bed that was placed against a wall, he briefly studied the projected readings of the surrounding medical instruments.

His limited understanding of biotechnology told him that his grandfather's condition had grown even worse in a week.

The decline had accelerated. This implied that his grandfather's life was truly nearing its end.

Ves grew more emotional as he shifted his gaze to the frail and wrinkled old man that was lying feebly in the medical bed.

"Grandfather."

The older Larkinson wearily opened his eyes. "Ves... it has become harder for me to see you clearly. Come. Lean over. Let me... take a better look at you... before I lose my vision completely."

Ves did as instructed.

Pride and contentment radiated from his grandfather as he gazed up at his best descendant.

"Do not... feel sad for me. I accepted this outcome for many decades. I am already living on borrowed time ever since I retired from mech piloting. The cycle of life can never be stopped."

"You are right." Ves sighed. "The cycle of life can never be stopped, but it can be prolonged and delayed. Raymond Billingsley-Larkinson received a round of life-prolonging treatment, so he can easily live for another century."

Benjamin's eyes displayed no envy. "I am happy for Raymond. He can stay and continue to tie the older generations of Larkinsons with the newer ones that have just joined your clan."

"Meow..."

Lucky jumped onto the bed and softly pawed at Benjamin's hand.

"What is your cat saying, Ves?"

"Oh, Lucky wants to remind you that your ending is not set."

"What does a cat know about life and death?"

"You would be surprised." Ves responded. "That is why I have come to visit you, actually. I wanted to inform you about a new development that may allow you to reinvent your life."

Ves leaned over until his lips came close to one of his grandfather's ears.

He softly whispered a story to him that caused Benjamin's heart rate to soar!

"Calm down, please!" The younger Larkinson urged. "I know it sounds improbable, but I really do think that it can give you a chance to make up for past regrets!"

The medical instruments injected a small cocktail of chemicals into Benjamin's body. This helped to reduce his exertion, though it also caused him to lose a lot of lucidity.

His eyes became more clouded, but there was a trace of steel in them that was reminiscent of his time as an expert pilot.

"I... do not think there is any point to it anymore..."

"Why are you saying that, grandfather? Think about it. You don't need to enter the battlefield again. It is already enough to repair a part of yourself while prolonging your life. Our family needs you. Your granddaughters and grandson can still make more memories with you before your time is up. I do not know how effectively my proposal can return your vigor, but as long as you can persist for a decade, then my next three children that I am planning to have with my wife will still have an opportunity to know you in person. It would be much more cruel for them to grow up in the absence of one of their grandparents."

Benjamin obviously felt troubled and conflicted by his grandson's proposal. Though he did not know at all whether this 'Carmine System' would allow him to interface with a mech without relying on a neural interface that he could no longer utilize, he felt it was a subversion of all of his beliefs and assumptions.

"I think... you should let... it go, Ves. This is... what nature intended. I am ready to move on, and you must accept that. Death is not an adversary that should be fought with a mech. It is a relief that brings a timely end to the life of a simple grandparent."

Ves softly placed his hand on top of his grandfather's wrinkled palm. "Maybe you should think about this a little further. I will bring my grandchildren to you on our next visit. I hope by then you will be reminded of what a delight it is to accompany them as they go through their childhoods. There is so much more about life that you are still destined to enjoy. Let me do all of the work. I will quickly design and fabricate a stopgap machine that should give your broken will a chance to mend."

"No... stop, Ves. Don't do... this. Please... respect my decision... I am tired... so tired..."

As Benjamin slowly drifted off to sleep in order to preserve what little vitality he had left, Ves continued to stare at his frail grandfather before he strengthened his resolve.

"I am sorry, grandpa, but I won't do as you say. Blame me all you want, but I am not going to do nothing when I clearly have the power to make a difference. If you want to embrace your end, you can do so after I have restored your condition."

Chapter 4986 Professor Gina Cavendish

It took days after Ves advanced to the rank of Senior before he formed a connection between the potential of the Carmine System and his grandfather's serious condition.

He remembered how shocked he became when he thought about the possibility that he had inadvertently developed the solution that could save Benjamin Larkinson's life!

Brain damage was one of the most feared afflictions in the mech community. Meeh pilots of all stripes wanted to avoid it at all costs, because once their brain tissue received serious damage, it became doubtful that they would ever be able to pilot a mech again!

Ever since the Larkinson Family arrived in Davute and folded into the Larkinson Clan, Ves and his clansmen had spent a significant amount of effort finding a remedy for Benjamin's condition.

Alas, despite the best efforts of the Larkinson Biotech Institute, there did not appear to be a solution.

"It is not impossible that the MTA or the first-rate superstates have advanced their medical science to such an extent that they possess not one, but multiple different solutions that can put high-value mech pilots back into the cockpit." Director Ranya Wodin once told Ves. "Yet if they have any, they have never made it available to the general public. The cost is either prohibitive or the tech has too many restrictions. If you cannot find any mention of this through your channels with the Mech Trade Association, then it is likely impossible to find a solution for your grandfather's condition."

Ves had little choice but to surrender to the prevailing consensus. Once a mech pilot's brain suffered enough injuries, then the conditions that made it possible for them to establish a stable connection with a neural interface no longer applied.

·c0m Any attempt to establish a connection by force would never end well for the pilot in question!

Yet was this truly the case now that the Carmine System offered an alternative solution?

Now that Ves came up with the idea, he could not get rid of it anymore. He felt that he owed it to his family to restore his grandfather's broken wings.

It may be too late to reverse the damage of his deterioration and restore him to his prime, but that didn't matter!

As long as Benjamin managed to regain a few decades of life, that was a lot of precious time where he could continue to witness the Larkinson Clan's rise and see all of his grandchildren grow up into wonderful descendants.

Ves barely had time to put his speed design skills to use when he received an important notification.

The MTA had come!

Fortunately for all of the residents of Davute, the Antazella de Osiris did not make a return to the busy port system.

Instead, a small and unobtrusive MTA frigate arrived one day. Such vessels came and went from time to time, so they never really attracted a lot of attention.

Different from previous transits, the frigate that arrived in orbit happened to bring along a small group of mechers who had been assigned to evaluate the latest masterwork mech produced by the Larkinson Clan.

When Ves submitted his application to the MTA, he requested for the Survivalist Faction to send their own people again.

The Phobos was an expert mech that was almost as significant and revolutionary as the Dullahan Project. Ves did not want complete strangers to poke around and ask uncomfortable questions about the primary components of the Geist System.

The bad news was that the Survivalist Faction hadn't been able to put its people on the inspection team this time.

It turned out that another faction managed to call dibs first!

"Don't worry, Ves." Gloriana said as she and her husband entered a secure underground chamber that was especially built to house the Larkinson Clan's precious expert mechs. "I am acquainted with the people sent by the Association. You may be close to the Survivalists and the Transhumanists, but I have always kept in touch with the Mech Supremacist Faction. Expert stealth mechs are a rarity in the industry, and one that has become a masterwork is especially worth examining."

"I know, honey, but just because you know them does not mean that I trust them with our clan's latest trump card. Every parameter related to the Phobos is valuable information. Who knows what the Mech Supremacists will do with the detailed scanning data that they will collect today."

"They won't mishandle the data. I will make sure of that, Ves."

He directed a dubious look at her. He seriously doubted that his wife held significant sway among the Mech Supremacists. She was still a tier 10 galactic citizen as far as he could recall, which meant that the mechers regarded her in a slightly better light than ordinary space peasants!

Ves had the feeling that the Mech Supremacists did not come for the sake of his wife, but for himself!

Sure, the Survivalists and the Transhumanists already treated him as their property, but that did not mean that others could join the party as well.

The air buzzed and shimmered before them. Soon enough, over a dozen different individuals emerged straight in the middle of the secure chamber!

"Welcome to the Cat Nest!" Ves greeted the new arrivals with a friendly smile. "It is a pleasure to meet you and receive you in my humble facility. The masterwork expert mech that we have prepared for your inspection is standing right behind you. Feel free to start your operations."

The various mech designers, engineers and other specialists began their work right away. They flew into the air and surrounded the Phobos from multiple directions before they began to scan the expert mech with their handheld scanners.

Only a single figure stayed behind. The woman wearing a labcoat put up her blond hair in a simple ponytail.

The enthusiasm and energy radiating from the mecher made it clear that she was a mech designer.

Ves could even tell that she was a Senior Mech Designer, one who advanced earlier and made a lot more progress than himself.

His wife happened to be acquainted with the leading mecher.

"Professor! We are finally able to meet in person!"

Gloriana and the other woman smiled in a friendly manner as they approached and embraced each other in a hug.

"Ves! Let me introduce her to you! This is Professor Gina Cavenish. She has a Class I design philosophy just like myself. She specializes in designing intermodular mechs. While our work diverges greatly from each other, we have many shared interests. She has taught me much about what I need to take into account when trying to perfect different mech designs."

Ves took a second look at Professor Cavendish.

Intermodular mechs was a concept that he had rarely heard about. It was an approach to building and using mechs that only wealthy first-raters could adopt.

The premise of it was rather simple. Rather than load batches of complete and fully functional mechs onto a fleet, the organization instead stuffed a lot of modular parts into the carrier vessels!

The idea was to build up an elite mech force made out of the finest mech pilots.

Whenever the fleet had to deploy its mechs into battle, the crews aboard the carriers quickly fit together a lot of different modular mech parts that were all part of the same mech ecosystem.

The incredible variety of different mech parts and systems enabled the elite mech force to always deploy the right machines for the right job!

Ves personally thought it was stupid, though. He couldn't stand the thought of leaving an excessive amount of spare parts behind. They did nothing but take up a lot of precious space inside the hulls of all of the carrier vessels!

There were only a few circumstances where it made sense to utilize intermodular mechs.

For example, the top competitive teams often toured around in large starships that carried a lot of parts for their competition mechs.

If the mechs in question ever incurred a significant amount of damage, it was easy to restore its condition by slotting out the broken parts and putting intact ones in their place

If the competitive team managed to advance to the next bracket and face a tough opponent, the mechs could easily change the configurations of the mechs by installing alternative parts!

In any case, intermodular mechs were extremely difficult and expensive to design. Any mech designer that was brave enough to design them deserved a lot of respect, especially if they managed to retain their sanity!

"Mr. Larkinson." The other Senior greeted Ves. "I have heard much about you from your wife and my associates within the Association. I have only taken a brief glance at your new masterwork, and I can already conclude that you are truly as impressive as they say."

"Thank you for your compliments. I still have many other ideas in reserve that are even better than the Phobos. It will take time to realize all of them, though."

"We eagerly await their completion so that we can continue to admire your craftsmanship. Speaking about that, would you like to explain in your own words how you have come to turn your Phobos into a masterwork mech?" "That will require a lot of explanation." Ves briefly frowned. "How much do you know about living mechs?"

"I have a good understanding of living mechs, Mr. Larkinson. I have read our internal files on this new category of mechs. and your wife has been especially informative about their nature and properties. I am not an uninformed laywoman."

"on."

"To be honest, I have a great personal interest in living mechs." The mecher continued. "They are largely antithetical to my own work, but that makes the contrast so fascinating. I hope to develop a

better understanding of the nature and the definition of mechs by coming into contact with your living mechs."

"Well, I would love to tell you more about them, so long as you can accept my claims."

Ves began to give Professor Cavendish a short explanation on how he managed to turn the Phobos into a masterwork mech.

Though he glossed over a lot of details, so much so that he practically skimmed through the Geist System and his Ascension Paths, the other Senior did not look disappointed.

"Your theory that there are more factors aside from the material that can determine whether a mech meets the standards of a masterwork is also supported by many of my colleagues within our Association. They may have different assumptions about the weight and composition of different variables, but the overall idea is correct."

That was quite useful to know!

"What are the variables that your Association has identified so far?" Gloriana eagerly asked.

"There is no broad consensus on the variables that affect the creation of a masterwork mech, but we have strong suspicions the novelty and uniqueness of a mech can play a small but helpful role. Another variable that I personally agree with is how innovative it is. Your clan is particularly known for this, so that may partially explain the high frequency of masterwork mechs in your clan."

Ves deeply agreed with the theories that Professor Cavendish put forth. He just never thought about it from this angle.

"Anything else?"

"There is a group within our Association that faith and belief can play a major role as well, but it has never been truly confirmed. The masterwork mechs are just as prevalent in religious states as more secular states. Religion or the lack of it does not appear to make a measurable difference, but it may be that our researchers have applied an overly narrow definition of belief."

This was a much more contentious topic and one that Ves was not eager to talk about.

"I think that a mech designer must rely on his skills and more objective factors in order to make a masterwork. That is the only way to output them more consistently."

Chapter 4987 Getting A Pass

Professor Gina Cavendish turned out to be a friendly and approachable mecher.

Of course, Ves understood quite well that the main reason why the woman took the initiative to present herself in the best possible light was because of the value of her conversation partners.

Gloriana may be just a Journeyman Mech Designer, but her design philosophy had a lot of potential. There was no harm in spending a relatively modest amount of effort in order to obtain a huge future payout.

Unlike his wife, Ves had already realized a portion of his immense potential. With fantastic mechs such as the Dullahan Project and the Phobos serving as the most up-to-date representatives of his design capabilities, not even the stuffy and arrogant first-raters dared to claim they could design mechs with similar functions!

The best they could do was to lean on their own strengths to design mechs that outperformed the latest two Larkinson expert mechs, but that was not really a victory as their own works could not possibly replicate anything comparable to the Carmine System and the Geist System.

Just as Ves predicted, the 70-ish year old Senior Meeh Designer soon shifted the conversation to his latest design applications.

"According to the design schematics and our current scans, there is much about the Phobos that still eludes our understanding." The female mecher primarily spoke to Ves. "As the lead designer of this special project, you should be able to provide additional clarification so that we have a better understanding of where the strength of your Phobos lies and how you managed to turn it into a masterwork mech."

Though Professor Cavendish did not sound too insistent, she clearly expected to receive a substantive answer.

Ves did not really want to reveal too much about the Phobos, but it was not wise to defy the Mech Trade Association too openly.

Since he couldn't reject this request, he may as well embrace the opposite approach and build up as much goodwill with the Mech Supremacists as possible.

After all, if Ves wanted to popularize the Carmine System and the Blood Pact across the entirety of human space one day, he needed the support of as many factions and groups as possible.

"I am sure you have already managed to figure out the obvious stuff." Ves casually answered. "The selection of resonating exotics, active stealth system and so on present a pretty clear package of how our new expert stealth mech is supposed to function in the field. What is not as clear is that it contains a lot of hidden design elements that cannot be recorded through conventional sensors. They are core extensions of my design philosophy."

Professor Cavendish had clearly done her homework, so she did not question this statement. "It is usually not that difficult to detect the psionic energy that you have invested in your living mechs, but the Phobos is an anomaly as I find it difficult to read it. This is a remarkable feat and one that is highly suited for a stealth mech."

"The Phobos would have been a failed product if you were able to detect that there is anything special about it." Ves smirked. "I put special attention into making it as undetectable to those with special senses as possible. One of my goals is to make it as effective at assassinating opposing expert mechs as possible. I believe that I have made good strides into fulfilling this goal. What is even better is that it will only improve upon this aspect over time."

That caught Cavendish's attention. "Truly? Have you already formed a plan to upgrade this design feature?"

Ves shook his head. "I do not necessarily need to do anything. Have you forgotten about the defining trait of my living mechs? The Phobos will automatically grow and develop its psionic properties over time. My machine has plenty of room for growth and will continue to develop the traits that best accommodate the mission profile."

Reading and hearing about it was one thing, but having it told was another.

Professor Cavendish looked at the Phobos with much more respect, especially now that she could deduce that the expert mech's metaphysical qualities played a massive role.

"How assured are you that it can assassinate an opposing expert mech?"

Neither Ves nor Gloriana knew the answer.

"We don't know. We have never put the Phobos to the test." Ves told her. "Much of this is new to us and we have employed a lot of new experimental tech into the design. However, our expectations are already high."

"I see We shall be patient and wait for further results There is one aspect of your Phobos that we would like you to comment upon. The 'Geist System' apparently occupies a high place of importance to your expert mech. However, it is a profoundly odd and seemingly illogical addition to your expert mech. Can you please explain in your own words how it enhanced the effectiveness of your expert stealth mech?"

The MTA Senior finally addressed the elephant in the room. Ves struggled to decide what he should say and how much he should reveal.

The mechers should have already been able to figure out a lot of secrets by themselves, but it was still different from spoon feeding them the answers.

"The Geist System is a product of multiple disciplines coming together to bridge the gap between psionic manifestations and material outcomes." Ves spoke up. "To put it as simple as possible, it is a crude and highly experimental attempt to leverage the special ability of expert pilots to distort reality with their willpower in a more structural and mechanical fashion."

"In other words, your Geist System is an attempt to weaponize willpower."

"That is about right. The exact mechanics are difficult to explain as they pertain to theories that require you to make a lot of assumptions, many of which may be counterintuitive to you. I have worked closely with both Cormaunt Hempkamp and Master Benedict Cortez to develop the structural parts and systems that are necessary to better extract the power of not one, but two expert pilots."

The mention of 'two expert pilots' caused Professor Cavendish's lips to twitch. She knew exactly what Ves was alluding to but was afraid to say out loud.

"You do not need to be concerned, Mr. Larkinson. We are not looking to find fault in your use of components for your Geist System. The origins of its key component is clearly known to us. Master Toqueman Huron has originally received approval from another department of our Association to explore a restricted field of research. The fact that you have claimed one of the products of his research as your spoils and utilized it in your own project is not an issue from our perspective. This behavior only becomes problematic if you lack sufficient justification."

Though her answer sounded a bit confusing to Ves, he understood that she was willing to give him a pass.

This was a huge relief!

Ves was afraid that the MTA would object to the Geist System and attempt to take back the skull of the Fridayman expert pilot that Ves originally extracted from the powerful plasma sword that the Golden Skull Alliance originally claimed in the Battle of Pima Prime.

Of course, Ves was not naive enough to assume that everyone who acted this way would receive the same degree of leniency from the mechers.

Ves only received this much leeway because he showed sufficient value. He could clearly read from Professor Cavendish that she wanted to build a better relationship with him. This would make it much easier for them to establish more substantial forms of cooperation in the future.

Though Ves tried to keep his descriptions a little vague, there was no way to hide the existence of the Geist System's fiends.

He and his clan would definitely deploy the Phobos against an enemy eventually, so the MTA with its extensive spying capabilities should clearly be able to record the damage wrought by the fiends!

Nonetheless, it was a bit hard for Cavendish to accept the premise that the Geist System could sabotage an entire facility or starship by relying on metaphysically empowered 'ghosts'.

"It is difficult for most mech designers to accept your descriptions at face value, but you have been known to realize all manner of new and highly unusual manifestations, from companion spirits to battle formations." The MTA Senior spoke. "It is also undeniable that your Phobos has become a masterwork mech, and one that has attained this level of craftsmanship by virtue of its exceptional metaphysical properties."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "So you are essentially saying that you are confident the Geist System will work effectively because the Phobos is a masterwork mech?"

"As a rule, masterwork mechs cannot take shape at the beginning if they contain any severely flawed, malfunctioning or non-functional parts. They may incur damage that may result in such cases, but that is only applicable after their initial creation. Before they have undergone their masterwork transformations, they must be holistically complete and functional according to the standards of the mech design and the intentions of the mech designers."

Both Ves and Gloriana looked a bit surprised! This was another valuable piece of information! Not only did it confirm a few of their prior theories and conjectures, but it also gave them additional insight on what it took to turn a mech into a masterwork!

Ves began to suspect that Professor Cavendish absorbed a lot of information about masterwork mechs.

It made sense for her to study much of what the Mech Trade Association knew about masterworks if she undertook the responsibility to inspect newly created masterwork mechs.

Ves tried to pump additional information from her. Any casual remark about masterwork mechs could easily be worth hundreds of thousands MTA credits if sold through other channels!

"I think it is clear that a lot of masterwork mechs have become so exquisite because they are extremely well constructed. How often does it happen that a masterwork mech comes about due to other reasons?"

Professor Cavendish smirked. "It happens more often than you think, especially at the higher end of the mech industry. You will learn the reason why that is the case when you advance to Master Mech Designer. Every mech designer that has realized a design philosophy will become exposed to the deeper rules that make up our reality. There are many greater forces that have yet to be fully tapped by our industry. You can interpret this as gaining access to additional resources that you can leverage to empower your mechs. This is where Master Benedict Cortez can generate additional energy through his Endex System, for example."

Both Ves and Gloriana looked thoughtful. They both had their own suspicions and ideas on the nature of these additional variables.

"So these Masters are able to produce masterwork mechs not because their basic craftsmanship is good, but because they impart their work with elements that empower them through different channels?" Ves asked.

"That is not always the case, but it is prevalent enough. If the Phobos is an accurate representation of your design style, then you should fall in the same category, Mr. Larkinson."

Ves blinked. It was a bit difficult for him to accept that he was a part of the crowd rather than the exception to the rule.

It made him feel... less special.

His wife began to look upset. "Does that mean that your Association does not agree with my approach of trying to perfect the physical properties of my mechs?"

"That is not the case, madame. Your approach is simply more difficult to yield successes. It is also much less compatible with the use of materialization technology, so it has fallen out of favor among many first-class mech designers. However, if you are able to excel in this area, then you shall be able to make substantial contributions to our mech community because not enough mech designers have produced any comparable results."

Cavendish's answer restored Gloriana's self-esteem. She was special! She was on the right track! Her work was just as valuable as that of her husband, if not more!

"Thank you for your clarification. I will be sure to share my results with you and your faction as long as I am ready to present my completed works."

Chapter 4988 Theory Of Masterworks

Every MTA faction had their strengths and specialties.

The Survivalist Faction possessed an open mindset and mastered a high degree of eclectic alien and unconventional technologies.

The Transhumanist Faction conducted the deepest studies in the field of human transcendence.

The Mech Supremacist Faction sought to make mechs as ubiquitous as possible by increasing their value proposition with the help of more effective technological advancements.

Much of these factions actually overlapped with each other. None of them were extreme enough to exclude technology that was more aligned with the other factions of the Meeh Trade Association.

This was because every faction was formed by large coalitions of like-minded high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers.

Each of them may have gathered together in order to advance their common causes, but they were individually quite diverse and comprehensive.

For example, the Polymath might align herself with the Survivalists for ideological reasons, but her extensive works were also highly desirable to the Transhumanists and the Mech Supremacists.

While it was indeed the case that every faction was comprehensive enough to possess basic competencies in most fields, they still retained a strong advantage in their main priorities.

For example, out of all of the factions of the Mech Trade Association, the Mech Supremacists possessed the greatest understanding of masterwork mechs!

Professor Gina Cavendish did not actually specialize in this field, yet she studied it extensively enough to provide Ves and Gloriana with a lot of useful tips and insights!

"Many mech designers have a great obsession towards masterwork mechs." She explained to the two as her team continued to examine the Phobos from top to bottom. "Their preoccupation is understandable. Masterwork mechs allow us to qualitatively increase the effectiveness of our products relative to warships. The Common Fleet Alliance has never invested nearly as much resources into them because it cannot possibly exploit masterworks to the same extent."

Warships were too big and complex to be made by a single individual in a short amount of time. They also had to be produced over longer stretches of time, which made it a lot harder to rely on serendipity or an inspired mood to elevate the quality of an entire vessel.

"So one of the reasons why your Association puts so much emphasis on masterwork mechs is because you want to beat the CFA?" Ves questioned.

"Exactly. Our rivalry with the fleeters may resemble a childish squabble to you, but the stakes are enormous. If we cannot make our mechs more effective through quantitative means, we can only excel through qualitative means. The difficulty of doing so is ten times, a hundred times or even a thousand times more difficult, but that means that mech designers such as ourselves will also have to be much better than the researchers and the engineers employed by the Common Fleet Alliance."

Ves had never heard that the Common Fleet Alliance employed any transcendent creators comparable to Master Mech Designers and Star Designers.

It appeared that the fleeters truly stuck to the conventions of the past by relying on purely mortal scientists to advance their technologies!

They might not be as brilliant and inspired as high-ranking mech designers, but they could easily be trained and educated en masse. The CFA could raise so many of them that it was easy to form a huge number of research groups that collectively invented a lot of useful new tech over time.

Ves understood only recently that the fleeters did not possess anything comparable to the Kingdom of Mechs.

This meant that the warship lovers did not develop a dependency on external conditions!

Their tech worked under every circumstance!

Their warships could easily be mass produced by any well-equipped and well-supplied shipyard!

Any scientist could follow-up on the research completed by others!

The Common Fleet Alliance truly embodied a focus on quantity over quality in all of its aspects.

That was not to say that the CFA neglected quality, but it only did so selectively whenever it could afford to care about such matters.

"Since you understand so much about masterworks, can you explain where they come from?" Ves boldly decided to ask a more fundamental question. "I mean, it is not really natural that creations like my Phobos suddenly transform in ways that I cannot explain just because it has passed a certain set of criteria. Who has set them? Why do they exist? What is the reason that high-quality products undergo such a transformation in the first place?" Professor Cavendish crossed her arms and adopted a serious question. "These are deep and profound questions that you are not yet qualified to ask. However, on account of you and your wife's contributions to our Association, I am willing to share a small part of my own understanding of this subject. Perhaps you may have already touched these subjects due to your own extensive track record of producing masterwork mechs."

She turned around and gazed up at the Phobos.

"Our universe is old. Our astrophysicists and other scientists are constantly debating about the true age range of the environment we live in, but the point is that an enormous amount of time has passed since the creation of everything and the present day. We are far from the first race to conquer the stars and harness the power of nature. There are many races and population groups that have preceded our rise. Many of them only managed to build a brief interstellar civilization before they inevitably became lost and forgotten with the passage of time. The only traces they have left behind are rotting ruins and faded monuments that remind the few of us that they once existed."

Ves thought about two distinct groups when Professor Cavendish spoke these philosophical words.

The luminal race had once mastered a lot of impressive crystal and energy-based tech. They also had individuals that managed to reach transcendence.

Primordial humans were the second group that he had in mind. Their impact on the Milky Way and the surrounding dwarf galaxies was much greater. Living traces of this ancestor race in the form of the Five Scrolls Compact still persisted even if most primordial humans had already perished.

"It is difficult for an extinct race to leave a legacy of their existence behind." Ves emotionally spoke. "The stronger and more successful ones should have been able to make their presence felt more easily due to their greater works." Professor Cavendish looked pleasantly surprised by this answer. "That is a good description. The common consensus within our faction is that somewhere in the cosmos, a powerful alien civilization or individual had once grown so powerful that it became possible to change the fabric of our universe, and not to a small extent."

"What you are describing is a god!" Gloriana gasped.

"Exactly This is not a god that is comparable to that of a Star Designer or a god pilot. The latter two may be regarded as deities in the flesh, but they are still subject to many limitations. The 'higher gods' that are central to our theory have grown far beyond that. For whatever reason, these powerful entities completed a grand process that has enabled them to permanently add their own rules to laws of reality. You can understand it as rewriting the source code of our universe."

How powerful must one be in order to change the universe in its entirety?

Since Master Mech Designers were only able to affect reality by relying on the power of the Kingdom of Mechs, Ves theorized that Star Designers may have become powerful enough to accomplish this feat by themselves.

Yet even then, Star Designers should only be able to induce small-scale changes, or else all science known to humanity would have changed beyond recognition by this time!

Still, as much as Ves was willing to buy the theory that an incredibly powerful 'higher god' waved his hand and remade reality to accommodate the existence of masterworks, grand works and so on. It sounded like an incredibly lazy answer that sounded no different from the unfalsifiable claims of many religions.

As a highly secularist organization, the Mech Trade Association shouldn't be so prone to embracing these kinds of arguments!

Unless...

"Does your faction have any proof that supports this theory?" Ves critically asked.

Professor Cavendish gave him an apologetic smile. "The answers that I can give you exceed the scope of your authority and rank. I can only say that many clever and successful mechers are convinced by this theory, including Star Designers who are the closest to approaching the power of these higher existences."

Few if any of those people were stupid! If this was the case, then perhaps the theory was much more likely to approach the truth!

Ves personally guessed that the higher gods in question were extremely powerful primordial humans, but they may as well be aliens.

Craftsmanship was universal to every intelligence race. Ves could not blindly assume that the once-powerful primordial humans were responsible for bringing forth every wonder.

"So what does this all mean?" Ves asked. "An ancient precursor race put all of this effort into rewriting reality to grant additional properties to well-made products. Is it just because these supposed 'gods' have a high appreciation of craftsmanship, or is it because they want to establish an additional means to empower their own creations?"

"Any of those reasons can be true." The MTA Senior replied. "We can only be certain about the information that we know. In general terms, masterworks are a reflection of an altered reality where their existence is made possible. One of the reasons why they are so prized is that they can more easily come into contact with the greater forces that I have mentioned earlier. The better and more exquisite a work, the more extensively the fabric of reality unravels around them. The walls that separate the higher dimensions grow weaker, making it easier to channel other energies and manifestations."

Both Ves and Gloriana widened their eyes in shock!

This was a critical insight that allowed both of them to connect a lot of guesses and theories together!

The pair looked at each other to confirm that they made the same realizations.

No wonder mech pilots broke through with greater ease when piloting masterwork mechs!

If the barriers between the higher dimensions became thinner, it became easier for the pilots to get into contact with extraordinary phenomena.

It was similar to how the distance between the material realm and the imaginary realm was a lot thinner in the Nyxian Gap, but in this case it was localized around a single well-made machine.

Cavendish's answer also explained why masterwork mechs were also a lot more effective at channeling spiritual energy and true resonance!

If this was the case, then the current iteration of the Phobos was bound to become an even greater terror than Ves originally envisioned!

The spiritual fiends that made up the Geist System could inflict much more physical damage because they needed to exert less effort to bridge the divide between the two realms!

Ves came up with an interesting theory.

"If masterwork mechs are able to distort the fabric of reality to a greater extent, then one of the requirements to making them is to be able to do this as well, am I correct?"

Professor Cavendish looked surprised at him. "That is an excellent deduction, Mr. Earkinson. It is hardly the only variable that can contribute to the creation of a masterwork mech, but we believe that this is indeed the case. This is also why only Senior Mech Designers and higher are able to fabricate masterwork mechs. Only they have reached a level of psionic power that can create an environment that is conducive to their formation. However, the substantial amount of masterwork certificates under your name has placed this theory in doubt. Our assumptions are either mistaken or incomplete. Would you like to provide a comment?"

Ves nervously smiled. "You can just treat me as an outlier. I have... special reasons why I was able to make so many masterwork mechs at the Journeyman stage."

Chapter 4989 The Value Of Masterwork Meeh Designers

Ves continued his attempts to squeeze more valuable information out of Professor Cavendish.

He was like a greedy kid that knew no restraint. Though he tried to remain as polite as possible, there was no way to hide his desire to learn more about what the MTA figured out about masterworks.

As the mech designers ascended into the air and flew up to the Phobos, they continued their discussion even as Cavendish commenced her personal inspection of the expert stealth mech.

"There are indeed differences between mech designers." Cavendish said as she gazed at the sensor readings of her sophisticated multiscanner. "There are those who can fabricate masterwork mechs while they are still Journeymen such as the two of you. This is a highly promising indication that you will one day be able to fabricate masterwork mechs with only a moderate amount of effort."

Both Ves and Gloriana agreed with this sentiment. It became easier and easier for the both of them to make their mechs surpass the masterwork threshold. The two were still young, so they had plenty of time to attain better results.

"What of the other extreme?" Gloriana questioned.

Professor Cavendish looked contemptuous. "There are mech designers who ascribe to the interpretation that they must solely excel at design. Most of my compatriots in my faction do not agree with this idea. It is extremely helpful to develop your fabrication skills. Not only will you be able to gain a greater understanding of mechs and technology by coming into more direct contact with them, but once you advance to Master and try to make any further progress, the ability to make masterwork mechs can accelerate your research."

"The reason why that is the case is because masterwork mechs can come into contact with greater and more hidden manifestations of reality that you have mentioned before, correct?" Gloriana asked. "You have also mentioned that Master Mech Designers must explore those same manifestations in order to advance to Star Designer."

The MTA Senior nodded. "That is a broad description. Let me give you a few statistics. Only 4 percent of the total population of Master Mech Designers can produce masterwork mechs on a consistent basis. Only 23 percent of all Master Mech Designers are able to produce masterwork mechs intermittently. The remaining Master Mech Designers have never produced a masterwork mech in their lives, and not many of them intend to remedy this shortcoming. Of the Star Designers that have risen up to this day, the majority of them used to be Masters who were able to produce masterwork mechs with ease."

Both Ves and Gloriana began to think hard after receiving these highly illuminating pieces of information!

"The amount of Masters in the first group is a lot less than I expected." Ves remarked. "The amount of Masters in the third group is a lot higher than I previously thought as well. This is weird. Since so many Star Designers used to excel at this, why is it not necessary to develop this competency?"

"Not every mech designer possesses the talent or the inclination to make their mechs in person." Professor Cavendish shook her head in disapproval. "However, it is undoubtedly convenient to be able to make masterwork mechs if you have any ambition to become a Star Designer. The reason for that is that you can fabricate your own high-value research objects by yourself. Other Masters that lack this capacity must approach others and commission the masterwork mechs they need to prove their theories and gather essential data."

Gloriana smirked. "I think that the mech designers who have never invested the time to improve their fabrication skills will find it much harder to obtain the high-quality products they need. Not every masterwork mech designer can meet their highly specific product criteria. The masterwork mech designer that can best fulfill a difficult commission can demand a high price, and may still not be able to deliver a completely satisfactory product."

"Only the mech designers themselves are able to make the products that suit them best." Ves agreed with his wife.

For example, Ves was able to fabricate mechs with strong and exquisite spiritual foundations.

If he needed a masterwork mech that was strong in this area, then it would be difficult for other mech designers such as Gloriana to satisfy his requirements!

"If this is the case, then why are most Master Mech Designers still content with lacking the ability to produce their own masterwork mechs?" Gloriana furrowed her brows.

"They have their own advantages. Their theoretical and analytical skills are stronger." Professor Cavendish replied. "They can visualize an entire mech in their own minds much more effectively due to persistent practice. If the research they are engaged in is heavily reliant on advanced theories and unlikely deductions, then they can make more progress in their studies. If they ever need a high-quality mech to facilitate their research, they can obtain one as long as they have developed a good relationship with a competent supplier."

"I see." Ves understood the story. "So mech designers who put a lot of effort into improving our fabrication skills can essentially service the practical needs of a larger group of peers, but that will come at the cost of diverting the time we spend on our research."

"You can say that. The actual circumstances are more complex than that. Many Master Mech Designers have formed their own groups where they have worked together for many years. It is customary for each of them to divide their responsibilities and specialize in different fields."

That sounded like a more advanced form of the synergy that Ves established with Gloriana. Both he and Gloriana looked inspired after hearing this. The Design Department already had the potential to morph into such a cooperative group.

Ves wanted to obtain one more answer about high-quality mechs.

"I have heard that one of the requirements for a Master Mech Designer to advance to Star Designer is to make a mech that surpasses masterwork in quality..."

That caused Professor Cavendish to pause her examination of the Phobos and turn around.

"That is not a topic that a Journeyman and a Senior should be concerned about." The older woman sternly said. "Since you are familiar with Senfovon's Ladder of Craftsmanship, I can speak a few words. What you heard is not correct, at least not entirely. It is not necessary for Master Mech Designers to produce a grand work in order to advance. However, every mech designer who has done so has become a Star Designer without fail. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"It does!" Gloriana happily replied! "Thank you for giving us hope. I have greater confidence in my ability to become a Star Designer than before!"

Ves also became profoundly impressed by what he heard.

Although he had no way to know for sure whether he could become good enough to fabricate a grand work in his lifetime, he believed his chances were much greater than most mech designers!

The research benefits associated with grand mechs must be enormous if it enabled Masters to advance on the spot!

One possible explanation was that their accumulation had grown massive enough for them to already qualify for advancement. A grand work was the icing on the cake and the culmination of a lot of hard work.

Another possible explanation was that the improbable creation of a grand mech provided critical data that could help with completing crucial theoretical frameworks. The grand work was the final piece of the puzzle that enabled a mech designer to complete his research.

Ves did not know which of these two possibilities were true. It could be that both of them were viable.

Whatever the case, Ves could do no wrong if he tried his best to make his own grand work one day.

Compared to his peers who were content with borrowing the services of masterwork mech designers, Ves would rather rely on himself and make sure he could always satisfy his material requirements!

This matter was even more crucial to Gloriana considering that her specialization revolved directly around high-quality mechs.

"You are pursuing a difficult direction of research, Madame Gloriana." The MTA Senior remarked. "Our faction has always considered it to be more difficult to master the skill of fabricating masterwork mechs by primarily leaning on excellence in physical craftsmanship. If you are able to progress your design philosophy and succeed in your research, then you will most likely become one of the most desirable mech designers that other Masters wish to collaborate with. This is because you can become a fantastic enabler of other excellent mech designers, your husband chief among them. Not all Star Designers have attained their ranks purely by relying on their own merits. The help they received from other mech designers has also made a difference."

The biographies of many Star Designers indeed mentioned that they received a lot of assistance from other Master Mech Designers.

The problem was that the biographies usually only centered on a single protagonist. The 'side characters' of those real accounts rarely managed to become Star Designers themselves!

Therefore, it was not enough to become a desirable collaborator. Gloriana still needed to progress her own design philosophy by completing her own difficult research projects.

"What about myself?" Ves asked. "I have always thought that my design philosophy can turn me into a more desirable collaboration partner as well. Much of my work does not depend on any rare or expensive materials. I can easily make a mech more effective without increasing its production cost."

"That is a prized advantage in the development of mass production mechs." The Mech Supremacist said in appreciation. "However, your advantage is less pronounced in the design of high-end mechs. The clients and customers of such products are willing to spend immense sums to obtain the most powerful mechs."

"I see."

"If you are able to deliver more mechs that possess the same set of features of your Phobos, then you may be able to increase your desirability. It all comes down to competition, Mr. Larkinson."

That was fair.

An hour went by as Professor Cavendish explored many different facets of the newly fabricated expert stealth mech.

The mechers eventually had to wrap up their work. They were busy people and they had many other responsibilities.

"You must be eager to hear our verdict." The older woman smiled at Ves and Gloriana. "I am happy to say that despite the fact that your latest masterwork is an expert mech that cannot be transferred to our Association, it has presented us with a greater amount of new data that has substantial research value. The differences between the Mars and the Phobos are so great that it is clear that you have made real progress, Mr. Larkinson. You deserved most of the credit this time. Here is the exact award distribution."

Professor Gina Cavendish projected a small list that immediately made it clear how many MTA merits she awarded this time.

[Ves Larkinson: 3,000,000 MTA merits

Gloriana Wodin-Larkinson: 250,000 MTA merits

Miles Tovar-Larkinson: 50,000 MTA merits

Cormaunt Hempkamp-Larkinson: 50,000 MTA merits

Master Benedict Cortez: 250,000 MTA merits]

"Only 250,000 MTA merits?! I deserve more than that!"

Cavendish remained unmoved. "You have certainly contributed to the formation of a new masterwork mech, but it is undeniable that your husband has been the main driving force behind the current state of the Phobos."

While Ves was more than happy to receive 3 million MTA merits which he could use to offset his wife's prized cranial implant, he felt a little sorry for his other two collaborators.

"Miles Tovar and Cormaunt Hempkamp may not have played a substantial role in this mech design project, but isn't 50,000 MTA merits a little too meager? They have learned a lot from this fabrication run."

"Our merit awards are based on contribution, not gains. What you say is true, but that is not how we operate, Mr. Larkinson. I am well within my rights to deny them these MTA merits. I have issued them anyway because I can justify the decision to grant masterwork certificates to your minor collaborators."

"Ah. I see. Thank you for the favor, professor."

Chapter 4990 Grand Convergence I

This was a week that kept on rolling for Ves.

Not only did he manage to complete the Ghost Project in the best possible fashion, he also earned 3,000,000 MTA merits and received a lot of insights on masterwork mechs.

The information he squeezed from Professor Gina Cavendish alone was easily worth at least ten times as much as the merits he had earned!

He almost felt regretful when the representative of the Meeh Supremacist Faction bid the Larkinsons goodbye and teleported back to the MTA frigate lingering in orbit.

"I need time to process everything that I have learned." Gloriana told her husband. "Combined with my latest research, I am confident that I can prepare a new solution in time for the Bloodripper Project and the Greenaxe Project."

The two remaining ongoing expert mech design projects were due to complete in two months.

Ves thought it was anything but certain that they would be finished at that time. He and his wife had harvested so many gains in the last couple of weeks that they would definitely make a lot of changes to the Bloodripper Project and the Greenaxe Project!

"Go ahead." He told his wife. "I need to address a few matters myself. We still haven't tested the Dullahan Project and the Phobos as of yet, and I also have to design a new test mech in order to conduct a quick experiment in relation to the Carmine System. Aside from that, I've received a notification that the Spirit of Bentheim will enter into orbit of Davute VII in a week."

The Golden Skull Alliance would finally be able to resume its Trailblazer Expedition once again!

The expeditionary fleet probably needed another week or so before it could actually leave the Davute System.

Ves was aware that it would take the crew of the factory a bit more time to complete their retraining and familiarize themselves with all of the upgraded ship systems.

Fortunately, the crew had not been staying idle all of this time. They had already undergone months of simulation training in order to learn how to operate the MTA-installed equipment and control systems.

·c0m After a brief chat, Ves waved goodbye to his wife and settled in his workshop to start a new side project.

His goal was to design a quick stopgap mech to reignite his grandfather's spark of life.

Speed was of the essence. There was no need to invest many months into designing a strong expert mech comparable to the Dullahan Project.

Ves could take care of that later if the need arose. For now, he needed to whip up a hasty solution to stop the deterioration of his grandfather's health. There was no point in considering any other plans centered around Benjamin Larkinson if his life couldn't be preserved!

Since the mech that he intended to design was just meant to become a carrier of the Carmine System, it did not actually matter whether it was good or even original.

It was faster and more efficient if he took one of his existing designs and modified it rather than designing a mech from scratch.

The downside was that all of his mechs were designed with a different purpose in mind. It would be troublesome to add the Carmine System to them as their internals needed to be completely redesigned.

Ves shook his head. "It is better to start from scratch with a basic mech. I can easily build it up over time."

It was best not to start with a mech that was too shabby. His grandfather sounded as if he was eager to leave his old life behind.

If Ves wanted to remedy this condition, then he had to introduce Benjamin to a mech that could make him feel alive again!

"The piloting experience has to be fun and exciting! My grandfather must feel as if he has gone back to the past where he was in his prime!"

Ves dove deep into the archives of the Larkinson Family. He called up a bunch of decades-old footage.

His grandfather looked a lot younger and more handsome at the time. It was easy to see where Ark and Ryncol inherited their optimistic bravery and dashing charm.

Benjamin used to pilot a third-class expert landbound knight mech called the Ember Star.

There was nothing particularly special about the Ember Star. While it could fight in space in an emergency with the help of a floater platform, it was especially designed to function as an offensive knight mech during planetary campaigns.

Knight mechs tended to get beat up the most, and the Ember Star fought in plenty of pitched battles.

It was due to the frequent exposure to high intensity combat situations that Benjamin Larkinson's luck finally ran out. The Vesians eventually succeeded in destroying the Ember Star on the battlefield!

Though the expert knight mech's cockpit managed to eject in time, its pilot still couldn't escape the powerful forces and the destructive feedback of feeling the Ember Star crumble after enduring catastrophic damage!

Ves understood that this deeply traumatic event haunted his grandfather to this day.

Should he 'reunite' Benjamin with a knight mech that closely resembled the Ember Star, or was it better to design a fresh machine that had no relations to his long and turbulent past?

"Hmmm... my grandfather isn't the sort of person to run away from his past. For better or worse, he needs to confront it and make peace with his past regrets."

The best way to do so was to design a facsimile of the Ember Star.

Ves began to sketch out a mech design that closely copied the appearance of the Ember Star.

Though Ves did not have any precise design schematics or spec sheets to reference from, he could still make his own estimations based on the archival footage of the old Ember Star in action.

It did not take that much effort to reproduce the mass, dimensions and much of the basic performance parameters of the old third-class expert mech.

As a second-class mech designer with lots of funding and resources at his disposal, Ves could easily find materials with many different properties that loosely matched the properties of the materials used to construct the original Ember Star.

The biggest deviation was that Ves did not include any resonating exotics to the design. He was unable to do so as he had no idea what locally available resonating exotics his grandfather could resonate with. There was no way to test this considering Benjamin's bedridden condition!

He also wasn't sure whether it was possible to attune an expert mech to an expert pilot with a broken will. Ves may have recently learned the right ritual from Master Vayro Goldstein, but he had never pulled it off under normal conditions.

"I guess I will settle for designing a standard mech and go from there. It will have to be a second-class mech in order to imitate the improved performance of a third-class expert mech."

It would also be easier for his grandfather to adapt to contemporary mech combat if he started out with a second-class mech.

Ves could upgrade it step-by-step so that Benjamin would slowly attain the combat effectiveness of a modern Larkinson expert pilot.

This was destined to be a long process. Even if Benjamin's body and willpower recovered faster than Ves expected, there was no denying the fact that the old man had already retired for too many decades!

Not only that, but Benjamin's training and combat experience only prepared him to fight in wars between two third rate states.

There was no way his grandfather would ever be able to keep up with the Larkinson mech pilots of today!

"Well, it is not as if I have to push him to the battlefield right away."

His grandfather likely had to go through a long and extensive recovery and retraining process.

Ves believed it would be best to keep his old man busy by assigning him the responsibility of teaching mooh cadets at the Larkinson Clan's academy.

The design already started to take shape after a day. Ves had focused on designing the Carmine System shortly after he put the basic frame together.

"I need to design the organic components first so that the Larkinson Biotech Institute can grow them in advance."

Fortunately, the Carmine System did not impose a lot of demands. Ves could make it as cheap or expensive as needed.

This time, he copied much of the work that he had already done for his stalled Blood Knight Project and adapted it so that it would take less time to grow to completion.

Once he was happy with the design of his current project's Carmine System, he sent off his instructions to Director Ranya Wodin and went back to designing the rest of the frame.

Ves imagined that he was designing a successor of the Ember Star.

Just as he had done with the Dullahan Project, Ves did not want to give his grandfather the false impression that he could reconnect with his old battle partner.

"I can't engage in falsehoods."

Ves merely wanted to give his grandfather the feel of piloting a familiar mech while also tempting him with the many benefits of modern machines.

The Dawn Star Project increasingly carried the grandson's hopes and dreams for his grandfather.

Despite its old and outdated shape, the mech design was filled with vitality.

Ves injected a bit of youth into its air in order to counter Benjamin's fatalistic mindset.

He also intertwined the Golden Cat as deeply into the design as possible. The design spirit had to take the lead in brightening Benjamin up and instill a deeper sense of intimacy and commitment to the Larkins Clan!

Though Ves did not really focus too much on strengthening its design, the Dawn Star Project could still put up a decent fight against most of his other mechs on land.

The combination of speed, defense and attack power turned it into a versatile machine that could serve a variety of roles just like the Ember Star of old.

Defense was still its strongest aspect, and Ves made sure to strengthen it as much as he could reasonably accomplish.

His grandfather already suffered a life-changing accident once when his Ember Star crumbled.

Ves did not want his old man to experience anything similar a second time!

The Dawn Star's internals became a lot more robust. The cockpit received an insane amount of strengthening that was far in excess of any second-class standard mech.

Ves still wasn't fully satisfied with the safety parameters of his mech design, but he would have to spend a lot more time if he wanted to strengthen its frame even further.

Altering the design to such a degree also made it harder for Benjamin to sync up with the Dawn Star Project.

Ves couldn't stuff the mech design with all kinds of advanced tech for fear of overwhelming his grandfather.

"The bandwidth of the Carmine System shouldn't be too good, especially for a mech and mech pilot as weak as this. Who knows whether the Dawn Star can even be controlled."

Ves needed to conduct at least one live testing session with the Dullahan Project to test whether Jannzi could pilot her machine without making use of the neural interface.

This could at least give him an indication on the viability of letting other mech pilots control their machines through their Blood Pacts.

The problem was that Ves could only conduct this test in a highly secure environment. The Cat Nest simply wasn't good enough according to Master Goldstein.

Ves began to smirk. "It's a good thing that the Spirit of Bentheim is already on the way!"

Enough time had passed for his flagship to arrive in the Davute System!

The MTA's skeleton crew were already in the process of moving the transformed factory ship to the inner system. The Spirit of Bentheim would soon link up with the expeditionary fleet again!