

Mech Touch 6271

Chapter 6271 Eleiha

From the moment the Minerva exploded, the entire battlefield seemed to pause for a moment!

The attacking orvens still fired their weapons at their human opponents.

The defending human assets fought back just as hard.

However, both sides seemed to pull back on their aggression a bit and refrained from making any overly risky moves as they began to divert a bit of their attention to the breakthrough taking place in the rear of human lines.

The Minerva clearly underwent a mysterious transformation that caused her to become stronger and more solid than ever.

Not only that, the living mech gained an even stronger imprint of her increasingly more powerful pilot!

Every human celebrated this phenomenon because it meant that the pilot had finally crossed a major junction in her career!

Only the greatest and most valiant of expert pilots earned a promotion like this. For Commander Casella Ingvar-Larkinson to break through on the battlefield definitely proved to all of her supporters that she was truly meant for greatness!

"She's still so young!"

"First, Tusa, then Isobel, and now Casella! What is it with this generation of the Larkinsons that enables them to race through the ranks and transcend into sainthood two or three faster than than most other mech pilots? I thought that ace pilots only had a realistic chance of breaking through when they have reached their 80's!"

"It has to be the Age of Dawn! Exotic radiation does something funny to all of these powerful pilots, and the Larkinson Clan happens to possess greater expertise in hyper technology and E-technology than others!"

"No matter. It is surprising that the older generation of Larkinsons are letting themselves get overtaken by pilots who weren't even born yet when they had entered their prime. According to my intelligence, Venerable Benjamin Larkinson, General Ark Larkinson and Venerable Davia Stark are projected to have the highest chance of breaking through, but the Larkinson Clan consistently defies those expectations."

"There is a pattern to this madness. It has to do with their culture and martial traditions. The Larkinson soldiers are notably more daring and courageous than others. They have embraced the New Elites Program more enthusiastically than many other groups. It is not a surprise that their younger expert pilots manage to ascend to sainthood first as their youth drives them to tackle greater challenges. They have not yet acquired the wisdom and temperance to conduct proper risk assessments."

"That doesn't make any sense. Commander Casella Ingvar is not known to be a risk taker. The opposite is the case. She prefers to adopt more cautious strategies. Her approach towards combat clearly emphasizes loss mitigation over maximizing merit income. Just look at what her Minerva and her mech units have done since the start of the combat. They have remained passive all this time!"

"...Ace pilots do not make any sense to us. We know far too little about them. What I do know for certain is that each and every one of them has deserved their rank. They are called saints for good reasons. Whatever the case of Commander Casella Ingvar's breakthrough may be, red humanity welcomes the arrival of another ace pilot as well as a high-potential future god candidate. A breakthrough before she had reached the age of 50 at least indicates an excellent combination of talent, opportunity and discipline. Her chances of breaking through again in the following century are higher than many of her peers."

"What is the secret of the Larkinson Clan? How can they produce so many saints?"

"That is a good question."

As many different parties continued to speculate on the cause of Commander Casella's breakthrough, the newly ascended ace pilot in question had just completed her highly eventful apotheosis!

Many pilots would be happy to break through. Not Casella. Although she had dreamed about this for many days, she was definitely not in the mood to appreciate her newfound power.

This was because for all of the power she and her companion spirit had gained, none of it could possibly bring her brother!

"It's not enough! It's not nearly enough! I can't bring him back yet! I need more power! I need more techniques! I need more opportunities!"

It was impossible to bring a dead expert pilot back from the dead. Though Casella did not know precisely how her brother died, her breakthrough had multiplied her intuition and gave her a much more instinctive idea on what caused him to die.

All she knew that her brother had somehow been put up against a nunsen phase lord, and that his powerful adversary had impaled a massive weapon through the cockpit and torso of his Blade Chaser!

There was no coming back from this. No ordinary life-saving miracle could revive an expert pilot whose entire body got pulverized and split into messy organic particles before being spread across the vacuum of space!

Faint images and impressions flashed through her mind. Her special bond with her brother must have caused her to receive them, but her conscious mind must have overlooked them due to the huge strain of Commandeering tens of thousands of mechs.

Unfortunately, the distance along with other factors massively degraded the contents of her brother's last 'transmission'.

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It would have been much easier if his body or his head was still intact.

Yet because that was not the case, there was only one conceivable way for Casella to bring her brother back from the dead.

Time reversal!

To be honest, Commander Casella Ingvar didn't know the first thing about manipulating the fabric of time.

It was an extremely esoteric subject, and hardly any high-ranking mech pilot ever got play around with this mysterious force.

Human technology did not seem to possess any means to travel back in time either. She already deduced that if red humanity possessed this capability, people would have already taken action to prevent a lot of serious disasters.

Maybe she was wrong. Maybe there was a branch of humans that did manage to master this mysterious capability. The general public just didn't know about it, as exposing this trump card would have attracted far too many enemies.

Regardless, Casella doubted that she would be able to ask them to pay a massive price just to revive a single high-tier expert pilot.

What about the aliens?

There were so many different alien species in the cosmos. The phase whales were masters of space. Had they already made any inroads into mastering time? Time and space were connected from what she knew.

Even if no alien species in the Red Ocean had mastered the power to travel back in time, then surely there must be one in Messier 87!

The supermassive galaxy was so large and powerful that it was bound to be filled with native aliens that mastered all kinds of reality-defying powers!

When Casella made this realization, she had set a powerful new goal for herself!

She wanted to do whatever it took to travel to Messier 87 and find a powerful alien that possessed the capacity to reverse time or travel back into the past!

Her goal in seeking out an alien time sage was not to ask for this mysterious being's cooperation. She was not naive enough to assume that a prideful and arrogant alien powerhouse would condescend to cooperate with an extragalactic stranger even if she was willing to make serious concessions.

Neither was her purpose to learn from the alien time master. She knew she was smarter than most of her peers, but that did not mean she could learn entirely different talents and disciplines from scratch. She had no confidence in her ability to learn and master anything related to a subject as difficult and abstruse as time manipulation!

If she couldn't resort to these solutions, then there was only one feasible way she could bring back her brother with the talent and capabilities in her possession.

She intended to take control of the alien time sage and force him to obey her whims.

Command had always been her greatest talent and ability as an expert pilot. Now that she became an ace pilot, her ability to Commandeer friendly mechs and mech pilots and bestow them with a measure of her power had become even stronger and far-reaching!

Casella's multi-tasking ability had evolved so much that she felt she could Commandeer the entirety of the Larkinson Army if she wished!

She could even reach out and Commandeer non-living mechs belonging to third party mech forces if she wanted, though the effectiveness would be much more reduced.

It was not impossible for her to empower starfighters with her expanded capabilities!

The newly ascended ace pilot did not feel she could do the same to warships, though. There was just something so fundamentally different about them that caused her Command Field to reject this very notion.

Perhaps she could work on this limitation and remove it one day, but that would require her to commit to this, which she didn't feel like doing.

Her Command Field did not just improve in terms of quantity. What she cared more was the quality of her empowerment ability.

Just as she predicted, some, though not all, all of the mechs under sway had received a power-up that made them practically on par with low-tier expert mechs!

Casella already instinctively understood that her new ability had only just begun to show its potential. A quick glance told her that her resonance strength had shot up to 130 laves.

This was enough for her to forcibly elevate just 35 mechs into temporary pseudo-expert mechs!

However, as her resonance strength grew, she looked forward to doing the same to hundreds if not thousands of Larkinson mechs in the future!

She could also increase the strength of the empowerment if she wished. This was rather difficult as she could only channel so much additional strength into weaker mechs.

Perhaps she might be able to forcibly elevate them into mid-tier or even high-tier expert mechs one day, but her resonance strength not only needed to grow a lot stronger, but she also needed to master her Commandeering ability to a finer degree.

Casella could never accomplish this in the short term. She also doubted whether it was useful to force ordinary mechs to perform so far above their normal level. The machines would probably fall apart and collapse as if they had gone through a particularly violent instance of forced resonance.

In any case, all of the new possibilities that she acquired by ascending to the rank of ace pilot sounded fantastic to a command-oriented pilot like herself, but she didn't care about them as much as she should.

That was because none of these abilities could help her bring back her brother.

One of the fundamental limitations of her Commandeering ability was that it only worked on friendlies. Whether they were Larkinsons or not, the other party had to be willing to accept her influence!

There was no way to go around this limitation. It was far too fundamental to her philosophy and command style.

Since this was the case, how could she possibly force the cooperation of an alien time sage from Messier 87 if they refused to be controlled by her willpower?

"I can't do it, but my companion spirit can! Isn't that right, Eleiha?!"

A large and powerful companion spirit emerged from her body. A winged snake covered by silvery scales majestically lit up the cockpit as she basked in her newfound power.

Just as Commander Casella ascended into a Saint, Eleiha simultaneously reached the second major cultivation rank as well!

"Ssha."

The most mysterious feature of this snake-like companion spirit was not her scales, nor her fluffy white wings.

It was her mesmerizing yellow eyes.

Eleiha did not previously possess such dazzling spheres a few minutes ago. She acquired them due to Casella's strong and overwhelming desire to gain the ability to control her enemies by force during her breakthrough!

Though Eleiha's aura had grown a little more ominous due to this targeted mutation, Casella became pleased because she instinctively understood that her companion spirit successfully gained the potential to dominate the hostile and the unwilling!

"Together, we shall bring back our brother!"

"Ssssha!"

Chapter 6272 Divergent Saint Kingdom

Commander Casella Ingvar never felt so driven as today.

Though she did not consider herself to be muddle-headed in the past, she admitted that she hadn't exactly set a solid enough goal or ambition for herself.

Merely wishing to become more powerful or to become a better protector and supporter of her brother was far from enough.

That may have been enough for her to advance to the rank of expert pilot, but ace pilots had to reach a higher standard.

Casella actually found it to be ironic that the primary driver of her breakthrough had been her inability to save her brother and her nearly impossible goal of bringing him back to life.

Previously, she often accused her brother for possessing a strong and frankly unhealthy fixation towards her. As much as she loved Imon, she did not think it was appropriate for him to dedicate his entire life towards her own sister.

Casella was not as unaware of the rumors that others shared behind her back as they assumed. They admired Imon's strength, but also considered him mad. They accused him of having a sister complex and that he probably would have married her if the practice was acceptable.

The worst part about these idle rumors was that Casella honestly couldn't say they were wrong.

In the end, Casella finally understood where Imon was coming from. Her breakthrough to ace pilot had caused her to develop her own brother complex of sorts.

There were many different goals to fight for. Casella wanted to fight for her brother. This goal had become so central to her psyche and willpower that its importance exceeded her loyalty to the Larkinson Clan!

That was not to say she was ready to defect from the clan on the spot, but if there was ever a conflict between her goal and her duty, she would not feel guilty in the slightest if she chose the former over the latter!

Casella did not think that she would be forced to do so anytime soon. The Larkinson Clan remained aligned to her own goals, and Ves was still the best mech designer to upgrade and improve the Minerva.

"LET US ANNOUNCE YOUR SAINTHOOD TO THE HUMANS AND ALIENS IN THE ARVEST LIMA SYSTEM." Her battle partner spoke. "IT IS NO LONGER POSSIBLE FOR US TO MAINTAIN A LOW PROFILE ANYMORE. SINCE THAT IS THE CASE, SHOW EVERYONE YOUR NEWFOUND STRENGTH AND COMMAND THEIR RESPECT."

Casella knew that her battle partner was right. It was impossible for her to travel to Messier 87 even if she advanced to the rank of god pilot one day. She still needed to rely on the best of red humanity to develop the necessary tech and supply the resources needed to build the device that could make the crossing.

She needed to expand her influence beyond the Larkinson Clan and build up a reputation among the elites of human civilization. Only by consistently proving her strength, her abilities and her value would she be able to forge fruitful relationships with the god pilots and Star Designers who could deliver her to Messier 87 one day!

Time was precious. Her breakthrough to ace pilot had caused the Minerva to become affected by forced resonance, which temporarily elevated its performance to that of an ace mech!

Her eyes glowed brighter as she actively stretched her Command Field, the zone in which she was able to reach out and empower any friendly mech within her range.

Just as she suspected, her Saint Kingdom was much different from that of any other ace pilot.

The best way to describe it was that it was an evolution of her old Command Field instead of her resonance shield.

This was probably the defining property that set a command-oriented ace pilot apart from more conventional ace pilots.

Casella knew that she had a choice to evolve her powers to specialize in strengthening her personal combat capabilities and empowering others during her breakthrough.

She decisively committed to the latter without needing to make a conscious decision. She had chosen to become a commander, and she fully intended to see it through.

What was important was that now that she had reached this level of strength, she had gained an unparalleled ability to command her troops, but sacrificed an opportunity to turn herself into a much more powerful combatant in the process.

Any ace pilot could defeat her and the Minerva if they were caught by themselves. Casella knew without a doubt that she could never fight at her full power ever again unless she had an army of friendly mechs at her disposal. Becoming a commander had become a permanent part of her identity.

One of the indicators of this profound change was the retention of her resonance shield. She still kept it, though it had become a lot more capable of blocking incoming damage.

It simply wasn't the same as a traditional Saint Kingdom, though.

Conventional ace pilots could exert their willpower onto anything that entered their domain, including enemies. They could sap the power from projectiles, slow down enemy phasefighters and induce fear in the minds of vulnerable soldiers.

Casella's resonance shield only offered the more basic protective properties that she was accustomed to as an expert pilot.

Yet what she gained in exchange was magnificent. Her Command Field had become so much stronger.

She was able to track everything that took place in a much wider range than before.

She was able to Commandeer friendly mechs at much further distances if she chose.

She was also able to analyze and predict the actions of most enemies that entered her massive domain field!

The Sentinel Commander began to take advantage of all of these expanded capabilities.

First, she began to Commandeer almost all of the Larkinson mechs serving in the expedition fleet.

This not included the predominantly ranged mech units that were located in the rear, but also the melee mech units that were deployed closer to the front!

Many Avatars, Swordmaidens, Penitent Sisters and so on became surprised when they felt the powerful influence of Commander Casella.

The distances between the newly ascended ace pilot and the melee mechs easily surpassed a hundred kilometers!

While that was not particularly huge in a large space battle like the one taking place right now, it was still a lot further than the dozen or so kilometers that previously characterized the radius of her Command Field.

The melee mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan did not look a gift horse in the mouth. Even if they harbored ambitions to break through by relying on their own efforts, they were still very curious to experience what it was like to wield the power of a demigod.

Perhaps they might even learn a few lessons that would help them gain a clearer understanding on what they needed to do master the same level of strength one day!

Many Larkinson mechs at the front began to light up just like all of the ranged mechs in the rear.

The latter had already been overperforming on the battlefield for a while now. The Commandeered Larkinson mechs not only attained much higher hit rates, but also coordinated their fire a lot more effectively, allowing them to take down targets much faster but without wasting any unnecessary energy and ammunition.

Once Casella began to Commandeer thousands of additional melee mechs in the more forward positions, their strength and fighting approach completely changed!

Each machine easily wielded the power of a quasi-expert mech. More importantly, Casella seemed to control them more directly, thereby causing them to fight as if the pilot possessed a large measure of her transcended skills and battlefield awareness!

The mech pilots in the cockpits of the Commandeered mechs voluntarily surrendered control to the ace pilot so that their mechs practically fought like perfect clockwork machines.

It was beautiful. Their coordination was already pretty good, but once Casella took control of the mechs, they moved in grand patterns that looked incredibly elegant and smooth from afar.

That was not all. All of the machines that glowed in dark gold resisted a lot more hits and inflicted greater damage when attacking. They even weakened transphasic energy shields to a much stronger degree due to the empowerment of their space suppressors!

All of these changes proved to be far too much to the elite orven phasefighters that had been grappling against the Larkinsons for a while.

Since the Larkinson Army was among the strongest second-class mech forces defending the Arvest Lima System, the predominantly orven invasion force had deployed much of their more elite phasefighters to entangle the Larkinson mechs.freewebnovel.com

It was a sound strategy as the Larkinson mechs and mech pilots had already proven their ability to trounce regular phasefighter units!

Though the orven phasefighter pilots weren't necessarily skilled enough to match the Larkinson mech pilots in skills, their more powerful interceptors were a lot more troublesome to fight against!

Their mobility, their hitting power, their transphasic missiles and their strengthened azure energy shields caused them to inflict greater losses onto the Larkinsons while not necessarily suffering too many casualties in return.

This was especially when the elite phasefighters always backed off and retreated when their azure energy shields had dropped to 20 percent integrity or less!

In many cases, the Larkinson mechs were unable to finish off these cowardly phasefighters, thereby causing their old enemies to return later with fully recharged azure energy shields!

The clever orven commander in charge of the elite phasefighters relied on this tactic to force the Larkinsons into a grueling, drawn-out contest of attrition, which was their least favorite approach towards combat!

As soon as Casella extended her power, the tables had turned.

The elite phasefighters no longer possessed a mobility advantage as the Larkinson mechs were able to catch up to them. Not just the light mechs, but the medium mechs were able to intercept their interceptors on a wide scale!

Once the mechs got close, their space suppressors sapped the strength of their azure energy shields, causing them to collapse after taking just a couple of blows from resonance-empowered swords and other melee weapons!

After that, it was game over for the elite phasefighters, as they had no ability to defend themselves once they lost their powerful azure energy shields!

The orven phasefighter pilots tried to adjust to the much higher tempo enforced by their opponents. They began to fight more aggressively themselves, hoping that their counterattacks would successfully force the Larkinson mechs to back off and abort their attack runs.

It didn't work. The dark gold coronas that surrounded all of the Larkinson mechs significantly amplified the defense of the machines!

The Larkinson mechs not only resisted a lot more attacks than before, but only backed off and fell back to the rear once they were on the verge of suffering serious damage.

With a commander as excellent as Casella in charge, her timing was always perfect.

Barring a few accidents such as mechs getting hit by an errant shot from the primary gun battery of an alien warship, Commander Casella personally ensured that no more casualties fell among the melee mechs!

The stupendous performance of the Commandeered melee mechs practically caused the orven phasefighter pilots to despair and lose all of their confidence in the battle.

"They're breaking!"

"I'm not surprised, haha! They lost over half of their number in just a couple of minutes!"

This was a small but important victory on the greater battlefield. A hole in the enemy lines had suddenly emerged. The orven assault fleets hastily had to divert their reserves to fill up the gap and prevent the humans from exploiting this flaw!

Though the quick response prevented any cascading failures, the orvens felt anything but good about it, because the reinforcements were getting trounced even faster than the previous elite phasefighter units!

Surprisingly enough, that was not even the worst that the newly ascended ace pilot had inflicted upon the alien attackers.

While Casella invested a lot of attention to micromanaging all of those Larkinson melee mechs at the front, she had diverted even more of her power to the 35 super-empowered mechs in the rear!

She could only elevate so many machines to a power level that was equivalent to that of a low-tier expert mech, so she had to choose wisely.

This was why she decisively chose to bestow this awesome privilege to 35 Transcendent Punishers Mark III!

What was the meaning of introducing 35 quasi-first-class pseudo-expert heavy artillery mechs onto the battlefield?

The impact they produced easily exceeded that of all of those Commandeered Larkinson melee mechs!

That was because the extraordinarily strengthened Transcendent Punisher Mark III's were beginning to lay siege on distant enemy warships!

Chapter 6273 The Power of the Small

Commander Casella Ingvar made a very calculated choice when she reserved her most potent form of empowerment to 35 Transcendent Punisher Mark III's.

Having Commandeered many mechs in the past, she knew that her empowerment was not entirely even. Weapons received a much greater boost in power than armor systems and flight systems.

Though Casella noticed that her ascension to ace pilot had caused the other amplification effects to become more respectable, there was no doubt that the weapon systems of mechs responded the best to her Command Field.

Given this logic, it made the greatest sense to reserve her limited quota of super-empowerment to the most offensive mechs fielded by the Larkinson Clan.

Three mech models came to mind. They were the latest standard living mechs published by the patriarch in the Hyper Generation, and the copies fielded by the Larkinsons had all quasi-first-class standards.

She quickly ruled out the Larkinson Edition of the Fey Fianna. The drone mech was powerful, but it was also a machine that emphasized versatility more than anything. Its strengths were too scattered to make this model her first choice.

The Storm Swords released by Ketis had been a smashing success among the Swordmaidens. Though they were not too numerous, each quasi-first-class swordsman mech had proven to be insanely effective against the native aliens. Their iconic Stormbreaker Greatswords were able to tear through transphasic energy shields like no other standard melee weapon in the Larkinson Army!

However, as powerful as the Storm Swords may be, their range was distressingly limited. They were pure melee mechs that were entirely designed around the use of their giant electrified blades.

The orvens were currently throwing phasefighter after phasefighter at the Commandeered Larkinson melee mechs in order to prevent them from attacking more critical alien assets.

While Casella could still proceed with super-empowering the Storm Swords, they would just proceed to chop a lot more alien phasefighters, forcing the orvens to divert more reinforcements to their location.

This was not a significant enough strategic gain for her to waste her power in this manner.

She had a much more suitable candidate in mind.

The Transcendent Punisher Mark III's that the Larkinsons had transferred to the nearby orbital defensive installations were more suitable for various reasons.

First, their long-range attack capabilities enabled them to attack enemies across many distances. Their synergy with Ylvaine even allowed them to feasibly target enemies that were located so far away that no enemy would have been on guard against the heavy artillery mechs!

There was no need for the Transcendent Punishers to move at all, which made life much easier for Casella.

Second, their attack power was the most pronounced at all. They were among the quasi-first-class mechs whose pure attack power had reached the ceiling of what second-class mechs were supposed to accomplish. Since her Command Field amplified weapon systems most of all, Casella was confident that she could firmly amplify their lethality to match that of first-class mechs with ease!

Sure, Casella was not able to do the same for their defenses and mobility, but it didn't matter because these factors weren't relevant for heavy artillery mechs unless they were being targeted and needed to evacuate from their positions.

All of these reasons and more prompted her to bestow her souped up version of Commandeering to the Transcendent Punisher Mark III's. The 35 closest machines not only glowed in dark god, but began to strike at distant starships with a vengeance!

One of the most prominent features of the Mark III's was their shift towards modularity. They boasted 8 weapon hardpoints, each of which could fit 2 small weapon systems, 1 medium weapon system or 0.25 large weapon systems.

The Larkinsons mostly preferred to reserve 4 hardpoints to mount the infamous Devora Cannon, and fill up the remaining 8 slots with weapons most suitable for the occasion.

Currently, the Transcendent Punisher Mark III's equipped with a variety of 'secondary' weapons, ranging from rapid-fire point defense luminar crystal turrets to fourth generation luminar crystal cannons.

It didn't matter to Casella, because she only super-empowered the Transcendent Punisher Mark III's to make full use of their Devora Cannons.

The massive super-heavy high-velocity transphasic hyper gauss cannons were too slow and powerful to be employed against enemy phasefighters. The Transcendent Punishers had been using them to pound the defenses of distant warships in order to drive them away a little faster.

Occasionally, the Ylvainan mech pilots borrowed the guidance of Ylvaine to target faster and more distant targets, but they refrained from doing so if there weren't any obviously good opportunities.

There was not much point in doing so in a battle as large as this. The Transcendent Punishers needed to conserve their resources and make sure they did not invest excessive resources to produce mediocre gains.

All of that changed once Casella empowered them far beyond the limit of her usual Commandeering ability. The Ylvainan mech pilots and their living mechs all became delighted when they gained such an immense degree of amplification that they truly felt they could fight on equal terms against other low-tier expert mechs!

Although the chosen Transcendent Punishers still did not come close to matching the extraordinary firepower of the Amaranto, there were 35 of them at this time!

There was a point where quantity translated into greater quality. Commander Casella herself did not exactly know for certain whether upgrading 35 Transcendent Punisher Mark III's into pseudo-expert mechs resulted in this transformation, but she was eager to try it out and see for herself!

"Open fire."

"Thy will be done, Saint Commander!"

35 resonance-empowered Devora Cannons opened fire within a span of half a second!

With Casella in control of all of the heavy artillery mechs, she was able to synchronize their actions to a superhuman degree.

35 super-heavy high-velocity transphasic hyper gauss rounds surged from their muzzles and began to cross across the busy battlefield at a respectable speed!

All 35 projectiles glowed with such dark golden vigor that they seemed to produce magnificent trails from one side to the other side of the battlefield. Their passage mesmerized many nearby humans and aliens, not fully understanding that their craft would have been completely pulverized if their machines suffered just a glancing blow from these rounds!

Soon enough, the 35 rounds approached an already besieged orven cruiser that had already lost half of her segmented transphasic energy shields.

The cruiser might not be as tough or massive as a capital ship, but the alien vessel performed respectably in the battle so far. She had withstood the attacks of hundreds of heavy artillery mechs for a while and allowed her gun batteries to pummel numerous orbital defense platforms into shattered debris.

Under normal circumstances, the alien cruiser was not afraid of getting his by a mech company's worth of Transcendent Punisher Mark III's. The slightly outdated vessel was originally designed to exchange fire with other warships, so she was quite accustomed to enduring heavy firepower.

This was something else, though!

6 rounds simultaneously struck a segmented transphasic energy shield that was already partially depleted.

A single resonance-empowered round already struck the energy shield pretty hard, but when 6 of them slammed against it at the same time, the energy shield was not able to buffer the attacks properly, causing it to break when it could have done more!

A short instant later, 12 Devora Cannon rounds slammed into the segmented transphasic energy shield underneath, producing the same effect, but this time on a fully intact layer of protection!

A short moment after that, 12 more super-heavy gauss rounds removed the third and final layer, thereby exposing a momentary hole that led directly to the hull of the orven cruiser!

Though the alien warship was capable of rotating her segmented energy shields to patch up any straight holes, the timing of the successive breaches was so tight that not even the automated systems of the alien warship was able to respond in time!

5 remaining resonance-empowered rounds went on to strike the hull in quick succession.

Each of them practically traveled along the same line as they breached the hull plating and successively produced deeper craters into the structure of the alien cruiser.

What was remarkable about this tightly coordinated sequence was that the very last resonance-empowered Devora Cannon round just managed to breach the engineering bay and destroy the main power generators and other critically important parts of the vessel!

The broad and 'upright' cruiser began to suffer multiple explosions from her center, causing her hull to break into different chunks that flung in separate directions!

"What was that?!"

"How can that be?! Even if these heavy artillery mechs temporarily gained the power of an expert mech, it is still outlandish for them to breach the defenses of an alien cruiser and cause her main power generators to explode."

"It's not just their power that is impressive. It is their perfect control and coordination that truly makes them shine."

"No alien cruiser or smaller is safe when she is empowering those heavy artillery mechs!"

The sudden loss of a fairly healthy orven cruiser caused significant trouble to the surviving alien vessels. The impact of this loss was much greater because it advanced the timing when the native aliens were forced to signal a retreat.

The orvens did not wish to overstay their welcome and suffer massive losses due to losing their numbers superiority!

If Commander Casella piloted an actual ace mech, she would have continued her current strategy and tear down other enemy warships.

Alas, her current power level was mostly sustained by the temporary forced resonance state.

Casella was already running out of time since her accumulation was a bit shallow.

She wanted to make the best of this gift while she still could, and she knew exactly how to make this happen.

She set her sights further than usual and fixated on a phase lord that was fighting on another section of the extensive battlefield.

"The Trampler of Stars."

The familiar nuser phase lord was a known presence in the Arvest Lima System. The alien apparently managed to redeem himself from his last setback and fought valiantly alongside the orvens as a representative of the Red Cabal.

The Trampler was especially good at clearing entire swarms of human mechs and starfighters!

Due to his exceedingly high threat against the mainstay of human forces, it was practically mandatory for the defenders to dispatch an ace mech to block the Trampler's passage and keep the phase lord far away from any human small craft.

Though the Trampler of Stars was not that great when fighting against ace mechs, he was still more than capable of lasting by assuming a more defensive posture.

At this time, the Trampler of Stars had been enduring the attacks of an ace swordsman mech for a while now. The machine inflicted serious damage, but it did not have any way to speed up the teardown of the phase lord's energy defenses.

Just like many other phase lords, the Trampler of Stars wore a massive raiment that generated additional segmented transphasic energy shields.

It was due to this that the ace mech was delayed in inflicting actual damage onto its adversary.

Though its relentless sword attacks enabled the ace mech to eventually strip the Trampler of his technological defenses, there was still his spatial barrier in the way!

The ace mech's high-quality space suppressor may be weakening the strength of this barrier to a notable degree, it would still take a lot of sword attacks to actually deplete this layer of protection.

That was until 35 resonance-empowered Devora Cannon rounds struck at the spatial barrier!

The rounds not only depleted a significant chunk of the integrity of the barrier, but also caused it to temporarily become more vulnerable at this section!

"%#\$&%#\$?!"

"WHO DARES TO INFERERE?!"

Saint Casella grinned from far away. "I dare. FIRE!"

Another salvo of resonance-empowered projectiles struck the spatial barrier despite the Trampler's attempts to become more mobile.

Though each salvo did not weaken the barrier drastically, what mattered was that they continued to slam against the Trampler's defenses without interruption.

The Transcendent Punisher Mark III's fired their main guns again, and again, and again.

As the successive salvos struck their mark without any shots going wide, the Trampler of Stars began to panic as his true body would soon become vulnerable to all manner of attacks!

"#\$%\$#@@!"

"FILTHY LARKINSONS!"

Despite his taunting alien words, the Trampler decisively turned around and attempted to flee to the rear of alien lines as fast as possible!

However, Commander Casella's heavy artillery mechs continued to fire whenever they had a clear shot.

The spatial barrier eventually broke, partially because it could not handle the strain of withstanding so many attacks that were concentrated on a very specific point.

Subsequent attacks blasted open holes in the phase lord's raiment and began to dig into his transphasic flesh!

Unfortunately, Casella was only able to land two entire salvos inside the phase lord's fleshy body before her forced resonance had run its course.

"Almost." Casella sighed in regret.

"WE WILL GET HIM NEXT TIME, PARTNER."

Though Commander Casella Ingvar had become exhausted to the point where she needed to make an early retreat from the field, there was no one among the defenders who dismissed her prowess anymore.

A lull occurred on the battlefield as both humans and aliens processed the rise of such a powerful command talent.

Soon, a chant began to spread among the ranks.

"Saint Commander!"

"Saint Commander!"

"Saint Commander!"

Casella Ingvar may not be the only ace pilot with a command specialization, but from the perspective of the rank and file who already benefited from her Commandeering, she was the only one who deserved to be regarded as a true saint among mech commanders!

Chapter 6274 The Strategic Value of Champions

When the Minerva traveled back to the Spirit of Bentheim that was located far to the rear, the expert command mech received an honor guard of first-class multipurpose mechs dispatched by the Red Association.

That was on top of the fixed escort of Living Sentinel mechs that always accompanied Casella's machine!

There were legitimate concerns that the native aliens might seek to end Saint Casella's life before she had any time to make use of her newfound strength and vastly expanded command field.

As long as there was a phase lord out there that was willing to take a dangerous gamble, he or she could opt to make a precision teleportation strike and smash apart the Minerva now that she was at her most vulnerable state in years.

The ascension of a new ace pilot among red humanity spelled bad news to the native aliens.

Ace pilots were very hard to deal with. Ordinary phasefighters and warships practically stood no chance against their ace mechs. The most they could do was to rely on overwhelming firepower and huge numbers to exhaust their Saint Kingdoms and drive their mechs away... for a time.

The only proper counter to ace mechs was to deploy other champion units against them. The native aliens did not have any direct equivalent to these powerful machines, so they had little choice but to deploy their phase leaders instead.

It was true that the phase leaders among the major alien races outnumbered the number of ace pilots in active service. Nobody knew the precise figure because not even the aliens possessed a full tally of all of the phase lords and phase whales that were still alive today.

The problem with relying on these phase leaders was that only a minority of them were fully geared towards warfare.

There were many phase lords that only made the risky effort to transform their bodies because they wanted to raise their status and increase their lifespans.

These politicians, researchers, artists and other highly placed dignitaries were not too bad in a fight, but they simply did not possess the training or the killer mindset needed to fare well on a dangerous battlefield.

Then there were all of the phase whales that got bored of their long lives and simply decided to sequester themselves in their own obscure pocket spaces.

One of the flaws of the phase whale race was that it was very individualistic. The phase whales had a very poor sense of community. The Red Cabal used to be a much less prominent club before the Red War forced the ancient phase whales to form a more organized form of resistance against the extragalactic invaders.

While the Red Cabal successfully persuaded more phase whales to answer the call of duty, there were even more that remained completely ignorant that the Red Ocean had moved far away from the Milky Way Galaxy!

So many phase whales remained in hibernation and would not wake up until hundreds if not thousands of years had passed!

In short, the native aliens could only mobilize a fraction of the absolute number of phase leaders in the Red Ocean.

This made the rise and fall of individual ace pilots and phase leaders quite important to both sides.

Any small change in the balance could easily cause entire battlefields to tilt towards the other side.

For example, the attackers and defenders of the Arvest Lima System already began to revise their calculations on the likelihood that the important strategic node would fall!

Even if the native aliens were aware that it usually took a year or so before a newly ascended ace pilot received an ace mech that could properly channel his increased strength, that did not offer enough consolation.

Ace pilots still received the benefit of gaining access to a proper Saint Kingdom, though in a weaker form than normal.

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson still had to wait a few months for his Dark Zephyr to receive his much-anticipated upgrade, but already he had been razing hell on the battlefield!

The same should apply to the newly christened 'Saint Commander', but the native aliens feared that her immediate impact would be even worse.

This was because she was one of the rare command-oriented ace pilots!

Instead of investing all of their power towards strengthening themselves and their ace mechs, they instead radiated their power towards their subordinates.

Though exceptions such as General Ark Larkinson existed, Saint Commander Casella Ingvar was absolutely a more classical representation of this ace pilot sub-type.

What did this all mean?

Casella essentially did not have to wait until her Minerva got upgraded to a super-duper fancy ace mech for her to start flexing her vastly expanded Command Field!

Sure, her performance in subsequent battles wouldn't be as exaggerated as when she was affected by forced resonance, but she still posed a massive concern even if she could replicate just 25 percent of her previous performance!

Once the Larkinson Clan got around to supplying her with a proper ace mech that was fully attuned to her Command Field and other capabilities, the prospect of having to fight against tens of thousands of 'quasi-expert mechs' and over a hundred 'psuedo-expert mechs' terrified the hell out of alien leaders and strategists!

Suffice to say, the Saint Commander's name would likely show up on a prominent position in the alien bounty lists before the day had passed.

Killing Professor Ves Larkinson may still be a greater priority to the Red Cabal, but eliminating Saint Commander Casella most definitely became a secondary priority to its strategic interests.

As long as she developed her power over a few years, the amount of ordinary mechs she would be able to empower would only increase. Being able to qualitatively improve a hundred thousand mechs was already enough to completely turn around losing battles!

The effective threat posed by the expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance would probably multiply by at least an order of magnitude, especially if her super-empowerment was taken into account!

This meant that if the expeditionary fleet fielded 100,000 mechs and put them all under the tender care of the Saint Commander, the native aliens effectively had to behave as if they were facing a massive mech army of 1,000,000 mechs!

It could get even worse for the native aliens. The thing about ace pilots and ace mechs that they always had room to improve. Natural growth along with continuous technological advancements practically ensured that the Saint Commander would become smarter, deadlier and more difficult to deal with over time!

This inexorable growth would probably persist at a fairly high pace until it reached a plateau when the Saint Commander hit the infamous bottleneck of a peak ace pilot.

By that time, the threat posed by Casella Ingvar would probably be so massive that she was only second to god pilots in her ability to smash all opposition and guarantee victory!

Both the humans and the aliens therefore expected great things from the Saint Commander if she was allowed to live.

The huge threat she posed to alien interests in the future caused her Minerva to become targeted by many alien assets.

If not for the fact that diverting their attention to a retreating expert command mech would completely cause their lines to collapse, a lot more alien warships would have opened fire at the distant Minerva by this time!

As it was, the reinforcing mechs and warships of the Red Association had moved in quickly enough to form physical as well as energy barriers around the precious expert mech.

The RA warships also activated their warp interdiction fields at full power in order to block any daring phase lord from conducting any teleportation strikes.

Numerous powerful aliens looked away in dismay as they observed that their window of opportunity had closed.

The next time the Saint Commander reappeared on the battlefield, she would definitely received more fixed protection than before!

As the native aliens lamented the missed opportunity to take out such a powerful strategic adversary, the woman in question had fallen into her own thoughts.

Any ace pilot in her place would have basked in her amazing performance earlier. The power they demonstrated when they were in the temporary state of forced resonance often served as a highly informative and aspirational preview of what it would be like if they piloted an actual ace mech!

Not Casella. Her main fixation centered around her brother. She knew that he died somehow, but she lacked any further details than that. She needed to know what happened that caused her to befall an accident that should have never happened.

Though conventional communications were still blocked for obvious reasons, the Larkinsons had more ways to communicate with each other.

The Minerva happened to be an inherent masterwork mech, so Ves was able to connect to the piece of himself that he had imparted to his excellent creation and form a small spiritual avatar of himself in the cockpit.

"How... how did he die, sir?" Casella asked in a hoarse and morose tone that sounded a lot different from her earlier aggressive tone. "What did General Ark do to drive my brother to his death?"

The avatar of Ves grimaced. "This is not the time and place to hold a conversation like this. I will inform you later once you are safely brought out of the battlefield and aren't interfaced with a war machine that can do a lot of damage. You also need to undergo a mandatory health inspection to ensure that your sudden breakthrough did not compromise your health in any way. Who knows whether you can handle the stress of learning what has happened. Please understand our concerns. This is also somewhat of a developing situation. There are... deviant variables at play that complicates the story."

Casella felt frustrated by the refusal to give her a straight answer, but as a mech commander, she understood the arguments behind this decision. She could not fault Ves or the Larkinsons for being cautious. Her mental state had indeed deteriorated to the point where she may suffer a breakdown of sorts.

"...Fine." She said. "I can wait, but my patience is limited. I will know the truth one way or another."

"I promise that I will be as frank with you as I can. I know you care a lot about this. However, the sensitivity of the information that I plan to share is so high that we need to wait until we can establish secure communications with each other. Perhaps the only way to accomplish that is to hold a face-to-face meeting, but that is so logistically troublesome that I will try to resort to other means."

Casella frowned. All of this sounded suspicious. A more straightforward mission and sequence of events did not merit so much secrecy. She was already able to deduce that something abnormal had taken place that the patriarch really did not want to leak to any third parties.

If that was the case, then Ves' response became a lot more understandable.

"Very well. I look forward to speaking to you, either in person or by remote."

"In the meantime, let's address your immediate future. Now that you have broken through, our Design Department will soon embark on the Minerva Mark... II... Project."

"It should be the Mark II." Casella said in a mild tone. "My expert mech has never received a major revision. She is still fairly new compared to the original six Larkinson expert mechs."

"Ah, that is correct. Your Minerva is still in for a massive treat. So many technological advancements have been made since her original delivery that she will evolve into a much more powerful incarnation by the time our Design Department is done. In order to get a better idea on what direction we should take for her upgrades, could you please explain how your command abilities work after your breakthrough? There are many different kinds of command specializations. I need to know where yours is leaning towards in order to develop a clear vision for your future ace mech."

"I can do that, sir."

Chapter 6275 Two Extreme Poles

It took a while for Casella to summarize the extensive changes and improvements to her powers and abilities as an ace pilot.

It didn't help that she was much different from Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, who was the most familiar ace pilot to the Larkinson Clan.

Unlike Tusa who was able to make his mech fly faster, hit harder, resist a lot more attacks and completely bypass any form of energy defenses, Casella's personal combat capabilities did not improve to such an exaggerated extent.

"I don't have a conventional Saint Kingdom." She explained to Ves. "My resonance shield has remained the same in essence. It has only become more powerful because my resonance strength has practically doubled. Instead, my Command Field seemed to have become my Saint Kingdom. This is a fitting outcome, because the range of my Command Field is countless times better than any conventional Saint Kingdom. It also imposes a permanent limitation on me, because a Command Field doesn't allow me to exert my willpower in a highly concentrated manner."

The spiritual manifestation of Ves nodded in understanding. "I get it. The inverse-square law still applies in this mystical phenomenon. It is logical to assume that your massive and stretched-out Command Field can only enable you to apply your power to a limited degree. You are basically trading range and quantity for quality. What about your ability to empower a limited amount of mechs to the standards of an expert mech? Can you only do that to nearby mechs, or can you bestow the same degree of power at the edge of your Command Field?"

"I can do it, but I can already tell it will be more strenuous to me. My intuition tells me... I will only be able to super-empower less than half of the mechs if I do so at closer ranges. It is best to reserve this new ability to ranged mechs if this is the case, though I think there is still value in bestowing this power to more distant melee mechs at key moments."

The Larkinson Army could accomplish a lot if the Saint Commander persistently super-empowered as many Transcendent Punishers as possible, but that would make other mech pilots jealous and resentful towards the lucky Ylvainans.

Besides, as awe-inspiring as the firepower of expert mech-level heavy artillery mechs may be, other mechs could perform other amazing feats. Different jobs required different tools.

Ves and Casella talked a bit more about the regular Commandeering process for a few minutes.

This was still the Saint Commander's mainstay ability and one that could comprehensively turn a regular mech force into an elite mech force.

What amazed both of them was the quantity of mechs and mech pilots that could be empowered at the same time. Casella's multi-tasking ability had reached stupendous proportions.

"I think I inherited a part of Titania's power during my breakthrough." Casella speculated. "Back during my forced resonance state, I noticed that I was executing tricks that I previously delegated to the design spirit of the Minerva. It is as if I have learned some of Titania's methods and integrated it into my own power."

That sounded incredibly interesting to Ves. It actually matched up to what happened to Saint Tusa to an extent.

Knowing that the ace pilots could pick up the specializations of design spirits made it a lot easier to predict their future ability set once more expert pilots broke through in the future.

For example, the Riot, which most people considered to be an offensive mech, actually possessed a defensive design spirit in the form of Qilaxo!

Once Venerable Orfan broke through, there was a considerable chance that she would gain an ability that enabled her to resist more blows as opposed to strengthening her own attacks.

Whether this was good or bad, Ves couldn't say for sure. This was highly personal to the pilots in question.

Ves figured that these sorts of advancements were still decided by the conscious and subconscious desires of the pilots in question.

It was just that the expert pilots worked with the design spirits for so long that they had taken a liking for the abilities of the latter. It was natural for the former to gain the ability to emulate the latter's advantages if that was the case.

"So your regular Commandeering ability excels in quantity?"

Casella nodded. "Yes. That is the distinct impression that I have received. I am not too familiar with the circumstances of other command ace pilots, but I doubt that their Command Fields or equivalents are as large as mine. I cannot say for certain, but I think that as long as I develop my powers in my current direction, the range of my Command Field will be able to encompass a light-hour, if not several light-hours."

That sounded extremely impressive! The God Kingdoms of most god pilots could only encompass a typical terrestrial planet and maybe a few moons at most. To be able to gain widespread awareness of everything in a space that could encompass entire suns and more was an amazing strategic advantage!

At the very least, no enemy stealth vessel or other hidden surprises could remain undetected within the Saint Commander's enormous Command Field!

Of course, conventional God Kingdoms were easily able to utterly defeat most enemy forces within their sphere of influence.

Casella's much more dispersed Command Field did not possess such exaggerated capabilities.

"I know that your Command Field already possesses two broad advantages. On the one hand, you can connect to different people and machines and essentially command and coordinate them in a highly unified manner. On the other hand, you can also empower mechs with your true resonance, thereby elevating their raw performance so that they can fight like quasi-expert mechs if not greater. Which of these strengths do you favor more? Are you developing towards the Archistrategos or the Technomancer?"

These were the titles of the two most iconic command-oriented god pilots of the human race.

Sure, there was also the Army of One, but every mech commander quietly considered him to be a heretic due to his complete refusal to command anything that was manned by humans.

The Archistrategos and the Technomancer were much more representative of the apex of what mech commanders could accomplish.

They had become fading names in the Red Ocean, but still remained widely known and revered in the Milky Way where they still resided.

Of the two, the Archistrategos was the oldest and most respected commander god pilot. He was only a bit older than the Age of Mechs, and pioneered the command specialization among high-ranking mech pilots. His lessons paved the way for many other talented mech pilots that possessed similar ambitions.

The most noteworthy strength of the Archistrategos was his range. It was ridiculously large. The god pilot was already over four centuries old, so he had plenty of time to expand his range of control, but most people assumed that it could encompass pretty much an entire star system if his god mech was positioned close to the center!

Among other command god pilots, the Archistrategos was actually not able to impart huge amounts of power into any single subject.

Instead, he went all-in on maximizing his awareness and coordination capabilities.

He was the most perfect system-wide scanner to exist. Almost nothing could escape his notice. He could even track all of the individual specks of space dust that was soaring through deep space in an entire star system!

Whatever Saint Commander Casella could track in her own Command Field, the Archistrategos was able to glean a lot more information in a much wider range!

It was impossible for any enemies that were present in the same star system to hold many secrets against such a ridiculous god pilot.

Combined with an ability to perfect command and coordinate the actions and maneuvers of any friendly or neutral assets ranging from infantry soldiers, armed shuttles, mechs, warships, fixed defenses and even monstrously large superweapons, the Archistrategos was able to control all of them to ensure they fought at the highest degree of efficiency!

Suffice to say, the forces under the command of the Archistrategos could easily defeat ten times if not a hundred times their number due to the difference he made, and that was without considering his ability to modestly empower all of those assets with his willpower!

The Technomancer rose up later, and developed her command specialization in a different direction.

As her title suggested, the Technomancer very much fixated on machines. Unlike the Army of One, she did not have an aversion to manned or piloted craft, so she was readily able to empower mechs, warships, armed installations and more within her God Kingdom.

Her biggest limitation was that her God Kingdom did not work at all with organic machines, or at least that was what everyone assumed.

Saint Commander Casella's feat of turning 35 Transcendent Punisher Mark III into temporary pseudo-expert mechs was rather impressive, but the Technomancer could do much more back when she was just a junior ace pilot!

Different from the Archistrategos, the Technomancer favored quality over quantity. It was well known that the range of her God Kingdom was a fraction of her older peer, but that also made it a lot more concentrated.

The Technomancer excelled at turning any crap machine into a peerless fighting monster. Her ability to empower any sort of machine to a ridiculous degree.

Saint Commander Casella's feat of turning 35 Transcendent Punisher Mark III into temporary pseudo-expert mechs was rather impressive, but the Technomancer could do much more back when she was just a junior ace pilot!

What really caused the Technomancer to gain a lot of respect was that her method of empowerment worked differently. There was a temporary component that disappeared when she withdrew her willpower, but there was also a permanent component that caused some of the mysterious upgrades to remain fixed!

In other words, as long as the Technomancer empowered any machine for a certain duration, it would undergo a slow and permanent mutation that permanently made it stronger and better in many ways!

What was strange was that the Technomancer did not fly around and impart her permanent empowerment effect on as many machines as possible.

There were either limitations to this ability or other people were reluctant to accept this gift. One of the most credible rumors that Ves heard on the galactic net was that any machine that was deeply touched by the Technomancer became hers forever. They would always obey her command over others without any exception!

In any case, the mech community usually tended to assume that the Archistrategos and the Technomancer occupied the opposite ends of a spectrum. It was easy to position most other command-oriented mech pilots between the poles.

When Ves mentioned the two famous god pilots to Casella, she had to think seriously where she stood in relation to these two extremes.

"My development is... strange." She said. "I would say that I am currently good at both. I suspect that I am stronger than a typical command ace pilot for reasons unknown to me. I don't occupy the middle of the spectrum. I occupy two different positions closer to the opposing poles at the same time."

That sounded weird. "Are you sure about that? Conservation of energy still applies to ace pilots for the most part. Each of you has a limited reservoir of transcendent energies that you can allocate in different ways. For you to be able to become good at two different sub-specializations sounds as if you are positioned right in the middle as opposed to what you have said. Maybe your judgment is off because you have never compared yourself to another mech commander at the ace pilot level."

Casella firmly shook his head. "I am not exaggerating or misjudging this. I have a fairly clear understanding of my own state. I do not think I have made any major compromises. I am becoming increasingly more certain that I have somehow gained the best of both worlds, or at least at this early junction. It is possible that this advantage will steadily diminish as my resonance strength grows, but for now I suspect that I can replicate at least a part of the performance of the Antistrategos and the Technomancer when they had just attained sainthood."

While all of this sounded impressive, Ves still looked confused. Where did Casella get all of her additional power from? Energy did not come from nowhere! There had to be a logical explanation for this! Was it her companion spirit? Was it the design spirit of her expert mech? Or was it her living mech?

Chapter 6276 Enfeoffment

The Minerva had returned to the Spirit of Bentheim by this time.

Though Commander Casella Ingvar preferred to berth her expert mech at one of the fleet carriers most of the time, the factory ship was able to provide the best care to the machine.

Ves was not too worried about the Minerva's condition. Casella's breakthrough and forced resonance state was not that strong. On top of that, her command specialization meant that her machine did not suddenly gain the power to punch phase lords in the head or anything.

The Saint Commander remained in the cockpit as she continued to discuss her gains with the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan.

The two had been trying to figure out the reason why Casella somehow became reasonably good at both commanding massive armies and super-empowering a small group of mechs.

So far, they had not come up with a more solid answer than chalking it all up to E energy radiation.

"The Red Ocean is what I call a medium energy environment." The spiritual manifestation of Ves explained. "It is already a known phenomenon that high-ranking mech pilots have become more powerful compared to their old galaxy counterparts, and it is not just due to differences in technology. There is just a lot more energy floating around in space that is entirely absent in the Milky Way. Those ace commanders in our former homes have to power everything by themselves, while you can borrow from the power of heaven."

"The power of heaven?"

"It's another way to refer to E energy radiation. Anyway, my theory is that one of the driving reasons why your Command Field has grown so ridiculously large at your current level of strength is because E energy radiation is passively supporting its existence. Do you think that is the case?"

Casella furrowed her brows. "I have not consciously thought about it, but your theory has merit. I cannot give you a definite answer as my Command Field is highly dependent on the tech integrated in the Minerva. Perhaps I previously ignored this factor because I thought it was filtered through technology."

"It is too soon to make a profound decision on this matter." Casella said. "I have only just attained my current rank. I still have much to learn and discover about my changes and improvements. I also need time to rethink my development trajectory. My brother's death... has prompted me to make changes in my life."

"Whatever the case, I think you have a choice on how you want to develop your Command Field in the future. Will you try to develop both directions as equally as possible, thereby risking the

outcome that you will merely become mediocre in both, or will you favor one direction over the other?"

That was a very important question, and one that Casella did not wish to answer right away.

"It is too soon to make a profound decision on this matter." Casella said. "I have only just attained my current rank. I still have much to learn and discover about my changes and improvements. I also need time to rethink my development trajectory. My brother's death... has prompted me to make changes in my life."

She wordlessly reminded Ves that he still owed her a full explanation about that. His spiritual projection raised his hand.

"Soon. Be patient. I think a face-to-face meeting isn't necessary. We will just have to wait until Saint Tusa returns from the field and becomes available to us. We can borrow his Saint Kingdom to hold a remote conversation in absolute confidence so long as you do not mind if he listens in on our discussion."

"If you think that it is not a problem for Tusa to receive this information, then I agree with your proposal. He should be out in the field for at least several more hours, though. Even if our defenses have repelled the latest offensive push, his Dark Zephyr is still expected to shadow the enemy and scout for any hidden movements."

"Then we will wait for his return." Ves smiled. "In the meantime, let's talk about your new ability to super-empower a small amount of mechs. It is clear that this is a distinctly different ability that deserves its own consideration. In fact, I think we should distinguish it from your regular Commandeering ability by calling it in a different way."

Casella looked pointed at Ves.

"Your tone suggests that you already have a proposal in mind."

"I do. You do not have to take over my suggestion, but I find it rather easy to understand and communicate. That is important as you will need to gain people's trust and acceptance if you want to super-empower them one day."

"What do you suggest?"

"Well, this act clearly goes beyond regular Commandeering. It should be labeled with a word that conveys a more extreme exchange of power and control. After a bit of thought, I settled on the word Enfeoffment."

Enfeoffment. That was not a word that Casella heard every day, but as a former member of House Ingvar, she was quite familiar with the concept.

"Enfeoffment is a term used to describe the transfer of ownership and possession of territory from a liegeland to a vassal." The female ace pilot said. "It is usually used in the context of heads of state bestowing territory as well as noble titles to their ostensive vassals."

Ves nodded. "Yes. I know the word doesn't exactly match what you do, but the symbolism is a very good match. The advantage of referring to your super-empowerment ability as enfeoffment is that you can borrow people's existing associations and understanding to gain people's cooperation and reduce their fear of the unknown. It should also make the procedure more exciting to them, as we can use noble titles to denote their degree of empowerment."

That caused Casella to look intrigued. Her clever mind already figured out his scheme.

"I see. You want to make the recipients of my super-empowerment more proud and satisfied by wrapping up my actions in ceremony. Instead of bestowing them with the power of a pseudo-expert pilot, I am 'Enfeoffing' them to the noble rank of Baron or higher."

Ves grinned. "Exactly! You can dress it up however you want! I think that as your resonance strength grows, it should become possible to make your Enfeoffed mechs a lot more powerful, though probably in exchange for limiting the amount of machines that can benefit from this treatment. There will be times where you want to go for quantity, and other times where you prize quality. This is where adopting an existing and easy-to-understand noble rank system can convey immediate understanding and other beneficial associations."

The Saint Commander did not entirely feel comfortable with this approach. There was a rather strong sense of deliberate manipulation through wordplay in Ves' proposal.

However, Casella was realistic enough to understand that resorting to more obscure or convoluted terminology would only spread greater confusion.

The greatest advantage of using Enfeoffment to describe her powerful new capability was that it gave the recipients and those that desired to enjoy this power strong desires. Everyone wanted to become a noble, even those that hated stuck-up aristocrats.

"We can use titles such as Baron, Viscount, Count, Marquis, Duke and maybe even Prince to denote successive levels of Enfeoffment." Casella fleshed out his plan. "Baron will correspond to the power of a low-tier expert mech. For now, elevating mechs to Baron is the limit of what I can do, but once I develop Enfeoffment further, I am confident I can bestow greater power to my Enfeoffed mechs."

"You can also use the title of Knight to denote all of the Commandeered mechs if you want to adopt a more unified theme. If you think about it, from the moment you broke through, you pretty much became the Queen of your own Saint Kingdom. The difference between you and other ace pilots is that your control over your Kingdom is not comparable to that of your peers. This is why you have no choice but to project your power through your vassals."

"Vassalization implies surrendering control."

"Any mortal kingdom is never completely centralized, Casella. The sovereign must always rely on vassalization and delegation in order to manage everything better. While Commandeering allows you to directly lead your massive army of Knights, Enfeoffment should not only be more about bestowing power to powerful candidates, but also giving them the space to exercise their power in a manner of their choosing. I mean, what is the point of controlling human-controlled mechs if you always take away all of their control? You may as well follow the example of the Army of One if you want to control every variable. Don't forget that living mechs are all unique and can think for themselves. Don't waste their advantages."

Ves had to stand up for his living mechs and at least persuade Casella Ingvar to give his products enough room to express themselves.

Casella looked thoughtful. "I shall consider it. Your argument is valid. I have not made a decision on whether to adopt your Enfeoffment scheme, but it is a good option. I have never truly seen myself as the Queen of my own Saint Kingdom. It sounds... overly dramatic."

"Ace pilots are all dramatic one way or another. You are so far removed from normal humans that you simply don't think like them anymore. This is a blessing as well as a curse. Just embrace it. This is your true nature. Trying to repress your eccentricities will probably hinder your growth. Doing the opposite and expressing your urges more freely will probably be better for your development in the long run. Just think about all of the people who eventually made it to god pilot. There is

absolutely no normal human among them. They all rank at the top in terms of eccentricity and weirdness."

He made another good argument.

Casella was not the sort of pilot who liked to express everything in the open. Her nature as a commander encouraged her to keep much of her thoughts and feelings to herself. She preferred to present a restrained and carefully cultivated image of herself to the public.

However, now that she had reached a stage of her development where she needed to become more powerful and high-profile in order to realize her ambitions, perhaps a radical switch was in order.

The Saint Commander actually began to adopt a more favorable attitude towards Enfeoffment. Dressing up the tiers of empowerment in noble titles could do much to distinguish herself from other ace commanders, not that there were that many of them in the first place.

She even had a candidate for the only pilot who deserved to be crowned King.

No one else but her brother deserved to reign as a co-ruler of her own Saint Kingdom.

As long as Imon remained absent, then the crown of the King would always remain unused.

"I think I shall take up the mantle of Queen of my own Saint Kingdom." She decided.

"Good. Please think more about your development direction going forward. Whether you want to field a vast army of Knights, build up a thriving court of Aristocrats or find a balance between both, it is better to make up your mind sooner rather than later. My wife and I can precisely plan, configure and design the Minerva Mark II according to your choices. It is very troublesome to change this later. I can think of multiple different ways to enhance your machine's effectiveness in all of those possible scenarios."

"Can you give an example, sir?"

"Well, one of the major advancements of my sixth-generation living mechs is the Ultimate Module. If you intend to invest heavily in Commandeering, I can probably figure out a way to make the Ultimate Module detachable. It may be possible to use it as a beacon to extend your Command

Field beyond its usual range. Maybe you can even deploy your Command Field in two different locations at once!"

That certainly sounded a lot more intriguing to Casella!

The tactical and strategic value of being able to deploy her Command Field beyond the radius of her Minerva opened up a lot of interesting possibilities, such as empowering a flanking force that attacked from a completely different direction!

Chapter 6277 The Retelling

Time continued to pass by as the latest offensive push against Arvest Lima V receded.

This time, the native aliens clearly lost more than they gained. They knew that they couldn't topple the defenses of the fortified planet in a single massive assault, so they sought to launch periodic attacks in order to exhaust and deplete the human defenders over time.

This time, the predominantly orven forces clearly suffered greater casualties than their human adversaries!

Too many orven phasefighters got shredded by the souped-up Larkinsons and their allies!

Even though the mass Commandeering of so many mechs of the expeditionary fleet only lasted for a limited time, the damage they inflicted on the regular and elite orven phasefighters was massive.

This was because the native aliens couldn't field nearly enough strike craft in the field that could fight on roughly equal terms to any machine that had been temporarily elevated to quasi-expert mech standards!

The 35 'Enfeoffed' Transcendent Punishers Mark III's also shifted the strategic balance through their amazing firepower!

The native alien attackers never accounted for their devastating impact. Their assault fleets had to plug the gap of the early retreat of a cruiser and also had to make other sacrifices to compensate for the premature withdrawal of the Trampler of Stars.

In the end, by the time the Saint Commander exhausted her breakthrough energies and gloriously returned to the Spirit of Bentheim, the outcome of the latest clash had already been decided!

Plenty of harassment and secret maneuvering took place after that. Both sides sought to set themselves up for the next collision by planting stealth probes, listening devices, hidden bombs and other nasty surprises onto each other.

Extremely fast and maneuverable ace mechs that could utilize their Saint Kingdoms to detect and mark any hostile devices were worth their weight in phasewater during these phases.

The highest commander in the Arvest Lima System made heavy use of both the Dark Zephyr Mark III as well as the Jedda Sandivar piloted by Saint Marissa Lewandowski to sweep up as many alien 'gifts' as possible.

Once the Dark Zephyr Mark III finally returned to the expeditionary fleet and entered one of the more private hangar bays of the Spirit of Bentheim, Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson had become mentally fatigued.

As hardy and persistent as ace pilots may be, even Tusa could become bone-tired after flexing his Saint Kingdom for hours on end.

He wanted to do nothing more than to return to his opulent and well-protected suite and collapse onto his luxuriously soft and bouncy bed.

Yet he could not do so yet. He still had a mission to complete, and it was one that he was especially keen to fulfill.

His expression inside his cockpit remained firm as he gently instructed his machine to stride across the deck and enter one of the private workshops buried deep in the center of the factory ship.

It was here where the Minerva had stowed herself after her return from the field. The private workshop where Ves and Gloriana had once birthed multiple masterwork mechs was the most secure location on the capital ship. The security level here surpassed that of the bridge, the main engineering bay and even the grand staterooms.

As the two living expert mechs came face to face with each other, it became clear that the two machines had become a lot more equal than before.

In past reunions, the Dark Zephyr clearly towered the other Larkinson expert mechs in terms of aura, prestige and inner strength.

The distance between the two machines had become a lot more reduced now that both of them received the baptism of forced resonance and became the chosen steeds of two awe-inspiring ace pilots.

The two living mechs had already begun to communicate in private through a hidden branch of the Larkinson Network. The Dark Zephyr had much to teach the Minerva about what she needed to pay attention to now that she became the fortunate carrier of a Saint.

From the perspective of living mechs, the relatively quick ascension of the Saint Commander also provided a massive benefit to their group. The Minerva had been voted in as the first head of the hidden Anima Order.

Though she was favored by other living mechs due to her intelligence and her policies, the strength and authority she gained from hosting a powerful ace pilot could do wonders in elevating her leading position and securing the obedience of every living machine!

Neither of the two living mechs divulged any of their discussions to their respective pilots. The business of the Anima Order had to remain secret by necessity. Its exposure through any leaks would deal a huge blow against the interests of living mechs. The current political climate in human civilization was not yet ready to welcome the rise of self-thinking, semi-autonomous and politically active living mechs.

Even though the two ace pilots could definitely tell that their battle partners were conferring among themselves in secret through their Saint Kingdom, they dismissed it as the typical private chatter between living machines.

They had much greater concerns in mind at the moment. Saint Tusa had retracted his Saint Kingdom to the point where it encompassed the boundaries of the private workshop and made sure that no spies or listening devices could leak anything to any third parties.

"This place is as secure as I can make it." Tusa spoke after a few minutes. "This workshop is surrounded by a lot of complicated machinery. I don't have the faintest idea how they work, but I have made sure to isolate them from any conversations that happen inside the cockpit of the Minerva."

The spiritual projection of Ves nodded in satisfaction. "I guess that is good enough. The mechers are present in this star system, and I have no doubt that they have extensively bugged the Spirit of Bentheim. It is in their nature to spy on other humans. You can't stop them any more than you can stop the native aliens from waging war against us. I don't think they can circumvent your Saint Kingdom unless they employ extremely exclusive tech or dispatch a god pilot. Neither of the two possibilities are realistic as the Spirit of Bentheim simply doesn't merit such a heavy investment. It is also a massive breach of trust for them to bring the big guns against our clan."

"Enough." Saint Commander Casella Ingvar spoke up. "I have tolerated these hours for far too long. I have resisted the urge to rest so that I may learn the fate that has befallen my brother."

Saint Tusa also expressed a lot of curiosity towards what had happened to the other Larkinson expert pilots.

"I wish to know as well. As the first saint of the Larkinson Clan, I think I am entitled to know the truth."

"Both of you will have it. I can promise you that." Ves frankly spoke. "I may have to... obfuscate certain facts that are inconvenient to share with the two of you, but I can guarantee you that anything solid is truthful."

"We shall see." Casella reserved her judgment.

Ves did not delay any further. The events in the Duqaste System had already concluded long enough for him to obtain a clear understanding of the timeline and the many consequences of the risky operation.

"Well, let me begin at the start. As you are already aware of, the 77th Warborn Mech Division is assigned to guard the Duqaste System, which is located in the same middle zone as the Arvest Lima System..."

In order to convey a complete accounting, Ves introduced the general circumstances and provided the necessary context to allow both ace pilots to understand General Ark's decision to embark on a risky operation.

Both Tusa and Casella frowned when they understood the underlying motivations for this operation. They were both ace pilots, so they keenly understood that Ark deliberately set a pitfall for himself in the hopes that the challenge of escaping it would force him to push past his limits.

"I do not necessarily disagree with the decision to raid Duqaste XI." Casella frowned. "General Ark's motivations are... sound. What I have a problem with is the haste and lack of preparations. Ark has neglected to properly scout and collect enough pertinent intelligence on the alien staging point. He has demonstrated that he would rather grasp opportunities that come with a great amount of uncertainty than to do his due diligence and incur the risk of returning empty handed."

She clearly possessed a more cautious stance on this matter than General Ark. This reflected their fundamental differences on the matter.

The spiritual projection of Ves sighed. "Ark gambled... and lost. Let me explain what happened up to the point where your brother got felled."

Ves carefully retold the sequence of events. He even exercised his spiritual manipulation abilities to produce a simplistic map that displayed the movements of different elements.

The Mars and the Tireless Engine had been dueling against each other a short distance away while the remaining expert mechs sought to punch through the blockade formed by the Ghirard Fleet and raid all of the depots and warehouses on the surface.

Nothing happened during these preceding phases that alarmed Casella. That did not mean she was happy about the reckless decision to venture to the surface of Duqaste XI in the complete absence of the rest of the mechs of the 77th Warborn.

Casella understood that bringing them alone would have merely generated mass casualties among the normal soldiers, but if this was the only other alternative, then it was better to call this ill-conceived operation off. General Ark ignored far too many warning signs early on, from disregarding the setback of getting discovered before the start of the raid to struggling to overcome a large quantity of experimental phasefighters.

Just as Casella anticipated, the operation immediately went pear-shaped as the Larkinson expert mechs attempted to make their way out and escape the clutches of the Ghirard Fleet.

"How can any of us miss the impending arrival of a second phase lord?" Casella critically questioned. "Shouldn't the mechers be on top of monitoring the movements of such powerful enemies?"

Ves let out a sigh. "I have no good explanation for this. It is true that it is a massive intelligence on the part of the Red Association as well as the 77th Warborn Mech Division to overlook the approach of a phase lord, even if he is among the weakest of his kind."

"And what about Ylvaine? Why hasn't the Great Prophet done his job and given us advance warning that my brother would die in this operation?!"

"Whoa, whoa, there. Calm down, Casella. Ylvaine may be able to predict the future, but his future sight is extremely limited. He cannot properly predict the future of powerful individuals such as Patriarch Reginald and the Tireless Engine because he is not strong enough to do so. He is also only able to see possible futures that may or may not come true. There is always a chance that Imon would die in every battle he takes part in. Sometimes, the probability is greater than usual, but the outcome is never truly certain until an event has already happened in reality. Our clan has participated in many battles in the past that could cause our future to diverge in radically different directions depending on who lived and died. Each time, Ylvaine is able to predict the possible fall of myself, Venerable Joshua or the Spirit of Bentheim, but he can only ever judge their probabilities, not the eventual outcomes."

In other words, Ylvaine was of very limited use in these situations. The strength of his predictive capabilities was not strong enough to essentially issue a deterministic verdict of a future that was absolutely guaranteed to happen.

Perhaps he might gain this power under limited circumstances when he grew strong in the future, but that was a very distant prospect!

The Saint Commander was not entirely unreasonable about this. She understood Ylvaine's limitations quite well as she had Commandeered and more recently Enfeoffed plenty of Ylvainan mechs.

"Please continue, sir. I can sense his moment of death is not far away from this point. What happened that caused him to be left vulnerable and without anyone coming to his rescue?"

"Well..."

Chapter 6278 A Chain of Bad Decisions

The air in the private workshop inside the Spirit of Bentheim grew heavier and more charged as Ves' tale approached the death of Casella's brother.

The two ace pilots might not be too old or experienced, but their transcendent power granted them an excellent understanding of the ebb and flow of battle.

This was especially the case for a command specialist such as Saint Casella!

The crude map generated by Ves was lacking in a lot of detail, but Casella skillfully made a lot of inferences that allowed her to more accurately reproduce the progression of the running battle in her mind.

Many risk factors clearly stood out to her. If General Ark weighed the risks like a reasonable commander, then he would have already aborted this operation from the moment the RA stealth carrier got discovered.

Sure, it had been necessary for the Mars and the expert mechs to deploy into space in order to destroy the hidden archship and prevent the Ghirard Fleet from hunting down the stealth vessel, but this was still a lot safer than to proceed headlong into enemy territory!

What Casella found especially painful was that by the time the mechs detected the approach of a second enemy phase lord, it was already too late for the Larkinson expert mechs to make an easy retreat.

Ves slowly retold the sequence of combat, making sure to be careful and precise with his words. The surviving mechs from this operation-turned-debacle retained detailed logs and recordings of the running battle, but it was irresponsible to transmit them over the galactic net or any remote communication method for that matter.

When he finally came to the key juncture where the younger phase lord purged his armor, took advantage of his reduced burden and turn around at a much faster rate than he had shown before, both Tusa and Casella could predict what happened next.

"These raiments do indeed weigh down their wearers." Tusa spoke. "When you fight against them for a time, it is difficult to keep in mind that they can actually move faster if they do not have to drag along thousands of tons of alloys. This L'Koi is quite sharp by giving up his armor during this critical instance. The timing couldn't have been better. Ark had failed to take out the phase lord with his overcommitted attack, and all of the other expert mechs were still very close as they sought to take advantage of the distraction. Perhaps the greatest fault that Rosa Orfan and the others have made during this instance was to put too much trust in their leader. They failed to hedge against Ark's failure."

Casella looked pained. Her brother didn't have to die despite this setback.

Venerable Imon Ingvar could have saved his life if he held back a bit and assumed a more cautious posture. He didn't have to charge straight towards the rear of the Faceless Warrior's head and gamble on whether he could land a killer blow on the phase lord.

As his sister, Casella understood Imon well enough to deduce that he wanted to get lucky.

He was waiting for Ark to land a crippling blow that stripped L'Koi's defenses but did not kill him outright.

It was unreasonable for a single attack, even one as powerful as the Cleansing Light in Giantslayer Mode, to cut down a phase lord right away.

That was why the Riot, the Blade Chaser Mark II, the C-Man and the Greenaxe positioned themselves around L'Koi. They were ready to deliver the follow-up attacks once General Ark had exhausted the awesome power of his magnificent attack.

It was too bad that Ark fell short at the end. He had succeeded in that he had blown apart the energy defenses of the enemy phase lord. He had also failed as his plasma sword failed to burn through the enemy's raiment and inflict a painful blow on the phase lord's true body.

Due to this specific outcome, L'Koi lost much of his defensive buffer, but still maintained his full offensive potential!

From the moment he grasped the Saint Piercer, the expert pilots should have withdrawn and sought to evade confrontation at all cost. It had been far too reckless for them to think about taking away the phase lord's life when he wielded a weapon that had already proven deadly enough to pierce through Saint Kingdoms as if they were nothing!

"The Blade Chaser Mark II had no chance." Ves unequivocally said. "As a mech designer, I have witnessed its performance against the Mars. It doesn't really matter who wields this weapon. As long as the wielder is large enough and possesses enough skill in spearmanship, he or she can easily tear through anything. The Mars is a much tougher machine to crack, and it has incurred many nasty tears to its armor system. The Blade Chaser Mark II's armor system is not nearly as good, and

L'Koi is just good enough with polearms to be able to deliver a strong and accurate thrust through the back of the expert mech and into the cockpit."

L'Koi knew enough about human mechs to understand the most effective way to take them down. He did not foolishly target the head of the Blade Chaser Mark II, nor try to stab in the very center of the torso. Eliminating the cockpit was the most certain way to defeat not just the machine, but also the human that controlled its movements!

Casella had fallen silent as she processed the reasons why her brother died at this junction.

There were so many things that he and the others could have done to prevent this fatal outcome.

If she was there, she would have never let this farce drag to this point!

There was no way her brother would have died if she was in charge!

Seeing that Casella was not in the mood to talk, Tusa opened up his mouth in an attempt to keep a conversation going.

"I can see why L'Koi chose to target the Blade Chaser most of all." Tusa said. "If I was in the phase lord's place, I would have tried to attack the Lionheart first, especially after it had clearly lost a lot of power. However, since it is necessary to close the distance in order to target the Lionheart, it is better to turn around and target the other expert mechs. Targeting the Blade Chaser makes the most sense. It is closest as it sought to target the nuns phase lord's head as opposed to his massive rear body. The Blade Chaser was also in the worst position to escape the reach of L'Koi's new weapon. As long as the phase lord spun around fast enough, Imon's mech should still be well within reach. The Blade Chaser was just begging to get impaled from the back at that point. Maybe it would have made a greater difference if Imon did not turn around in an attempt to flee."

Casella grimaced deeper. There were so many possible decisions that her brother and the other expert pilots could have made that could stave off this specific outcome.

If her brother hadn't been so greedy to target the phase lord's head, thereby earning a lot more ire from 'L'Koi than the others, the phase lord might have chosen to impale another expert mech instead!

If the other expert mechs such as the Riot and the C-Man hadn't placed themselves so much further away they had already escaped the reach of the Saint Piercer by the time the phase lord around, the Blade Chaser wouldn't have stood out so much!

Casella's powerful mind couldn't help but fixate on the huge number of what-ifs that were beginning to overload her expanded cognition!

"Calm down, Casella!" Tusa barked and flared his Saint Kingdom a bit, allowing him to shock the distressed Saint Commander from her unhealthy preoccupation. "Your brother doesn't want you to burn up your brain by obsessing over his demise. He wants you to live. Do not dishonor his sacrifice by defying his earnest wish."

Those were the right words to say to the Saint Commander. As smart and thoughtful as she was most of the time, there was still a human inside the powerful ace pilot. That lingering human vulnerability could have caused the Larkinson Clan's latest saint to self-destruct before she could be put to good use!

Though Casella found it impossible to completely stop thinking about her brother's death, the forceful push from Tusa at least brought her back to relative sanity.

"Thank you, Tusa. I... needed that intervention." She softly said before turning to Ves. "Please tell me what happened next. What happened to the killer of my brother? Did the Larkinsons manage to retrieve the wreck of his expert mech? Did the Warborn at least manage to pry the Saint Piercer from the nunsers?"

Ves remained for a few seconds before he began to clarify what happened next.

"All of the expert pilots had fallen in shock at that time. They could not accept that one of their own had gotten killed in such a quick and brutal fashion. The Blade Chaser's resonance shield may have been on the verge of collapse at that point, but its shield generator and armor system is still decent, if a bit outdated. In most situations, an expert mech should still be able to remain functional after suffering a heavy blow from a relatively weak lesser phase lord. Not this time. The Saint Piercer is such an effective weapon that it has invalidated all of the defenses of the expert mech. The expert pilots hadn't fully understood the implications of this, so they froze while L'Koi proudly lifted up his weapon and showed off the expert mech that he literally speared through the back."

"What... happened next?"

"Well, before L'Koi could shake the Blade Chaser from his fancy new weapon and turn it against the other Larkinson expert mechs, Patriarch Reginald Cross forcibly intervened. The Mars had deliberately pushed away from the Tireless Engine and approached L'Koi so quickly that his Mars ended up colliding against the younger phase lord's exposed body. The son of Ghirard not only received a heavy bruise against his flank, but also got pushed away, preventing him from claiming a second expert pilot."

The Mars was able to disengage from the Tireless Engine because the older phase lord no longer held the Saint Piercer anymore.

Just as the Mars lacked a powerful killing weapon against its adversary, Ghirard also lacked the power to inflict a decisive killing blow onto the ace hybrid mech.

Of course, the Tireless Engine grew very angry about the fact that he had been dismissed, and already started to close in on the Mars.

"GET OUT OF HERE!" Patriarch Reginald Cross roared over the communication channel. "This battle is over! Run and don't turn back! I will hold these enemies as much as possible. Don't wait for me! I can make my own way back to Duqaste VII!"

It seemed very uncharacteristic for Patriarch Reginald to show so much care and consideration for others, but even he could not remain unmoved by the death of a high-tier expert pilot from the Larkinson Clan.

"Hell no!" Venerable Vincent defiantly shot back. "We can't let L'Koi get away with killing one of our own! I don't want to let these filthy aliens bask in their victory over us! We need to avenge my friend's death!"

Venerable Rosa Orfan also had misgivings about an immediate withdrawal.

"We need to take back the Blade Chaser. Imon is dead, but his living mech still lives on. We can't allow his battle partner to fall in the hands of the native aliens. We should take away the Saint Piercer as well! If we bring it back and hand it over to the mechers, they can research this experimental weapon and develop counters that can prevent others from suffering the same fate."

"No." General Ark struggled to speak through his complex mood. He could procrastinate later. "We cannot take any further risks. Letting the aliens keep Imon's mech and the Saint Piercer is bad for many reasons, but we do not have the luxury to fulfill these objectives. We are at a heavy

disadvantage. We cannot resist two phase lords as well as the entirety of the Ghirard Fleet at once! Listen to our only ace pilot and flee!"

Though the pilots were split on their goals, they were professional enough to understand that the worst possible outcome was to remain divided on the battlefield.

In situations like these, it became imperative to obey the orders of the highest-ranking officer unless it was clearly idiotic or illegal.

The risks of persisting in the battle were far too great at this point. The safest option that best preserved the lives of the remaining mechs and mech pilots was to give up and run away.

"That was what they did in the end." Ves softly said. "It is clear that Venerable Vincent and Venerable Orfan really wanted to stick around and take back the Blade Chaser at the very least, but they cannot justify this decision when there is a high likelihood that another expert pilot will end up getting cleaved into oblivion by the Saint Piercer. Patriarch Reginald also did not try to retrieve the expert mech either. He was badly outnumbered and had his hands full with trying to hold back all of the aliens by himself."

Casella did not know what to think at this time.

On the one hand, she agreed with the logic that the risks were far too high.

On the other hand, she resented the Warborn even more for not even attempting to bring back her brother's expert mech!

The aliens who captured this precious machine would most certainly despoil it somehow, thereby denying Casella from gaining possession of the strongest legacy of her brother!

The aliens who captured this precious machine would most certainly despoil it somehow, thereby denying Casella from gaining possession of the strongest legacy of her brother!

She hated General Ark for setting up the circumstances of Imon's death, and she hated Patriarch Reginald for not using his power to push aside L'Koi until it was too late!

Chapter 6279 Exhausting Retreat

What happened after the expert mechs began their retreat was mostly predictable.

The Lionheart, the Riot, the C-Man and the Greenaxe did not stick around so that their pilots could argue further, but straightforwardly fled into deep space.

Naturally, their enemies did not want them to leave so easily.

"WHO PERMITTED YOU TO LEAVE?! EACH OF YOU MUST DIE TO ANSWER FOR THE AFFRONT OF ATTACKING US AND DESTROYING OUR WAR MATERIALS!"

The Mars responded to this call by blasting out a full salvo of its overstrained ARCEUS System.

The damage inflicted by the resonance-empowered positron beams were not too great, but the machine had been firing them into Tireless Engine for a while now. Even if his true body was larger than his current form, the phase lord still suffered a lot of accumulated damage from getting struck by so many timers!

"I will not let you kill any more comrades in front of my eyes!" Reginald growled. "Forget about pursuing them. I will not let you chase after them if I have anything to say about it. Fight me if you want or back off if you don't want to deal with me anymore. Whatever you decide, don't think about coming after the expert mechs."

The injured but still battle-hungry Tireless Engine gazed at the Mars with a challenging expression.

"YOU ARE OUTNUMBERED. YOU CAN STOP ONE OF US, BUT YOU CANNOT STOP ALL OF US. WITH MY FLEET AND SON AT MY DISPOSAL, YOU CANNOT HINDER US FROM ELIMINATING YOUR FOLLOWERS."

Patriarch Reginald did not bother to correct the phase lord's faulty assumption that he was in charge of the expert mechs.

Instead, he grinned and instructed the Mars to lift its Whale-Cutting Saber in a challenging motion.

The Tireless Engine clearly cared a lot about his proudest son. He wouldn't have tossed over a weapon as precious as the Saint Piercer if this was not the case.

"You can't take them down, because I will stop you no matter what you choose to do. If you chase after my comrades by yourself, I will fight your son and do everything in my power to kill him. I don't care whether he wields your Saint Piercer or not. He is not skilled and strong enough to make that weapon sing. If you choose to hold me back by yourself, then that is great. Your son isn't as strong as he looks. Now that the surprise factor is over, I think my friends can still defeat him as long as there is no outside interference. As for your fleet, do you want me to relocate our duel in the midst of your precious warships?"

Ghirard looked a lot less amused as Patriarch Reginald explained all the ways he could deter the nunsers from running the expert mechs down.

The Tireless Engine clearly cared a lot about his proudest son. He wouldn't have tossed over a weapon as precious as the Saint Piercer if this was not the case.

Even now when the older phase lord had reclaimed his experimental weapon, the Tireless Engine still did not feel confident in his ability to contain and wear down the Mars.

Sure, Ghirard managed to inflict extensive damage to the exterior of the Mars, but that was when both sides actively wanted to defeat each other.

If Patriarch Reginald no longer fought in order to defeat his opponent, but merely wanted to stall the alien forces, then there were many ways his fast and highly resistant ace mech could act as a spoiler to his enemies!

There were two big constraints that Reginald imposed on the nunsers.

First, his ace mech was extremely good at inflicting collateral damage. The Ghirard Fleet had already suffered a blow from losing a lot of powerful phasefighters and failing to prevent the human invaders from destroying so many supply depots.

Suffice to say, the Red Cabal would not be happy with the Tireless Engine and the Ghirard Fleet after it had learned about this debacle.

Letting the Ghirard Fleet suffer even more material losses due to provoking the Mars into a destruction-filled rampage would cause the nunsers to suffer even more blame for slowing down the Red Tide Offensive!

Second, Patriarch Reginald and his Mars posed a deadly threat against L'Koi.

The Tireless Engine had fought extensively enough against the Mars to know without a shadow of a doubt that the powerful ace mech truly had the capacity to outfight his son and slay him within minutes!

This effectively meant that the Mars could easily force Ghirard to stay by relentlessly targeting L'Koi!

There was no way the father would leave his son to contend against a powerful ace mech by himself. The support of the Ghirard Fleet was not enough to change the outcome.

This severely limited the older phase lord's option. If he had to choose between two priorities, then he would rather protect son than to chase down after the fleeing expert mechs!

In the end, the Tireless Engine settled for a decision that best safeguarded his son's life while also giving him a small chance to claim the lives of additional expert mechs in the process.

"PURSUE THE FLEEING COWARDLY FALSE GODS, BUT ALSO DEFEND WHAT REMAINS OF OUR DEPOTS!"

The Ghirard Fleet split into half.

Part of the warships activated their warp drives and sped up into the distance to catch up with the fleeing expert mechs.

The remaining warships and phasefighters stayed behind in order to guard Duqaste XI. The Tireless Engine did not forget about his primary responsibilities.

Though this compromise solution allowed the nunser warlord to check the most boxes, the fact of the matter was that the pursuit force was not strong enough to guarantee success!

"What happened next?" Saint Tusa asked.

"Well, I don't think it is necessary to give you a detailed recounting." The spiritual projection of Ves responded. "A running engagement ensued where the four fleeing expert mechs tried to flee the reach of the pursuing nunser warships. The annoying part is that both sides are equipped with warp travel functionality. The warships are equipped with larger drives that possess a higher warp factor, so they can always keep up with the expert mechs. However, they cannot sustain their warp travel if our machines get too close, because the resonance-empowered space suppressors can sabotage their warp bubbles."

"So the enemy vessels can keep up with the expert mechs, but they cannot maintain their mobility advantage."

"Yes. While the expert mechs have become more vulnerable than ever due to losing their resonance shields, they are still very powerful as they are all piloted by high-tier expert pilots. The machines can easily dodge most incoming attacks and they can also close in on the warships and prevent a lot of enemies from firing at them due to the excessive risk of inflicting collateral damage. General Ark and the others have taken advantage of this many times in order to gain an advantage over their enemies. They have expressly targeted the smaller enemy warships in their periodic counterattacks."

"Clever." Casella spoke up again. "The smaller enemy warships are lightly defended and cannot withstand the attacks of multiple expert mechs for long. They are also among the fastest enemy hulls, so removing them from the board first will make it much harder for the aliens to keep up their pursuit. How did it end?"

"Well, the expert mechs and the pursuit fleet continued on with this dance until they finally reached the nearest asteroid belt. It was there that the Warborn took advantage of the abundant obstacles to shake off the pursuing warships and quietly return to the hangar bay of the RA stealth carrier."

Both Tusa and Casella looked relieved when they learned that the remaining Larkinson expert pilots managed to get away with their lives and machines left intact.

However, Casella's feelings about this outcome was a bit different from her nearby peer.

She wanted General Ark to live so that she could force answers from him in person one day.

If the good general was truly responsible for driving her brother to his death, then Casella did not have any good intentions in mind for her fellow command specialist!

"What about Reginald? Did he manage to get out okay after getting ganged up by two phase lords?" Tusa asked with concern.

Ves smirked. "Patriarch Reginald Cross acquitted himself well. He was still having the time of his life I think. At that point, the Tireless Engine and his son have both lost their energy defenses as well as their raiments. Ghirard has reclaimed his Saint Piercer, but his body is no longer in good shape. L'Koi may also be a phase lord, but he is too vulnerable and can't even inflict powerful enough attacks to harm the Mars. Reginald has stayed true to his word. He stalled the two phase lords long enough for the enemy leader to eventually give up any further desire to defeat the Mars. Ghirard didn't want the exhausting clash to last any longer because the Mars constantly targeted L'Koi."

This was the power of a proper ace pilot paired with a fitting and powerful ace mech.

Not all ace pilots would have been able to fight against those two opponents and perform so well that they could depart on their terms.

Casella wished that her brother was as strong as Patriarch Reginald, but reality often did not match her desires.

"So that is it, sir?" She asked in a quiet tone. "The others made it out alive, but they had to leave behind the remains of the Blade Chaser?"

Ves nodded. "There is no realistic way to take away the Blade Chaser and protect it from subsequent attacks. The Mars fought against two phase lords for an extended period of time. It managed to inflict a good amount of damage to both of them, but also suffered more extensive damage that will necessitate deep repairs. The fleeing expert mechs also incurred varying degrees of damage due to getting hit by warship-grade attacks that they weren't able to dodge. It is also quite favorable for them to make it back without suffering any further permanent losses."

"Then... what happens with Imon's mech?" Tusa asked. "Can you still keep track of it now that we don't have it anymore?"

"The Blade Chaser is a post-living mech." Ves explained. "Even if it has no independent personality, it is still connected to the Larkinson Network. The Golden Cat is able to keep tabs on it, but she cannot really do more than that. The fact that she is able to perceive it even now means that it is still 'alive'. The stab through the upper chest may be a fatal wound to most humans, but it is not an extensive enough affliction to 'kill' a living mech. According to Goldie, L'Koi has claimed the Blade

Chaser as his trophy, but his father wants to transfer the machine to his research teams in order to learn everything possible about one of my better works."

That caused Tusa to frown. "How much can the aliens learn from a post-living expert mech? Will they be able to figure out your secrets and develop their own living machines, or will they be able to figure out better counters to our other living mechs?"

Ves shrugged his shoulders. "I cannot say for certain. It depends on what kind of researchers the Tireless Engine gives permission to study the Blade Chaser. It also depends on what the aliens intend to do with their trophy. I don't think there is a serious chance that they will crack the secret to living mechs and develop their own version of them. There is a more serious probability that they will learn how to better respond against other living mechs in the future. Finally, I cannot guarantee that the nunsers will keep the Blade Chaser intact. If they want to learn all of its secrets, then their researchers must definitely resort to destructive methods."

That caused Casella to grow a lot more upset about the fact that the enemy managed to capture her brother's mech!

"We need to reclaim the Blade Chaser."

"Agree." Ves responded. "We need to be realistic, though. If the Tireless Engine has any sense, he will immediately transfer the wreck of your brother's mech deep into alien territory. He will also assign his son to escort his trophy to the rear. Neither of the two have a place on the frontlines."

If the aliens truly intended to take the wreck of the Blade Chaser far beyond the reach of human space, then that made it almost impossible for Casella to reclaim her brother's machine!

Despair welled up in her overstressed mind.

"Imon..."

"Uhm, about that..." Ves slowly said. "I haven't completed my tale. Not entirely. There is one more thing I have to share with you. This involves a very sensitive secret of mine, and it is also very difficult to explain. I would never share it with you if we weren't talking inside Tusa's Saint Kingdom."

The Saint Commander grew suspicious. So far, what she heard was certainly sensitive, but not to the point of ensuring that the mechers or any other third parties couldn't eavesdrop on the discussion.

She had a strong feeling that she was about to learn the true reason for all of this secrecy.

"Explain."

"Well, your brother may have died, but that doesn't necessarily mean he is gone. You see, there are rare cases where living organisms can still live on after death..."

Chapter 6280 Defying the Fog.

Awareness came back slowly.

Gray mist spread in every direction.

No noticeable features could be seen.

An indeterminate amount of time seemed to pass.

At one point, a new presence started to emerge.

Some of the gray mist parted as a humanoid figure came into form.

That figure was a man who wore a filigreed red-and-white uniform.

Any human in the Red Ocean was able to identify this iconic man.

He was Professor Ves Larkinson, the most innovative and successful Senior Mech Designer of the new frontier.

A grave and solemn expression appeared on the man's face. The strong sense of insubstantiality and disassociation made it difficult to get a clear look at the famous mech designer.

When the man opened his mouth, no sound seemed to propagate.

The man did not give up and repeated his words.

"...on...mon...Imon...me Imon...er me Imon...Can you hear me Imon?"

At one point, another insubstantial figure became increasingly driven by instinct to offer a response.

"I... hear... your... call..."

It was incredible for Imon, for now he finally recalled his own identity, to issue a simple response.

It was as if he had to lift up several times his own body weight just to say a single word!

What happened to him? Why did he become so incredibly weak? What was this mist-filled place?

A sympathetic expression appeared on the mech designer's face.

"Imon... do you remember... what happened to you during your last battle?"

Nothing but fog filled Imon's mind.

"Duqaste XI... L'Koi, the Faceless Warrior... the Saint Piercer... purged his raiment... Blade Chaser Mark II got impaled from the back... no chance for your body to survive..."

As Ves patiently summarized the sequence of Venerable Imon's last battle, the high-tier expert pilot finally remembered what had befallen him at the end.

He died!

He should have felt shocked at this result.

He should have felt indignant for dying far too soon.

He should have felt unwilling to leave his sister bereft of his existence.

Yet... in his weak and foggy mindset, he only felt tired.

His time had come, no matter whether he accepted it or not. Death came to everyone. Nobody could refuse its call.

Every part of his insubstantial existence accepted the unmistakable fact that he had died.

He no longer belonged among the living anymore.

He should make peace with this fact and embrace his next destination, whatever that may be. Imon was a secularist, so he never really thought hard about whether there was a definable afterlife. In his current soul-weary condition, he was ready for anything.

Yet there was a certain presence in this strange environment that did not want to see Imon depart from his current life and reality.

"IMON! Wake up, you dolt! Don't go! You may be dead, but that does not mean you have to disappear! There are more possibilities than moving on! I have seen people and beasts figure out a way to live after death before. So long as you are strong enough, you can force yourself to persist in our current realm!"

That sounded way too esoteric for Imon, especially now when his mentality was degrading by the second.

He was dead.

Parts of him were already crumbling away.

Soon, there would be nothing left to hold any conscious thoughts.

Why wasn't he moving on already? Why must this phase be prolonged?

He was so tired...

"You dummy... you don't have to die! You can still live! Don't you want to find a way to stay in the realm of the living and make up for all of your past regrets?!"

The words of the mech designer sounded so distant to Imon. Every fiber of his crumbling being had been infected by the force of death. He was no longer alive. Why must he continue to listen to the prattle of a person that he would never have to see again?

Nothing seemed to matter anymore to Imon. From the moment his body broke apart, his stay in the current realm had come to an end. He needed to go. He did not belong here anymore. The longer he stayed, the more he violated a fundamental rule that he never learned about, but instinctively knew.

Bad stuff would happen to those who defied the fate of death. Imon did not understand why this was the case or where he learned about it, but it seemed incredibly obvious now that he became afflicted by death.

"I... cannot...."

"Goddammit Imon! If you want to live for yourself, then you should at least live for your sister! Casella Ingvar will be devastated if you leave her forever! Do you remember her? She's your closest relative! She is the only member of the fallen House of Ingvar who stuck with you thick and thin. Do not allow death to deprive you of your memories of the sister you love the most!"

The words initially sank into Imon's mind like fog, but the more Ves talked about how much he cared about his sister, the more his vague and insubstantial memories evoked emotions that jolted strong emotions from another part of himself.

Love, affection, yearning. All of these emotions and more seemed to push away the fog and slow down his rate of decay.

Forgotten memories that the fog tried so hard to obscure from his awareness gradually returned within his reach.

The spark of intelligence began to light up in his eyes. Imon slowly began to regain a semblance of his old awareness!

"I... remember. I... am Imon Ingvar. I have a sister... Casella Ingvar. Together, we fight for the Larkinson Clan... I died in the field of battle... My life.... Is over..."

"It is not over." Ves corrected the dead expert pilot. "I have been trying to tell you multiple times that dying is not necessarily the end for all organisms. There are special circumstances that can allow you to persist after death. You may even be able to return to life again. I promise you with all my heart that I have personally witnessed at least one feat of true resurrection. The dead can come alive again. It is difficult, but it is possible. So long as you manage to retain a semblance of existence in our current realm, you still have a chance."

Coming back to life should have appealed to Imon a lot stronger than he currently felt.

Unfortunately, the fog still persisted inside himself. It seemed to grow stronger and started to assail him more aggressively.

Death was highly possessive of the deceased! It did not tolerate any interference in its sacred and inviolable duty!

"..."

Ves' expression grew a little more urgent as he recognized that the clock was ticking.

"IMON! Do not zone out on me! I don't care if you are tired or whatever, but there are still people who need you in the realm of the living! Think about your sister! Casella Ingvar needs you! She would do anything to have you within her reach! Do you want to make her sad by passing on without giving her the courtesy of a final farewell? Wake up, Imon! Remember who you were originally fighting for! Where is the expert pilot who vowed to dedicate all of his life to his sister?!"

The expert pilot... remembered this solemn vow.

Yet... what did it matter?

He was dead?

All promises, vows, oaths and contracts became invalid from that point.

Or at least that was supposed to be the case.

The affairs of the living should be confined to their own group.

The dead belonged elsewhere. They should have no lingering attachments to anything related to the realm of the living.

Imon instinctively understood these rules, but... the more he thought about his sister, the more he recalled his dedication towards his closest blood relative.

He... did not want to make her sad.

He knew that she would become sad if he died and disappeared.

He would rather make her happy.

Yet... how could he do so when his soul had already been claimed by death?

"I... do not want to die, but... I cannot defy my fate. My sister... will have to manage with me..." Imon slowly said as the fog started to return with a vengeance!

Seeing that time was starting to run out, Ves sped up his words.

"Imon... there is still a chance! It is true that you are not strong enough to anchor yourself to the realm of the living, but I am different! I have a... special relic... that bestows me the power for you to persist even if you are dead! You will have to sign a contract with me and undergo a radical transformation... but it is not impossible for you to meet with Casella and continue to protect her in your new state!"

The deceased expert pilot should have felt a lot more receptive towards these words, but he struggled to understand and care about the claims made by the mech designer.

"How...?"

Ves held out a hand. That hand seemed to glow with a completely different power than the death that tried to enforce its claim on Imon's soul.

"I cannot lie to you, Imon. The opportunity that I am giving you cannot bring you back to a true state of life. At least not immediately. However, there are always chances to make everything right as long as at least a semblance of you is retained. I am giving you this chance. To do so, you must agree to become my Chosen Envoy. You must wholeheartedly agree to surrender your permanent and undying loyalty to me, Ves Larkinson. In exchange, you shall enter my special court, gain power as my Chosen Envoy and gain opportunities to speak to your sister once again."

Imon frowned. From the moment Ves mentioned the phrase 'Chosen Envoy', a lot of meanings and associations got stuffed into his awareness. He somehow knew that everything Ves had mentioned was true... and a bit more that he had not mentioned.

One fact remained extremely clear, though.

Not everything about his old self would be retained.

To become a Chosen Envoy was to literally dedicate his life to the person he pledged to serve, even beyond death.

This was a contract that not only defied the heavens, but also the fundamental force of death itself!

In other words, it was a huge taboo!

Imon's decaying soul quivered with primal fear at the thought of defying those powerful forces.

Was it worth it to condemn his soul to a potentially grave punishment just because he wanted to remain within reach of his sister?

Even if he accepted this contract and turned into a so-called Chosen Envoy, would he retain enough awareness of his old self, or would he turn into a ghost that only possessed a superficial resemblance of himself?

The fleeting urge to reunite with his sister at least once seemed to override his doubts and concerns.

A part of his old impulsiveness came back to him all of a sudden. It prompted him to throw aside all of his useless thoughts and accept the deal.

Imon slowly raised his arm and reached out until he shook Ves' glowing hand.

" ... "

Nothing happened.

Ves briefly frowned. "A valid contract is a mutual agreement. Both sides must have full comprehension of the terms and agree with them wholeheartedly in order to take effect. You... are still rejecting some of the terms. Are you having trouble with pledging your eternal loyalty to myself?"

" ... "

"I know it sounds onerous, but it is truly the only chance to bring you back to your sister."

" ... "

"Yes, I am aware that you don't necessarily care about me anymore. You only want to come back because of your sister, but I am telling you that this is not how this works. A Chosen Envoy can only serve the person that possesses the capacity to extend this contract. Pledge your loyalty to me, and I shall give you opportunities to speak to your sister after becoming my Chosen Envoy. I can't give you more than that, but I promise to you that I will work to ease the restrictions on you one day. Whether that entails freeing you from your service or modifying the mechanisms that enforce your loyalty to me, there is always a solution to a problem. Is this good enough for you? As long as we work hard enough, there is always a chance for you to come back to life in full and return to being the brother that Casella truly desires."

The fog threatened to claw back Imon's soul, but evidently Ves' persuasion had lit up such a strong fire within him that the deceased expert pilot briefly managed to regain a sense of greater clarity!

A bit of his old self stared deeply into Ves' eyes.

"I agree so long as this isn't permanent." Imon firmly stated. "Promise me that you will earnestly seek to free me from my compulsion and give me a way to come back to life!"

"I promise. You can trust me, Imon. I always abide by my word."

The expert pilot continued to stare deeply into Ves' eyes before he decisively shook the mech designer's hand.

Everything exploded into light.