

Mech Touch 6661

Chapter 6661 High Burdens

With Venerable Davia Stark's permission, Joshua and Ketis got to take a closer look at the Amaranto Mark III.

The machine was currently the latest completed high-ranking mech designed by the impressive Miracle Couple.

The combination between Ves' creative genius and Gloriana's meticulous technical mastery resulted in a work that nearly perfectly combined their respective strengths.

However, it was undeniable that Gloriana claimed a significantly greater share of ownership of the high-tier 'expert' mech than before.

"This material is all kinds of weird." Ketis observed with a notable degree of perplexity. "I can tell that it is blended with Solus Gas, as it is partially resisting my examinations. I can also tell that it is almost entirely made up of hyper materials, with only a small proportion of exotic materials mixed in to make it tougher and stabler. The internal structure should be especially more fragile than what the designers could have developed if they used more conventional first-class materials."

"What does that all mean?" Joshua asked.

"Let me put it like this. Every conventional mech is designed like a hardboiled egg. It has a hard shell and a fairly soft interior. One of the excellent advantages of archetech is that it introduces a technological paradigm where the differences between the two becomes less. The architecture is so different that it is possible to homogenize the exterior defenses and the internal defenses to a much greater degree than was possible in the past."

"Oh, so that is the reason why the Dark Zephyr Mark III is a lot tougher and more able to take risks than before."

"That is right, Joshua. The arche race has strange notions about what technology should look like. There are definitely advantages to their approach, but it is hard for engineers of other races to understand the convoluted and sometimes counterintuitive mindset needed to work with archetech. The normal choice to make with this tech is to apply the same scheme onto the Amaranto Mark III. It would allow this 'expert' mech to maintain a light and fast mech frame while also enhancing her

defensive buffer by a large extent. The defensive upgrade would have been a game changer compared to the Mark II iteration. Instead of doing that, Ves and Gloriana instead opted to use Solarium as a form of external plating and Divurnas alloy as the main material for the internal structure."

"And that matters because...?"

"It's like turning back to the clock!" Ketis explained with an exasperated voice. "Gloriana purposefully used archetech in a different way than the alien race intended. She used the alien architecture as a means to apply hyper materials throughout the entire mech frame at a much greater proportion than she would normally be able to get away with!

Do you know how amazing it is for her to successfully pull this off from an engineering standpoint? All of the activity generated by Divurnas alloy will produce a huge amount of emissions, mostly in the form of light, but also in the form of heat and other forms of radiation. That would have wreaked havoc in a conventional mech frame, but one of the advantages of archetech is that its internal mechanisms are so much more well-shielded against interference that the Amaranto Mark III should still be able to operate close to her peak condition even when she is glowing like a lightbulb!"

Joshua could only scratch his head in response.

He wasn't stupid. He roughly understood the gist of his explanation. He just didn't know what the big deal was all about.

His wife evidently saw that in him, so she stopped trying to make him understand. "Forget it. You will only begin to appreciate how much of an offensive upgrade this is for the Amaranto Mark III when you finally see her in action. Davia is right. She doesn't need the Instrument of Doom in order to inflict damage at a level that surpasses that of a typical high-tier expert mech. The Instrument of Vengeance that is designed to effectively tap into the excess power produced by the mech frame effectively turns this oversized luminar crystal rifle into an incredibly powerful cannon. The vision behind it is amazing, and Ves and Gloriana do deserve lots of credit for being able to realize such a demanding technical concept."

As the only mech designer among the three, only Ketis possessed the eyesight to better appreciate the profound technical accomplishment of the Amaranto Mark III. Her offensive prowess had been raised to an extreme, all without making too many compromises in terms of defense, mobility and other factors.

This meant that while the Amaranto Mark III excelled at long-range target elimination, she could also put up a mean fight if confronted up close.

The only problem was that the Instrument of Vengeance was not the best weapon to wield in close-quarters combat.

"It has a plasma blade bayonet." Venerable Davia Stark mentioned. "It is not as if my battle partner is completely defenseless at close range. However, I probably won't be able to rely on it to fend off the Dark Zephyr Mark III and so on. Ves and Gloriana have made it abundantly clear to me that resorting to the bayonet is purely a last resort. The Amaranto should rely on other melee mechs to defend herself against enemies up close." "The Bastion was the perfect complement for this role. Ketis mentioned. "The expert heavy space knight can directly shield your Amaranto against ranged attacks, thereby allowing her to stay put for longer periods of time. The Bastion is also great at fending off most close-ranged attackers as long as they are not too powerful or numerous. If a martial-oriented phase lord ever gets close, the Bastion will be in much greater danger than your Amaranto due to the differences in mobility."

That was one of the disadvantages of piloting a heavy mech with a strong defensive focus.

It didn't help that the Bastion was falling increasingly behind the times. It was not as old as the First Sword Mark II, the Riot Mark II the Everchanger Mark II, but she was very clearly not designed to confront the enemy types deployed by the native aliens.

Venerable Jannzi was one of the high-tier expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan that was most at risk of dying in the upcoming operation.

Her awfully slow Bastion was not as capable of retreating as the other high-ranking mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

She might actually have to eject her cockpit if she wanted to escape the clutches of a phase lord that was hell-bent on killing her and her machine.

Whether she was willing to do so was another question. Jannzi and the Bastion formed the very first Blood Pact of its kind. It was pretty much the role model for all subsequent Blood Pacts. The bond between pilot and mech was so much more intimate than the ones formed between complete strangers.

Would Jannzi ever permit herself to leave the Bastion to her lot if the machine was on the verge of getting torn to pieces?

Joshua could not imagine it, and was the same for the others. This was why giving her enough cover to retreat was one of their secondary objectives for the upcoming fight. The Viola Magnifica System was not a location worth dying for. It was important to make the aliens bleed for every fortification they destroyed, but the troops had to keep the big picture into account. They needed to survive so that they could fight the aliens again in

another day.

Venerable Stark and Venerable Joshua began to speak about potential forms of cooperation between the two. The massive upgrades to the expert marksman mech had huge implications on the battlefield.

"If my new Amaranto performs as well as I hoped, we will attract an enormous amount of attention from the enemy phase lords. They will seek to prioritize our destruction once they realize how much danger they are in if they leave me unopposed." Davia Stark said. "I have already spoken with Saint Linda Cross about how to handle this scenario. She promised me that she can only hold back one enemy phase lord at most, and not for long if she is confronting a greater phase lord."

"It is good news that we still have Casella with us due to the fact that her future ace mech upgrade is already in the works." Ketis mentioned. "She can relieve your burden as well by providing massed fire support with the help of her Command Field. She can't actually halt any phase lords in their tracks, though. She is much more suited to counter the massed warships. She doesn't have any assets that are strong enough to duel against

phase lords up close."

Saint Commander Casella was an excellent asset for the upcoming battle. As one of the few ace pilots who remained behind in the Viola Magnifica System, she could empower lots of ranged living mechs and amplify their firepower to the point where she could effectively wear down the spatial barriers of phase lords over a distance.

However, it was not viable to rely on melee mechs to physically fight these phase lords to a standstill. The gap in absolute power was simply too great even with the benefit of Enfeoffing mechs so that they performed similar to low-tier expert mechs.

In a way, both the Amaranto and the Minerva Mark I suffered from the same problem. They were backline combat assets that preferred to focus more on damage output than impeding the advances of incredibly powerful opponents.

Ketis began to frown. "Both of you are in an awkward situation now that I think about it. Casella is an ace pilot that is limited by her expert mech. She cannot fully utilize her full power due to the technical constraints of her own machine. As for you, Davia, you are still a high-tier expert pilot that is currently paired with what could credibly be called an ace mech. The fact that Gloriana installed ace mech-grade resonating exotics into the mech frame in advance is a risky decision. The Amaranto will hold you back if you fail to break through and continue to remain stuck as a high-tier expert pilot. However, so long as you are able to attain your sainthood during the upcoming battle, you will be in a much better condition than our Saint Commander. Your Amaranto Mark III already fits you perfectly at your new rank, so you can unleash your full potential and inflict much more damage onto the enemies in the field without worrying about damaging your

machine." Her message was clear. Many of the problems that hung over their heads would become a lot easier to deal with as long as Davia Stark broke through! "Ketis may be able to help." Joshua spoke up. "You must have heard the stories already. She has published a new theory that has taken the swordsmanship community by storm. She has also given me and many other expert pilots advice on what they need to focus on in order to break through."

The swordsmaster in question smiled in response. "I can consult you if you are open to my advice. As one warrior to another, I think that you are already on the right track, especially now that you are piloting an upgraded machine. However, if you don't want to end up like General Ark Larkinson and Venerable Benjamin Larkinson and fail to break through in the past few months despite receiving new machines of their own, you need to reflect deeper on the power that you wish to rely upon."

"I think I will take you up on your offer. I am not arrogant enough to assume that I have

all of the answers. The other expert pilots have already given you praise on how extensively you have broadened their perspectives."

Though Ketis' Heaven Earth Man Trifecta sounded simple, the value in this new theoretical model lay in its ability to contextualize the power system of high-ranking

mech pilots.

In other words, her new theories gave them a logical explanation on how to systematically increase their breakthrough chances!

Chapter 6662 New Synergies

The Bitter Scimitar and the Amaranto Mark III were not the only new combat assets that the mech designers of the Larkinson Clan had introduced to the expeditionary fleet. Ketis had already released a corrective update to the recently released Stormblade Samurai Mark II that offered significant advancements related to her new School of Reformed Swordsmanship.

This was especially relevant to the Larkinsons as the Swordmaiden Mech Legion already fielded a small but formidable core of quasi-first-class versions of the Stormblade Samurai Mark II!

The good news was that the older version did not have to be scrapped. Ketis and other competent mech designers or mech technicians could apply relatively quick and easy modifications in order to update them to the latest iteration of the design.

That allowed them to be fully ready and prepared to fight at their best in the upcoming confrontation.

Another new addition to the lineup was the mysterious Karma Cutter mech line.

Absolutely no one aside from Ketis knew how Ves was able to design and complete this solo project without exposing any news.

Just like the Stormblade Samurai Mark II and many other releases from the Design Department, the Karma Cutter came in two different editions.

The Commercial Edition was a fairly mid-range hyper mech that attempted to find a balance between functionality and affordability.

So far, the regular second-class version of the Karma Cutter failed to make an impression. People did not understand the point of this rifleman mech in the current day and age.

It sounded like an effective counter against many forms of hyper technology. It also promised to be highly effective against cultivators.

However, most ranged mech pilots worried more about shooting down agile phasefighters and wearing down the formidable defenses of enemy warships more than anything. They had no need for a mech that sounded like it was more effective at countering human forces!

The Larkinsons reacted more positively to the introduction of the Larkinson Edition of the Karma Cutter.

The quasi-first-class rifleman mech packed a mean punch, and while it lacked the luminal crystal weapons of other machines such as the Fey Fianna, that didn't matter when firing at huge and not too mobile targets such as phase lords and warships! Ves had been quite clear that he designed the Karma Cutter specifically for the Battle

Crier Mech Legion.

The Battle Criers in turn welcomed this mech model with open arms. They had always felt neglected due to their lack of signature mechs that could allow them to differentiate themselves from the other mech legions and develop their own iconic mech doctrines and battle tactics.

However, there was one other mech legion in particular that objected to the exclusivity of the Larkinson Edition of the Karma Cutter!

"Why do oafs like you get to enjoy the Karma Cutter by yourself?!" A Penitent Sister mech pilot marched up to a group of Battle Criers and complained. "This is a mech blessed by the Superior Mother herself! It is only through the power of her damnation phase that this Karma Cutter can strip away the power of hyper technology and isolate its enemies! This should be our signature mech model, as we are the people who can best channel the Superior Mother's power!"

"Well, though luck, woman, because the Karma Cutter is all ours. The patriarch himself designed it for us. We are the only mech legion that is equipped to fight against. extraordinary threats, whether they come in the form of high-ranking mechs, qi cultivators or alien phase lords. We need a mech like this in order to do our jobs properly. Stick to what you are good at and we will stick to ours. Just because the Superior Mother is a design spirit to the Karma Cutter does not mean that you can take it away from our mech legion. If you have a problem with that, take it up with the patriarch!"

While the Penitent Sisters continued to complain about the fact that the brutes of the Battle Criers could not properly appreciate a mech that was blessed by the Superior Mother, that did not stop the latter from acclimating to their new machines and their interesting new weapon.

The Null Rifle was an unconventional mech rifle that forced the Battle Criers to adopt a completely different approach from what they were accustomed to when piloting the Nullifier mech model.

The latter was equipped with the iconic but aging Godkiller Heavy Luminar Crystal Rifles.

Previously, the Nullifier Battalion had made a name for themselves when employing the enhanced versions of normal transphasic luminar crystal rifles. They were the most effective standard weapons to employ against phase lords outside of certain artillery

cannons.

This made the Nullifiers equipped with the limited amount of Godkillers a favorite target for Commandeering or Enfeoffment for Saint Commander Casella Ingvar.

Now, she had gained another powerful option in the form of the new quasi-first-class Karma Cutter mechs.

The only problem was that Ves released them so recently that the Larkinson Clan could only produce and ship out a limited quantity of them. The Spirit of Bentheim had to stay

behind rather than joining the preemptive evacuation just so that her fabrication halls could churn out as many Karma Cutters as possible!

"It is worth it." Legion Commander Hugin Cinnabar told the Saint Commander when she paid a visit to the Battle Criers in order to examine the new mechs in person. "The Nullifiers are not weak by any means. Their Godkillers are still amazing. It is just that they were designed to allow standard mech pilots to suppress and maybe even take out enemy expert mechs. They were mechs designed for the conflicts of the past. The best thing about the Karma Cutters is that they are designed for the conflicts of the future. While they are admittedly not as valuable in the present, their value will only increase once more and more human as well as alien threats make more extensive use of E energy to empower all of their combat measures."

Casella Ingvar studied the copies of the Karma Cutters that were currently on standby in one of the hangar bays.

As an ace pilot, she and her companion spirit could always obtain a good impression of what another living mech was good at by relying on her Command Field and other

senses.

Right now, she could feel that the Karma Cutter was designed around the concept of severing something mysterious and intangible.

Its physical damage output was not the highest by any means, but its true lethality rested in its ability to disrupt the enemy's connection to E energy radiation and

potentially other factors.

Legion Commander Cinnabar and Saint Commander Casella directed much of their attention to the specially designed weapon of the Karma Cutter.

"The Null Rifle is a low-tech ballistic rifle." The Battle Crier Commander said. "But that is an oversimplified explanation. It is best characterized as a delivery vehicle for Null Rounds. The hyper bullets are designed to cut the karma bonds of anything it hits, whatever that means. We have only briefly tested out this feature and found that it actually does what it is supposed to do. The only issue is that since the Null Rounds need to be fabricated in large numbers, they are only made up of low-grade or occasionally medium-grade exotics and hypers. They are not laced with phasewater either, which means that a single round cannot produce much of a difference. Getting struck by a single energy beam from the Godkiller Heavy Luminar Crystal Rifle is much more painful."

Ballistic rifles generally inflicted much less damage on impact than gauss rifles. The firing rate of the latter was generally low, but they were much more favored in mech combat because each projectile flew much faster and had an easier time punching through armor.

"I see what you mean." Casella said with greater interest. "The Null Rifle is a polar opposite of the Godkiller. It is weapon that relies on spraying lots of low-grade bullets, hoping that piling up on quantity can produce a qualitative change. It is an interesting

concept. There is an exception, though."

"Two exceptions, to be precise. First, the Null Rifle is equipped with an underbarrel grenade launcher. The Karma Cutter can choose to launch a Null Round Grenade. It works similar to a fragmentation grenade in that it is designed to launch Null Rounds in every direction upon detonation. I am told that the patriarch designed it to let the Null Rounds cut the karma bonds of

targets that are poorly protected from behind and to more effectively take out highly maneuverable small craft."

The grenades significantly enhanced the Karma Cutter's ability to fend off alien phasefighters and other mechs. The new mechs only had to be careful not to throw them near other friendly mechs!

"What about the Ultimate Module? I am told that this is the crowning feature of your Karma Cutter model."

The legion commander grinned. "That is right. It is a rather strange device. We haven't been able to test it because it relies on a specific condition in order to work. Supposedly, the 'D-Chamber' can capture a strong soul of one of enemies that are killed in the vicinity of the mech. After the D-Chamber imbues that soul into a Null Round, the projectile will undergo a powerful transformation over time that makes it much deadlier than before. After that, we can choose to fire it, allowing it to cause much more damage than what the Null Rifle is ordinarily capable of. The patriarch isn't able to give us any more details than that, but he swears it is worth it. He did warn us that we need to be careful about handling the D-Round. If we don't fire it in a short amount of time, then we need to transfer it to containment in order to prevent it from wrecking our Null

Rifles." Saint Commander Casella frowned. The functionality of the new Ultimate Module sounded a bit too convoluted. The time it took to create a D-round was especially concerning. A decisive battle was about to take place, so she was afraid that the Karma Cutters wouldn't have time to produce a single decent D-Round.

She inwardly shrugged. There was no need for her to pine over this unreliable gimmick.

She already understood what the Karma Cutter was capable of, and she could see many ways she could make them more useful in the upcoming battle.

"I have heard enough, Cinnabar. Patriarch Ves designed the Karma Cutter for good reasons, and I believe I may be able to leverage them to our advantage in the upcoming fight. Please tell your men to take into account that I may Commandeer or even Enfeoff them, especially in the latter phases of the battle."

"Will you begin by empowering the heavy artillery mechs in our fleet?" Commander Cinnabar asked in a knowing tone.

"That is correct. My current plan is to begin the fight by empowering the Transcendent Punisher Mark III's in our fleet. Their long-ranged damage output is excellent, and I can use them to soften up the defenses of any incoming phase lords and warships. I will not be able to do this forever, because the Eye of Ylvaine mechs are essentially stationary. It

would not do me good to remain in a single position, especially if I am being pursued by one or more phase lords. I will need faster and much more mobile mechs by my side to inflict massed resonance-empowered ranged attacks. I am reluctant to throw melee mechs against phase lords, but now that the Karma Cutter model has entered into service, I have a better alternative available. I will rely on your Nullifier mechs for long-ranged damage output. I will make use of the new Karma Cutter mechs to rapidly debilitate enemy phase lords at mid-range or closer."

Both commanders could see the synergy between Casella's Command Field and the

Karma Cutters.

A single Null Round was weak. Firing lots of them in a short amount of time could produce better results, but there was a limit to this improvement.

What if Casella suddenly Enfeoffed a Karma Cutter into a Baron, thereby temporarily boosting its offensive performance to the level of a low-tier expert mech?

Its Null Rifle would hit much harder, and its extraordinary effects may become amplified

as well!

If Casella repeated this trick with 30 more Karma Cutters, then nobody could imagine how much more dramatic their damage output and offensive utility would become! This was the power of a good high-ranking mech commander!

Chapter 6663 The Power of Ark

As the defenders of Viola Magnifica made their final preparations, the native aliens were wrapping up their own efforts.

Scouts had observed that the native aliens had stopped receiving any further

reinforcements a day ago. The alien commanders were now busy with trying to organize their many fleets and agree on a common attack plan.

This would probably take a bit of time, but not too much. The only reason why the aliens had yet to start their offensive was because the attacking side consisted of fleets that

belonged to multiple different alien races.

Interspecies coordination had always been a problem for the native races. They generally did not like each other. While the circumstances forced them to set aside their animosity towards each other, that did not mean that all of their hostility had disappeared.

Entire battles had been won or lost depending on how extensively the fleets of different races were willing to coordinate their maneuvers with each other!

Bad teamwork could occasionally lose them a battle that they should have won in theory due to their superior numbers!

Such problems occurred quite frequently in the beginning of the Red Tide Offensive. The aliens were learning, though. They were not inflexible enough to let this problem persist. They discovered the hard way that it was better to delay an attack and reserve an additional day just to sort out the coordination problems in advance.

A big attack like the one that was about to take place may cause the aliens to sit around for two more days, but not any longer than that. They were eager to produce results, because the longer they lingered, the greater the chance a random god pilot might drop into the star system and wipe them all out en masse!

As the specter of a decisive battle loomed over everyone's heads, the remaining high-ranking mech pilots in the Viola Magnifica System were doing their best to improve their chances to make a difference during the imminent battle.

With the departure of many powerful ace mechs such as the Mars and the Royal Jeem, the burden largely shifted to the remaining expert mechs.

This was hard because according to the latest scouts, there were as many as six phase lords gearing up to lead the upcoming attack!

Saint Linda Cross and Saint Commander Casella could not fend off six phase lords at once, of whom several happened to be greater phase lords that possessed rich experience with fighting against ace mechs.

Unlike the Battle of Mazepan where Saint. Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson managed to slay a powerful greater phase lord while driving away another, support from the Red Three

was meager to say the least.

While their fixed combat assets remained in the star systems, they had withdrawn part of their mobile assets.

There were less first-class multipurpose mechs and warships left to provide fire support and help with wearing down the defenses of the formidable phase lords.

This meant that the burden shifted to the remaining ace pilots and expert pilots.

When they compared their strength to the estimations of the enemy's strength, it was clear that the former fell short by a huge extent!

There was only one surefire way to even the odds.

"We need to break through."

"If we don't have at least three or more breakthroughs, the enemy phase lords will be able to overpower us by relying on a combination of numbers and hard power."

Every expert pilot. knew what needed to be done. Expectations were high, causing many of the ace pilot candidates to bear a lot of pressure.

General Ark and Venerable Benjamin were among the ones that felt a lot of responsibility over their continued failure to break through.

Ketis had met with the two in order to provide her consultation to the pair of expert pilots that had remained stuck despite being paired with two near-modern high-tier expert mechs.

"Have you thought about what I shared with you last time, Ark?"

The general of the 77th Warborn slowly nodded. "I have. I have spent hours musing over your theories. To be honest, I did not want to admit that a younger woman such as yourself possesses a greater grasp on the nature of our power to the point of developing a logical theory on how we can work towards our breakthroughs. However, it is childish of me to reject your advice because of our generational gap. I have talked to several other expert pilots about your Heaven Earth Man Trifecta, and they all agree that your theory is the best one they heard, even though it is short on specifics. It at least gives us a more reliable means to evaluate our development and figure out what we need to work upon as expert pilots."

"And do you recognize which of the three aspects you can work on in a short amount of time?"

"I do." The general spoke. "The Heaven component is most likely holding me back the most. I admit that my Man component is not as good as that of Venerable Dise before her deserved breakthrough, but I have been working on that for months. According to your theory, the reason why I still failed to trigger my breakthrough was that I was directing too much attention on repairing my willpower. I completely neglected the necessity of building up the foundation of what will become my domain." Privately, Ketis believed that General Ark's weakest aspect was actually his Man score as

opposed to his Heaven score.

She did not think it was wise to share that particular opinion with him. His pride had been repeatedly bruised over the years as younger and more talented Larkinson expert pilots successively broke through.

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson, Saint Isobel Kotin and Saint Commander Casella Ingvar were all young enough to be his children!

The matter became a little more questionable in the case of the more older Saint Dise Larkinson, but she still belonged to a younger generation than Ark!

It must have been hard for the prodigy and rising war hero from a past age to see himself get overtaken by these youngsters all of the time.

General Ark must regularly be questioning his own competence why he couldn't become an ace pilot despite piloting the Lionheart, a still fairly recent fifth generation living mech and a masterwork no less!

This made it all the more delicate for Ketis to bring up this topic. She had already done her best by giving him a theoretical framework that he could use to analyze his own

shortcomings.

She only feared that his blindspot regarding his own qualities may be too big for him to come to the correct conclusion.

That wasn't her theoretical model's fault. It would merely be another case of garbage in,

garbage out!

Instead of trying to solve General Ark's true shortcomings, Ketis believed it was much more realistic to help him improve his Heaven score instead.

At least that should be an attainable goal in the short term.

"Given your unorthodox approach as a high-ranking mech commander, have you figured out what 'element' or 'concept' defines you best?" She asked instead.

"I have thought about it. The initial answer I came up with was light. I have always seen myself as the savior and protector of my troops and my state. I always feel obliged to stand up and become the brightest presence on the battlefield so that the enemy focuses their attacks on myself rather than the troops under my command. The Lionheart was also designed with this concept. With the help of Lumosium, it literally shines brighter when my willpower grows stronger and my Warborn places their faith in me and my machine. I like to see myself as a paladin who is sworn to use the light to protect the weak and the incapable."

Ketis looked intrigued. "Is that what you truly think you are? Do you see yourself as an incarnation of light that is compelled to protect the weak?"

Ark slowly shook his head. "I used to think that, but light is more of a tool to me than a quality that defines my being. I like to shine bright because of practical considerations, not because I am a vain attention seeker who wants everyone to stare at me. I think that

there is a better concept out there that can encapsulate my philosophy towards combat. In order to figure it out, I have been spending my time on rewatching archival footage of all of my previous battles."

"And did you manage to find it while reviewing the highlights of your mech piloting career?"

"I think so." General Ark said with a confident expression. "It clicked with me when I

thought about it. While I have not been able to manifest it particularly well like Saint Dise had done just before her breakthrough, I know in my heart that I have found the

right direction for myself."

"Would you like to share this concept that you think represents you best?" Ketis

curiously asked.

"Idol."

The swordmaster blinked. "What?"

"Perhaps I should use the term idolatry instead. General Ark said with a smile. "I greatly identify myself with the ideas behind this term. Idolatry stands for showing extreme admiration or reverence to another. For much of my life, I have served as a role model and an example to others. From my classmates at the mech academy to the soldiers of the Mech Corps, I have always felt the need to step up and give the masses the encouragement they demanded of me. At times, I even felt as if I had become a god. Perhaps I should have used the concept of belief or worship instead, but as a Brighter that makes me feel uncomfortable. I am fine if others regard me as their idol, because that is what I am. Their faith in me literally fuels my power. The stronger they think I am, the stronger I

become in reality. Now that I have recognized this core component of my power, I am confident that I will succeed in breaking through in the next battle!"

"...That sounds marvelous, Ark."

"You agree, right?! It is so obvious, yet. I have never consciously thought about it in all of

the years I have been fighting as a high-tier expert pilot. Now that you have helped me discover my true power, I am preparing myself to commit as fully to the upcoming battle as possible. I have already made the arrangements to spread my name to the troops outside of the 77th Warborn. The more people I am able to inspire, the more I will be able to reward them by fighting harder than I have ever done before!" Ketis had to admit that this was definitely an answer that only Ark could come up with.

She suspected that the main reason why he identified so much with this concept was because he was his own biggest worshiper!

Still, whether he was right or not, at least he had broadened his perspective and was working on improving his strength from another angle.

"Since this is the case, you don't need my guidance anymore. My only remaining advice

to you is that if you are truly convinced that idolatry is the basis of your power, then you should be careful to fight on your own battlefield. If you stay too close to other high-profile champions, you will have to share the limelight with them. They are also

idols to the troops, you know."

"I am aware of this problem." Ark seriously responded. "My chances of breaking through are much greater if I am the only high-ranking expert pilot on the battlefield, but I can work with this situation. The enemy will never allow us to fight our ideal battles. As long as I can persevere and stand out on my own, I will never fail. This is what I believe." Well, at least Ark was not lacking in confidence anymore.

Chapter 6664 Final Skirmishes

The final battle of Viola Magnifica had begun just before the start of the fourth year of the Age of Dawn.

The native aliens had completed their preparations and began to advance on the planet that had frustrated them for so long.

The human defenders had done their best to prepare, but the fighting that took place in the months preceding to this momentous day had continually worn down a portion of the orbital defense network and the mech forces that sought to hold the native aliens back.

Although every offensive push made by the aliens caused them to lose a lot more hardware and lives than their human adversaries, the calculus was still in their favor due to their heavy numerical advantage!

Now that numerous powerful ace pilots abided by the orders of High Human Command and transferred to the much more strategically important Upper Zones, the native alien commanders behind in the Middle Zones recognized an excellent opportunity to make a lot of inroads into the Middle Zones.

The aliens remained patient for the time being. They did not launch all of their forces all at once, but instead began to send out their scouts and skirmishing forces to gather more intelligence and confirm that the human defenders had not secretly called in reinforcements in order to lay an ambush.

Space was big and largely empty, so it was very hard to hide a large concentration of troops.

However, there were still numerous planets, moons and asteroid belts that could be used to hide a number of surprises. The aliens were concerned whether the humans had hidden any secret bases or fleets in these locations, so they sent out huge swarms of phasefighters and occasionally a few fast and light warships to investigate their current situations.

At the same time, the human defenders were also suspicious whether their adversaries had brought in additional warships or an extra phase lord or two. It wouldn't be the first time the native alien commanders tried to be clever and try to take the humans by surprise.

Both sides therefore had a strong interest in deploying enough scouts and skirmishers to all of these satellites and fight an information war.

The goal of both sides was to collect as much intelligence of their enemies as possible while denying them the opportunity to gather their own information!

Hundreds of small fights ensued across the star system.

The fights surrounding the empty and undeveloped planets generally lasted an hour or so before the human defenders took the initiative to withdraw.

Enough time had passed for the formidable industrial machine of the native aliens to pump them out by the millions!

The only reason why the native aliens couldn't deploy more phasefighters to the frontlines was the lack of trained pilots and the limited amount of transportation capacity.

If not for these problems holding the aliens back, they would have chosen to deploy at least three times more phasefighters!

Even so, the intelligence reports indicated that the aliens already deployed at least 50 percent more phasefighters than all of the mechs in the star system. The ratio may even be higher!

This made the fight to gather intelligence a lot more dangerous to the participating mech units.

Each of them had to face the prospect of getting outnumbered whenever they made contact with the enemy.

Due to the fact that every phasefighter was equipped with a small transphasic energy shield or the more advanced azure energy shield, each of them took effort to disable and destroy.

The numerical and material advantage of the native aliens did much to compensate for the inherent lack of flexibility of the alien strike craft and the utter lack of skill and experience of their pilots!

Aside from the more elite phasefighter units that were better geared and piloted by real soldiers, the most of the craft were piloted by alien conscripts or alien soldiers who used to serve in other capacities.

While they were able to understand the basics of operating the simplified control scheme of a typical phasefighter relatively quickly, they were still very far behind their professional human mech pilot counterparts!

This caused the two sides to adopt different doctrines when it came to deploying their small craft and what sort of tactics they should employ when they were locked in combat.

The human mechs tried to avoid fighting in the open whenever possible. It was best to take advantage of nearby hard cover, whether that was a moon, an asteroid field or the hull of a friendly starship.

Since they were almost always outnumbered, the mechs needed to make use of complex maneuvers and impeccable teamwork to grind down their tough opponents.

What was even more important for the mech pilots was that they needed to be ready to disengage at all times. They couldn't afford to suffer an even greater disadvantage in the numbers game.

If the mech could not be saved, then the mech pilot should at least be given a chance to flee to safety.

Even if the Viola Magnifica System was doomed to fall in the hands of the aliens, the mech pilots could still recover and fight in other contested star systems!

The native aliens on the other hand were a lot more straightforward. They were generally much less capable of complex maneuvering. They also lacked the training and awareness to follow complicated orders. Most alien races found it best to just point at a target and tell the alien fighter pilots to pounce!

While the direct approach caused the aliens to yield mixed results, they didn't care so long as the alien phasefighters took down at least one mech before they went down themselves!

Certain alien races did not even bother to put much effort into picking up their fighter pilots after they ejected from their cockpits.

The nunsers for example nearly always tried to recover their lost brethren that were floating around in space.

The orvens did not even bother to include ejection seats in the cockpits of their weakest phasefighters at all, as their high-caste masters held great contempt towards the

low-caste members of their race!

Given how easily the native aliens were able to replenish their phasefighters and fighter pilots, the human mech pilots bore great pressure.

They constantly had to fight at their best. Any victory only inflicted a temporary setback to the enemy forces.

The mech pilots still chose to persevere. They had no other choice. They weren't about to give up and allow the aliens to roll over human space without opposition.

Most of the mech units that participated in the skirmishes consisted of light and medium mechs.

Out of the Larkinson Army, the Flagrant Vandals excelled in this mode of combat the most. Their tried and true Ferocious Piranha Mark III's might not be as new and equipped with the latest technologies as the newer mech releases, but each of them had received light upgrades and modifications by one of the many low-ranking mech designers in the past few years.

They hadn't developed any official variants of the Ferocious Piranha Mark III design, but instead provided customization services for Vandal pilots that were willing to spend their merits.

These upgrades ranged from stronger armor plating, sharper weapons, upgraded sensor systems and maybe even a compact external azure shield generator!

This was one of several ways the Flagrant Vandal mech pilots were able to cope with the period before the Design Department released the much-anticipated Ferocious Piranha

Mark IV.

Director Gloriana had already allocated update projects of many staple Larkinson mech designs to numerous different design teams, and shouldn't take much longer for them to present their initial batch.

However, it was too late for the mech pilots stationed in Viola Magnifica as they all had to make do with lastgen mechs!

"I'm under heavy fire!" A Ferocious Piranha mech pilot shouted as his Mark III weaved through the asteroids in the way. "I've got three orven phasefighters on my tail, and they

have already blown away one of my mech's arms!"

The Flagrant Vandal pilot already considered himself a veteran, but he should have been more vigilant before a trio of phasefighters ambushed his machine while they had huddled behind an asteroid with their power shut down.

As the light skirmisher continued to maneuver around asteroids, incoming laser beams took a lot of effort from the mech pilot to evade as

pelted at the rear of the machine.

many of these beams as possible. He did not always succeed, but whenever a laser beam was about to strike a more delicate section such as the flight system, the Ferocious Piranha automatically took action and forcibly juke it to the side.

The Ferocious Piranha had become a third order living mech a long time ago. It had

grown rapidly during the Red War and could be considered a veteran among its kind! The Vandal mech pilot did not show any irritation whenever his battle partner overruled his piloting decisions and performed a different action.

The two had developed a lot of trust over the years. They also refined their teamwork to the point where the living mech knew exactly what he was allowed to do at specific

times.

Right now, the Vandal mech pilot entrusted his Ferocious Piranha to help dodge attacks that launched far too fast for any reasonable human being to evade an incoming laser beam attack in time!

A more skilled mech pilot would have been able to rely on his or her intuition to evade such attacks, but the Ferocious Piranha mech pilot was not demigod material. This made it viable to rely on the mech to evade the most difficult attacks instead. Even so, the light skirmisher was suffering more and more damaged to its rear plating as

well as a few internals.

It would not last long if it failed to shake off its pursuers. Fortunately, after passing a certain asteroid, two additional light mechs emerged from

the cover of nearby space rocks and began to chase and open fire at the enemy

phasefighters!

The Stingripper Mark II's were ranged light mechs armed with luminar crystal

submachine guns.

These light and compact weapons did not pack much a punch, but they were able to spit

out energy beams at a fairly high firing rate, thereby making them perfect for harassment as well as gunning down fast and maneuverable targets!

The two Stingrippers concentrated their fire on one phasefighter, seeking to overwhelm its azure energy shield and rip apart its vulnerable body.

However, this took quite a lot of attacks due to the lack of space suppressors weakening the enemy azure energy shield up close.

"Come on! Attack us! We are right here!"

"Damn. The orven pilots aren't falling for it anymore. They've learned."

The phasefighters doggedly pursued the Ferocious Piranha Mark III even though it had already been half-crippled.

The orven mech pilots had apparently been instructed to ignore the Stingrippers. They had made the right decision!

The Stingripper Mark II, while only a bit less outdated than the Ferocious Piranha Mark

III, had turned out to be one of the best and most cost-effective counters against alien phasefighters!

The highly evasive properties of the Stingripper model made it a nightmare for alien strike craft to land their shots on the light mech. They became especially more difficult

to target if they fought in unison with Ferocious Piranhas as their glows synergized very

well with each other!

Therefore, if the orven pilots wanted to avoid getting disturbed by the Ferocious Piranha's suppressive glow while at the same time getting deceived by the Stingripper's own glow, it was best if they could take out one of them first! The Stingripper pilots felt angry at being ignored, but they

took advantage of the situation to finally pop the energy shield of their target and disable it with a torrent of

energy beams!

However, the remaining two phasefighters were ultimately able to finish the job. The

Ferocious Piranha lost propulsion as its flight system had suffered too much damage to

remain operational!

The Vandal mech pilot only hesitated briefly about evacuating from his machine. However, the third order living mech did not want both of them to perish,

"Go. Don't try to save me. Leave so that you can take revenge with a better living mech. I

have lived a short but good life already. As a mech, I have fulfilled my purpose throughout all of these years. Let me do my duty one last time."

Though the mech pilot still felt unwilling, he couldn't allow himself to abandon his fellow

Larkinsons.

"...Ejecting"

The Ferocious Piranha rapidly turned around before ejecting its cockpit away from the

pursuing phasefighters.

This left the two remaining phasefighters in a confrontation against two Stingrippers piloted by angry Vandal mech pilots!

"Finish them off! Don't let the pair get away!"

The mech pilots did not forget that they needed to down more phasefighters if they wanted to make the final fight more bearable.

The more strike craft they eliminated in the asteroid field, the less the aliens were able to deploy in the main battle!

Chapter 6665 Asteroid Belt Skirmishes

The Flagrant Vandals fought hard to prevent the aliens from advancing with ease and collecting more information.

The Ferocious Piranhas, the Stingrippers and the Light Hunters formed a classic combination that allowed the Flagrant Vandal mechs to fare extremely well against other enemy small craft.

They made the aliens fight for every scrap of data. Their increasingly more experienced and veteran mech pilots as well as living mechs frequently outmaneuvered and outfought the clumsy phasefighters.

Yet it did not seem to matter.

The Ferocious Piranhas could dive close and use their space suppressors add-ons to weaken and disrupt the enemy craft in multiple ways.

Yet the light skirmishers had attracted so much notoriety among the alien fighter pilots that the Ferocious Piranhas usually got focused down first!

The Stingrippers were able to evade ranged attacks much better than other mechs by relying on a combination of ECM and the perception distortion effect produced by Kalo, but the value of these capabilities were severely discounted when the native aliens left the light harasser mechs for last.

The Light Hunters possessed excellent sensor and scanning capabilities, allowing them to detect enemy craft through the dense environment of asteroids and space dust with their powerful Samasel Orbs.

Unfortunately, the advance warnings granted by these scout mechs did not help friendly mech units all that much when the aliens deployed so many phasefighters in a wave that pretty much anyone could see them coming.

While the Flagrant Vandals did make use of other mech models to add more throwing weight to their mech legion, most of their machines were still predominantly lightly armored.

They could not evade every attack, nor fight the enemy phasefighter formations with favorable numbers.

Even if they pulled off several successive ambushes, more phasefighters arrived that were fresh and fully capable of gunning down mechs that had already spent half their resources or more!

"The aliens are deploying more phasefighters in the asteroid belts than expected!" "Is the intelligence wrong?! Did the aliens bring more phasefighters than we thought?!" "We need more help if we want to slow the enemy down further."

"Help is already coming. The Avatars of Myth, the Swordmaidens and the Penitent Sisters have all dispatched their mech units to the asteroid belt. There is a good

opportunity to eliminate a large amount of alien phasefighters without the interference of warships and phase lords. Fight them hard and try to take down at least three of the enemy before your mech goes down. For the clan! For humanity!"

The native alien forces committed a surprising number of phasefighters to clear out the asteroid belt.

The human commanders saw an opportunity to allow their mech forces to fight the enemy phasefighters on much fairer terms than was possible under other circumstances.

Most warships couldn't fly into the asteroid belt without crashing against several space rocks.

The phase lords that led the alien armada were so arrogant that they disdained the thought of participating in these small skirmishes.

For these reasons and more, the Larkinson Army dispatched additional forces that were already in reserve.

Bright Warriors, Red Axes, Lucid Rages, Buzzy Bees, Fey Fiannas, Valkyrie Redeemers, Maidens of Adversity, Second Swords, Storm Swords as well as the new Stormblade Samurais all entered the asteroid belt at different points and fought against the advancing alien phasefighters.

The medium mechs weren't as fast and maneuverable as the light mechs fielded by the Flagrant Vandals, but the mechs of the Avatars, Swordmaidens and Penitent Sisters made up for these shortcomings in other ways.

For one, they were much more suited to collide head-on against the alien phasefighters and brawl against them until they broke and scattered!

These medium mechs did not confront the alien phasefighters by themselves. They joined forces with the light mechs of the Flagrant Vandals in order to increase their detection envelope and prevent the alien craft from running away without penalty. The Larkinsons had fought alongside each other enough times to refine their cooperation!

"Come on, sisters! Take these phasefighters down while we are still drawing their attention!"

Three Maidens of Adversity flew together and joined forces to share their modular armor plating with each other. Their iconic Battle Skirt System not only allowed them to dynamically form physical barriers that could block quite a few attacks, but they also allowed the mechs who possessed the same armor system to share their modular armor plating with identical machines on the same side.

These were not the original modular armor plates that were derived from an outdated mech design.

These were improved transphasic hyper armor plating that could more effectively resist

enemy attacks, especially those launched by most phasefighters!

The three Maidens of Adversity hailed from the same squad of Penitent Sisters and were able to tightly coordinate with each other.

Not only did the hero mechs dynamically switch their formations to present the least amount of surface area to their most threatening opponents, but they also concentrated their fire against the same targets.

As the defense-oriented hero mechs did their job of attracting the attention of the enemy phasefighters, a pair of Valkyrie Redeemers swooped in from behind another asteroid and charged straight at two enemy phasefighters each, not even bothering to use their upgraded luminar crystal submachine guns to lay down harassing fire! The Valkyrie Redeemer Mark III was a classic among the Penitent Sisters, the Glory Seekers and the Hex Army.

Updated for the Hyper Generation, the Valkyrie Redeemer had proven to be one of the most effective mech models fielded by the Larkinsons and Hexers for one reason. When they channeled their glows, Helena's gaze seemed to pierce across space and directly pin the alien fighter pilots with a gaze that foretold their own impending deaths. Although persistent exposure to E energy radiation had passively spurred the growth of all alien spiritualities in the Red Ocean, Helena had grown a lot stronger as well, so the pilots of the phasefighters were still vulnerable to this effect!

The gap between Helena and these mortal alien fighter pilots was too big! Since the alien soldiers had not yet engaged in systematic cultivation, their untrained spiritualities were not strong enough to withstand an attack on this level.

Their lack of experience and tempering put them at an even greater disadvantage!

Even if they heard about mechs that were able to fill their heads with illusions about their impending demise, learning about it and experiencing this frightening effect for themselves was still different!

The alien fighter pilots targeted by Marked For Death ability froze for varying amounts of seconds.

This made their craft a lot more vulnerable!

Not only did they get hit by more energy beams from the Maidens of Adversity, they also failed to evade when the Valkyrie Redeemers finally closed the distance and thrust their spears straight into the azure energy shields that protected them from damage! Though the spears deformed upon collision, they had successfully completed their jobs. The weakened energy shields failed to withstand the kinetic impact damage and bursts

like bubbles!

The two phasefighters suddenly became exposed, causing them to get torn to shreds by

the Valkyrie Redeemers with the help of supporting fire from the Maidens of Adversity.

The mechs subsequently teamed up to eliminate the remainder of the alien fighter craft. They went down much easier due to the prior losses and due to the intimidation factor of the two Hexer mechs.

"Good work, sisters! We have eliminated another batch of alien scum, and without

suffering losses this time!"

"Do not become complacent. According to the latest transmission, the aliens have already begun to adjust their strategy. They are no longer trying to sweep everything at once. They are beginning to concentrate their phasefighters to make them much harder

to defeat."

"That will just give us all a fixed target to fight against! Let us rendez-vous with our other sisters and introduce these poor aliens to the power of hexism!" Though the Penitent Sister mechs performed well against their alien foes, their

machines wore down after encounter.

The Maidens of Adversity could only use up so much modular armor plating before their Battle Skirt System became bare.

The Valkyrie Redeemers were inherently offensive mechs that inevitably sustained damage over the course of fights. Their round shields provided them with a little bit of physical protection, but they weren't as big or thick as the tower shields of typical knight

mechs.

The Swordmaidens fared a little better. Ketis had taken such good care of them that they possessed the highest proportion of quasi-first-class transphasic hyper mechs! Aside from the lastgen but still fairly capable Second Swords, the Storm Swords and the brand new Stormblade Samurai Mark II's proved their worth whenever they closed in on alien phasefighters!

Unlike most other mechs that had to attack many times in order to break the azure

energy shields that protected the physically fragile phasefighters from harm, the

transphasic hyper swordsman mechs equipped with stormblade technology were especially designed to counter their defenses!

The Swordmaiden mech pilots employed no trickery or deception. They simply charged directly towards a squadron of phasefighters!

If the phasefighters flew in empty space, then they may actually be able to outpace their pursuers.

However, the mechs were considerably better at lateral movements. Although the aliens

tried to be clever by employing the basic tactic of weaving around so that they could always target a mech from the flanks, the Swordmaiden mechs mostly ignored the incoming attacks and closed in just to deliver one or more good hits!

Every strike was accompanied by a soundless but violent electrical discharge!

The transphasic hyper version of stormblade technology was much stronger than the original version.

The azure energy shields destabilized much faster than normal, causing the shield

generators of the phasefighters to work at full capacity to maintain the active defenses!

Though both the Storm Swords and the Stormblade Samurai Mark II made use of the same tech, their applications were different.

The Storm Sword was designed with the classic Swordmaiden fighting approach in mind. They were armed with electrified versions of greatswords that not only possessed greater reach and power, but were also able to contain much higher charges than most

other weapons.

This meant that a Storm Sword typically only had to land two or three good hits to completely overwhelm an enemy fighter craft's azure energy shield!

The Stormblade Samurai wielded a pair of one-handed stormblades instead. What they lacked in power and reach, they made up for it with faster attacks and slightly better

mobility.

The two mech models did not have to rely on fancy glows or strange gimmicks to defeat their alien adversaries.

They only had to rely on the power of their space suppressors, their physical attacks and the stormblade effect to quickly scramble the enemy's azure energy shield and cut the phasefighters to shreds!

Unfortunately, their biggest problem was that they too suffered in terms of defense. While the quasi-first-class mechs were still able to withstand a number of hits, none of the Swordmaiden mechs were designed to withstand repeated attacks. Combined with relatively average mobility compared to light mechs, the alien phasefighter pilots learned to keep their distance and wait until they amassed larger numbers before confronting the native aliens.

"The aliens are wising up. If we keep this up, these skirmishes will turn into full-blown

battles." "Then what would you have us do? If we keep evading their larger units, we will just give

up ground and allow them to clear out the entire asteroid belt."

"We need to consolidate our forces and fight harder."

"The Avatars of Myth have already transmitted a rallying call. Commander Melkor

apparently wants to launch at least one big push in order to give the aliens a bloody

nose."

"That sounds interesting. He is being bolder than usual."

As the fighting all along the asteroid belt intensified, more and more mechs and

phasefighters began to gather together.

All of this culminated in a series of battles where both sides fought against each other

more directly!

Chapter 6666 Willpower Mirage

Commander Melkor Larkinson waited as the scattered mechs of the Larkinson Army withdrew from their forward positions and arrived at the rallying point that he had set. Dozens of mechs trickled in over the course of half an hour. He expected around a thousand mechs to arrive by the time he was ready to commence his plan.

This was not a large amount of mechs compared to all of the small craft that had been committed in this star system alone.

Melkor along with many other mech pilots had become more and more accustomed to fighting battles involving tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of mechs.

The native aliens fielded even more phasefighters so long as they were able to transport them all to the frontlines!

All of these battles tested Melkor in ways he had never been challenged. He had to maintain a clear head, pay attention to the strategic disposition of both the defenders and the attackers, predict the next actions of the enemy forces and figure out what he and his Avatars could do to attain a better outcome.

The battles were exhilarating and terrifying. Even quasi-first-class mechs such as his customized and upgraded Larkinson Edition of the Fey Fianna turned into nothing more than slightly better cannon fodder!

There were many times where he felt that he felt so utterly small and weak on the battlefield that his presence or absence ultimately wouldn't make a difference.

There were plenty of other Larkinsons that could do so much more to influence the course of a major battle.

There were the expert pilots and ace pilots who could defeat powerful enemy champions or wipe out hundreds of weaker units with their high-ranking mechs alone! There were much more brilliant mech commanders who could inspire greater courage and duty among their men, or possessed excellent tactical acumen that enabled them to defeat enemy forces that were thrice or quadruple the number of mechs under their command!

There were also visionaries like Ves whose works and ideas changed red humanity for the better without needing to step foot on the battlefield!

Melkor was none of those Larkinsons.

He was... pretty average, to say the least.

The only reasons why he was still held in high esteem was because he was a trueblood Larkinson and supported Ves since the beginning. The fact that his leadership also did not cause the Avatars of Myth to go downhill also helped a lot.

Even so, Melkor still felt unfulfilled. He was being outshone by many others, and his efforts to break through had consistently failed.

Practicing an auxiliary qi cultivation method had caused him to become better and smarter, but it was not as if other mech pilots ignored systematic cultivation.

When everyone improved with the help of systematic cultivation, Melkor ultimately ended up in the same relative position as before.

He had been struggling for a long time on what to do with his future. He had ultimately decided to give up on becoming an expert pilot and try his hand at becoming a qi cultivator instead, but just when he was about to switch from the Commanding Controller Auxiliary Qi Cultivation Method to a more serious qi cultivation method that would permanently transform his spirit.

Doing this was a serious matter as the Red Collective had warned that once a human began to practice qi cultivation in earnest, he would no longer be eligible to become an expert pilot anymore.

"Well, there is an exception for companion spirits, you are already practicing a method of your own, right, Jonas?"

Melkor's companion spirit briefly poked his head out and nodded.

The companion spirit that spawned from his companion spirit seed ended up as a fairly mundane-looking gray short-haired cat.

Jonas was still fairly young, but he had already begun to develop his power as a spotter and detector by practising the Perceptive Assistant Qi Cultivation Method of the Assistant Series.

The Cultivation Method Department of the Red Collective originally developed the Assistant Series for qi cultivators that sought to provide greater help in less direct ways.

Even though the Assistant Series lacked any direct combat enhancements, the extreme specialization in specific kinds of utility made it easy to become very powerful in a single capability over time.

The different variations of qi cultivation methods of the Assistant Series ranged from turning the human brain into an organic supercomputer to operating multiple high-tech instruments with great proficiency at the same time!

People eventually discovered that the Assistant Series also happened to be highly compatible with companion spirits.

Most of the people who gained companion spirits did not harbor any crazy ambitions to pursue two different main careers at once.

People like Ketis pursued two careers with relatively little overlap at the same time were the exception rather than the rule!

Many people who obtained companion spirits would rather have them complement their existing strengths. That way, they would be able to achieve much more success in their chosen careers.

Melkor was still determined to be a mech pilot, and he would also like to retain a leadership role.

Having Jonas practice the Perceptive Assistant Qi Cultivation Method seemed like an excellent idea.

For now, Jonas was not able to detect the approach of massed alien phasefighters due to his shallow cultivation, but he would probably be able to extend his detection range by numerous kilometers once he had more time to grow and cultivate.

In any case, ever since he saw how well Jonas was able to begin his practice in his qi cultivation method, Melkor came close to pulling the trigger himself.

The only reason why he held off on trying to become a double qi cultivator was because he had yet to make up his mind on which method he wanted to practice.

The Larkinson Clan offered a few good ones, but the selection was rather limited. The premium offerings available in the Repository were not necessarily worse, and their catalog was much larger and more varied.

He had just begun to narrow his choices to 5 different qi cultivation methods when Ketis suddenly published her Manual of Reformed Swordsmanship.

Melkor had no interest in swordsmanship. He specialized in piloting rifleman mechs, so why did he need to read a book on how to wield a sword?

It turned out that the new publication contained a lot of profound theories about the nature of willpower cultivators, of which mech pilots were included as well!

"Heaven, Earth, Man." The visored legion commander whispered. "Interesting. It has a ring of mysticism to it. Does it apply to everyone, or is it only valid for willpower cultivators?"

He was more inclined to believe in the former. If a person wanted to become stronger as

a qi cultivator, he could not do so by relying on 'heaven' alone. Many qi cultivation methods emphasize the importance of developing a specific mindset, constructing an elaborate artistic conception in one's head or becoming more disciplined in behavior.

These were all rules and instructions meant to raise the Man score of a qi cultivator. Those with talent probably possessed inherently high scores when came to practicing certain cultivation methods, but Melkor did not think he was blessed in that way. The Earth score became a lot more important for that reason. Aside from talents that could make a huge amount of progress, others needed to rely on cultivation aids such as elixirs, pills and in a few cases specific kinds of artifacts.

Each of these resources were produced from planets, asteroids and such, so they all fell under the category of 'Earth' to keep everything simple and organized.

As the Avatar Commander, Melkor should not be weak in this aspect. He used to pilot the Golden Beacon but had switched over to the much more powerful and much more suitable Fey Fianna.

However, just like many other mech pilots, having a good mech did not necessarily increase his chances to break through as a mech pilot.

Unlike before, Melkor not possessed a more detailed understanding why he had

remained stuck as a standard mech pilot all of this time.

According to theory espoused by Ketis, if his Earth score was more than sufficient, then his Heaven and Man scores were too deficient.

The answer should be simple, right? He just needed to raise his Heaven and Man scores.

He had already been doing the former by practising an auxiliary qi cultivation method while Jonas practiced a more serious qi cultivation method.

It was his Man score that was dragging him down. He did not think he could obtain a convenient elixir or artifact that would help him pierce the extraordinary threshold as a

mech pilot.

He had performed enough evaluations on himself to conclude that he was not expert.

pilot material.

He was also growing older, if not in body then in mind. Responsibility had a way of making him more thoughtful and less impulsive. Granted, he had always been rather reserved in the past, so his changes only reinforced his existing

tendencies.

Try as he might, he just couldn't replicate the stupidly confident or irrationally driven mindsets that characterized the expert pilots that he had met in person.

Each of them were defined by their overpoweringly strong personalities. It was as if they were humans dialed up to eleven or even higher!

Melkor could never imagine himself undergoing such a change. He might not even welcome it if he had to become a different person like Jannzi.

"Maybe I should stop thinking about a future that will never come to pass." He sighed.

At his age, Melkor found it increasingly less realistic and rational to continue to pine for a breakthrough that would most likely never come.

Rather than waste any further years on chasing after an illusionary dream, he could do himself a much greater favor by pursuing the much steadier path to becoming a qi

cultivating mech pilot. Examples of that had already started to show up across human space.

They were particularly loved by older mech pilots who had already grown old and

weaker. Since they were no longer in peak condition, their breakthrough chances were

minimal.

They might as well turn to qi cultivation instead, which was much more systematic and transparent.

The mech pilots all appreciated that they not only received clear instructions on what

they should do to reach the next cultivation stage, but that they could also sense their progress in real-time by sensing the growth and development of their qi cultivation! Melkor was twice as young as the average age of mech pilots who went down the path of qi cultivation, but he was already thinking about starting ahead of time. The Larkinson Clan constantly faced greater threats. The Avatars of Myth also deserved

to be led by a stronger and more capable leader.

"I am not going to spend the next 40 years flailing around while trying to test my

courage in stupid challenges or whatever."

The Manual of Reformed Swordsmanship briefly revived his hopes of a better future, but

it was ultimately a mirage in his opinion.

Melkor did not think he was destined to become a powerful expert pilot, let alone an ace pilot or god pilot!

All of this willpower business frustrated him.

never gave him a clear indication of how

much progress he made or what he needed to do to trigger a breakthrough. Perhaps that was the point. The uncertainty surrounding willpower cultivation made it so that only the most confident, disciplined, strong-willed and resilient of warriors would be rewarded for their superhuman efforts!

Melkor most definitely did not think any of those words could be attributed to himself.

This was why he reluctantly set aside any further thoughts about pursuing willpower cultivation and reaffirmed his decision to become a qi cultivator. "The only question is what cultivation method I should practice." This was an important choice, because if he wanted to get started on a few of them, he would have to perform a 'ritual' on the battlefield!

Chapter 6667 Larkinson-Exclusive Contract Cultivation Method

Contingents of the Avatars of Myth, the Flagrant Vandals, the Swordmaidens and the Penitent Sisters came together.

Much of the gathered mechs consisted of melee mechs. Ranged mechs tended to suffer from a disadvantage in the current battlefield, though they could still be useful in certain situations.

Nonetheless, Legion Commander Melkor was happy with what he got. The mixture of premium second-class mechs and considerably more powerful quasi-first-class mechs should be enough to close the gap in equipment.

"Captain Koltov, which alien leader unit is leading the phasefighters allocated to this area?"

"We have identified dozens of elite phasefighters of puelmer design that are coated in dark yellow and bear purple markings. Typical of the puelmer race, each phasefighter is made out of highly

saturated transphasic materials and possesses different pieces of advanced technologies. Our Light Hunters have only been able to collect enough readings to identify a portion of them. The only confirmation we have is that the puelmer phasefighters are definitely equipped with imitations of modern human hyper technology."

"Great." Melkor frowned. "What is your judgment on their combat power, captain?" "I would say that they are tougher and more difficult to take down compared to our quasi-first-class mechs. Their power reactors are definitely more powerful than ours as we are still restricted by the limitations imposed on second-class mechs."

This was not the first time Melkor cursed the artificial rules and restrictions that ensured a strict separation between tech levels.

All of the quasi-first-class mechs fielded by the Larkinson Clan could have easily become at least twice as powerful if only they were able to upgrade their power reactors to proper first-class machines.

However, unlike ordinary grunts, Commander Melkor understood the reasons why the Red Three had never rescinded this restrictive policy.

The Red Ocean was already suffering from a shortage of resources, especially first-class materials that were strong enough to withstand the rigors of high-end warfare.

Letting second-raters make use of first-class exotic materials would instantly cause their prices to skyrocket!

Many first-class mech forces would instantly experience a lot more difficulties in replenishing their losses as their mechs cost 50 or even 100 percent as much to

The clear demarcation of tech levels also had a guiding function to the native aliens. While the Red Cabal and the major alien races never divided their own heterogeneous tech development into numerous distinct classes, they quickly learned from their hated enemies and adjusted their own troop deployments accordingly.

Both sides developed a tacit agreement where they only sent their best units to the Upper Zones, their more disposable cannon fodder to the Middle Zones and their trash to the Lower Zones.

Even the aliens struggled to deploy enough high-end warships and phasefighters to the front in a short amount of time. Their production was gradually ramping up, but the losses inflicted by red humanity was also considerable.

Just the hardware being lost to rampaging god pilots alone had reached an astronomical figure!

This made it so that the native aliens preferred to concentrate their best assets and distribute their lesser units to war theaters with lower strategic value.

That did not mean that all of the alien units sent to the Middle Zones were garbage. Just like how every significant human troop concentration hosted champions and elites, the native aliens also made sure to do the same.

These powerful combatants were not necessarily meant to carry the entire fight. They instead acted as force multipliers that could easily amplify the combat power of

regular units due to their special characteristics.

"Puelmer phasefighters are rare, but they are definitely among the most troublesome to fight against." Commander Melkor frowned.

"The yellow ones that showed up this time look like their alien pilots are trying to prove themselves. Captain Koltov commented, "Our scouts haven't made enough observations to provide enough proof, but when I look at the images, I can't help but suspect that they are trying to lure us into a trap so that they can annihilate us in one fell swoop. Call it a gut feeling"

That was an interesting opinion to share.

Captain Sara Koltov was a veteran Flagrant Vandal pilot that had managed to keep up with the growth of the Larkinson Clan.

She began with piloting the old Hellcat model of the original 6th Flagrant Vandals. Over the course of numerous years, she switched over to specializing in the Ferocious Piranha while working her way up to the rank of mech captain.

As a former Brighter and third-rater, that was quite impressive, as she constantly had to improve and learn in order to keep up with the rising standards of the clan. Second-raters and first-raters that were born as designer babies and received further

Although former third-raters such as Melkor and Sara Koltov still managed to maintain their current positions by virtue of their dedication and contributions, they still had to work hard in order to meet the minimum standards required to do their

jobs.

For now, they were doing fine, but what about the future?

Systematic cultivation allowed the people of different classes to close the gap between each other, at least on the surface.

The argument was that qi cultivation methods provided the exact same benefits to first-raters, second-raters and third-raters.

They should therefore benefit first-raters the least and third-raters the most.

However, the availability and affordability of cultivation resources could easily cause these people to grow apart from each other.

First-raters earned more and had much more money and resources at their disposal. It was much easier for them to acquire powerful elixirs and helpful artifacts that could speed up their cultivation progress. They also had easier access to high-end cultivation methods and could easily afford the expensive resources to get started in these advanced scriptures.

Third-raters could only make do by relying on their own talent and efforts.

Melkor was glad that he was no longer in the latter position anymore. As the Avatar Commander, he had earned enough salary and merits to afford many expensive cultivation resources.

In fact, he already ordered a bunch of them in order to get a better feel and understanding of their associated qi cultivation methods.

He already acquired access to three different methods that had caught his interest.

One of them had been developed by the T Institute while he redeemed the remaining two from the Repository.

Each of them made large promises. They were especially designed for military commanders that were looking to make a greater impact on the battlefield.

He actually considered two more promising qi cultivation methods, but he ultimately kept them as reserve options.

The reason for that was because they promised to help him empower his subordinates in a similar way to Saint Commander Casella's famous Command Field.

Melkor instinctively rejected the decision to imitate Casella.

It was not that he thought that he placed a lower value on the direct empowerment of subordinates, but he simply did not want to be known as an imitation of the Saint

Commander.

It might not be much, but Melkor was determined to make it grow, and to do that, he needed to become stronger in his own way.

He briefly went over his options so that he could make up his mind. The most obvious cultivation method for a Larkinson in his position was the

Larkinson Design Spirit Contract Method.

Developed by the T Institute with input from the patriarch himself, it was a cultivation method that made the practitioner powerful by forming a mutually agreed contract with a more powerful entity, which in this case happened to be one of the design

spirits of the Larkinson Clan.

The T Institute actually told him that it was primarily a form of 'contract cultivation' due to the fact that Melkor would mainly be able to develop his strength by absorbing the strength of another entity.

It actually had a lot in common with the Blood Pacts that became more prevalent these days. Both cases involved two different parties signing a metaphysical contract with each other that imposed certain rights and restrictions.

The design spirit could not unscrupulously try to manipulate the contract cultivator.

The practitioner also had to abide by any specific demands or requirements the design spirit might impose in exchange for donating a portion of his or her power. Both parties had the right to unilaterally dissolve the contract at any time.

If that ever happened, the practitioner would get to keep his cultivation progress, but would not be able to form a new contract with another design spirit for around half a year due to mental stability considerations.

There were several pros and cons associated with this new contract cultivation

method.

The obvious advantage was that it imposed very low requirements on the part of the practitioner. It did not require any talent to get started, though having it would certainly make it easier to absorb and digest the strength of compatible design spirits. The practitioner also did not have to spend much of his time on meditation, mental exercises or constructing an extremely complicated artistic conception. The design spirit already did the heavy lifting. Melkor only had to focus on assimilating the

foreign energy.

Depending on how quickly he was able to absorb the strength of a design spirit, Melkor could grow powerful at a rapid speed.

Personally, one of the reasons why he liked the Larkinson Design Spirit Contract Method was because it fit the theme of the Avatars of Myth extremely well!

As long as Melkor absorbed enough power from a design spirit such as Titania to the

point that his domain was nearly identical to her own, he could one day have her descend into his body or maybe his companion spirit, thereby turning one of them

into her avatar!

Titania would subsequently be able to channel her strength and fight against enemies like a real qi cultivator for as long as Melkor was able to sustain her presence! This ability promised to become more powerful as his own cultivation advanced. Perhaps one day, he would be able to replicate the effect of a battle formation, but allowing it to last a lot longer without requiring the assistance of others! However, as much as Melkor found this method to be attractive, it also came with

obvious downsides.

For example, there was no way to avoid contamination. The more Melkor absorbed

the strength of a design spirit such as Titania or Qilanxo, the more he would come to resemble them. His personality, his behavior and his perspective would all come to resemble his contracted design spirit!

Melkor was not very willing to sacrifice his humanity in exchange for power. Another disadvantage was that the lack of personal effort required to progress in this method caused him to lack self sufficiency. The only reason for his power was because he begged another design spirit to donate a few scraps.

If the contract ever expired, Melkor would lose much of his capabilities. He would just degenerate into a qi cultivator that was lacking in personal abilities.

What also bothered Melkor was that the hard limit of this contract cultivation method

was that his strength would always be limited by the strength of a design spirit.

If the latter was no longer able to grow, then he would remain limited as well.

Perhaps he could mitigate this problem by forming a contract with a different entity, but that came with a lot of compatibility problems that would set him back for a long

time.

Despite all of these factors weighing the Design Spirit Contract Method down, Melkor still liked it because it was by far the least difficult cultivation method in his consideration.

As long as he made a deal with the right design spirit, there should be no chance for

him to fail in his contract cultivation.

After spending several decades fruitlessly trying to advance to the rank of expert candidate, Melkor deeply appreciated the certainty and ease of this Larkinson-exclusive method.

"Do I take the easy way out, or should I take a chance on a more challenging

cultivation method?"

That was because it was centered around the use of qi formations on the battlefield.

Chapter 6668 Formation Master Series

Qi cultivation came in many different forms. The Red Collective's Cultivation Method Department recovered many old texts and figured out a lot of different means of power expression.

When Melkor sought out a qi cultivation method that could expand his capabilities in a way that was helpful to a mech commander, he quickly became attracted by the mention of formations.

It turned out that formations were a big deal in qi cultivation. The way he understood it was that it was a purposeful way to leverage massive amounts of E energy radiation to produce powerful outcomes, often far beyond the actual cultivation level of the practitioner who set up the formations in the first place!

This immediately attracted his attention due to the promise of being able to produce significant results without needing to be strong himself.

However, when Melkor dove into this subject, he found that it was a lot more complicated than he expected.

There were at least two recognized categories of qi formations.

There were the highly familiar battle formations, which were usually practiced by groups of mech pilots in order to gain strength that exceeded the sum of their parts. Every Larkinson already had a good impression of battle formations!

However, there were still differences between the 'classic' battle formations taught by the Red Collective and the bastardized battle formations utilized by numerous Larkinson mech legions.

The former generally did not rely on borrowing power from a design spirit or other specific entity.

Originally, battle formations were supposed to be pure applications of qi. They relied on taking control over large amounts of E energy from the environment in order to form a powerful energy structure.

They could potentially allow a group of weaker practitioners to summon a large energy construct that could fight head-on against a powerful enemy such as a phase lord!

However, the demands on the mech pilots were hard. They needed to possess a certain combination of talent, comprehension, analytical ability, trust and teamwork in order to pull it off correctly.

The trump cards invented by the Larkinson Clan were like the contract cultivation version of battle formations.

formation than a Larkinson battle formation!

The former did have its advantages, though.

They were not exclusive to specific mech legions or those who were in the good books of the design spirit they borrowed power from. Anyone could practice them so long as they met fairly reasonable requirements.

The practitioners of classic battle formations could also leverage them more flexibly and exert greater control over them as their cultivation and mastery increased. They were combination techniques that possessed very high ceilings.

There were other ways to play with qi formations.

The Red Collective defined spell arrays as employing specialized material formation anchors to temporarily or permanently direct the behavior of E energy in the environment to produce a powerful effect.

These formation anchors usually came in the form of flags, totem poles and stones, but could take other shapes as well.

What was important was that the formation anchors had to be carefully designed in order to work. They had to be made out of hyper materials and had to be integrated with runes, patterns or other mysterious markings that effectively played the role of a programming language.

Making the formation anchors was only half the job. The next challenge was to deploy them in a specific location, and that demanded deep insight into formations, the flow of E energy radiation and terrain knowledge. Depending on how they were designed, the formation anchors had to be placed at specific locations and at very specific distances and angles from each other.

There were so many different variables that the formation master had to calculate and take into account that it was impossible for general qi cultivators to set up most of these incredibly complicated spell arrays!

These spell arrays could produce nifty effects, many of which were difficult to replicate with technology.

The most straightforward spell arrays were those with offensive and defensive purposes.

The former could turn a region of space into a killing ground where half-material swords stabbed everyone inside an area.

The latter could channel lots of E energy to form an energy shield that could cover an entire space station like a Titan Shield.

A more exotic category of spell arrays were illusory ones. They could project all kinds of illusions to deceive the enemy and conceal what was truly located in a certain area.

certain aspects of their strength, such as their access to E energy.

Then there was the utility category of spell arrays which contained everything else that could not be placed under the previous categories.

There were amazing spell arrays that could accelerate healing, perform remote scrying on a distant area and even protect against enemy scrying attempts.

In short, spell arrays alone possessed a lot of depth and variety. It was already amazing that the Red Collective managed to recover, decipher and modernize an entire set of them in a short amount of time.

This was the most classic form of formations. In theory, only one formation master was necessary to design, deploy and potentially control active spell arrays, though nothing stopped them from working together.

When Melkor learned about the sub-profession of formation master, he felt compelled to learn it, but he initially grew intimidated by the high intellectual requirements to make it far in this field.

Formation masters had more in common with mech designers than mech pilots!

They needed to be incredibly smart and possess deep knowledge on how the universe worked and how E energy worked in order to combine the two together to produce amazing battle formations and spell arrays.

Though Melkor did not believe his learning ability was bad, he was nowhere near comparable to a mech designer or an engineer!

Out of the Formation Master Series, there was no way he could attain great success in the General Formation Master, Battle Formation Master and Spell Formation Master of

qi cultivation methods!

The Red Collective valued them a lot for this reason and specifically compiled the Formation Master Series of qi cultivation methods to help people get started in this

esoteric field.

Sadly, it had yet to attract a lot of interested people.

Most people that had decided to become a serious qi cultivator were much more attracted to flashy and more straightforward options, such as cultivation methods that allowed them to fling fireballs or fly in the air without the use of technology. Studying qi formations was largely intellectual in nature, and that made many people feel as if they had to go back to school and endure the high pressure of memorizing and comprehending a lot of advanced book knowledge!

The threshold to becoming a successful formation master was high. It would also take a long time for those who started in this field from scratch to gain the knowledge and understanding to design his first successful spell array.

fortunately the Red Collective did not leave mech pilots in the dust.

It turned out that the collies also took less intellectually gifted and inclined individuals into account and expanded the Formation Master Series with cultivation methods

specially geared towards people like himself.

One of them was the Combat Spell Array Master Qi Cultivation Method.

It

all of the aspects ated designing and creating your own qi formations.

This allowed the cultivation method to focus more on deploying existing qi formations, mostly spell arrays, and controlling them in a more proficient manner on

the battlefield.

This sounded much more to his liking!

While Melkor still needed to learn a lot of theory about qi formations, he only needed

to understand a fraction of the knowledge this time.

In fact, much of the expertise was related to calculating and identifying the places where he needed to place the formation anchors.

Depending on how well he positioned the anchors, the resulting spell array could

produce effects that were 20 percent, 50 percent or 100 percent as strong as its

theoretical maximum!

There was a way to cheat this process.

Many of the tedious and complicated calculations were necessary in order to identify the right positions in a given terrain to place the anchors. However, a formation master with enhanced perception capabilities could not only collect more useful data to speed up the calculation work, but could even spot some if not all of the right locations to place the anchor by observation alone!

This meant that Melkor could borrow his companion spirit's excellent perception to immediately deploy the more basic spell arrays that he had procured in advance! This shortcut did not work for the more powerful and advanced spell arrays, but there was no need for Melkor to think about that in the short term.

"Is this really what I want for myself, though?"

If he had a choice, then he would definitely try to achieve a breakthrough and become a glorious expert pilot.

He already ruled that out due to losing his patience and lacking the confidence to succeed in this trajectory.

He saw no point in becoming a pure combat-oriented qi cultivator.

All information related to the subject informed him that expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots could wipe the floor with qi cultivators in direct combat!

The unreasonable willpower of high-ranking mech pilots defied the heavens and repelled all hostile sources of E energy!

Since this was the case, why would Melkor try to work so hard to become an inferior version of true heroes and gods?

The cultivation methods that were designed to partially imitate high-ranking mech

pilots fell short because they never promised anything to compensate for what was missing. Melkor did not want to become an incomplete or inferior powerhouse. He would rather retain his pride and remain weak in a personal sense if that was the case.

Becoming a formation master or more specifically a combat spell array master pretty much guaranteed that.

Oh sure, practicing it would allow him to become smarter and become a lot more capable of performing the calculations to quickly figure out where to place the formation anchors.

While that intellect boost might also allow him to pilot his Fey Fianna more proficiently, that was not the point of this qi cultivation method.

"It's not flashy, but it can allow me to produce results far exceeding my own strength fairly quickly."

It also had a bright future. High-ranking mech pilots would always remain the premier champions of red humanity, but there were always too few of them to go around. Formation masters could assist mech forces in many different ways that not even ace pilots or god pilots could replicate, Melkor especially liked this sub-profession because it not only complimented his role as a mech commander very well, but also

did not overlap with Casella's Command Field!

This was an important observation!

If his suspicions were right, then Melkor could potentially deploy his spell arrays alongside Casella's Commandeered and Enfcuffed mechs!

They could synergise with each other and achieve results that were far greater than what they could accomplish on their own!

"The Saint Commander is strong without a doubt, but she will never be able to weave

magic with spell arrays like I can do... so long as I practice the Combat Spell Array Master Cultivation Method..."

Melkor felt enormously attracted to commit to this choice, but he still found the alternatives to be compelling as well. This was a life changing decision. He did not want to make a choice that he would regret down the line.

Aside from the Design Spirit Contract Cultivation Method which was probably the

easiest to progress, there was also a third qi cultivation method that he had been thinking about practicing as well...

Chapter 6669 Dangerous Legacy Qi Cultivation Method

When Melkor looked for qi cultivation methods that he could use to complement his existing job as a mech commander, he sought for an alternative that did not have the intellectual requirements of a formation master.

This was the main reason why he was still reluctant to commit to this path.

While he had already exchanged a hefty sum of merits to gain access to the manual of the Combat Spell Array Master Cultivation Method, he became intimidated by the fact that he still could not escape the necessity of spending lots of time on book learning if he wanted to reach the advanced stages.

The further he progressed as a formation master, the more essential higher math and comprehension became!

If he did not make enough progress in these essential areas, his qi cultivation would eventually hit a bottleneck and slow his growth to a crawl.

Another disadvantage related to becoming a formation master was that it required a lot of setup in order to produce results.

Melkor had an advantage in this aspect because he could command his subordinates to place the formation anchors at the coordinates he specified.

He did not even have to enter the battlefield in person in order to make it happen!

It would be even better if he was present. A spell array master specialized in controlling active qi formations.

Letting a spell array run by itself was like letting an autonomous battle bot fight. The bot could only follow its own programming and was not able to make flexible and unpredictable decisions.

A spell array controlled by a formation master that knew his business belonged in a different category.

Melkor would be able to use his own judgment and perception to employ more advanced tactics, make correct adjustments on the fly and even inject his own power into the spell array in order to boost its strength and prevent it from breaking!

While Melkor liked the sound of that, the requirements to control a spell array were not light either.

The starter spell arrays that he had exchanged from the Red Collective were deliberately simplified to allow beginners like him to control them at a decent level. What he was worried about was that the difficulty ramped up quickly if he wanted to make use of qi formations that were powerful enough to affect phase lords!

"Aside from that, it is not safe to remain too close to an angry phase lord."

Powerful individual combatants such as ace pilots could resist the attacks of most phase lords unless the latter wielded Saint Piercer arms. Even then, most ace mechs were fast enough to escape the reach of those deadly weapons.

A spell array master lacked those conveniences. The Formation Master Series might be able to make him a little stronger and extend his lifespan and such, but it would not save him if a nunser phase lord physically trampled his mech with his gigantic hooves!

This was why he sought a qi cultivation method that could offer him a bit more self-protection ability.

It was not necessary for him to become a budget high-ranking mech pilot, but he should at least be able to survive the battles to come. The native aliens continued to grow stronger, and there may be even greater threats on the horizon.

This was why he delved into the more obscure sections of the Repository and tried to find a way to grow powerful that may be able to do a better job at meeting his admittedly demanding requirements.

Perhaps he was being too picky, because he failed to find a superior choice.

The best result he came up with was a qi cultivation method that was arguably just as promising as the other two options into consideration.

Different from signing a contract with a design spirit or deploying spell arrays into battle, the one he found in the least popular section of the Repository was derived from an ancient cultivation method.

The collies merely translated the ancient text into standard language and edited it so that it became more understandable to modern people.

Despite its murky background and mysterious elements, it promised amazing benefits to a practitioner that possessed the talent, perception and perseverance to practice it over the long term.

Since it was an ancient cultivation method, the requirements to get started with it were much harsher.

Not only that, but the translations could lead to misinterpretations that could cause Melkor to make a mistake in his progression.

Since few people had begun to practice this expensive and obscure qi cultivation method, there was no one around who could teach him. There wasn't any mature community of practitioners and cultivation scientists that were working together to figure out its secrets and demystify its more abstruse instructions.

To put it in another way, Melkor would have to rely on his own efforts in order to master this ancient qi cultivation method.

If he encountered a problem that he could not overcome, then he could either remain stuck and make no further progress. or improvise and hope that would allow him to

go forward.

This was an exceedingly dangerous decision that could lead to cultivation deviation. Once that happened, Melkor would become compromised and suffer from a range of maladies, ranging from violent mood swings to complete changes in personality! Despite all of these well-deserved warnings, Melkor could not help but consider it anyway due to the promises it made.

This was because practicing the Clockwork Hollow Sect Timestream Magistrate Qi Cultivation Method might ultimately allow him to manipulate the property of time!

Yes, time!

According to the extensive analysis by the cultivation scientists of the Red Collective, the qi cultivation method was originally created to form mid-level 'timestream magistrates' for the Clockwork Hollow Sect.

Timestream magistrates were essentially qi cultivators that specialized in the concept. of time. More specifically, they were trained to manipulate how time affected themselves at first and subsequently everything within their range.

This had many different uses and applications!

A timestream magistrate could speed up the passage of time on himself, thereby allowing him to move faster and spend more time on thinking and working.

He could also slow down the passage of time on projectiles or even enemies so long as they were not strong enough to resist the effect!

Naturally, Melkor did not need to think about accomplishing the latter in the short term. It took serious attainments in the refurbished cultivation method before he

could attempt such a magical feat onto others.

While Timestream magistrates weren't powerful by themselves, their ability to manipulate time to this degree could allow them to produce a lot of favorable results, especially if they were mech commanders!

That was not even the main highlight of this legacy qi cultivation method. One of their most powerful and costly abilities was to turn back the clock!

By winding back their clockwork artifact, timestream magistrates could effectively

travel back in time!

Even if they could only go back a number of seconds or minutes, this was already enough for Melkor to change the course of a battle!

What he found odd was that timestream magistrates were actually not meant to wield all of these abilities. The Clockwork Hollow Sect apparently developed much more powerful qi cultivation methods that could allow practitioners to mess with time to a much stronger and more dramatic degree!

the Cultivation Method Department claimed.

In any case, the aforementioned abilities were actually supplemental to their main purpose, which was to monitor the passage of time and ensure that was not being manipulated by unauthorized parties!

Timestream magistrates were equipped with a number of effective techniques that allowed them to track down and counter any time manipulation shenanigans performed by third parties!

It made sense for an ancient organization like the Clockwork Hollow Sect to raise

their own version of law enforcers in order to prevent abuse of the same techniques

they taught.

When Melkor grew curious enough about the qi cultivation method that he decided to exchange it outright, he encountered several explicit warnings about the

consequences of abusing time manipulation.

Different from what he expected, the Clockwork Hollow Sect did not put so much

effort into regulating the passage of time because they were afraid that spinning time into a messy yarn would cause the universe to collapse or whatever.

The real danger came in changing time to the point of attracting the unwelcome attention of mysterious but exceedingly powerful god-like entities! These were beings who surpassed time and space to varying degrees!

It was never a good idea to become known by them, because many of them were utterly alien and unpredictable!

Another danger associated with abusing time manipulation was adversely affecting the futures of those who would eventually become one of those very same unfathomably powerful god-like entities!

While these terrible gods could not manipulate their own past to undo their own natural 'fate, they were still able to protect themselves against unnatural changes! There was no way that Melkor would be able to withstand the wrath of such a powerful god-like powerhouse!

This meant that even if Melkor did everything correctly and turned into a perfectly normal timestream magistrate, he would still be playing with fire every time he manipulated time and affected the lives of a lot of people.

Small changes to the timeline were relatively safe as they were too weak and lasted

too short to get detected.

It was only when a timestream magistrate ceased to guard the timeline and started to

resemble the criminal that he was supposed to watch out for that the risks would

begin to rise.

practicing the Clockwork Hollow Sect Timestream Magistrate Qi Cultivation Method

right away.

He couldn't let it go, however. Even if he chose to turn his back on it, he couldn't help but recall it and read through its descriptions and his own notes.

The Larkinson Clan might have more use for a timestream magistrate than a spell

array master.

The latter was awesome and all, but the former could guard him and his fellow clan against threats of a much more hidden and nefarious nature.

The only question was whether any time cultivators would show up in the future that might pose a credible threat against the Larkinsons and the rest of red humanity. If not, then a timestream magistrate became partially redundant. Another problem associated with this qi cultivation method was that it was not easy

to get started with it. Any cultivator of the Clockwork Hollow Sect had to possess the

very rare affinity of time.

This was actually a nearly impossible condition to meet. Even during ancient times, the Clockwork Hollow Sect struggled to recruit naturally talented seeds!

This was why the sect came up with numerous ways to bypass or substitute for these

harsh requirements!

Melkor managed to negotiate a deal with the Cultivation Method Department about this subject.

He borrowed special cultivation resources from the Red Collective that could theoretically allow any human to meet the starting requirements of the qi cultivation method and become a timestream magistrate straight away!

The caveat was that he could not complete this transformation at his leisure. The unorthodox method involved 'stealing the time' of others, which meant that he had to conduct a ritual centered around his enemies in order to properly practice this

method!

Suffice to say, the Legion Commander was not sure if he could get his enemies to cooperate. Perhaps it was better to consider the other two options instead.

"It's too difficult to make up my mind."

Melkor did not intend to procrastinate any longer. The time for battle had almost

come, and he could not keep himself from holding back while the war progressed. One way or another, Melkor intended to start a new chapter in his life.

Chapter 6670 Initiation Ritual

Melkor struggled to make a single choice out of three promising and powerful qi cultivation methods.

Each of them would have massive implications for his career as well as the Larkinson Clan if he could make a huge difference in a battle.

The homebrew Design Spirit Contract Qi Cultivation Method pretty much guaranteed that Melkor would become powerful enough in his own way. He could channel the power of a contracted design spirit for a longer period of time and gradually become able to perform similar abilities by relying on his own strength.

The Combat Spell Array Master Qi Cultivation Method would cause him to miss out on gaining more direct combat power, but he would gain the capability to affect the battlefield on a large scale, thereby allowing him to boost friendly units and debilitate enemy units en masse.

The most mysterious Clockwork Hollow Sect Timestream Magistrate Qi Cultivation Method promised to turn Melkor into a unique timeline guardian of sorts. It not only had great potential in manipulating the course of battles, but also enabled him to protect the clan from temporal assaults.

The first method developed by the T Institute was by far the most economical one. The second one was demanding in terms of study load and hard work. The third was the riskiest one as it was derived from an ancient legacy text.

If Melkor was anything like his far more successful cousin Ves, then he would have felt inclined to take a bet on becoming a timestream magistrate.

As long as he was able to overcome the many risks and perils associated with practicing a method that could hide all kinds of traps and variables that did not fit the current environment, he would be able to play with time in all sorts of useful ways.

Most notably, he saw enormous value in the ability to wind back the dial of a clockwork artifact, effectively allowing him to travel seconds or even minutes into the past!

He also felt that the Larkinson Clan could use a guardian who especially monitored the timelines related to the Larkinson Clan or at least its most promising members. However, the latter might not be that relevant considering that it was incredibly difficult to comprehend time.

Outside of the rare few that possessed an inherent talent in this E energy attribute, everyone else who attempted to cultivate the Clockwork Hollow Sect Timestream Magistrate Qi Cultivation Method would have to rely on insanely expensive resources that were aspected towards the time attribute!

than space hyper materials. The Red Three and a few other major groups were able to produce the latter in reliable quantities by combining hyper technology with phasewater technology.

If he committed to the latter, then he would have to compensate for his lack of talent in the time attribute by ingesting expensive elixirs and procuring rare time hyper materials to produce the signature artifacts of Clockwork Hollow.

The latter was rumored to cost as much as a first-class expert mech, and that was just the minimum price estimate!

Could Melkor truly impose these cost burdens on the Larkinson Clan?

Perhaps.

The clan was earning quite well these days, and Melkor should still have enough personal funds and merits left to afford a few nice goods.

Yet what about later?

Melkor did not want to become an enormous resource drain to the clan. He also did not want to end up stuck if the clan's income ever declined.

Compared to the troublesome time-related qi cultivation method, any option from the Formation Master Series was a lot more affordable.

The more powerful spell arrays could only be realized by constructing high-end formation anchors that were entirely comprised of high-grade hypers, but most of them were still a lot more affordable than any hyper material related to the time attribute!

A classic formation master could even become a powerful earner for the clan. The ability to design custom spell arrays and produce the necessary formation anchors to deploy them on or off the battlefield all demanded specialized skills, knowledge and extraordinary capabilities that other cultivators could not replicate. Unfortunately, Melkor had no hope of earning money by doing this because he did not have the time, interest and brainpower to do all of this intellectually demanding work. Becoming a pure combat spell array master meant that he had to source his spell arrays from other formation masters.

For the time being, the only existing formation masters were those raised by the Red Collective and several other major groups. The spell arrays they developed and released so far were fairly basic but also expensive due to their scarcity.

What made Melkor more optimistic about becoming a spell array master was that the market for these new and exotic products would probably drop over time.

As more and more formation masters emerged, the market for spell arrays would probably develop in a similar way to the market for mechs. The spell arrays would get

more reasonable ranges.

Having learned all of the amazing effects that spell arrays could produce, Melkor was incredibly optimistic about this market.

He believed that formation masters would become a profession that possessed prestige similar to mech designers.

Meanwhile, combat spell array masters that were able to quickly and proficiently deploy spell arrays would become high-value combat assets similar to high-ranking

mech pilots.

Their methods and capabilities may be completely different, but their impact on the battlefield were probably on the same level!

Wasn't this what Melkor wanted all along?

Even if he was not able to become an expert pilot, he at least wanted to become recognized as a powerful combatant.

At this point, Melkor did not care too much whether he became a supportive asset rather than a direct combat asset.

The clan already had plenty of expert pilots and was gaining more ace pilots over time.

What the Larkinsons did not have was a combat spell formation master. While other Larkinsons could become one as long as they had enough money and merits to spare, Melkor believed he could do a better job than most!

As Melkor began to lean more and more towards becoming a formation master, he hesitated one last time.

Was he willing to miss out on embodying the power of design spirits and becoming a timestream magistrate in order to deploy qi formations?

"What do you think, Goldie?"

"Nyaaaa." The Golden Cat manifested inside the cockpit and bathed Melkor in her

warm and pleasant glow. "Nyaaaa nyaaa nyaaa."

He smiled. "It is reassuring to hear that you are okay with each of my choices. If this is the case, then I will go ahead and try to become a combat spell formation master. You know, if I chose to practice the Design Spirit Contract Qi Cultivation Method, I strongly thought about forming a contract with you. As a Larkinson, I can think of no

better choice."

The Golden Cat tilted her head. "Nya?"

"Oh, I am sure that forming a contract with the likes of Gaia, the Superior Mother, the Phase King, Lufa and so on will allow me to borrow and channel their powerful and useful capabilities, but I am not that close with any of them. They are all allies of the Larkinson Clan, but they are not bound to us in the same way. You on the other hand

are the literal embodiment of the Larkinsons. You are the last spirit to abandon us. So even if you aren't the most powerful among your kind, I still trust you over anyone

else."

"Nyaaa~"

Goldie could feel the sincerity in his words. She leaned in and rubbed her body against his head.

The two would probably become great contract partners if Melkor practiced the most suitable method.

Alas, the legion commander had already made a different choice. He would leave this responsibility to other Larkinson mech pilots that had given up on willpower

cultivation.

When Goldie left the cockpit, Melkor already began to adjust his mindset.

He recalled the mantras and instructions that were necessary to become a combat

spell array master. They were fairly simple as the Red Collective compiled the Formation Master Series from a clean slate.

Several minutes passed by as Melkor underwent a partial transformation in spirit.

"The first step is done."

As a premium cultivation method, it took far more effort than this to become a formal

qi cultivator.

Getting started was one of the challenges of qi cultivation. The threshold of the more advanced methods were always high.

The Red Collective had thought about that and was prepared to conduct a special ritual that should allow him to get started with greater ease than usual.

He began to load a special software program into the operating system of his Fey

Fianna.

His mech soon gained a new function that benefited Melkor right away.

"It's much easier for me to crunch the numbers this time!"

Different from ancient formation masters, a modern combat spell array master could

also be a mech pilot.

This meant that as long as Melkor connected his mind to his mech, he could borrow the latter's incredibly formidable processing power!

Drone mechs happened to possess more processing power than normal, so Melkor

could offload a lot of tedious calculation and simulation work to his Fey Fianna in order to obtain results a lot faster than usual!

Of course, a computer was not able to substitute a combat spell array master in its

The more mysterious processes could only be performed by a cultivator that changed his spirit in a way that allowed them to do stuff that was otherwise impossible.

Melkor did not understand the science behind it, but that was not important. He only knew that if he wanted to employ spell arrays the fullest, he needed to

undergo a permanent transformation. "That is why I need to conduct a ritual."

Similar to the ritual that would allow him to become a timestream magistrate, Melkor

could also employ a similar shortcut to quickly become a combat spell array master!

The so-called initiation ritual entailed personally deploying and controlling a simple debilitating spell array while remaining stationary. He also had to swallow an expensive elixir that was made out of ingredients that he couldn't understand while repeating a strange mantra.

The more enemies affected by his spell array, the greater the feedback!

There were several ways that this could go wrong. If the spell array and the mechs he

brought to the upcoming fight were unable to contain the enemy phasefighters, then Melkor's Fey Fianna may be forced to move.

Doing so would invalidate the ritual and waste the elixir that took a lot of effort for the

Red Collective to make!

If the native aliens also managed to capture or destroy the formation anchors, then Melkor would suffer an even greater loss!

Aside from that, interrupting the ritual at a critical point might botch his transformation into a combat spell array master, resulting in cultivation deviation or

worse outcomes!

In other words, Melkor had to be completely confident in his battle plan. He also had to do a good job of anticipating the enemy's strength and moves. This test was part of the ritual. The more thorough his preparations, the more positive

his mood became, which would subsequently affect his transformation in beneficial

ways!

"Im, let's make sure the enemy won't be able to outmaneuver my forces."

He began to take another look at the gathered intelligence and began to make many

different guesses and predictions.

The fact that the enemy phasefighter force was led by an elite unit of puelmer phasefighters added a lot of complications.

Every puelmer phasefighter was a technologically advanced black box. Human mech pilots always hated it when they had to fight against one because no one could ever predict what they might encounter!