

The Mech 5981

Chapter 5981 Prelude to Transformation

Ves got reminded once again why interacting with the Evolution Witch was not a good idea.

The god pilot had violated his privacy and dug up a lot of secrets related to his complicated cultivation situation.

She not only managed to identify all of his incarnations, but also gained a huge amount of insights into how much their strength had grown at the True God-level!

This was a pretty massive information breach. Ves had plenty of reasons to worry about this unanticipated leak.

Although Ves trusted the Evolution Witch to avoid doing anything that directly damaged his interests, who knew what she might do with the intelligence she plucked from his mind.

He could not forget that the Evolution Witch was still a leader of the Red Association. If Ves ever fell out with the mechers, there was a chance that the god pilot might use the information against him one day.

"Ugh."

There was nothing he could do about it. The only acceptable response to this incident was to train his mental defenses to the point where the domain of a God Pilot could no longer dominate his mind to such an extent.

He at least needed to gain the ability to fend her off for enough seconds to close the connection!

"I should prepare other defensive measures. It is really embarrassing how easily she had me at her mercy."

It was times like these that Ves hated the fact that he was still stuck in the first major cultivation rank. He needed to work a lot harder and speed up his progression if he wanted to prevent a repeat of this incident!

In any case, Ves soon moved on with his life.

He briefly contacted the leaders of the Larkinson Clan and conveyed a summary of the first session of the Interim Leadership Council.

The message that the Red Collective would soon organize cultivation through a limited amount of sects had massive implications to everyone, including the Larkinsons!

"I am not sure what the criteria for obtaining a sect quota will be, but our clan probably won't have any trouble with securing one." Ves told the three chief ministers during a remote conference session. "It is better if we can obtain multiple quotas. We need at least one that is orientated towards raising combat cultivators. Perhaps Ketis can lead a separate one that is completely based on traditional swordsmanship. In addition, the Creation Association is pretty much a sect in all but name. It would be beneficial for us if we can formalize its status and allow it to gain support from the Red Collective."

That was an ambitious layout!

Whereas most groups that had heard of this news only thought about founding a single sect, Ves already sought to create three separate sects for the Larkinson Clan!

"What if we fail to secure more than a single quota, patriarch?" Chief Minister Novilon Purnesse inquired. "It is not strictly necessary for us to found three separate sects. We can create a single sect that we can split into multiple branches or departments. As long as we grant them enough authority, they can enact their own policies with little interference from others."

"You make a good point, Novilon, but it is always better to have multiple sects than none. If one of them has gone astray to the point where the Red Collective revokes its quota, we will still retain our other sects. There are other reasons why it is better to have more. As long as our clan maintains its growth rate, I think that we can obtain more than enough cultivators to justify their existence. For now, I need our clan to lay the groundwork in the planning of this future initiative. So long as the news surrounding this measure remains obscure, we can build up a very advantageous head-start."

The three chief ministers all agreed with this logic. Though none of them had a clear idea of what a sect entailed, they had plenty of time to investigate this matter.

Before Ves ended this private conference, Chief Minister Abigail Evern gave Ves an important notification.

"The expeditionary fleet is on track to launch a major operation." The former naval officer told Ves. "The Golden Skull Alliance has been working hard to collect intelligence on powerful alien battleships that we can take over and use against our enemies. The Black Cats and other investigators all understand the value of your Battlecruiser Token. In order to put us in the best possible condition to embark on the deep strike operations that will commence in two or three years, we are willing to delay our acquisition by several months if necessary. There is no concrete timeline on when we can locate a powerful alien warship and begin our capture operation."

Chief Minister Evern smirked. "The Red Cabal has begun to roll out modernized versions of their own homeships that have incorporated much more human technologies than before. While they are still rare at the frontlines, we have obtained clues of the arrival of several alien warships that have incorporated hyper technology as well as other advantages."

If the expeditionary fleet was putting so much effort to locate an excellent alien warship, then she certainly had to be a lot more special than the low-quality or outdated hulls that typically made up the alien raiding fleets.

"Can you share more details about the power and capabilities of the alien vessels that the expeditionary fleet is targeting?"

Chief Minister Evern smirked. "The Red Cabal has begun to roll out modernized versions of their own homeships that have incorporated much more human technologies than before. While they are still rare at the frontlines, we have obtained clues of the arrival of several alien warships that have incorporated hyper technology as well as other advantages."

Such vessels were indeed worth all of the effort. There was too much of a performance gap between old and new.

Ves did not request any further information. There was no need for him to know all of the details. He could only trust that the Larkinson Army and the expeditionary fleet had the situation well in

hand. It was not worth it for them to sacrifice so many mechs, starships and human lives just to capture a fancy alien homeship.

He was perfectly okay with converting a junk-quality alien warship into a temporary battlecruiser.

"I will keep this in mind." Ves responded. "I think my clan can provide additional support to the Larkinson Army before the operation commences. I will make sure to check whether we are supplying our mech legions with enough updated Larkinson mech designs. Hyper technology is just too useful to miss out on it for so long."

"That would be appreciated, sir. The more new and updated hyper mech designs you can complete, the better. Your latest product releases have all resulted in a comprehensive improvement in battle results. We are all hoping that you can continue this trend."

After this virtual conference came to an end, Ves worked harder to complete his design work.

Although the probability was not great, he wanted to see whether he could complete this crucial mech design project fast enough to allow Venerable Tusa to participate in this ambitious operation with his new and improved expert mech.

Weeks passed by as Ves continued to place much of his focus on his research and experimentation.

The development of his ambitious Ultimate Module did not go smoothly all of the time, but his persistence and ingenuity allowed him to overcome many different problems.

Ves already figured out a broad plan for his destructive phasing module based on the key hyper materials that he had selected. He spent so much time familiarizing himself with the tangible and intangible properties of Omen Stone and Texeira-063 that he could come up with lots of ways to shape them into different products!

However, his proposed destructive phasing module was not an ordinary hyper tech product. Its advanced nature and impressive power demanded a lot more work and rigor from him. There were even times when he feared he might get stuck on the same problems for weeks on end.

That did not happen. Ves gained more momentum with each passing day. His mood improved so much that he no longer feared failure anymore.

He felt as if he had become invincible!

No matter what problem or complication got in the way, he bulldozed over the issue through a combination of inventive solutions and brute force problem solving.

Regardless of whether his work was elegant or robust enough, Ves merely cared about whether the end product became viable. Nothing else matters!

After enough time had passed, both Ves and Gloriana gradually brought the Dark Zephyr Mark III Project to a functionally complete state.

They had both worked hard to speed up the development of the high-tier expert light skirmisher.

Ves had completed a project that should normally take years to complete in a matter of months.

Gloriana had also gone above and beyond to completely redesign the Dark Zephyr into a full archemech.

The deep and pervasive substitution of conventional technology with archetech was so thorough that hardly anything that originally belonged to the Dark Zephyr would be left after its transformation!

As the date of the planned upgrade session drew closer, Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson and the current iteration of the Dark Zephyr departed from the expeditionary fleet and traveled all the way to the New Constantinople System.

Ves and Gloriana personally greeted the expert pilot and his living mech after they had been teleported down to the surface.

"Welcome to New Constantinople VIII!"

Ves grinned and moved forward to embrace Tusa in a friendly hug.

Though Tusa looked more bemused than sentimental, he appreciated the familial gesture.

"I have been looking forward to this for years." The expert pilot mildly said as the two Larkinsons separated. "This is a nice planet. I have hardly seen much of it, but I can understand why you have decided to settle down here. Have the Terrans been treating you well?"

"Naturally. The Terrans never fail to show their appreciation of my continued presence. They prefer it if I stay with them on a permanent basis, but I will not be able to oblige them. I will leave sooner or later. I just want my children to enjoy a somewhat normal childhood long enough before I leave."

"Understandable." Tusa nodded before turning to Gloriana. "Thank you again for putting in so much effort to upgrade my battle partner. You cannot believe how many times he has obsessively studied the technical updates that you have occasionally transmitted to us. He is looking forward to completing his transformation into an archemch."

"Truly?"

"TUSA IS SPEAKING THE TRUTH." A male synthetic voice boomed from the Dark Zephyr's external speakers. "I AM MORE THAN TIRED OF BEING KNOWN AS THE OLDEST, WEAKEST AND MOST OUTDATED EXPERT MECH IN THE LARKINSON ARMY. ONCE I OBTAIN THIS UPGRADE, IT WILL FINALLY BE MY TURN TO LAUGH AT MY INFERIOR BROTHERS AND SISTERS. AS THE ONLY EXPERT MECH THAT INCORPORATES ARCHETECH AND AN ULTIMATE MODULE, I SHALL FINALLY BECOME KNOWN AS THE MOST POWERFUL MECH OF THE LARKINSON CLAN!"

The expert mech sure possessed a competitive spirit. He became so excited at the prospect of undergoing his long-awaited refit into a much more powerful version of himself that his spiritual foundation vibrated with excitement!

"Calm down, Zeph." Tusa called and slightly resonated with his expert mech from a short distance away. "You will have your turn. We first need to complete all of our tests and examinations. If the mech designers discover any problem, then that needs to get fixed first."

"HURRY UP, THEN. PLEASE START RIGHT AWAY. I DO NOT NEED ANY REST. I AM A MECH."

Gloriana smiled and gave the eager expert mech a friendly smile. "I originally wanted to postpone your examination for tomorrow, but if Tusa is willing to skip the celebratory dinner, I can examine you as soon as we have shipped you over to one of our workshops."

"Please do, madame."

Upgrading the Dark Zephyr mattered too much to everyone. None of the three Larkinsons had any objections to starting work right away.

It was for that reason that Ves, Gloriana and Tusa went straight to an underground mech workshop so that they could learn whether the Dark Zephyr was in a good enough shape to undergo a massive transformation.

Chapter 5982 Difficult Maintenance

The return of the Dark Zephyr was a great occasion for the Design Department.

Many mech designers knew about the living mech's return eagerly suspended whatever they were doing and moved straight to the private workshop where the machine had been moved.

A lot of eager Journeyman Mech Designers wanted to witness the oldest and earliest Larkinson expert mech to see how much he had grown since his birth. The 25 mech designers originally recruited during the Fey Shaper Contest and afterwards were particularly eager to witness one of the most celebrated and admired mechs of the Larkinson Clan!

Ves allowed them to pass through the entrance so long as they knew how to behave. They were all core employees of the Larkinson Clan, and had proven themselves trustworthy and capable enough to participate in all kinds of Larkinson mech design projects. It was not a bad idea to introduce them to the more advanced and high-end projects in advance, especially since they may be invited to contribute to a future expert mech design project one day.

Many of these young and eager Journeymen looked enviously at Adrien Marceau and Ariana Roux. The two had been lucky enough to contribute to development of the Dark Zephyr Mark III Project shortly after they started to work in the Design Department!

Adrien Marceau had worked alongside Ves, Gloriana and many other engineers to develop a very high-end combat warp system for Tusa's expert mech.

Mobility was paramount for the expert light skirmisher, and the advantages of Marceau's quirky combat warp system sounded perfect for the occasion.

If all went well, the archetech-adapted combat warp system should allow the Dark Zephyr to generate powerful warp bubbles with minimal delay, enabling the living machine to alter his vector in an instant. The evasive characteristics of an already agile mech would become even more ridiculous!

Ariana Roux's contribution was also pretty significant. She worked alongside Gloriana to upgrade and optimize the new computing systems for all of the archetech parts and systems.

More importantly than that, she also applied a major upgrade to the Dark Zephyr's ECM capabilities. The new Electronic Gremlin System allowed the Dark Zephyr to hack many different machines within its range.

So long as the virtual projection of enemy computing systems were not sophisticated enough, poorly designed by modern human standards, horribly outdated to the point of missing too many security updates or simply too weak to withstand brute force hacking, any human or alien computing system could be hacked!

Even if the Electronic Gremlin System focused on quantity over quality, the Dark Zephyr would already have an easier time running circles around a lot of opponents so long as the latter's offensive systems experienced disruptions.

Ves and Gloriana had a clear goal in mind when they permitted Adrien Marceau and Ariana Roux to participate in the development of the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

The expert light skirmisher needed to become as difficult to pin down as possible!

By enhancing the Dark Zephyr's mobility and ability to cope with crowds of lesser opponents, Venerable Tusa and his battle partner would gain a much larger chance to dive in the middle of an enemy formation alone.

No standard mech was able to keep up with the Dark Zephyr!

Venerable Tusa had long become accustomed to operating by himself. He and his battle partner always attracted a huge amount of enemy fire as a result, and the Dark Zephyr's resonance shield always incurred heavy impacts as it was impossible to evade every single attack launched in the machine's direction.

Hopefully, the comprehensive upgrades combined with the contributions made by the two new Journeymen should allow the Dark Zephyr to get hit much less frequently in the future!

Both mech designers looked inordinately proud and happy to see the Dark Zephyr in the flesh.

They had both grown incredibly familiar with the expert mech's old and new designs. They frequently inspected the machine by remote.

Yet none of those examinations could compare to seeing the actual living mech in person!

The two had already gone ahead and touched the metallic surface of the old and proud expert mech.

The maintenance crews took excellent care of the Dark Zephyr while he was under their care, but there were still plenty of unmistakable signs of wear and tear.

Subtle metal warping, new replacement parts taking the place of destroyed ones, worn and scratch coating and other physical signs all showed that the Dark Zephyr not only existed for a number of years, but also experienced regular action throughout his life!

All of that had led to a lot of accumulation, both physically and spiritually.

When Ves joined up with Adrien and Ariana, they all stopped to appreciate the Dark Zephyr's accumulation of age.

"You've grown so much." Ves sighed as he could feel the richness of the Dark Zephyr's tempered spiritual foundation. "Fourteen Ascension Runes. That's pretty good. I see that you have embraced the concept of freedom with great enthusiasm."

The eyes of the black-and-gray expert mech briefly flashed. "TO STOP IS TO DIE. MOVING IS LIFE. TO STAY ALIVE, I NEED TO POSSESS THE POWER TO DICTATE MY OWN MOVEMENTS. NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO THREATEN MY FREEDOM TO MOVE."

"That is understandable. Don't worry. The coming upgrades will strengthen your mobility even further. The experimental Dark Wind Module that I have recently completed shall become your strongest guarantee. No enemy warship will be able to stand in your way once you activate your trump card."

A visible wave of excitement radiated from the Dark Zephyr. Even though the machine was technically inactive, that did not stop the living mech from looking forward to gaining so much power.

Just like Tusa, the Dark Zephyr had long grown tired of lacking enough offensive power to land a fatal blow on powerful enemies!

Although the Dark Zephyr was slated to receive a lot more features than the Dark Wind Module, Ves' new design application was by far the most exciting and impactful addition.

The expert mech understood extremely well that his male progenitor was by far the best possible choice to upgrade his combat capabilities further.

While Gloriana also contributed a lot to the Dark Zephyr design and creation, the living expert mech did not value her work as much.

That might change once the Dark Zephyr converted into an archemch. The comprehensive technical performance of archemch was so much better that it shouldn't belong to this mech generation!

As the four mech designers continued to examine the Dark Zephyr in a more thorough and systematic fashion, they detected many small issues that the maintenance crews failed to resolve.

This was normal. The mech technicians and low-ranking mech designers assigned to service and repair the Larkinson expert mechs did not possess the full skills and technical acumen to fix every issue.

They need the assistance of Gloriana or another highly competent mech designer who happened to be familiar with the expert mech in question in order to perform deeper repairs!

Though these small issues never became serious enough to threaten the safety of machines such as the Dark Zephyr, Gloriana grew more and more upset when the deep scans exposed more and more signs of inadequacies.

Wear and tear, imperfect repairs, ad-hoc modifications and simple mistakes all added up to slightly reduce the Dark Zephyr's performance.

Any normal mech force would have accepted the reality of this situation. The cost to repair all of these subtle shortcomings far exceeded the benefit of doing so. It was uneconomical to pursue all of these faults.

Gloriana did not agree with that mindset. To her, even a 1 percent drop in performance was enough for her to kick up a fuss!

Fortunately for everyone involved, she did not let her anger get the better of her and blame the maintenance crews for being too lazy and incompetent to restore the Dark Zephyr to a better state.

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Our expert mechs are not getting the care they need and deserve. We should retrain the maintenance crews and hire additional technical personnel with superior qualifications. The problem may not seem too serious to you, but this is only the prelude of a greater fault. The current version of the Dark Zephyr is already among the simplest expert mechs in the Larkinson Army. Once we are done with him, the expert light skirmisher will reach an unprecedented degree of technical complexity."

Ves' expression changed. "That is indeed a serious issue."

"I can already tell you now that none of the mech designers and mech technicians will be able to learn how to properly service and repair an archemch." Gloriana flatly stated. "They do not have to understand the ins and outs of archetech, but even a superficial understanding of its working principles is already too much for their limited intellects to bear. We need to hire the graduates from the best second-class and ultimately first-class mech design universities in order to keep the Dark Zephyr and every future archemch in good condition."

That sounded like overkill at first, but it was actually not. Archetech was just too difficult and alien for humans to understand in a hurry. Gloriana only managed to get this far by relying on a couple of exceptional circumstances. How could ordinary mech designers do any better even if all they needed to do was to maintain, repair and possibly fabricate new archetech parts?

The exponentially greater burden of servicing highly advanced mechs was one of the most important constraints that prevented a lot of forces from fielding mechs beyond their usual means.

So what if a group obtained a supremely powerful machine?

A few years of moderate usage would steadily cause the advanced mech's parts to wear out or incur significant damage!

Without money and connections, it became far too difficult to purchase expensive materials, acquire the right production machines and hire the highly skilled workers to preserve such an expensive machine!

Ves realized that the Larkinson Clan had already reached this awkward stage. The clan grew too quickly to adjust the standards for maintenance crews upwards and hire more capable mech technicians to complete all of the more complicated tasks.

"I am satisfied with how you have handled the reorganization of the Design Department and the initiative to found several new R&D groups for our clan. I will leave this matter to you as well, Gloriana. Just make sure you coordinate your actions with Commander Casella Ingvar. Many of the old-timers who have enjoyed the honor of servicing our expert mechs for many years will grow upset when we attempt to replace them with better personnel. You need to take care of their feelings, but not in a way that compromises your goal, do you understand?"

His wife maintained a serious expression as she nodded. "I will address this issue immediately after completing this project."

"There is no acute need for the time being, so you don't have to push yourself. I think that fabricating your first full archemehc will sap most of your concentration."

"I suppose you are correct, but I can still transmit preliminary instructions. This issue needs to be handled fast enough to prevent the Dark Zephyr from lacking the treatment that he deserves. Our living expert mechs have fought hard alongside our clansmen and experienced great dangers while fulfilling their missions. We cannot and should not accept any form of mistreatment and neglect towards them. The better they are taken care of, the harder they will fight when we need their protection in return."

"Well said." Ves smiled.

He fully agreed with her sentiment. Living mechs could not be treated as ordinary commodities. They possessed their own thoughts and feelings, so gestures such as excellent care did not more than fix their physical ailments.

The earnest care made the Dark Zephyr feel loved and welcomed in the Larkinson Clan.

The benefits of showering them with additional care and attention could not be measured, but Ves believed it could make a great difference during crucial moments!

Chapter 5983 Difficult Archetech

After closer inspection, Ves and Gloriana confirmed that the Dark Zephyr Mark II was not in the best physical shape.

The Unending alloy plating had protected the expert mech for a long time, but it was impossible procure more of it after it had been destroyed in battle.

This forced the maintenance crews to make use of armor plating made out of entirely different materials in order to restore the expert mech's armor coverage.

While the Larkinsons had done their best to match the mass and density of the replacement plating, it was impossible to make everything as congruent as before. The inconsistencies produced multiple misalignments and slightly reduced the fluency and the reliability of the expert mech.

This was just one of many ailments that affected the Dark Zephyr's performance!

Trying to repair it all was a massive endeavor. Gloriana estimated that she would have to spend at least 3 weeks to carefully reconstruct and restore the Dark Zephyr Mark II to his original form.

Fortunately, that was not necessary this time.

"I am glad that we do not have to restore the Dark Zephyr to his old state." Gloriana said after she had studied all of the data readings. "Once we commence our upgrade run, we will have to test the Ship of Theseus concept much more extensively than before. Hardly anything of the current mech will be retained once we are done with our work."

The Dark Zephyr Mark III was superior in every way, but all of that demanded a much more extensive reconstruction as a result.

Replacing conventional metallic parts with archemetal equivalents was such a massive overhaul that it was impossible to retain so many outdated and inferior parts.

Ves and Gloriana did not even like any of the materials that made up their oldest expert mech.

Back when they originally designed their first batch of expert mech under the supervision of Master Moira Willix, the Larkinson Clan used to be in a much poorer position.

All of that changed drastically over the years. The Larkinson Clan of today was in a much better position to design and fabricate high-end mechs.

The LMC, the Open Consortium, the T Institute and many friendly business partners all possessed the capacity to supply rare and valuable strategic materials to the Larkinson Clan.

Ves also had the luxury to spend his MTA merits on a lot of exclusive goods from the Red Association's Merit Exchange.

His tier 3 galactic citizenship combined with his many contributions opened up access to a large selection of materials that ordinary mech designers could only dream of obtaining!

Neither Ves nor Gloriana held back all that much when they selected a lot of powerful and expensive materials to elevate the physical parameters of the Dark Zephyr.

Even though his slim frame prevented him from piling up a lot of armor, the advantages of archotech meant that his effective ability to resist damage had increased by a huge margin!

This was especially the case when the structure of the mech frame consisted of first-class alloys that were harder and tougher than Unending alloy!

So long as enough hyper materials were added to the archemetal, Ves believed that the new and improved Dark Zephyr should still retain his spiritual prowess. It might even improve due to the use of superior and more specialized hyper materials!

However, Ves and Gloriana could not say for certain whether the Dark Zephyr's parameters would improve as much as they anticipated.

After all, ever since the Age of Dawn had commenced, many simulation programs became inaccurate and unreliable. The Red Association had yet to publish a comprehensive new set of formulas and data sets that could be used to accurately model the performance of hyper technology.

Simulation programs already struggled to predict the performance of high-ranking mechs, especially when the extraordinary willpower of expert pilots and ace pilots came into the picture.

Vulcan had been working to improve the realism of the MSTs, but it was very hard to account for phenomena that were difficult to reproduce.

In short, every mech designer including the Larkinsons had no ability to fully predict the actual performance of a hyper mech in advance.

Additional complications such as archotech and the Dark Wind Module made it even more difficult for anyone to have a solid clue of how good the Dark Zephyr may become at the end!

This was incredibly frustrating for the people involved. Tusa and his battle partner had little idea what was in store for them. The lower and upper boundaries of the possible boost in performance were so far apart that it was pointless for them to think about it any further.

This also put a lot of pressure on Ves and Gloriana. Both of them needed to trust that their design work was sound and that they could adequately handle the fabrication of archotech in the coming days.

Tusa and a handful of mech designers gathered before a brand-new set of production machines.

"As you know, we intend to replace virtually all of the Dark Zephyr's existing parts with archetech equivalents." Gloriana explained. "The necessary archemetal cannot be produced through conventional means. This is why we have purchased a set of archemetal fabrication machines. They are derived from the production machines used by the arche race and produce blocks of archemetal in a manner that is similar to how the aliens grow their own archeshells. It is an organic-like production process that is much different from what humans are accustomed to. It is a troublesome production method, but as long as we do not make any mistakes, the results are far superior to what we can achieve with normal parts and processes."

The expert pilot looked at all of the advanced production equipment and felt totally lost. He did not understand how ordinary 3D printers and so on worked. How the hell could he judge anything from looking at these incomprehensible devices?

"I trust in your abilities." Venerable Tusa said in a humble tone. "You have made a lot of promises about archetech. It is my hope that you are able to fulfill them all. I will not be upset if you can't, but I hope that everything goes right. How sure are you that your work will live up to your highest expectations?"

That was a difficult question to answer. Ves and Gloriana both exchanged glances for a moment.

"My personal estimate is 50 percent." Ves added. "The quality of the physical frame will probably not meet our highest standards, but that is not related to the spiritual qualities of the Dark Zephyr. I have made massive strides in this area, so I think there is a good chance that the superior spiritual foundation of your expert mech will overcompensate for the physical shortcomings of his archemetal frame."

"It is... challenging to produce a nearly flawless result." Gloriana reluctantly admitted. "Our craftsmanship is unequaled among our ranks, but we have never seriously produced a full archemech. We have practiced the exotic new production processes many times in virtual simulations, but their fidelity is limited. We will most definitely encounter multiple brand-new problems that we simply cannot prepare in advance. Combined with the additional complications related to the need to upgrade an existing mech as opposed to creating one on scratch, we are not confident that we will be able to turn your Dark Zephyr into a masterwork mech. I estimate that we have a 40 percent chance at best."

"My personal estimate is 50 percent." Ves added. "The quality of the physical frame will probably not meet our highest standards, but that is not related to the spiritual qualities of the Dark Zephyr. I have made massive strides in this area, so I think there is a good chance that the superior spiritual foundation of your expert mech will overcompensate for the physical shortcomings of his archemetal frame."

This was not a new story for Ves. His solo masterworks had always been this way. He could never bring himself to care as much for physical perfection as his wife. His style and priorities were just too far apart from hers.

Though Ves gave Tusa a little bit more hope, he still felt disappointed. Piloting a genuine masterwork mech had long been one of his cherished wishes.

Although he did not begrudge other lucky expert pilot for being able to benefit from piloting masterworks, Tusa could not help but feel inferior for missing out on this amazing benefit.

The Dark Zephyr was too old. He had come to life during a time when Ves and Gloriana's craftsmanship was much rougher and more immature than now. The expert light skirmisher had also been built years before Gloriana successfully developed her ground-breaking god body solution.

Gloriana reached out and patted the seasoned expert pilot's shoulder. "It will be okay, Tusa. There is no real loss if we fail to create a masterwork. I have made sure to integrate the god body solution in as many archemetal parts as possible. As long as the Dark Zephyr is able to absorb enough E energy over time, his physical frame will automatically evolve to masterwork standard. It is just..."

"We have never tested the combination between archetech and Gloriana's god body solution in reality." Ves informed his cousin. "The interaction between the two might work as planned, but it might also result in anti-synergy that ultimately delays or hinders this gradual process. In my opinion, the additional complexity of archemetal components will probably cause the Dark Zephyr to improve his physical quality at least several times slower than before. There is just so much more that needs to happen in order to elevate your expert mech's physical standards."

Tusa only roughly understood the point that the two mech designers were making. Instead of worrying himself sick over this complicated issue, he turned his attention to the two recently recruited Journeymen that were standing right behind the Miracle Couple.

"Will the two of them participate in the upgrade run?"

Gloriana nodded. "They shall, but not in a capacity that you expect. Neither Adrien Marceau nor Ariana Roux have become proficient enough in archetech to fabricate the parts by themselves or under supervision. They shall act as our assistants instead. They will be responsible for moving parts and materials around. They will also be responsible for scanning the archemetal parts to verify that their quality is up to standard."

That was the most that the pair of newcomers could do. The basics of archetech were just too difficult to learn in a short amount of time.

Perhaps the story might be different in a few years, but that required a lot more time.

"Will you be able to produce archemetal parts, Ves?"

"Somewhat. I am not as good as Gloriana in this aspect, but I have learned enough from her to gain the qualifications to fabricate simpler archemetal components. I will still have plenty of work to do, but my involvement is not as great as you think. My wife is responsible for fabricating the vast majority of archemetal parts. We will all be working at her pace and schedule."

That was anything but ideal, but there was nothing they could do about it. The success of this project largely hinged on Gloriana's mood and performance during the upgrade process.

Though his wife was under a lot of pressure right now, she did feel nervous about it. She had studied archetech and worked with it for so many months that she was extremely eager to realize her latest mech design!

Even if her performance disappointed her in the end, she would at least gain crucial experience that she could use to increase the success rate of her next archemtech project.

"There is one more thing I have to inform you about." Ves spoke up. "Before we begin the fabrication process, I plan to conduct a ritual. It will be a little weird, but just play along. Who knows whether it might make a difference in the end. Are you okay with this, Tusa?"

"It is fine as long as it isn't too weird. I will not do anything that I personally disagree with. I hope you won't test my tolerance."

"Don't worry. It won't involve any human sacrifice or other lurid stuff. I still have standards."

Ves needed to pay more attention to his optics. With the passing of the sect proposal, Ves needed to make sure to keep his act clean and avoid giving the Red Collective reasons to deprive him of a sect quota.

Chapter 5984 The Strength of Mech vs Mech Pilot

The time of upgrading the Dark Zephyr drew closer.

Ves and Gloriana did not begin their work right away. They conscientiously retired for the evening and enjoyed a good night's sleep.

Once they woke up, they both regained their peak condition.

Anticipation surged in their bones as they looked forward to creating a completely different mech than they had ever worked with in the past.

Breakfast became a happy affair as Tusa took a seat next to Ves and his immediate family.

It had been a long time since the children last saw and spoke with their uncle in person, so they immediately began to chat with the expert pilot.

"Meow." Lucky rubbed his body against Tusa's arm before flying away to eat a few chunks of hypers and exotics.

"How are Doria and Giovanni doing?" Aurelia politely asked.

"My children are doing okay." Tusa smiled when he recalled their faces. "It has been hard for them to grow up without their mother in their lives, but there are so many other nice ladies over at the expeditionary fleet that they do not lack for aunts."

"Can their mother contact them while still remaining connected to the EdNet?"

"She can, but the mechers do not recommend it." The expert pilot said. "The difference in the passage of time within the EdNet and outside of it is so great that she will perceive everything we say and do in slow motion. We can use technology to compensate for that, but it will lead to long and awkward delays in conversations. There are also other psychological issues related to breaking the relative isolation between different realities. This is why we limit these contacts to a handful of times a year. The more frequently Ranya tries to connect with her children, the more she becomes disassociated with the EdNet. This will increase the load to her brain to an unacceptable level."

It was difficult for many of the Larkinsons that started their own families to endure the years-long separation with their young children.

Parents such as Ranya were making an especially difficult sacrifice by subjectively spending up to 20 years in a reality where they could not hug their children!

However, this opportunity was too precious for them to miss. They would regret it if they missed out on a free opportunity to advance to first-class professionals.

This was an especially crucial transition period for the Larkinson Clan. If they did not become first-raters by the time the clan was ready to participate in the first deep strike operations, they would lose their leadership positions as they were unable to keep up with the demands of their current positions.

It was not fair for Doria and Giovanni to grow up under these circumstances, but the Larkinsons fostered such a strong communal family atmosphere that the damage shouldn't be too great.

Ultimately, Ranya should be able to provide a lot more for her children once she returned and resumed her responsibilities as the director of the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

"You look different." Andraste said as she stared at Tusa's more worn and rugged face. "You used to look so young, but now you are beginning to look closer to grand-uncle Ark."

Tusa chuckled in a good-natured manner. "I am not a young man anymore. Everyone ages. I am no exception to this rule."

"I thought that expert pilots age slower than other people."

"That is partially true, Andraste. A stronger will and a greater obsession in one's appearance can indeed make expert pilots look younger and more pleasing, but only to an extent. I have never cared too much about my appearance. I am fine with looking older and more appropriate to my current age. I am a father, after all, though he is doing a much better job at clinging onto his youth."

"My body is much more radically altered and enhanced than yours." Ves mentioned. "I never really paid any attention to this, but now that I am looking at you, I can tell that your body is barely augmented. That is quite rare in the Larkinson Clan these days. Your wife runs an institute that is performing a lot of augmentation procedures and is becoming better at this job with each passing year."

"I became an expert pilot fairly early on. As a third-rater, I never depended on implants and genetic modification to improve my performance. Once I settled in as an expert pilot, I found plenty of ways to improve my combat skills. Diligent practice along with frequent enough combat has allowed me to become better to the point where I never felt the need to augment myself. At most, I only installed a fairly basic cranial implant so that I can improve my ability to handle tech."

The children all looked impressed at Tusa. Each of them were well aware that they were very far removed from baseline humans. They did not think it would be that difficult for them to rise to greatness, but it was different for Tusa!

"Augmentations matter less for expert pilots." Gloriana explained to her children. "One of the definitions of apotheosis is the transformation from human to a god. The mech community has adopted this word to emphasize how much expert pilots have transcended the limitations of ordinary humans. As their resonance strengths grow, they will continue to improve in many different aspects, some of which overlap with the benefits of artificial implants and gene mod templates. As long as Tusa fights well enough without relying on the advantages bestowed by augmentations, he can become just as successful as second-class and first-class mech pilots who are always augmented with very few exceptions."

"So is it possible to become a god pilot without ever making use of augmentations?" Andraste eagerly asked.

"Not always." Ves shook his head. "The less you rely on augmentations, the more you have to compensate in other areas. Talent, hard work, luck and other factors must fill up the gap. You will also have to accept the fact that there are many strong and useful benefits brought by pilot-oriented augmentations that cannot easily be replicated through other means."

Tusa seriously nodded. "He's right. I am not as precise, and my reaction speed is not actually the highest. My body cannot withstand as many shocks and cannot go without sleep for too many days. There are many useful improvements that I am missing out on. It is not all that bad, though. I am comfortable in my own skin. I don't suffer from any compatibility problems. I don't need to change my habits or diet."

"Shouldn't light mech pilots supposed to possess higher reaction speeds than others?" Andraste looked confused. "Why don't you augment your ability to react to rapid changes on the battlefield? Won't it make it easier for you to evade attacks?"

"You are not wrong, little girl, but reaction speed alone does not make for a good light mech pilot. Do I hate getting hit? Yes. Who wouldn't want to avoid harm? I pilot one of the most fragile expert mechs in the Larkinson Army. I have to pay constant attention to my movements and the actions of the enemy in order to prevent my expert mech from getting struck. Since I cannot rely on super-duper reaction speed and other superior physical traits, I have taken to relying on another strength to make sure that my Dark Zephyr remains untouched. Can you guess the answer?"

Andraste furrowed her brows for a few seconds. "Is it intuition?"

"Correct!" Tusa grinned. "The combat intuition of an expert pilot is celebrated for good reasons. It is one of our most powerful advantages as far as I am concerned. However, what not everyone knows is that intuition can be trained like a muscle. By repeatedly subjecting my Dark Zephyr to enemy fire, it is up to me to help my expert mech thread through all of the dangerous attacks. My intuition is constantly being tested to its limits each time I face enemies. When this happens often enough, my intuition has become so practiced at this that I can evade all of the attacks launched by a couple of hundred ranged mechs without putting in too much effort."

"That... that is awesome!" Marvaine exclaimed! "Intuition is so strong!"

"So out of all of the Larkinson expert pilots, you are by far the best at evading attacks?"

"Yes. I am the champion in this as far as I am concerned. I will challenge anyone else that thinks he or she can do better. My closest rival is Venerable Pedro Rodrigo. His newer and much more powerful Bloodripper is truly a fast and agile expert mech. I do not think that it is all good, though. It is exactly because the Bloodripper's mobility is so high at the start that Venerable Rodrigo isn't able to exercise his intuition as much as myself. He will never be as good as me in evasion. He is much more accustomed to letting his expert mech's tech save his hide."

"Are you suggesting that we shouldn't make our expert mechs so powerful for recent breakthroughs?" Gloriana asked with obvious concern in her voice.

"I wouldn't say that, madame. The enemies we are fighting against are much more powerful than the Fridaymen and other rabble that we faced in the past. A single direct hit from the primary cannon of an alien battleship can easily tear up a weaker expert mech. It takes years of constant

training and repeated exposure to dangerous combat scenarios for me to refine my intuition to where it is today. Venerable Rodrigo doesn't have that luxury. Intuition is not the only factor that makes expert pilots strong. He can make it up in other ways."

Ves nodded in agreement at Tusa's explanation. "I agree. A stronger mech pilot can compensate for a weaker mech. A weaker mech pilot can still be saved by a stronger mech. You should never evaluate the two elements separately. Mechs and mech pilots make up for a single composite combat unit. It is not necessarily wrong to rely more on the superiority of technology than human capabilities. You just need to be careful not to take it too far. A good mech ultimately facilitates the growth of a mech pilot. It is never meant to inhibit a person's growth."

Personally, Ves valued Tusa's intuition a lot more than the alternatives. This was a trait that could never be bought or acquired by spending lots of money. The only way to improve intuition was by training and actual usage in combat.

If Tusa had learned how to anticipate and evade lots of enemy attacks while piloting a relatively weak expert light skirmisher, his ability to avoid getting hit would definitely skyrocket once he gained access to the Dark Zephyr Mark III!

Risks were proportional to the rewards. This rule applied to high-ranking mech pilots as well.

The harder they needed to work to overcome the limitations of their machines, the stronger they became in the later halves of their careers!

Of course, all of this was dependent on whether the expert pilots in question were able to survive while subjected to all of their handicaps.

Ves was glad that Venerable Tusa managed to stay alive while fighting under challenging conditions, but it could have been different.

"The upcoming version of the Dark Zephyr is ridiculously more mobile than the current version. What used to be an act that required you to dance at the edge of the knife will suddenly become as easy as walking down a flat bridge." Gloriana stated to Tusa. "I hope that once you obtain your new and improved machine, you will not let your highly trained intuition atrophy. It would be a shame for you to forget what brought you so far and become a slave to advanced technology."

The expert pilot did not take this warning lightly. "I will not let myself go like that. I won't be able to become an ace pilot with that mentality. Rest assured that I will still do my best to challenge my limits. Every light mech pilot is a daredevil in some fashion. If my mech has become a lot better at avoiding danger, then I will seek it out with much greater effort than before. From what I have learned about the new 'Dark Wind Module', I will not lack opportunities to dance at the edge of a knife once again."

That was not an understatement. Tusa and the Dark Zephyr could easily kill themselves if they failed to utilize the Dark Wind Module correctly. This risk was present even if they only fought against a single opponent!

Chapter 5985 Fadestone

After a sumptuous breakfast, Ves and Gloriana entertained their kids for a time.

Though the kids wanted to witness their parents embark on a great work yet again, their schooling was more important. Neither of the two parents permitted their children to skip their classes just so that they could see an expert mech being remade into a much stronger version.

This was not the first time their family went through this ordeal. Upgrading the Dark Zephyr was of great importance to the Larkinson Clan. Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine had to spend a week under the care of their nannies and other clansmen as their parents could not afford to lose their focus.

"Please do not be concerned, madame." Shannon Maris spoke as her arms held the hands of Aurelia and Andraste. "Your son and daughters will remain preoccupied for the remainder of the week. We have already scheduled several visitations to the estates of their wealthy Terran playmates."

Gloriana lifted Marvaine in the air and kissed his cheek before putting him down.

"Miaow~"

Clixie ran up and rubbed her body against Marvaine, causing him to giggle and pet her back.

Once the children boarded the shuttle that would take them to school, many mech designers moved down to the high-end workshop where the Dark Zephyr awaited his life-changing transformation.

Only Larkinson Journeyman Mech Designers received permission to witness the remaking of the expert mech from afar. Plenty of them grew excited at the prospect of observing the best mech designers of the Larkinson Clan at work.

Even though the Journeymen all needed to complete their daily work quotas before they could spend their free time on observing Ves and Gloriana at work, none of them begrudged this demand.

This was because the opportunity to see Gloriana but especially Ves transform the Dark Zephyr into an archemech that might or might not reach masterwork quality was an exceptional privilege to them all! Many other Journeymen would kill to be in their position!

So long as the members of the Design Department managed to obtain a few insights from observing the Miracle Couple at work, they could incorporate their gains into original new design applications that would subsequently boost their design philosophies!

That was why neither Ves nor Gloriana minded the gallery. Letting their subordinates observe their work ultimately benefited the entire clan.

Before Ves entered the workshop, he briefly encountered a group of disgruntled mech designers.

Not every mech designer received the privilege of witnessing the transformation of the Dark Zephyr.

Most of the low-ranking mech designers accepted the reality. It was not always good for their development to become exposed to the brilliance of stronger and more capable mech designers.

However, there was an additional reason why Ves prohibited the current group of mech designers from observing the upgrade process.

"Professor Larkinson, would you please reconsider your decision to leave us out of the workshop? We are aware of the risks, but we are not afraid of getting contaminated by your design philosophy. It is the opposite. We would love to become exposed to your work in close proximity. In the time we have stayed at your Design Department as guest designers, we have yet to make visible progress

in reproducing the ability to design living mechs. We believe we may be able to achieve a breakthrough when we can observe you at work."

Ves peered down at the short but stocky form of Trent Aaden.

He and 9 other dwarven Novice Mech Designers had dressed up in their most professional outfits and looked eager to secure this opportunity.

Unfortunately for the dwarves, Ves had no intention of changing his mind.

"I have already explained to you why you are not allowed to observe the upgrade process. Not only will it be detrimental to your own development, the tech we intend to add to the Dark Zephyr are all highly sensitive. Don't get me wrong, Mr. Aaden. I trust in your integrity. I do not believe you and your fellow Vulcanites are the sort of people who will sell out all of the secrets of one of my expert mechs. However, it is difficult to control such things when they have spread a bit too far and wide. There are cosmopolitans hiding in every corner. Once they learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the Dark Zephyr, our forces are prone to suffering a massive loss if the aliens ever make use of their information advantage."

The two argued for another minute, but Ves refused to budge. He remained unmoved even when the test tube baby of the legendary Iron Emperor took the initiative to offer another starship from the Eternal Vulcan Empire.

Ves already took a considerable risk by allowing so many Larkinson lead designers the opportunity to observe the upgrade process.

He was not stupid enough to grant outsiders the same privilege.

While he was sure that the Red Association and maybe the Terran Alliance might have infiltrated the workshop to the point where they could observe every work process, Ves could not do much about it. He could just accept it and hope that these parties did not leak the information to their true enemies.

Of course, that did not mean he was willing to make it easy for all of these third parties. As he entered the mech workshop, he glanced over at Ariana Roux.

Although the new recruit was not that useful when it came to working with archetech, her expertise in hacking also turned her into a highly competent virtual security specialist.

Ves had tasked her and Lucky to cooperate with the clan's own resident security experts to thoroughly inspect and cleanse the workshop of any listening devices and spying software.

Right now, a dark gem cat hung lazily on the woman's shoulder. Ariana gently lifted her hand and petted Lucky's head.

"Meow~"

"Ariana."

"Sir."

"What did you find?"

"Not much." She said. "Your security experts and those dispatched by the Terrans, the mechers and the fleters have been very thorough. The security consultants belonging to the latter three all kept

each other in check, so I am reasonably confident that they have removed most of the subtle software taps in the old and new production equipment. It is just that it is not possible for us to guarantee that every form of tampering has been removed. The latest archetech fabrication machines are more advanced than anything I have seen. Their programming is highly convoluted. In fact, much of the proprietary software operates on an alien programming language. Our security experts will need to learn an entire language and culture in order to become fluent in its usage."

Ves did not look surprised at this. "I am not entirely satisfied with this result, but I am aware that this is the best that you can do for the time being. Go ahead and check whether the preparations for the ritual are in order. It might not seem important, but we cannot ignore the power of symbolism."

As Ariana and Lucky moved towards a section of the workshop that had been converted into a completely incongruent ritual site, Ves moved over to Alexa.

His newest and most reliable assistant performed a final inspection of all of the high-quality materials that would be used to upgrade the Dark Zephyr.

Each of the crates and containers remained closed whenever possible in order to prevent the energetic materials from creating accidents.

However, Alexa's attention was entirely taken up by a surprisingly small but decorated container.

Encrusted with gems and covered with velvet, the small container looked like it belonged on one of Gloriana's vanity stations!

Ves already guessed who sent this particular good. "It seems that Tristan Wesseling managed to fulfill his promise."

The Terran mech designer nodded. "It arrived yesterday. A fast courier vessel delivered it straight from Davute. I have already conducted a preliminary inspection. The raw data suggests that this hyper gem outperforms any other hyper material reserved for the Dark Zephyr Mark III."

Ves gazed closely at the container. It was doing a decent job at isolating the energy activity of the gem, but it was not enough. It had actually arrived in an even larger and more effective container to isolate the gem.

"Open it up, please."

Alexa transmitted a command that did so. As soon as the gem became exposed, the ambient E energy immediately began to surge towards the exposed crystalline object!

"That's enough."

The small container immediately shut down again, causing the surrounding E energy radiation to resume its usual pattern.

"That was stronger than I expected from Tristan." Ves spoke with genuine appreciation in his tone. "It isn't the strongest gem that I have seen, but he has made good progress. What can you tell me about it, Alexa?"

"According to the documentation provided by Mr. Wesseling, he has managed to combine Teraixe-063 along with other powerful hypers and exotics to produce what he calls the Fadestone. It is his best work to date and works as a remarkably effective positive shadow hyper gem. It not only generates a strong attraction to shadow energy, but slightly weakens the barrier between realspace

and a dimension that is related to the shadow attribute. What is especially notable about the Fadestone is that it is notably pure. It has very little side effects that you should pay attention to, and it does not generate strong interaction with other elements with the notable exception of light."

"What happens if it gets exposed to too much light energy?" Ves inquired.

"Mr. Wesseling states that his Fadestone can withstand weak to moderate exposure to light energy. Any more than that and it will weaken accordingly."

"I see. That is no different from other shadow hyper products."

The Fadestone did not add any novel effects to the Dark Zephyr, but its concentrated power could directly enhance the effectiveness of the Dark Wind Module.

Due to volume constraints, Ves could not stuff it with as much Teraixe-063 as he wished.

The Dark Zephyr was already among the smallest and slimmest expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan. Its archetech conversion may have freed a bit of capacity, but Ves and Gloriana immediately filled it up with a lot of additional functions.

This was why Tristan Wesseling's business was starting to take off at the start of the Age of Dawn.

His expensive but compact hyper gems allowed for much easier and stronger integration of hyper materials in a technological device.

The only reason why Ves did not commission hundreds of gems was because Tristan's product couldn't be stacked.

Whenever two or more of his hyper gems gathered in close proximity, they started to interfere with each other for whatever reason. This was a limitation of Tristan's special production process.

Ves was no stranger to this restriction. Lucky's gems possessed the same limitation.

Fortunately, one hyper gem was enough for his purposes. With the arrival of the Fadestone, Ves internally increased the estimate of turning the Dark Zephyr into a masterwork mech by another 5 percent.

That still did not guarantee a successful outcome, but there was little Ves could do aside from hoping that his luck would pull through.

A part of himself was still intimidated by the prospect of making his first true archemch.

Both he and his wife would have to forgo a lot of familiar production processes that they had already mastered over many years.

Trying to fabricate an archemch using new and exotic production machines was as weird as trying to produce a biomech as far as he was concerned.

Gloriana did not suffer as much from this problem due to her significantly greater investment in archetech, but even she could not promise to match the quality standards of her previous projects.

Ves shook his head. There was no need to obsess too much over this aspect. The Dark Zephyr Mark III design incorporated so many changes and innovations that he could not even guarantee whether the new and improved expert light skirmisher could be switched on anymore!

Chapter 5986 Ritual in Shadow

The time to begin the upgrade process drew closer.

Gloriana knelt and prayed in front of an altar of the Superior Mother as usual. No one took the initiative to join her. In fact, her pious display attracted a lot of puzzlement from the newcomers.

In the months they spent under her management, Gloriana had never exposed any obvious Hexer traits. Sure, she still possessed a lot of eccentricities, but she never said anything that was clearly related to hexism.

That made it harder to believe that someone as smart and ambitious as Gloriana could also be a woman of faith.

Everyone who was more familiar with her knew better. They automatically ignored her actions and just waited for her to be done with her private ritual.

Rather than staring at his wife's attempt to obtain more psychological comfort for himself, Ves preferred to focus on a ritual that promised to create a more material effect on the upcoming upgrade run.

The most recent transformation of the Dominion of Man had taught Ves a lot about the power of ceremonies and rituals. They were far from subtle and could be used to produce powerful outcomes if used correctly!

Though Ves did not have access to millions of people or a powerful Fire Elemental, he possessed his own bag of tricks.

Tusa had already arrived at the ritual site. The expert pilot looked a little bemused when he saw the black altar, the carvings made out of shadow hypers and a particularly conspicuous bowl.

"Am I supposed to fill this up with my blood?"

"How did you guess?"

"The decor pretty much screamed it already. Please tell me that you are not joking."

Ves smiled. "I am not. Haven't you learned who my mother used to be? Rituals can change reality, and blood has many extraordinary properties. Combining the two will produce a stronger effect than usual."

"How many people will be involved?"

"Not much this time. In fact, I am trying out something new. The first goal of this ritual is to increase the probability of transforming him into a masterwork mech. To do that, I will try to imbue the materials used to make the archetech components with life energy. The second goal is to increase the Dark Zephyr's affinity with the shadow element. I have gained a lot of inspiration recently that may facilitate this process. This experiment should hopefully produce the result I want in exchange for a price."

"And what is the price that you are referring to, Ves? Don't tell me that I need to chop off my left hand or make the same commitment as Jannzi."

Ves shook his head. "Nothing of the sort. Don't worry. I know you value your freedom, and I don't need you to harm yourself. Just a vial's worth of your fresh, juicy and willpower-infused blood

should be enough for our purposes. I will bear the biggest price. It will not be small, but I think it will be worth it in the end."

His cousin felt relieved. "Thank you, Ves."

Before long, Gloriana, Adrien, Ariana and Alexa all gathered around the ritual site.

Ves first turned to Alexa. "You will be my deputy and substitute while I am gone. Are you up for teaching my classes according to the lesson plans?"

She nodded. "I have already become proficient enough in designing living mechs to teach classes about it. My fabrication skills are not even close to good as yours, but I have learned enough from you and Gloriana to exceed the vast majority of Journeymen, so I can still take care of this matter for the time being. As for Frontier Wisdom, it is better to give the word to wise and highly experienced guest lecturers. Their unique perspectives will add much-needed diversity to the lesson content."

"That is good."

They talked a bit more before Alexa departed from the workshop. As much as she wanted to witness the entire run, her responsibilities had multiplied for the remainder of the week.

Ves turned towards his wife. "Alexandria can deploy her design network now. Leave Tusa and I out of it until we have completed the ritual."

His wife wordlessly nodded.

"Maow."

The Queen Cat proudly made her appearance before binding Gloriana, Ariana and Adrien in a design network.

The pair of recently recruited Journeymen had already experienced this several times before, but the experience was still novel to them. There was nothing else like it. Alexandria had to limit the transmission of thoughts and emotions to prevent Adrien and Ariana from getting distracted to the point of losing their focus on their work tasks.

"Mrow mrow."

Blinky appeared next. The Star Cat appeared more powerful than before. The most recent tribulation storm had strengthened his Blinkyverse, which subsequently caused the star system reflected in his fur to grow more complete.

As Ves approached the altar, the light levels of the mech workshop began to dim.

A large amount of shadows appeared. Each of them grew deeper due to the fact that a lot of ambient light sources had shut down entirely.

Only a handful of directional lighting sources remained active, and their luminosities had dropped to the point where the entire workshop began to resemble an ominous cult temple!

The inactive Dark Zephyr hardly remained visible to baseline humans at this point. The machine was entirely engulfed in shadow, and so were most of the production machines.

Ves picked up the empty bowl in one hand while holding a small knife in his other hand.

For whatever reason, he looked as if he blended in remarkably well in the shadows!

Ves indeed felt a lot more comfortable in his own skin now that the mech workshop had lost a lot of light. His Spirituality became more active and he felt that if he mastered the right technique, he could convert the surrounding shadows into his own eyes and ears!

That was not all. Blinky cautiously opened his mouth and began to release shadow energy.

The darkness engulfing the mech workshop seemed to grow thicker and more substantial.

None of the attending mech designers looked afraid, but they did not feel comfortable either.

Since every Larkinson Journeyman received their own companion spirits, they could more easily sense the flow of E energy in the vicinity. They knew that Ves must have a good reason to engage in this strange behavior.

Ves began to hold a speech.

"For many years, the Dark Zephyr has served as a partner to Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson. Together, mech and mech pilot have fought to defend the Larkinson Clan and fight against humanity's common enemies."

The shadow energy around the ritual site grew thicker. Not only that, but it began to get absorbed by the altar and the bowl, both of which were made with shadow hypers.

"The Dark Zephyr is the first expert mech designed and built for the Larkinson Clan. Though he is the smallest and arguably the least advanced expert mech of the series, he has never allowed his shortcomings to limit his deeds and accomplishments."

Tusa couldn't help but swell with pride when he heard that. He had indeed worked together with the Dark Zephyr to constantly push their limits and seek more effective ways to overcome their opponents.

The ability to perform the Leap of True Freedom had been their greatest success so far! Years of hard work and persistent effort without receiving any positive feedback for such a long time had finally paid off in spades.

Tusa took a lot of pride in the fact that he was one of the few high-ranking mech pilots that possessed the capacity to bypass transphasic energy shields entirely.

Yet the ability to move anywhere he wanted no longer satisfied him anymore.

"Yet as much as Tusa and the Dark Zephyr try to exceed their enemies, there are limits to how far they can go. This is not their fault. The lack of upgrades to the expert mech has long held them back. This ends now. From the start of this day, we shall work day and night to transform the Dark Zephyr into a high-tier expert mech that has the makings of an ace mech. No longer shall Tusa be held back by a partner that has been showing his age."

As the altar and bowl began to get saturated with shadow energy, Ves finally moved to use his knife.

He approached his wife.

"Gloriana, do you vow to do whatever it takes to turn the Dark Zephyr into a mech that is fully worthy of his battle partner?"

"I do."

"Then seal this promise by shedding your blood."

Though his wife looked more bemused than anything, she obediently extended her arm and temporarily deactivated her personal shield generator.

Ves made a careful incision on her forearm with his knife.

As Gloriana's clear red blood began to drip into the shadowy bowl, everyone looked fascinated or horrified.

This was starting to look a bit creepy!

Ves did not pay attention to this. He waited for a dozen more seconds before he moved away from his wife.

Gloriana's smart clothing already moved to seal the cut and regenerate the damaged skin cells.

After staring at the bowl that was no longer completely empty anymore, Ves approached Adrien Marceau and Ariana Roux while demanding the same vow.

The two Journeymen's involvement in this upgrade process was not significant, but Ves did not let go of the opportunity to pull them into the ritual.

More blood spilled into the shadowy bowl. Due to the high concentration of shadow energy, the mixed blood already started to get affected to a degree.

Ves approached Tusa next.

"Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson. As the first and only battle partner of the Dark Zephyr, will you do your best to prove yourself worthy of commanding the power of your living mech, and continue to fight together with honor and dignity?"

His cousin slowly nodded. "I will do my best to continue to partner up with the Dark Zephyr. I shall always try to fight with honor and dignity if the circumstances allow for it. I shall always hold the Larkinson Clan dear in my heart, and I will not ignore the plight of humanity."

Tusa's blood soon spilled into the bowl. His blood was among the most important of all. Ever since he grew into a high-tier expert pilot, his biological tissue already started to contain more overt extraordinary properties!

The addition of Tusa's blood seemed to excite the shadow energy. Though Tusa's affinity to shadow was not strong, Blackwing's relation to this element was much more intimate!

Since Blackwing was a split personality of Tusa, this effectively meant that Tusa's blood already possessed a special connection with the shadow element.

Though the bowl still felt extremely light and weak to Ves, he somehow gained the illusion that it had gained a bit more metaphorical weight.

Ves smiled as he approached the altar and set down the bowl. The higher quantity and concentration of shadow energy began to interact more vigorously with the mixed blood.

He held out his own palm. His control over his own body had reached a level where there was no need for him to cut himself. A cut spontaneously formed!

Blood that was redder and more powerful than any other began to fall into the bowl.

The shadow energy became a lot more active as a result! It was as if a nest of snakes had just come across a plump little mouse!

"Since each of you have made a commitment, I, Ves Larkinson, promise to take care of the Dark Zephyr and imbue him with the power of shadow. The darkness shall be his ally, and the shadows shall become his weapon as well as his savior. I vow to improve the Dark Zephyr's ability to synergize with Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson and give them the opportunity to ascend to godhood together! Let my blood seal my promise!"

After he spilled enough blood, Ves forced his wound to close.

Just as everyone thought this ritual had come to a close, Ves surprised his audience by picking up the bowl and approaching Tusa yet again.

The expert pilot began to have a bad feeling about this. His intuition already told him that it was best not to get too close to the bowl.

"What... do you want me to do, Ves?"

"Drink."

"Are you crazy? That is not healthy! Drinking the blood of other humans is supposed to be unhealthy, but drinking the blood of a phase lord is suicide!"

"Drink." Ves repeated as an ominous grin appeared on his face. "Do you think it is easy to ascend to godhood? Very few mech pilots make it to the end. If you do not have enough courage to risk your life, you may as well give up on your dream. Trust me on this Tusa. Drink this bowl and accept our combined blood."

"I... I will end up in the infirmary after this. That phasewater blood of yours will tear open my throat and stomach and cause a lot of internal bleeding. I have read the stories on the galactic net!"

Ves had read those reports as well.

"That won't happen, Tusa. It is true that my blood is dangerous, but... it doesn't have to be. Trust in your strength. Make use of the willpower that you have strengthened and refined over the years. As long as your will is strong enough, I am confident that you can tame this blood! Will you drink or not? You may refuse if you think this is nonsense."

Tusa gave Ves an intense stare. A wave of pressure started to emanate from his body as his willpower became agitated by this challenge.

"Fine!"

Before he could second-guess his decision, he grabbed the bowl and poured the dangerous blood into his mouth in a single motion!

Chapter 5987 A Set of Trials

"TUSA!"

The Dark Zephyr was supposed to be inactive, but the living mech had always been paying attention to the ritual.

When the expert light skirmisher observed that Tusa had actually been reckless enough to swallow the bowl of dangerous blood, the mech almost wanted to activate and run towards his battle partner!

However, Tusa immediately raised his palm.

"Don't!"

His expression immediately grew strained. His face grew redder as the foul and potentially lethal mixture entered his body.

Ves' phasewater concentration had reached 3.8 percent. Even though he had only shed a tiny fraction of his own lifeblood into the bowl, there was already enough phasewater mixed in to heavily injure or outright kill any baseline human!

The Larkinsons who watched Tusa with genuine concern all waited for disaster to strike.

When that did not happen, they steadily grew relieved.

This was because Tusa had mobilized all of his extraordinary willpower. After his resonance growth had exceeded the threshold of a high-tier expert pilot, it was no longer as weak and insubstantial as before.

Even though it was still inferior to that of an ace pilot, Tusa's willpower already had the ability to override reality to an extent!

Right now, Tusa's genuine and justified concern over his own health and life forced him to stimulate his willpower to the fullest!

Even though he wasn't able to resonate with the Dark Zephyr, he still managed to muster enough strength to force the minute amount of phasewater inside his body to remain calm enough to suppress their spatial activity.

"This... this is impossible!"

"He's not even piloting his mech!"

"Have expert pilots already become that powerful by themselves?"

The reactions from the Journeymen were not unjustified. It was general knowledge that expert pilots were not really strong enough to perform any of the feats they were famed for when they were by themselves.

Without the amplification and synergy of a compatible expert mech, expert pilots were almost just as weak and vulnerable as other mortals!

The reason why Tusa still managed to suppress the phasewater in his body was not entirely due to his willpower.

The truth was that he was not alone.

"Chip! Chip!"

Tusa's Blackwing became active and channeled all of his power to assist in the effort to suppress the spatial activity of phasewater.

The companion spirit was not weak, which helped a lot to exert enough strength to stabilize the fabric of space occupied by Tusa's body.

Even though Blackwing had no special affinity to space, he was able to produce a strong enough effect by drawing on all of the darkness and shadow energies from the environment.

Blinky's output of shadow energy empowered Blackwing just enough to keep the expert pilot safe!

Yet as Tusa almost keeled over, it became clear that he and his companion spirit were straining their utmost to maintain a stable equilibrium.

If they lost their strength for any reason, then the phasewater that was still swirling in Tusa's body may eventually create a spatial outbreak, causing a lot of short-lived spatial twists that always proved damaging or fatal to human bodies.

"Damn it, Ves." Tusa squeezed from his lips as he looked and sounded as if he suffered from a severe case of constipation. "Are you trying to turn me into a phase lord by force or something? This is an awful way to go about it. I don't even know why I accepted your dare and drank that foul bowl of blood. I can't keep this up forever. My willpower is getting more strained by the minute, and Blackwing can only help so much. What am I supposed to do, now?!"

"Endure. Adapt. Overcome." Ves intoned in a serious voice.

"What?!"

"Do you think I fed you my blood for fun? That is not the case. I exposed your body with phasewater because it is necessary. The Dark Zephyr Mark III incorporates a revolutionary new Ultimate Module that can allow the expert mech to phase into a shadow dimension of sorts and pass through solid matter. According to my theories and loose projections, it should not be a big problem for your upcoming expert mech to engage in destructive phasing for a second or so. However, there is no guarantee that all of the advanced hyper technology that I have applied to your expert mech will extend to your frail human body. There is a realistic possibility that when the Dark Zephyr Mark III activates his new Dark Wind Passage ability, your own body may get left behind in the current dimensions."

Ves did not need to explain why that was extremely bad. If the Dark Zephyr Mark III attempted to destructively phase through an alien warship, then Tusa's body would get left behind!

Worse, the expert pilot's body would crash against the exterior hull plating of the ship at an effective speed of at least hundreds of kilometers per hour, thereby causing all of his organic tissue as well as his piloting suit to get squashed with so much force that all of that matter would get obliterated!

Tusa's pupils shook in an uncontrollable fashion as he imagined this potential horror scenario.

"Ngh! I... even if that is a risk, can't you wait until you have finished the upgrade and allow me to test the new ability before resorting to this dangerous measure!? I can die at any minute if you don't pull the phasewater out of my body!"

Ves shook his head in disapproval. "That is unnecessary. I believe in you, Tusa. I believe in the strength of your willpower. You are an expert pilot who has charged into entire alien fleets with just your expert mech and come out on top every time. I am not too sure how our other expert pilots are doing, but as the earliest Larkinson to pilot an expert mech of my design, I believe you possess the traits that grant you the qualifications to rise above your peers."

"What are you talking about?!"

"Not even General Ark Larkinson or Venerable Benjamin Larkinson has survived the high-risk challenges that you have subjected yourself to. You are a light mech specialist. You have managed to survive time and time again by piloting the smallest and most fragile variations of mech types in widespread usage. How could you have survived all of this time without tempering your willpower to a higher degree than any of your peers in the Larkinson Clan?"

Tusa almost vomited out the contents of his stomach. A part of him felt tempted to, but the stubborn and proud streak within him refused to give in to his fears!

"Is this... a demented plot you cooked up to forcibly trigger a breakthrough? If it is... then the first thing I will do after I become a Saint is beat you up until you are but a centimeter away from death! I know you're a phase lord! I know you can take it! I will board my mech... and punch you... until I knock out all of your oversized teeth! YOU HEAR ME, VES!?"

"I hear you, Tusa." Ves grinned as most of his body continued to remain shrouded in darkness. "I am more than happy to accompany you. Just make sure you survive until then. I don't know how long it will take for your body to naturally expel the phasewater that you have just ingested, but I don't think you can suppress it long enough in your current state. You need to do better, Tusa. As strong as you may have become, there is still lots of potential in you. Stay put and don't move. If you want to overcome this challenge as honestly as possible, then try to rely on your own strength. Tame the phasewater. Control the space around you. The better you are able to command your own space, the more powerful you become after you finally get to pilot your new and improved expert mech!"

Ves moved away from the pained and struggling expert pilot and reunited with his fellow mech designers.

He told no one about the ritual he had in mind, so each of them looked at him with utter shock!

"If... if anyone else attempted to poison a client with phasewater, I would have put a stop to this upgrade run." Gloriana said. "I... will not question whether any of this is a good idea in the first place. As long as Tusa's body has yet to rupture, I will perform my work as I have originally planned. Given Tusa's tortured state, I will leave him out of the design network."

"Don't." Ves commanded. "Pull him in. Don't avoid him just because he is in pain."

"You have become even crazier than usual, Ves! I have no desire to share his pain when I am responsible for converting his Dark Zephyr into an archemech. I require the utmost concentration in order to fabricate the highest possible quality of archemetal parts."

"I think you can handle it, Gloriana. More than that, I think it will make you produce better results. As long as you can filter out the worst of the distractions, Tusa's pain and suffering will motivate you into working faster and better. The best way to 'cure' his condition is to deliver the Dark Zephyr Mark III in the best possible state. As soon as he hops inside the cockpit and resonates with his machine, the powerful true resonance generated by the two can completely neutralize the phasewater that still remains buried inside his flesh."

His wife carefully weighed this argument and found it plausible. She still looked at Tusa with concern.

"You are gambling with his life."

"He'll be fine." Ves said in a nonchalant tone. He looked and sounded a lot more evil when he continued to remain shrouded in shadow. "Consider this as a set of trials. I have subjected Tusa to one trial. I have subjected the both of us to another trial. Each of us must work at our best and push our capabilities to the limit and beyond in order to produce the best possible outcome. If either of us fall short in any way, then there is a substantial risk that Tusa will not be in a shape to pilot a mech for an extended period of time. If a bit of phasewater has entered his brain, then he may be forced to end his career."

"You... you madman!" Gloriana gasped.

"Accusations won't change anything, my dear. The only way we can provide definite relief to Tusa is if we get to work right away."

Ves was right. The mech designers soon split up and began to engage in their respective work.

This upgrade run was unlike any other.

When Alexandria pulled the mech designers, the agitated Dark Zephyr and the tormented Tusa in a single design network, it took a lot of effort for Ves and Gloriana to maintain their composure!

The mech workshop itself remained poorly lit, though that did not hinder the mech designers from their duties. Their augmented vision and the well-lit interfaces of the production machines ensured that they could still see what they were doing.

Ves also employed a variation of his Living Workshop ability.

Blinky sucked in a lot of ambient E energy and converted it into life energy to saturate the entire workshop.

Yet what was different was that Blinky kept the aperture that separated the universes from each other open.

The Blinkyverse continued to release its accumulated shadow energy into the main universe!

Life energy along with a bit of shadow energy continued to engulf the workshop, causing everything to become affected in subtle ways.

All of these abnormal conditions and more both tested everyone's ability to endure and adapt.

Though Gloriana initially stumbled a few times and accidentally produced a couple of defective achemetal components, she refused to allow her husband's latest antics to ruin her first attempt to produce an actual archemtech.

After she spent a few minutes to pray to the Superior Mother, she regained much of her composure and began to work with considerably greater focus than before.

Soon, she managed to fabricate her first functional archemetal component of the current project!

Chapter 5988 Professional Ethics

Everyone was confused.

No one understood why Ves chose to conduct such an insane ritual!

Although he had already built up a reputation for being obtuse, irrational and outright crazy at times, his actions today far exceeded his usual pattern!

On the surface, his decisions conformed to an underlying logic.

He dimmed the light levels of the mech workshop in order to set the right mood and produce a more conducive environment for a mech aligned with the shadow element.

Blinky pumped additional shadow energy into the mech workshop to further saturate the materials and soon-to-be-fabricated archemetal parts.

He conducted a small ritual that ostensibly sharpened Ves and Gloriana work focus.

He also forced Tusa to swallow a small but already deadly portion of Ves' phasewater-infused blood, with the intent to temper the expert pilot's willpower and increase his tolerance towards dangerous spatial phenomenon!

On paper, none of these actions sounded detrimental, but the reality was quite different!

Ves had become an outright devil by forcing all of these weird and dangerous conditions onto everyone!

At the very least, Ves had crossed a very dangerous ethical line today, so much so that the observing mech designers couldn't believe that their idol could be so unscrupulous!

"Miss Alexa, are you sure that the professor is of the right mind?" One of the Journeymen contacted Ves' deputy for a second opinion. "Mech designers exist to serve mech pilots. According to this principle, we must never purposely cause harm or put our clients and customers at a clear disadvantage. Even if the professor's intentions for Tusa are benign, the ends do not justify the means, especially when the latter is outright lethal to any human!"

None of the high-ranking mech designers of the Larkinson Clan were stupid. The worst of them comprised elite graduates of renowned second-class mech design universities. The best of them were genuine first-class mech designers!

Each of them took mandatory courses on the ethics and morality of their work. They had received thorough training on the scenarios where they learned how far they could go in putting mech pilots at risk in order to achieve a better outcome.

Mech piloting was an inherently dangerous occupation. It was impossible to coddle mech pilots to the greatest possible extent. All soldiers had to accept the fact that their duties might not allow them to come back from the battlefield alive. Their mechs may not strictly be their allies anymore, as the very act of piloting them might cause their lives to be cut short a lot sooner than if they stayed away from the battlefield.

One of the most important factors that mech designers needed to take into account was duty.

The inherent dangers that mech pilots had to bear over the course of piloting their machines had to be weighed against the expectations of their obligations to their employer, their state or their civilization as a whole.

It was through these considerations that mech designers were able to justify actions that arguably put mech pilots at greater risk of losing their lives than usual.

For example, mech designers could justify the development of cheap and inferior mechs that arguably put mech pilots in much greater danger than usual. There were plenty of mitigating factors

that justified their use, such as limited resources or granting opportunities for mech pilots with inferior genetic aptitude.

Another case was the design and use of light mechs. Compared to medium mechs, light mechs were obviously smaller and weaker. Centuries worth of statistics also showed that light mechs tended to get wrecked a lot more frequently than the mechs that belonged to other weight classes.

If that was not enough, light mechs usually offered less protection to their cockpits, which meant that their mech pilots had a significantly greater chance of losing their lives over the course of their service!

Yet mech designers still found enough excuses to justify the continued development of light mechs. They were excellent at scouting, they were much more suitable for flanking roles and the importance of superior mobility sometimes trumped every other parameter.

Mech pilots themselves also did not reject the existence of light mechs. Each pilot who chose to take the high-risk option of piloting light mechs had years to weigh their decisions during their academy days.

Their teachers and instructors always explained the pros and cons of piloting light mechs to an exhaustive degree.

Compared to other weight classes, light mechs were indeed a lot more fragile than other machines, but they possessed a completely different appeal that could not be replicated by more massive mechs.

The constant adrenaline rush, the ability to choose when to advance and retreat, the extremely high skill ceiling of most light mechs and the satisfaction of the weak overcoming the strong all attracted a certain range of mech pilots.

Light mech pilots tended to be braver and more prone to making risky decisions than other mech pilots.

They rarely possessed the smartest minds, but they were always quick on their feet.

Each veteran light mech pilot developed their own means to survive while enduring the elevated risks of piloting mechs that could break after getting struck by a couple of substantial attacks.

Those that failed to do so either died, retired early or changed their specializations so that they could pilot heavier machines!

In short, light mech pilots willingly tolerated a lot more danger than normal. This granted mech designers greater allowances to subject their customers to risks so long as their intentions remained honest.

Of course, there was a limit to everything. Mech designers could not break every rule just because they believed that doing so would benefit their target audience in the end.

Most mech designers immediately judged that what Ves had done to Tusa clearly crossed the line!

It was worse in this case because Tusa was not just an ordinary mech pilot.

He was an expert pilot, one that had managed to approach the peak of his rank at a remarkably fast pace!

There was no need to subject such a 'talented' and proven expert pilot to any elevated risks.

As long as Tusa continued to serve his duty in a steady manner for a couple of decades, he would eventually temper himself to the point where he could break through to the rank of ace pilot sooner or later.

A high-tier expert pilot who was in his forties had a lot more breakthrough opportunities than another expert pilot who was over a century old!

Younger mech pilots were more malleable and still had room to grow. Tusa's future was already bright, so there was very little reason to boost his chances further by resorting to extreme methods.

This was why no one understood Ves' actions.

Not even Alexa could justify an act as extreme as stuffing phasewater down Tusa's throat!

A brief internal war raged within her mind. Her professional ethics clashed against her loyalty and belief in her mentor.

This conflict did not last long. Her eyes firmed up as she offered an unambiguous response.

"Professor Larkinson is the most innovative and successful Senior Mech Designer that has ever arisen. None of the Star Designers who we celebrate up to this day can match his accomplishments at this stage. He has made more contributions and saved more people with his works than anyone else in a comparable position. That has earned him a great amount of leeway. At the very least, unless his unorthodox actions have produced permanent material harm to Venerable Tusa, the professor has earned the benefit of your doubt."

"That is not how this is supposed to work, miss." The Journeyman did not mindlessly agree with Alexa's argument. "The very act of gambling with the life of a high-tier expert pilot is already a violation in itself. Regardless of whether the outcome ultimately favors Venerable Tusa or not, the mere possibility of endangering the life of a protected class of people according to the rules of the Red Association should be reported straight away. The mechers may be able to treat Tusa straight away once they bring him back to their advanced medical facilities."

Alexa frowned at that. "If your conscience compels you to report a possible violation, then you are free to do so, but do not expect a response. The Red Association will not respond as you expect, especially during this changing climate."

"What do you mean, miss?"

"Professor Ves Larkinson is an honorary member of the Red Association. He is no longer a subject. He has earned enough recognition from the Association to become a member of this powerful institution. One of the dirty secrets of the mech industry is that the mechers often go easy on each other. As the people who enforce the rules, there are times where they believe they are above the rules."

"..."

"The professor is also a tier 3 galactic citizen, though it could be argued that his actual contributions should have elevated him to a tier 2 galactic citizen." Alexa added. "Have you forgotten how far that sets him apart from the rest of us? You are not even a galactic citizen as far as I know. A space peasant cannot shake the foundation of a tier 3 galactic citizen unless the latter egregiously violates

a taboo. Similar as before, high-tier galactic citizens are no longer strictly subject to the rules anymore. They are the individuals who make the rules. Every high-tier galactic citizen has amply proven themselves to the point where the institutions of our society are willing to extend him greater allowances."

"So nothing will happen to Professor Larkinson even if he ends up killing Venerable Tusa?"

"I did not say that." Alexa sharply responded. "The professor has taken a calculated risk. If his bet pays off, then he is entitled to reap all of the rewards. If his bet turns against him, then he must take responsibility for his failures. This is a rule that he cannot escape from. The mechers will not incarcerate him, but they will impose other sanctions on him, such as depriving him of his allowances and subjecting him to stricter monitoring. He will also have to account himself to his own clan. He has fostered an organization where every member treats each other as family. What he has done is as bad as killing his own brother. He cannot keep his position as patriarch in that case."

That sounded extremely serious!

"This doesn't make any sense if that is the case! How could Professor Larkinson be so reckless as to put his relationship with the Red Association and his leadership of the Larkinson Clan at risk? This is such an unreasonably lopsided tradeoff that no normal mech designer would choose to go through with such an ill-conceived experiment. His actions do not even conform to the scientific method!"

Alexa ruefully smiled. "That is what separates Professor Larkinson from the rest of us. He is a genius, but he is also a madman. What prevents the mech community from condemning him as a war criminal is his ability to succeed in his calculated risks. He is not as reckless as he appears. He might not seem meticulous, but he invests enough time and effort into estimating his chances of success before he takes on a substantial risk. If Professor Larkinson has built up enough confidence to feed Venerable Tusa with his blood, then there are enough reasons to be confident about the expert pilot's ability to cope with his situation. Even if Tusa cannot withstand exposure to phasewater any longer, he can still be saved before he suffers a fatal injury."

It was the belief that Ves and the Larkinson Clan had implemented enough safeguards that no one ultimately tried to stand up and put a stop to this mad experiment.

That did not change the fact that a lot of mech designers did not approve of this radical action!

Their opinions of Ves no longer became as admiring as before.

As the recent hires gradually realized that their new employer was not as heroic and upstanding as they thought, the mech designers began to feel a lot more ambivalent about working for the Larkinson Clan.

Chapter 5989 Gloriana's Frustrations

While all of the observing mech designers reacted with shock, concern, dismay or resignation towards Ves' antics, the man responsible for causing this distress was having the time of his life!

He had purposefully engineered this exceptional situation for multiple reasons. This included ones that he could not properly explain!

He just knew that if he arranged stuff in this specific fashion, he would gain a small but important boost to his productivity.

So far, the outcome matched his expectations!

His recently acquired affinity towards darkness added a very helpful dimension to his work process.

By acting according to the concepts represented by darkness, Ves experienced a range of improvements.

He became more excited. His passion burned hotter. He became more interested due to the novelty of these unprecedented circumstances.

Breaking expectations, raising the stakes, increasing his adversity and putting Tusa in an underdog position all conformed to the darkness in his heart.

Even though Ves knew that his outrageous actions wouldn't do his reputation any good, he still chose to act according to his whims because he sincerely believed that he would be able to produce the best iteration of the Dark Zephyr Mark III in these special circumstances!

Of course, not everything went well at first.

One of the downsides of surprising his wife was that she had been pushed far from her comfort zone.

The active design network allowed Ves to clearly sense his wife's frustrations towards him by pulling off this stunt.

Combined with the constant pain and resentment generated by Tusa, it did not surprise anyone that Gloriana failed to produce archemetal parts that were up to standard!

However, Gloriana was not that weak. She hated it when her husband messed up her carefully laid plans, but she harbored an even stronger hatred towards failure!

When two different hatreds assailed her at the same time, Gloriana could only set aside her lesser pet peeves and focus on making sure that she did not end up a loser due to an inability to adapt to changing variables.

A perfect mech designer never failed!

A perfect mech designer should be able to improvise under any circumstances!

A perfect mech designer should never lose control over herself due to encountering setbacks!

"Please bless my mind and help me stay in focus." Gloriana softly prayed to the Superior Mother.
"Please save my work from your misbehaving son."

Whether the Superior Mother responded to her prayers or not, Gloriana did not wallow in her misery, but steeled her mind in order to ensure that she did not fail in this critical upgrade run.

Upgrading a living mech was much more challenging than fabricating a new one from scratch!

There was only one Dark Zephyr. Any attempt to upgrade his mech frame affected his spiritual foundation. A botched upgrade attempt could actually cause the living mech to regress, thereby becoming weaker instead of the opposite.

Even if Gloriana was able to repair the Dark Zephyr and bring him to his intended condition, the damage was already done at that point.

Therefore, Gloriana believed that she only had one real chance of upgrading the Dark Zephyr in the most perfect fashion possible.

That was not the only concern that weighed on her mind.

She briefly glanced in Tusa's direction.

After putting Tusa in lethal peril, Ves advised the expert pilot to not call for any medical assistance.

This left Tusa to resist the harmful effects of phasewater ingestion by relying on his own limited means!

With the help of Alexandria's active design network, Gloriana became much more familiar with Tusa's struggle than she was comfortable with. She sensed his persistent pain. She heard his curses towards Ves. She felt his willpower becoming more worn by the minute. She perceived Blackwing's frantic efforts to employ shadow energy to suppress the spatial activity of phasewater.

Above all, she could feel his growing determination and conviction towards beating Ves' game.

Tusa had vanquished many mechs, beasts and alien warships!

He was not about to let a few drops of Ves' blood break his winning streak!

He was stronger than this! He was stronger than Ves!

The prospect of passing this test before subsequently teaming up with his new and improved archemec to punch Ves in the face served as a powerful motivator to the struggling expert pilot.

Tusa wanted to pay Ves back tenfold for all of the suffering he was forced to endure!

All of this activity was distracting to say the least. Even when Alexandria purposefully filtered out the worst of it all, Tusa's thoughts and emotions were still highly incongruent to Gloriana's ideal state of mind.

It was as if she was trying to paint Tusa's portrait in the middle of a loud and chaotic dance club!

How was she supposed to guarantee high-quality output when the entire workshop tried to disrupt her work rhythm?!

"Ves..." Gloriana gnashed her teeth for the umpteenth time.

Though she wanted to do nothing more than to walk up to her husband and yell until his ears grew deaf, her work came first.

The design network also allowed Gloriana to gain a clear impression on how Ves was faring in a challenging situation of his own making.

She grew frustrated when she noticed that Ves did not appear to suffer any significant setbacks.

To use the same dance club analogy, Ves embraced the moment and happily danced to the music!

Somehow, he was able to dance while making sure to paint his portrait at the same time. There was no apparent conflict between these two activities. Ves acted as if he was completely in his element!

Though Gloriana could never bring herself to embrace the moment like her husband, she could still draw strength from his mood, his optimism and his surprising lack of concern towards failure.

"Maaaooow."

As Alexandria's glowing red form continued to serve as a weak light source in the mech workshop, she was working a lot harder than usual to regulate the design network.

She was in full control of all of the connections, and she needed to make a lot of judgment calls on what sort of stuff she should pass.

Gloriana knew that she would completely lose all of her strengths if she took in everything that was allowing Ves to work at peak efficiency.

However, her companion spirit still discovered enough positive aspects about Ves that could enable Gloriana to cope with this abnormal situation.

It worked.

Her mood grew steadier. Her nerves became less frayed. She oddly felt more comfortable in the darkness. She no longer became bothered by the massive deviations from her plan.

Though she hated to admit it, there was no one who could improve better than her husband!

As Gloriana continued to borrow from Ves' strengths, she increasingly adapted to the anomalous circumstances.

She still felt bothered by Tusa's tortuous experience, but she no longer allowed him to disrupt her rhythm.

Instead, she derived a greater sense of urgency from his pain. She knew that the harder she worked, the more she was able to provide relief to Tusa!

Gloriana no longer tried to restore her plan at all costs. She became more willing to make adjustments and speed up her work.

If she could finish the transformation of the Dark Zephyr a day or half a day earlier, then that could make a real difference for Venerable Tusa!

As Gloriana continued to work under pressure, she gradually felt she was on the right track again.

Though the archemetal parts she fabricated with the help of the new machines still did not reach an acceptable quality standard, her output slowly improved on this front.

She had practiced with fabricating archemetal components in the past, but she never approached this task so seriously until today.

The archemetal components that she needed to produce were predominantly difficult and complex to make.

Archemetal parts never fulfilled a single defined purpose. They often blended a lot of different functions together in order to achieve greater levels of redundancy.

Gloriana had to mix in dozens more materials than usual and also make sure to transform them into a huge number of subcomponents that seamlessly integrated with each other.

Archemetal was nothing more than an artificial reproduction of an archeshell. The production method therefore demanded a lot of attention from Gloriana as she needed to form a lot of different integrated parts at the same time.

If not for her massive cognitive boost from her recent cranial implant upgrade, Gloriana wouldn't have been able to keep up with all of the critical processes!

She didn't have to make the production of archemetal so hard on herself. As long as she activated a few automated settings and drastically slowed down the fabrication rate, she possessed a lot more confidence in her ability to churn out higher-quality parts.

However, the additional sources of pressure prevented Gloriana from considering this alternative approach!

She needed to complete this project with greater haste than before.

Despite feeling frustrated about her inability to choose her approach, she did not remain upset for long.

She appreciated Ves' attitude and enjoyment towards fabricating a mech on a tight deadline.

Hours into the upgrade process, Gloriana did not need to borrow as much strength from Ves anymore.

This was because she had recovered her mood and adapted her mentality just enough to rely on her own motivations to persist in her work!

The archemetal components started to get better over time. Their quality gradually improved. Gloriana not only felt more comfortable with the abnormal situation, but she also gained a large amount of practical experience in producing archetech.

Her proficiency in operating the archetech fabrication machines rose quickly. Though she had already spent hundreds of hours operating the same kind of machines in virtual reality, none of those practice sessions could match the actual processes in reality!

It was the rapid accumulation of practical experience that allowed her to increase her speed while making sure the quality of her output did not deteriorate.

Though she still experienced difficulties in her attempts to fabricate the most challenging archemetal components, she did not experience the setbacks that she was afraid of. None of the work intimidated her to the point where she lost her confidence.

Part of it came from Ves, but another part of it came from herself. Both Ves and Gloriana possessed an unflinching belief that they could overcome all of the challenges and turn the Dark Zephyr Mark III into an archemech that they could take pride in creating!

Gloriana learned a lot of lessons so far, and not even an entire day had passed as of yet! She learned so much more about Ves, herself and Tusa that she felt the urge to spontaneously change the design in order to incorporate her latest insights.

She resisted the urge to do so. This was an action that Ves would gladly make, but she was not her husband. She possessed her own style and work approach. At best, she could implement her insights in her subsequent mech design projects. The Dark Zephyr Mark III design already satisfied her expectations.

When Gloriana eventually suspended her work and took a scheduled break, she became satisfied when she looked back at her output so far. Their quality might not be the best, but she was confident that they would perform adequately once they were put inside the new and improved expert mech.

She supposed she could do better by remaking a lot of inferior archemetal parts, but this would delay the completion of the project far too much.

Trying to remake all of the old parts would also disrupt her rhythm and weaken her momentum.

She quite liked her current mood to be honest. She knew that this approach suited Ves best, but it was not bad for her to embrace it as well, particularly given the circumstances.

She glanced over at Tusa.

The expert pilot was not doing much better than before, but he somehow managed to muster up greater strength than before. The phasewater circulating inside his body remained docile enough for the time being.

She just hoped that it would last.

Chapter 5990 The First Ultimate Module

Days went by. The mech workshop continued to remain immersed in shadow.

Blinky never ceased to pump more shadow energy into the chamber. Despite the fact that a lot of the energy quickly passed through the walls and dissipated into the environment, the companion spirit did not take notice of all of this waste and continued to make sure that the workshop remained shrouded in shadow.

Combined with the effort to convert other forms of E energy into life energy, the companion spirit single-handedly turned the mech workshop into a mystical work facility!

It was as if Ves and all of the other mech designers had somehow teleported to a completely different time and place.

By employing a novel variation of the Living Workshop ability, Blinky provided Ves with a much more supportive environment than before!

Not only did Ves find it easier to imbue the archemetal parts with life, but the higher concentration of shadow energy also provided a more conducive environment to current endeavor.

All in all, Ves started off strong from the beginning as his motivation remained high throughout the entire process.

He had every reason to be excited about the novel set of circumstances of this upgrade run. Even though he could literally feel Tusa and Gloriana's growing frustrations towards him, he took their resentments in stride and continued to work with a lot of optimism towards the future!

Although Ves eventually started to experience a bit of difficulty when he needed to fabricate more tricky archemetal parts, the challenges were not serious enough to force him to a halt.

Gloriana had already assumed responsibility for fabricating all of the truly complicated archemetal components.

That left Ves with all of the simpler and more trivial archemetal pieces.

However, there was one notable exception to this arrangement.

Ves insisted on fabricating all of the parts of the Dark Wind Module in person.

He wanted to be responsible for constructing and assembling his first full Ultimate Model by hand whenever possible.

The challenge was not insurmountable. The Dark Wind Module possessed a lot of remarkable properties, but its physical complexity was not too high. It essentially relied on a strong combination of hyper materials to bestow the Dark Zephyr with a powerful hyper ability.

Ves invested a lot more time and effort into building up and optimizing the E-technology aspect of the Dark Wind Module.

The hyper materials provided all of the energy and resources to produce a strong effect, but it was the advanced and elaborate spiritual programming that enabled the Dark Wind Module to produce powerful and focused effects.

In other words, Ves had already completed the most difficult work in advance. The intricate work that Ves put into the Dark Wind Module's E-technology could easily be reproduced onto the actual module once it came into existence.

However, that did not mean that fabricating the physical form of the Dark Wind Module would be easy.

He had worked together with Gloriana to convert what was supposed to be a conventional physical module into a more compact and powerful archemetal counterpart.

This made the Ultimate Module a lot smaller and easier to fit into the Dark Zephyr's cramped mech frame, but the tradeoff was that the difficulty of producing it had skyrocketed!

Ves wisely chose to leave the fabrication of the Dark Wind Module for last.

He cherished the opportunity to get as much practice as possible by fabricating a lot of other simple archemetal components.

Much of it comprised of exterior armor plating and other parts with less sophisticated demands. There was enough work for Ves to keep him busy for multiple days.

Despite the relative simplicity of the archemetal parts that he was responsible for making, Ves still had to struggle a lot in order to produce parts that were up to standard!

It couldn't be helped. Ves only invested a fraction of the amount of time that his wife had spent on studying and mastering archetech.

Not only did Gloriana absorb a lot more theory on this alien tech base, she also invested enough time on fabricating and experimenting with actual archemetal parts.

All of that granted her much greater comprehension and fluency when he produced her own archemetal parts. The difference was so great that she made Ves feel like an immature kid in comparison!

Ves did not feel upset about the gap between himself and his wife. They possessed completely different specializations. The greater their differences, the greater their synergy.

The active design network served as a lifesaver for Ves.

By borrowing Gloriana's much more advanced insights and comprehension of archetech without too much friction, he was able to perform a lot better than if he was working by himself.

His wife actually offered wordless corrections and advice in the first few hours. Ves' grasp on archetech was so shallow that he had inadvertently made a few beginner's mistakes.

He quickly corrected that after Gloriana spared enough attention on his work to scold him and tell him how he could do better over the design network!

The fact that all of this happened through spiritual connections as opposed to verbal communication allowed the both of them to maintain their rhythm throughout their exchange.

Ves quickly managed to gain enough proficiency to perform all of the basic processes without any further supervision from his wife.

He had practiced these steps enough times in virtual reality. As long as he paid extra attention to the aspects that did not conform to reality and made targeted adjustments based on changing variables, he should be able to maintain a consistent level of output.

It was only when he was getting closer to fabricating the Dark Wind Module that he began to grow more concerned.

It was not particularly big, but its technical complexity still exceeded that of an exterior armor plate.

One of his greatest concerns was trying to combine significant quantities of high-grade hypers and exotics without causing them all to conflict with each other and produce an explosion.

This was a very real risk when attempting to produce high-quality miniaturized components. It was one of the many factors that drove up the production cost of such parts, especially if they couldn't be produced with materializers.

In any case, Ves needed to work at a fairly brisk pace once he started to produce the Dark Wind Module.

If he worked too slowly, then the incomplete module would stay out of balance and become susceptible to uncontrollable reactions.

However, working too quickly might cause him to lose control over the fabrication process, thereby making it much more likely for him to ruin this critical module!

His wife briefly looked up from her own work and pointedly gazed in his direction.

He met her eyes and shook her head.

"This is my work. It won't be the same if you are the one who makes it. Let me try."

Though Ves felt intimidated by the difficulty of this challenge, he did not allow himself to shy away from it. The Dark Wind Module was his baby as far as he was concerned!

Besides, if Tusa was willing to ingest a bit of phasewater, then why couldn't Ves produce an unprecedented archemetal part?

Ves understood just enough theory and gained sufficient practice to handle a task like this. If he failed, then it wouldn't be because he was not equipped to do so, but because his mentality was too poor.

In order to ensure that he developed the right mindset to success, he took a deep breath and pushed aside all of his doubts and fears.

It was quite easy for him to do so. The Living Workshop ability made him feel at home. The fact that Tusa continued to endure the pain despite straining his willpower for such a long time gave Ves the impression that no limitations were absolute!

"I can do this." He told himself.

There was one more step he needed to take.

He reached out to Vulcan.

Before, Ves had been working without involving Vulcan too closely.

His incarnation did not possess any better understanding of archetech than him. Ves had already internalized a lot of Vulcan's craftsmanship, so he did not see much point in drawing upon the spiritual entity's power.

This was different. The Dark Wind Module was not a regular piece of archetech. Ves practically considered it to be an artifact.

In order to ensure that he would be able to successfully produce it in his first attempt, Ves wanted to cooperate with Vulcan more directly in order to ensure that the resulting product met his standards.

Once Vulcan's glow began to emanate from his body, Ves gained a much stronger focus and began to operate the archetech fabrication machine with a lot more intensity than before!

Ves and Vulcan worked in near-perfect synchronicity as the Dark Wind Module gradually began to take shape.

The full design of the Ultimate Module resembled a fairly compact metal cube. If no one knew what it was capable of, they would have mistaken it for an incomprehensible piece of archetech.

However, the integration of high-quality materials and the exceptional implementation of E-technology elevated the Dark Wind Module into a trump card that could elevate the Dark Zephyr Mark III into a best-in-class expert mech!

If Ves successfully created a version of the Dark Wind Module that matched his most optimistic estimates, then the new and improved Dark Zephyr would stand head and shoulders above any other Larkinson expert mech!

The superiority of the Dark Zephyr in comparison to the Phobos, the Lionheart and the Blood Star Mark II would become so obvious that Ves gained all of the validation he needed to declare the arrival of the sixth generation of living mechs!

With so much progress at stake, Ves continued to work together with his dwarven incarnation to maintain a steady and stable output.

The two of them did not try to be too ambitious and attempt to exceed the parameters set by the design.

The Dark Wind Module was already cutting-edge enough. There was no reason for them to take any further risks in this regard.

Besides, the difficulty of controlling all of the additional variables and ensuring that nothing would go wrong already demanded their full attention!

Darkness swirled around Ves with increasing intensity as the minutes went by. There were times where he almost slipped up, but he managed to recover in time.

Gloriana provided timely help through the design network. She had gone back to supervising his work even when that caused her to shift her focus away from her own fabrication work.

An hour went by. The Dark Wind Module had become a lot more complete at this point. Seeing that Ves already managed to fabricate the most finicky and sensitive aspects of the archemetal construct, he grew a bit relieved.

Gloriana slowly started to draw back her attention as Ves and his incarnation proved that they sufficiently mastered the production process to finish the work by themselves.

By the time the Dark Wind Module came close to completion, Ves brought out the key component that was designed to give it a powerful boost.

He remotely retrieved the Fadestone from its decorative box.

A small and delicate bot lifted up one of Tristan's latest hyper gems and carefully brought it to the archetech fabrication machine.

Once the bot deposited the gem into a tray, the fabrication machine absorbed it and began to transfer it right inside one of its internal chambers.

The gem approached the nearly complete Dark Wind Module and before it got slotted into place.

Ves and Vulcan observed the projected control panels with baited breath before they felt a strong influx of shadow energy!

The entire Dark Wind Module attracted 15 percent more shadow energy than before!

The Fadestone somehow harmonized with Teraixe-063 and other compatible hyper materials used to construct the Dark Wind Module.

The Ultimate Module had become more reliable than before. Though Ves could not prove it, he believed that the integration of Tristan's hyper gem made it significantly easier for the Dark Zephyr to fade into a shadow dimension than before!

"Success!"