

Mech Touch 6681

Chapter 6681 No Way...

Ves began to form a quick and dirty plan to convert the formation anchors into living fey. He did not dare to apply any direct changes to the formation anchors themselves. His plan was to stuff it inside a shell that would act as a carrier for these pillar-shaped constructs.

As long as he affixed a few thrusters and maybe small transphasic energy shields onto the shells, they would be able to move wherever they were needed while being able to withstand a few stray shots.

Of course, a small energy shield module was not enough to make them last on a real battlefield. They still needed to be protected until they were ready to go active and trap enemy units.

Ves intended to apply other features and improvements onto the shell, but they weren't really worth mentioning to Melkor. The mech commander and combat spell array master wouldn't really understand the technical details.

The biggest limitation that Ves had to work with was that he had to limit his application of hyper technology and E-technology.

Aside from betting that inserting the formation anchors would turn them into

pseudo-high-level artifacts, Ves could not permit the use of any other material or tech that had an effect on the flow of E energy radiation.

It was hard for him to abide by this limitation. Hyper technology had revolutionized the mech industry as well as many other industries, while E-technology happened to be a part of his main specialization.

Ves drew on Veronica's experience of designing the Auto Heretic mech line and quickly got used to the mindset of designing a mech without making use of hyper materials. Of course, he did have the option of using phasewater, but he tried to be a little more restrained with using this material because it might interfere with the functioning of the formation anchors.

Work like this was trivial to a Senior Mech Designer like Ves. he was able to whip up a complete solution in a handful of hours. He could have compressed that time even further, but he wanted to be extra careful in order to prevent the already fragile formation anchors from falling apart in mid-flight.

While he designed the formation anchor fey, Ves regularly asked questions about formation masters to Melkor.

Ves could easily retrieve documents related to this up and coming cultivation specialization from the Red Collective, but he preferred to hear the details from a friendlier and most trustworthy source.

Melkor's opinions would definitely influence Ves' policies towards formation masters! The Avatar Commander was well aware of that, so he tried to be careful and attentive. with his wording. He did not want to give Ves the wrong impression about important subjects.

"If this cultivator mech concept succeeds and allows you to amplify your power on the battlefield, are you willing to take this to the next level?" Ves asked as he continued to work while repeatedly examining all 25 formation anchors.

They were fascinating artifacts that already incorporated the deliberate and systematic use of runes to 'program' their behavior.

The Red Collective had made rapid progress in understanding the meaning of runes as well as figuring out how to apply them to create artifacts with a deeper level of

complexity than regular hyper products!

"What do you mean by that, Ves?"

The physical projection of the patriarch smiled in Melkor's direction. "There is one easy way you can improve your combat effectiveness as both a mech pilot as well as a combat spell array master. Have you thought about forming a Blood Pact with a Carmine mech?"

To be honest, Melkor did consider this choice. The benefits of the Carmine System to a conventional mech pilot was not as dramatic as was the case for norms, but they were still significant.

A mech pilot would be able to gain additional control over a living mech. He would also develop a much deeper relationship with the machine that transcended ordinary friendships.

By making a mutual vow to fight together to the exclusion of everyone else for the rest of their lives, the Carmine mech and Carmine mech pilot automatically elevated their trust and friendship to the highest level!

The question was whether Melkor was ready to make such a life-changing commitment. Were the benefits of forming a Carmine mech truly worth the limitations imposed upon himself?

Different from most mech pilots, Melkor was not the sort of mech pilot to develop an unhealthy attachment to his living mechs. The fact that he had passed on the increasingly more outdated Golden to an Avatar mech officer and switched to piloting the much newer and more powerful Larkinson Edition of the Fey Fianna proved that he valued immediate practicality over sentimentality!

Perhaps this was one of several traits that disqualified Melkor from breaking through as a mech pilot.

"Not for now." Melkor eventually replied. "I am not the kind of mech pilot that can

accept the possibility that I will forever be barred from piloting anything else ever again if my Carmine mech gets destroyed in battle. If you have been fighting the native aliens as often as my men and I, you will know that the native aliens never fight on the same level as us. They play dirty, they readily abuse their advantage of numbers and advantage of resources, and frequently try to shoot at mechs with their formidable warship-grade gun batteries. Any machine that gets hit by the latter will disappear without a doubt." "That is not quite true." Ves responded. "Most expert mechs are able to avoid or resist them quite well. Now that you have become a cultivator on the same level as an expert pilot, you are not as vulnerable to the threat of enemy warships as before. As long as you are paired with a powerful cultivator mech that is designed to the same standard as an expert mech, you will definitely be able to survive many battles."

Commander Melkor could understand these points, but he still felt reluctant to commit to such an extreme approach.

"I don't think that your comparison holds up as well as you wish. Expert pilots have many different ways to directly enhance the performance of their expert mechs. They are able to resonate with their

expert mechs, thereby amplifying their technical performance. True resonance can also generate a resonance shield around an expert mech, which is usually strong enough to resist at least one or more direct hits from the primary cannon of a large warship. Then there is the secret weapon of every expert pilot, their strong and uncanny intuition towards danger. This is how Saint Tusa was able to evade nearly every attack that threatened to shatter his relatively thin and fragile mech over the course of his career."

The Avatar Commander raised good counterarguments. He was true about how well expert pilots amplified the performance of their expert mechs. This was the entire reason why the latter became so fast, powerful and unreasonably resistant against damage. Combined with the uncanny intuition of expert pilots that enabled them to avoid many fatal errors over the course of their active service, they were simply the best out of making the most of their already powerful machines!

As a qi cultivator and one oriented around support rather than direct combat, Melkor was distinctly lacking the enhancements that would allow him to fare much better when directly threatened by enemies.

Perhaps his overall spiritual growth may have made boosted his intuition by a noticeable extent, but it was probably not as exaggerated as that of an expert pilot.

As for resonance, it was impossible for Melkor to resonate with an expert mech due to

his relatively weak willpower.

His recent breakthrough may have caused his willpower to grow as well, but this was most definitely a side benefit. The important part was that Melkor's willpower did not exceed the standard of a typical qi cultivator.

"You're right." Ves admitted. "I didn't fully think this through. A qi cultivator piloting a Carmine mech will not enjoy the extraordinary protection of a proper expert mech. This

puts the long-term survivability of your machine under question. While our clan is working on more effective solutions to allow your living mech to survive even if the mech frame gets blown to pieces, they are either limited in effectiveness or not even close to ready for implementation. If you still want to make use of Carmine mechs, but don't want to be restricted by the current limitations of the Carmine System, you can always wait for a number of years. The later generation of Carmine Systems will definitely offer more mitigating solutions that will make it 'safer' to pilot Carmine mechs."

"I will look forward to that." Melkor said with an accommodating smile. "I am not principally opposed to using Carmine mechs. I just don't want to put all of my eggs in a single basket."

Though Ves felt disappointed by Melkor's rejection, it was not that big of a deal. Multiple mech pilots rejected Carmine mechs for similar reasons. They were all potentates who had no problem with using the neural interface to control their existing machines. Their demand for the Carmine System was not very strong even if Ves tried his best to sell its

virtues.

Oh well.

Ves returned to his work and quickly finished his design for the modified and more personalized version of the Fey Fianna. He proudly presented his quick improvisation to

his cousin.

"Here you go. This is how your machine will look after it has been changed. It will be paired with 25 formation anchor fey. It will take quite a bit of time to fabricate the components and put them all together, but there are plenty of mech technicians on this ship who can complete this job in a hurry."

"You won't do all of the work in person?"

"I will." Ves responded. "I will just be present in a special form since my actual body is light-years away from Viola Magnifica. Even then, I can't possibly produce 25 formation anchor fey and perform the necessary modifications to the mech frame by myself. Don't worry. I will be constantly monitoring the work of others, and I have other ways to keep them under control. Now what do you think about the revised design?"

"Well, I can't mount more than a fraction of all of the fey on the back of my mech. They will have to remain separate from my Fey Fianna. I don't see any other type of fey in your design. Will I be able to control a few spare azure energy shield fey to improve the defenses of my machine? If the native aliens figure out that my mech and I are the ones to control the big spell array, they will definitely focus fire on my machine!" Ves nodded. "That is a realistic possibility. I have chosen to withhold myself from adding more fey to your mech because I already have to split 17 more subordinate spirits from its spiritual foundation. Even if I try to mitigate the damage as much as possible, the

strain on the living mech will still be unimaginably high. I do not dare to stretch its limitations any further"

"Then my mech will become a sitting duck."

"Not if you rely on the support of other mechs and assets, Melkor. You are not alone, remember? You can rely on your subordinates to provide you with cover. In fact, there is an even better way to amplify your performance and increase your survival rate on the battlefield. This is actually one of the main reasons why I insist on designing a special

cultivator mech for you. The potential synergy is insane." "What are you talking about, Ves?"

"I know you haven't considered it since you are a mech commander yourself, but have

you ever thought what would happen if you deploy your spell array while you are actively being Encoffed by Saint Commander Casella?" Melkor widened his eyes as he began to consider this possibility.

"No way..."

Chapter 6682 Aureus

The new Fey Fianna had taken shape.

It took a lot of effort to get this done within a very limited timeframe.

Ves delegated most of the work involving the fabrication of fey parts and assembling them around the 25 formation anchors to the best-performing mech technicians who served on the Spirit of Bentheim.

These Larkinsons had years of experience with working on many different kinds of living mechs.

They participated in the production of hundreds of them and also services quite a few existing machines.

While they did not understand how the living mechs like Ves, they had developed their own feelings for them that could only be accumulated through years of experience!

Ves was quite satisfied with their attitudes, their professionalism and their competence. So long as he wrote a clear and detailed manual that described the steps that they needed to follow, he had no concerns that they would screw up along the

way.

Unfortunately, as good as the Larkinson mech technicians have become, the modifications to the Fey Fianna's mech frame required more skilled and delicate touch.

This was why Ves decided to descend on the Spirit of Bentheim in person so that he could do all of the work himself!

One way to do this was to possess one of his masterwork mechs and use the mech frame as a medium for him to operate tools and equipment. He had done it several times in the past by temporarily taking control of the Everchanger.

However, Ves disliked this measure because it wasted a lot of energy and made him feel exhausted at the end. A mech was also far from suitable to perform precision work. The Everchanger was never designed to perform these tasks!

Another solution that was a bit more unconventional ways to use his external incarnation Vulcan to possess the body of a mech technician or craftsman who worshiped Vulcan.

Vulcan worship was not that prevalent in the Larkinson Clan, but they could always be found on every Larkinson capital ship.

Although using Vulcan to perform mech-related work was not ideal, the advantage was that the design spirit was extremely good at elevating the quality of every work he touched!

If Ves had no better option at his disposal, he would have settled for this approach. It was a good thing that he did happen to have a better choice.

"Who are you? What are you?" Commander Melkor asked with surprise when an ostentatious golden mechanical construct entered the mech workshop!

"Don't you recognize me, cousin? It's me, Ves!"

Melkor would have accepted this statement if the speaker even vaguely resembled Ves.

The problem was that the construct looked nothing like the patriarch. The remote-controlled bot was shorter than a typical human but possessed a lot more girth. The construct's appearance greatly resembled that of a stereotypical dwarf that was engaged in blacksmithing or other productive craft.

What made the bot a lot different was the fact that it was made entirely of uncoated metallic golden alloys!

Gold dominated all of the visible surfaces of its exquisite mechanical body. What was interesting was that his exterior was not entirely smooth and closed. Instead, many parts of its chest, arms and legs were deliberately opened, showing off a lot of dazzling gears and other anachronistic mechanical implements that looked like they belonged to a completely different age!

Melkor suspected that the spinning gears and such served no purpose at all aside from making the golden dwarven mechanical avatar look more classy and artful.

"Is this... a masterwork?"

"Yup." The golden dwarf construct replied with a deliberately mechanical and tinny voice. "This is Aureus, one of several masterwork mechanical avatars that I have constructed through special means to allow me to 'possess' them. It is much more efficient and convenient to have me work through this construct than trying to do the same with the Everchanger."

Technically speaking, Ves made this masterwork avatar to allow Vulcan to seamlessly possess it whenever possible.

After all, an inherent energy-based life form that had made a lot of strides in his deity cultivation was much more suited to descend on a suitable vessel!

Ves on the other hand would have to force himself to perform an action that he was not inherently supposed to execute.

While there were several differences between letting Ves or Vulcan do the work, it didn't matter too much in this case.

Aureus was not the only mechanical avatar tied to Vulcan. It was merely the one that the God of Dwarves, Mechs and Craftsmanship had created and deposited inside the Spirit of Bentheim for occasions like these.

Given that Aureus would likely be used for mech-related tasks, Vulcan had designed

the mechanical avatar to excel at operating high-tech instruments and production machines.

Argent was the second dwarven mechanical avatar that Vulcan had made. It was currently deposited inside Ves' personal office within the Astral Octagon. If there were any situations over there that required him to be present in person, he could have Vulcan temporarily manifest a part of himself inside the silvery shell.

Since Argent was designed to work with cultivators of many different varieties, Vulcan had impregnated its silver alloys with a higher proportion of hyper materials than usual. This made it very suitable to craft certain types of artifacts.

There was also a third mechanical avatar named Aes. Ves and Vulcan deliberately designed the dwarven avatar to possess a larger and more stout dwarven appearance. Combined with decorative elements that adhered to the brutalist style and a booming low-pitched mechanical voice, Aes did an excellent job of conveying strength and

power.

Aes was stationed in the Eternal Vulcan Empire, though it had yet to make a public appearance.

Ves just wanted to deposit a mechanical avatar close to the Iron Emperor and the fanatical dwarves in advance.

Vulcan was already working on the design of a fourth mechanical avatar that had yet to be named. This one was designed around a dark theme and was meant to navigate the seedier corners of human society.

Ever since Ves climbed his way up the ladder and entered the upper echelon of red humanity, he no longer maintained any contact with the black markets and other elements of the underworld.

That did not mean they had ceased to be of use. These murky sectors always offered goods and services that people wanted but did not dare to obtain through regular

channels.

From the bodies of deceased high-ranking mech pilots to stolen pieces of Mentalist Crystals, a lot of contraband could be bought as long as customers were willing to

take risks and pay big fat premiums!

It was completely unsuitable for Ves or most of his clansmen to get in touch with the underworld.

If Calabast was still around, then he would have entrusted her to form a discrete trade

channel.

Her absence during the current period made Ves reluctant to delegate this matter to the rest of the Black Cats.

It would be better if he could do this himself through an avatar that could disguise itself and share no obvious relations with Ves.

This was why the design of his fourth mechanical avatar had to be impregnated with a

lot of Solus Gas.

While the mysterious substance was excellent at blocking all kinds of scanning and

observation methods, it also had the potential to block Vulcan from manifesting himself inside the mechanical shell!

This was why Vulcan needed more time to conduct research and find a way to reconcile two conflicting demands.

So long as Vulcan found a solution to this problem, it should be no problem to cover up the surface of the dark construct with false organic skin and pass it off as a human.

Naturally, the fourth avatar was designed to look like a human rather than a dwarf. The latter would attract way too much attention for Ves' liking.

The steady development and production of these unique mechanical avatars imperfectly solved one of Ves' long standing problems.

Since he was way too important to participate in battles and expeditions in person

like he used to, he could still be present in a different way by possessing these

masterworks!

He originally intended to design a few cat avatars for himself, and he might still do so

in certain cases.

For now, Aureus would allow Ves to work on Melkor's mechs with a much greater

degree of control and feel than through other means.

After an extensive round of upgrades and modifications, the iconic drone mech of the Larkinson Clan had drastically changed in function and performance!

Ves did not apply too many changes to the mech frame. At most, he applied a few quick fixes and upgrades that should slightly improve the Fey Fianna's defenses and responsiveness. He also updated it to a seventh generation living mech, though he did not implement any measures related to assisting in the cultivation of the Combat Spell Array Master Qi Cultivation Method.

He did not understand it himself, so the probability of making mistakes when implementing it was high. There would be time to implement this feature later when he was willing to design a proper 'cultivator mech' for Melkor.

In fact, the Fey Fianna served as an initial proof of concept for Ves. He wanted to

know how a modern qi cultivator was able to amplify his capabilities with the help of a mech designed to complement his abilities.

The lessons learned from observing the upgraded and modified Fey Fianna in action would definitely provide Ves with a lot of guidance on how to design a proper cultivator mech from the ground up! If successful enough, Fey Fianna could even be

used as the basis of an upgrade project.

mitigate everything that went sideways.

This was a much safer and more thorough design approach that would ensure that Melkor's first proper cultivator mech made him as useful as an expert mech.

Ves refused to accept a lesser outcome! Given the rapidly expanding demand for mechs, especially Carmine mechs that could allow qi cultivators to properly fight on the modern battlefield, Ves needed to

get in early rather than later. He did not want his competitors to overtake him and set the standards for this new and special classification of mechs.

"So what do you think now that my work is done? Do you feel more eager to pilot your mech than before?" Ves asked through his Aureus mechanical avatar.

"It looks better." Melkor admitted. "I don't think its performance has improved by

much compared to the base model of the Larkinson Edition of the Fey Fianna. The

only real changes are related to the fey. I don't know whether the new formation anchor fey will work as intended. I need to take the new mech out for a spin."

"Then go ahead. I am curious to see how my work will perform as well. Your Fey Fianna has become the precursor to cultivator mechs. I need to know whether my theories are correct."

Melkor entered the cockpit and smoothly activated it. Once the living mech came online, he immediately noticed a number of differences.

"My living mech has become less responsive. His personality is not as strong and

assertive as before. It's like he has turned from a healthy adult into a bed-ridden old

man,"

"That is an expected outcome." Aureus said without any surprise. "Your living machine had to splinter many more pieces of himself to infuse life all 25 formation anchor fey.

It is already good that it still remains alive. As long as you keep piloting your machine, your spiritual feedback will nourish it back to health. For now, I want to control the new fey and try to deploy a weak formation if possible. We need to find out whether their core functions are still working" Melkor and his modified drone mech cautiously proceeded to conduct a few tests.

Chapter 6683 Testing the Improvised Cultivator Mech

The upgraded and modified Fey Fianna largely worked as Ves and Melkor hoped.

At the start, Melkor found it difficult to control the formation anchors. It turned out that surrounding the objects in a metal shell and adding extra modules onto it caused numerous disturbances that had to be corrected one by one.

Many of the changes did not require a lot of work. Ves was able to perform corrections by changing the settings and programming of the Fey Fianna.

Once the drone mech's configuration received a round of corrections, Melkor finally became satisfied with the current machine.

"I have to say that your work is excellent as always." Melkor said. "It is uncomfortable for me to lose access to the regular set of fey, but being able to control the formation anchors directly is a fantastic benefit. It opens up new possibilities that I haven't thought about before. Instead of sending the coordinates to other mechs in order to tell them where to plant the formation anchors, I can do it directly, saving valuable time and reducing errors. While I am concerned that the new formation fey may get intercepted along the way, I already intend to provide them each with an escort that includes at least one space knight."

"That's a good idea. The native aliens won't let them fly without interruption."

"There is another advantage to this new setup." Melkor added. "I can pre-prepare the qi formation by moving all 25 formation anchor fey roughly in the places where they are supposed to be. Once my fey and I have moved close enough to a group of enemy phasefighters, I can make fine adjustments that will allow me to find the optimal positions for the formation anchors in any environment, including open space. I can subsequently activate the spell formation with minimal delay."

"What does this mean?"

"The upgrades you made to my Fey Fianna has made it much easier for me to deploy the confinement spell array reactively rather than proactively. Do you understand the difference, Ves? It means that I don't have to plant the formation anchors at the chosen sight in advance! I can use them offensively by bringing the new fey to the front and deploy them while the fighting has already erupted. So long as the escort mechs do a good job of protecting the formation anchor fey, they should definitely be able to occupy the right coordinates. If not, I can make last-minute adjustments based on feel and judgment. This should allow me to activate them quickly enough before our enemies shift their priorities and attack the formation fey"

This was an important gain for Melkor.

He previously viewed sealing spell arrays as metaphysical traps. They had to be set up in advance on a site where he guessed the enemies would pass through.

This could easily work if he fought on land, but out here in space there were many places that were completely empty!

Most places of the Viola Magnifica System did not host convenient asteroids which could be used to hide the precious formation anchors.

Perhaps stealth technology could be used to hide the planted formation anchors on a temporary basis, but there was too little time for Ves to implement this elaborate function.

In any case, Melkor possessed all of the flexibility he needed for the moment. He could bide his time and wait for the native aliens to advance to the main fortress planet.

It was difficult to guess how the native aliens intended to assault the defenses. Their angles of attack, their formations, their force divisions and so on could take on many different forms.

If Melkor planted his formation anchors at a certain site in advance, then he may come to regret his decision when the native aliens decided to attack the stronghold planet from the opposite direction!

The new setup helped him a lot by reducing this possibility. He could wait until the enemy committed to an assault and take the time to choose where to activate his spell array based on the maneuvers and disposition of the enemy forces.

"I have a few more questions, Melkor."

"Ask away."

"Do you feel as if the formation anchors have gained life? Are you able to control them better with the help of the neural interface?"

"I do." Melkor responded as if he did not quite believe in his own answer. "It is really strange. Your prediction that I do not necessarily need the formation control artifact anymore is partially correct. I think I can activate the formation anchors directly through the living mech. It's not ideal for me to do so because the formation disk contains a lot of easy controls that are specifically designed to activate many specific functions."

"I see." Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "Next time, I will look into designing a formation disk holder that can allow you to integrate the artifact with your living mech. This should enhance your control over the spell array even further. I can even make room for multiple different formation disks."

He continued to generate more ideas on what his next cultivator mech should look like. Ves became more and more interested to explore the new possibilities and design the best possible machine for Melkor!

As the testing process wound down, there was only one more matter that needed to be tested.

"I've invited Saint Commander Casella Ingvar to hop into the cockpit of the Minerva and test whether she can successfully empower you through her Command Field. In order to conduct this test in greater confidence, we'll need to move to a more private location. Can you shrink the size of your spell array?"

"I can, but there is a limit. These formation anchors are designed to transform a large amount of space. Trying to go against that will cause them to work less effectively. If the size of the spell array shrinks too much, they will start to interfere with each other, making it impossible to form a proper spell array. I have to make use of a smaller set of formation anchors that are designed to operate on a reduced scale." That was interesting to hear to Ves. "Can you deploy your formation anchor inside a large mech depot? The local garrison has recently abandoned one of the many warehouses where they used to store mechs and massive spare parts reserves for repairing damaged gun platforms and orbital fortresses. It's not as spacious as I would like, but it is buried deep underground in order to shield the warehouse against orbital bombardment and starship crashes."

Ves sent the data on the location of the abandoned warehouse and how much space Melkor would have at his disposal.

"This warehouse is bigger than I expected. It should do fine."

"Then let's go."

Twenty minutes later, the Fey Fianna accompanied by 25 formation anchor fey

entered the large and rectangular-shaped hall.

Melkor automatically directed his mech to deploy the 25 formation anchor fey. The resulting spell array should cover at least half of the underground warehouse.

Soon enough, Melkor's breath hitched as he felt a powerful presence descending down

to the warehouse.

This was hardly the first time he came into proximity to the Larkinson Clan's third ace

pilot. Unlike other ace pilots, the Saint Commander's Command Field lacked the oppressive and domineering qualities of the domain fields of other ace pilots.

Perhaps it was because Casella Ingvar already considered the Larkinsons to be friendly and trustworthy by default, but her Command Field always felt very inclusive

to other Larkinsons.

Now that Melkor had broken through to a real qi cultivator, he was able to sense the Saint Commander's domain a lot better than before.

Casella Ingvar was powerful. Incredibly powerful. Her Command Field may be accommodating, but it was still based on her extraordinary willpower! That potent willpower not only made it difficult for Melkor to observe the Saint

in charge!

As the Minerva entered the warehouse and gently flew towards the modified Fey Fianna, Melkor slightly came under pressure as he found it difficult to put himself on

the same level as Casella Ingvar.

Their strength diverged too much. If Melkor was like a dim star, then the Saint Commander was like a bright and scorching sun!

Melkor had a strong feeling that this wouldn't change too much if he ever broke through to the next major cultivation rank.

"I have come." The Saint Commander announced while restraining her presence as best as possible. "I have already been briefed on the purpose of this experiment. Let us proceed without delay as I am needed elsewhere."

As one of the few ace pilots remaining in this strategically important star system,

Casella definitely gained a lot of responsibilities.

From trying to boost the morale of the defenders by holding speeches to meeting up with strategists to understand which enemies she should prioritize on eliminating, the Saint Commander was doing her best to raise the odds of victory!

The only reason why she agreed to come was because Ves and Melkor believed that this experiment would definitely produce a positive result.

If that was the case, then the Larkinson Army gained another trump card that it could spring against the native aliens at the worst possible moment!

"Alright." Ves transmitted to the two Larkinson mechs. "Please send me confirmation that you are ready to start. Received. Since both of you are in good condition, then let us proceed with the first step. Casella, I want you to try and Commandeer the Fey Fianna. Melkor, do not resist. Try to accommodate the Saint Commander as best as

possible."

Both mech pilots did as instructed. The Commandeering process usually took place in an instant for Larkinson mechs and mech pilots, but Casella had to take her time.

"I am encountering more resistance" She remarked. "It is easy enough for me to Commandeer the Fey Fianna itself, but when I try to Commandeer Melkor, I feel the similar sort of resistance when I try to Commandeer a fellow expert pilot. The only high-ranking mech pilot that I was able to Commandeer successfully was my late brother. Once he died, I haven't been able to empower any other expert pilot and

expert mech."

That meant that this was a new result. Saint Commander Casella looked stumped for a moment.

"Melkor, are you resisting her efforts?" Ves asked.

"Yes, I mean no. I feel like I really can't let her inside me and take control over me."

Malkor ranliad with a hit of distrust in his tone. "Chcello is so powerful that if I let her

into my mind, her power would shatter my cultivation. That is why there is a new part

of me that is actively resisting her entry."

That sounded like a serious problem! Casella immediately ceased her attempts to Commandeer Melkor.

"Being able to empower your mech and not yourself is not ideal, but it is safer." She

succinctly explained. "It may not be a good idea to assume direct control over you. I am not versed in qi formations and wouldn't know how to manipulate a spell array such as you. It is better to let you stay in control. I can even feel that I have gained

control over the fey as well."

That last part was an important observation!

"What about Enfeoffing?" Ves asked. "It works through slightly different principles,

correct?"

"I was just about to try it out, sir."

When Casella switched from Commandeering to Enfeoffing, the differences became a

lot more apparent.

Not only did the Fey Fianna gain access to true resonance that it was able to use as if

it belonged to itself, but the same effect applied to the formation anchor fey, thereby making them a lot more resistant to damage at the very least!

"This is much better." Melkor said with relief. "I don't feel as if Casella is trying to force

me to surrender control over my own body to her. I now feel as if I have entered into a more casual employer-employee relationship with her. This gives me enough agency for me to deploy and control my spell array!"

"Hmm, the conditions of the formation anchor fey have not deteriorated now that they are exposed to true resonance." Ves observed. "These are good signs. Let's proceed with testing the spell array under these circumstances. You can start whenever you can, Melkor."

"Well, here goes nothing."

The familiar white mist of the confinement array began to appear as it went active. A

huge amount of E energy radiation got sucked into the active qi formation in order to sustain its effect.

What was different from before was that Casella had Enfeoffed Melkor and his Fey

Fianna so that they constituted a Baron, which in this case corresponded to a low-tier expert mech!

Casella widened her eyes when she felt as if her true resonance was taking effect on the spell array.

"This is amazing!" Melkor said with growing excitement. "It actually works! The effect

is not as strong as I expected, but Casella's true resonance has indeed made the qi formation stronger and more resistant to faults. I can even feel that the durability of

the formation anchors has increased. It will take much more damage for them to

break!"

The experiment was a success!

The test definitely proved that it was possible for Saint Commander Casella to empower qi cultivators under certain circumstances!

This opened up an entirely new set of possibilities!

Chapter 6684 Ego Problem

Although this was just a single test that produced a solitary set of data points, it already confirmed a lot of theories.

"Commandeering doesn't work properly because the process of turning a mech pilot into a Knight is inherently a domineering act." Saint Commander Casella explained her theory on what had happened during her initial attempt. "Standard mech pilots can easily accept my influence because they are frankly not strong enough to resist my authority. They are completely willing and able to allow me to take control over them. They realize that the difference in strength is so high that there is no point in resisting."

"Ah." Melkor said in realization.

"It appears you understand. Your recent breakthrough and increase in strength has boosted your confidence, and subsequently your self-esteem. From the moment you see yourself as a champion rather than a common soldier, you no longer want to bow to my authority. That is why you have been resisting my Command Field's attempt to turn you into one my Knights."

In other words, it was an ego problem. Melkor thought he was too good to be reduced to a cog in a machine.

As long as he held this thought, he would instinctively resist Casella's forceful influence over his mind and spirit.

There was nothing much Casella could do about it. The process of Commandeering should only be conducted between two willing parties. If one side did not want to let a powerful ace commander take charge, then that should be the end of the story.

"Is it possible for Melkor to adjust his mindset so that he can be Commandeered?" Ves curiously asked.

"I think so." The Saint Commander asked. "I will need to widen the gap between myself and him. If I become a senior ace commander and earn a large amount of glory in battle, Melkor will put himself in a lower position relative to mine. I imagine that this will work for other qi cultivators as well. As long as they sincerely believe that I am much more powerful than them, they will earnestly bow their heads and accept my authority."

This sounded rather troublesome. It meant that the great hope of amplifying Casella's impact on the battlefield by allowing her to Commandeer tens of thousands of cultivator mechs was probably a lot more difficult to realize.

The most crucial limitation was the power gap. At this moment, the Saint Commander had yet to prove herself enough times. She was still waiting on the much-anticipated upgrade of her Minerva to an ace mech before she could truly show off the majesty of an ace commander.

Right now, she wasn't powerful enough to suppress the ego of a newly emerged qi cultivator.

Of course, Melkor was not a regular qi cultivator by any means. He was a combat spell array master who was able to engineer the defeat of dozens of elite phasefighters and hundreds of regular phasefighters with the help of expensive formation anchors.

Even if the last battle ended up bloodier than he desired, Melkor still thought of it as a victory that cemented his growing strength as a combatant!

When Ves observed Melkor's expression, it became clear that it would be counterproductive to ask the new qi cultivator to humble himself.

After struggling for several decades to chase after a breakthrough that never came, Melkor finally took his first few sips of power and success. The feeling of becoming a qi cultivator on the same level of an expert pilot was simply too intoxicating. It could make anyone's ego swell.

"So is the ego problem the reason why Enfeoffing had a better effect?" Ves inquired. Casella nodded. "Likely so. Enfeoffment originally derived from my ability to empower my... late brother. When Imon broke through and became an expert pilot as well, I was able to infuse him with power because he had absolute trust in me. He was completely willing to put his entire life in my hands because of that. Even so, I never attempted to abuse his hospitality and largely allowed him to retain control over himself and his mech. I merely loaned him my willpower so that he could wield much greater power in combat than usual,"

This dynamic had a lot of potential. Regrettably, Imon died before he and his sister could perform this promising capability at the level of an ace pilot.

At least Casella's breakthrough enabled her to apply an ability that was once exclusive to her brother to other recipients. Being able to elevate them into Barons effectively allowed her to add several dozen additional low-tier expert mechs on the battlefield at any time!

While Casella's Enfeoffment ability was already amazing when used on powerful quasi-first-class mechs such as the Transcendent Punisher Mark III of the Eye of Ylvaine or the Storm Swords of the Swordmaidens, its value had skyrocketed now that they found out that it also worked on cultivator mechs and qi cultivators!

"I understand." Ves said as thoughts spun in his mind. "The process of Commandeering is like drafting soldiers under your command. It is hierarchical, forceful and not very subtle. The process of Enfeoffment is like loaning a part of your power and authority to others. They can make use of your power, but still retain their own pride and much of their autonomy. It is more of a ritual between equals if you conduct it with a fairly powerful mech pilot."

"It doesn't work on other expert pilots or ace pilots." Casella mentioned. "It only ever worked with my brother. As for other expert pilots, my bond with them is not as

strong. The closest that I got to making it work was with Joshua, but even his willpower still rejects my wholehearted attempt to give him an advantage."

"I see. That makes sense." Ves said in thought. "High-ranking mech pilots constantly need to prove themselves. From the humblest low-tier expert pilot to the most accomplished peak ace pilots, each of them are under constant pressure to hype themselves up and prove that they have what it takes to become the heroes and gods that they aspire to be. From the moment they take any step back in their pursuit of greatness, their growth has come to an end. That is how most expert pilots and ace pilots begin to stagnate in their progression."

In other words, if Joshua was truly willing to accept Enfeoffment, then his chances of breaking through a second time and ascending to sainthood was virtually nil!

It was good that this outcome did not happen.

"So what does that mean for qi cultivators like myself?" Melkor asked.

"You should be fine. That goes for every other qi cultivator. Your willpower isn't strong enough to make a fuss over this matter." Ves theorized.

This was ultimately a good outcome. It meant that. Casella still had the option to infuse her willpower and true resonance into cultivator mechs.

"What is your current. Enfeoffment limit, Casella?"

"40 mechs, sir. I am barely able to convert 40 mechs into Barons."

"Your growth rate has slowed."

Casella casually shrugged. "You know why. I am still waiting for you and Gloriana to upgrade my Minerva to a first-class ace command mech. My resonance strength has hardly grown. My current peak is 149 laves."

That was way more than a high-tier expert pilot, but it was barely better than any other junior ace pilot in her first year.

Having a good ace mech made a huge difference in the growth rate of an ace pilot!

"We are still working on it, Casella. The Minerva Mark II Project has only slightly fallen behind schedule. We have recently acquired a Mentalist Crystal which should massively boost your Command Field and its associated abilities. The trouble is that it is such a powerful hyper material that we are having trouble figuring out how to best integrate it into your future ace mech. Don't worry. We'll figure it out. Even if our implementation is suboptimal at first, we can apply incremental improvements over time. Right now, not many people have worked with Mentalist Crystals, so there is not much knowledge out there on how to make full use of its wonderful

capabilities." Saint Commander Casella Ingvar was already fairly powerful in her current state, but she would definitely become a monster once her battle partner received a massive

upgrade!

Melkor looked envious as they talked about their expectations of the Minerva Mark II. Piloting an ace mech was beyond him now that he had chosen to commit to qi

cultivation.

At least the future for mech pilots like him was still fairly bright once Ves managed to

design a proper cultivator mech.

The three Larkinsons continued to talk about various subjects before the testing

session finally came to an end.

Time was of the essence, and Casella needed to attend to a lot of other duties.

"Melkor?"

"Yes?"

"Good luck. I know how important it is for you guys to put up a good fight later today, but don't take too many risks, okay? You are a qi cultivator now. You are not obliged to act like a foolhardy and suicidal challenger like other high-ranking mech pilots. I know it will be difficult for you to adjust your mentality, but please understand the differences between qi cultivators and willpower cultivators. Cowardice is not an unforgivable sin, and you don't have to force yourself to fight against phase lords head-on, especially when you have only taken your first steps as a combat spell array

master."

Though Ves meant well with his words, the Avatar Commander still looked offended.

"With all due respect, patriarch, do not lecture to me about matters you do not understand. I may be a qi cultivator, but I am also a soldier and officer of the Larkinson Army. For as long as I lead the Avatars of Myth, I must always hold myself to the highest standards of my mech legion. Becoming a qi cultivator is no excuse to

tarnish my honor and forsake my dignity"

Ves' physical projection did not bother to hide his disapproval.

"Ugh, you mech pilots are all the same. Fine. You can do what you want. It is your life.

At least recognize that you are still a baby in terms of qi cultivation. It is not your job to confront the greatest threats. Not yet. Phase lords should only be dealt with by ace pilots, and only two of them are left in the expeditionary fleet."

"Three." Melkor corrected Ves. "You are overlooking Saint Dise."

"Oh yeah, I forgot about her. I'm sorry. That said, my point has not changed all that much. Dise's effectiveness as an ace pilot is severely constrained by the First Sword Mark II. It is still a mid-tier expert mech at best. It is grossly underpowered compared to Dise's current capabilities."

"That won't stop her." Melkor confidently said.

"I know, and that worries me. She knows a lot better what she is doing, though. I have no choice but to trust her judgment and let her decide to pick a fight that she knows

The Larkinson Clan was undergoing a second rapid growth phase. The explosive sales of the Yellow Jackets was filling its coffers with more money than it could possibly spend on a monthly basis, and several Larkinson ace pilots had emerged in the last few years.

As long as those precious ace pilots survived for a few more years and grew accustomed to piloting their powerful new ace mechs, they should definitely have the capital to defend themselves against most alien threats!

The first-class mech force and warships of the Larkinson Clan should also be ready for action in a few years.

The Larkinson Clan would gain the initial ability to defend itself against enemies at that point.

Ves would no longer have to rely so heavily on the protection of the Bluejay Fleet and other external forces to maintain his foothold in the Red Ocean.

If possible, he did not want his underequipped ace pilots to risk themselves in the next few battles. Unfortunately, there was no choice.

Chapter 6685 Staking Their Lives

The decisive battle was about to start.

The native aliens had completely swept the entire outer system and large parts of the inner system of Viola Magnifica.

Now, they descended upon the fortress planet with confidence that the last bastion of resistance in the star system would fall into their hands.

The only question now was how much of a price they needed to pay to secure a victory.

The alien warships advanced cautiously. They had taken the measure of their opponents during the earlier skirmishes. The human mechs remained as strong as ever, and they definitely kept a few surprises in store.

However, the alien armada likely held trump cards of their own. Enough years had passed for the Red Cabal and the major alien races to shake off their complacency and fully acknowledge the threat posed by the extragalactic invaders.

The reason why the native aliens still decided to commit to an all-out assault was because they found out that the humans had withdrawn numerous ace pilots from the Middle Zones.

Although most phase lords and phase whales did not acknowledge the divinity of high-ranking mech pilots, they most certainly regarded them as threats on the same level as themselves.

The aliens were playing for keeps this time.

The alert sounded throughout every human base and starship. The soldiers schooled their expressions and methodically began their final preparations.

The mech technicians performed last-minute checks on as many mechs as possible in order to verify that they were fully loaded with energy cells and ammunition.

The mech pilots all attended their final briefings in order to understand their own assignments and the enemies that they would likely have to fight against.

The orbital defense platforms and orbital space fortresses warmed up their cannons and performed checks on their energy shield systems.

The few CFA and privately-owned auxiliary warships in the star systems positioned themselves close to the orbital defense ring. They clearly intended to use the space fortresses as cover in the hopes of limiting the damage to their hulls.

Other starships such as fleet carriers, combat carriers and the rare support vessel such as the Spirit of Bentheim hovered further to the rear. They were vital enough to remain in the contested star system, but not strong or useful enough to move further forward,

These ships were probably the only way out for the defenders who were about to fight the good fight.

The vessels were already prepared to receive as many withdrawing soldiers as they could hold. The orbital defenses were doomed, but the personnel who served aboard them could still be saved as long as they evacuated in time.

The ships must also be ready to pick up a large number of fleeing mechs and mech pilots. Each of them were valuable combatants that could do a lot of good if they managed to live and fight on another battlefield.

Many defenders were already familiar with this routine. They had experienced similar withdrawals when they fought to defend the fortified star systems of the second and third defensive bands.

However, it was exactly because many veterans had experienced those withdrawal events that they never dared to let down their guard.

This was because an orderly withdrawal could easily turn into a chaotic rout!

If the native aliens pushed harder than expected, then the ships in the rear could easily come under threat!

For example, there had been times when phase lords forcefully pushed past the human defensive lines and prioritized the destruction of those warships above all other priorities!

This often happened in battles where the native aliens were able to deploy more champions than the enemy.

Everyone knew that the balance of power between the champions of both sides was decisive in determining the outcome of the upcoming battle.

The greater the disparity, the greater the chance that the battle would take a drastic turn for the worse!

The high-ranking mech pilots of the Golden Skull Alliance attended one more virtual meeting.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar passed on the latest intelligence on the enemy. "Numerous intelligence sources have come to a consensus on what our alien adversaries are relying on to secure their victory." She said. "A sizable detachment of high-tech puelmer heavy cruisers and carriers have arrived. As far as our observers can tell, every puelmer warship is equipped with high-tech weapons and modules that can pose an immense threat to our warships and defenses. They are also fairly mobile and can accelerate faster than a high-quality transphasic mech can keep up if their warp drives are not interdicted."

"Do we need to prioritize their destruction, ma'am?" Venerable Brutus Wodin asked with concern.

"Not specifically." Casella shook her head. "We can only entrust our mechs, our warships and our orbital defenses to handle this threat. Our sole responsibility is to counter the enemy phase lords. At this moment, our intelligence analysts are 85 percent confident that we will be confronted by 6 phase lords. What is distressing to us is that 2 of them are greater phase lords and 4 of them are lesser phase lords. The only consolation is that most of them have only been recently transferred to the front. They lack experience in fighting against us and can be taken by surprise." Projections of long-ranged image captures appeared above the briefing table. They depicted a variety of different phase lords.

They all happened to share one concerning trait.

"They are much better armored than before." Joshua said with a frown. "Those raiments looked brand-new and a lot more advanced than what the phase lords have

been using in the past."

"Good observation." Casella nodded towards him. "That is because the aliens have begun to ship newer generations of phase lord raiments to the front. These are considerably more powerful and difficult to damage due to one underlying reason. They are not entirely products of the aliens themselves. The new generation raiments were instead developed by joint teams of cosmopolitan mech designers and alien

engineers."

"What?!"

"No wonder those raiments look familiar! It is like looking at a collection of

juggernauts."

"Those damn traitors! When do they think they have done enough to skew the war against our favor? Do they really want us all to die?!"

Casella allowed the champions of the expeditionary fleet to vent their frustrations for

a moment.

"Alright. That is enough. We cannot do anything to stop the Cosmopolitan Movement from offering mech designer services to the aliens. All we can do is prepare ourselves to fight against phase lords that may be able to leverage the power of mechs in various ways. We should expect them to fight with significant computer assistance for example. They will also enjoy more advanced energy and material defenses, which makes it even harder to inflict serious damage to their massive bodies. Their relatively small warship-grade weapon modules will also hit harder. Worst of all, the raiments may also be mounted with alien-adapted space suppressors."

That last bit of news did not make any of the champions happy.

The slavish cosmopolitans were willing to sell out every human technological secret on the cheap. It was only a matter of time before the aliens stole and adapted human space suppression modules for themselves.

"This has massive implications." Saint Dise spoke up for the first time during this briefing. "If the phase lords can generate fairly powerful space suppression fields, then our mechs will lose at least a part of their transphasic enhancements. The effect on expert mechs within range of the alien space suppressors will be serious, though I do not think it will limit mechs piloted by ace mechs due to stronger willpower." Casella nodded. "I believe this to be the case as well. The immediate consequence is that it is not wise for our transphasic melee expert mechs to move into close range of the enemy phase lords as much of their performance will diminish. A single serious attack may overcome the weakened defenses of the precious expert mechs and cause them to be eliminated in advance."

"Then what are we supposed to do?" Venerable Vincent Ricklin asked in a peevish tone. "If you are asking me to wield a rifle and take potshots at incoming phase lords from a distance, then forget about it. I would much rather charge against a phase lord and punch his spatial barrier to pieces! If I am lucky, I may even break through, allowing me to put up a much better fight against the enemy"

"Or you may just crash against an unbreakable wall and kill yourself in the process." Jannzi warned.

"Venerable Jannzi's words should be taken seriously." Saint Commander Casella told everyone. "I will not issue orders to you, but I will present two proposals that you can choose from. First, maintain your distance and shoot at the phase lords with your resonance empowered weapons. I am not forcing you to do this, but if you are a low-ranking expert pilot who has only broken through a handful of years ago at best, I highly recommend you do not attempt to challenge phase lords who are more comparable to ace pilots in strength."

The old veterans who had managed to become high-tier expert pilots did not think much of Casella's words.

Her true target audience was the new breakthroughs that emerged in the past year or so. The Larkinson Clan had gained a bunch of low-tier expert pilots, and so did the other members of the Golden Skull Alliance.

None of them had been able to become famous or renowned enough for everyone to remember their names, but that might change if they managed to survive the future.

These expert pilots all had their own pride, but they were not stupid enough to miss the huge disparity in strength.

Casella's proposal gave these low-tier expert pilots a way to decline the notion of committing suicide by charging directly at the phase lords.

Since the Saint Commander told them to swap their swords or spears for rifles and hang back in the rear lines, then it was best for these immature champions to follow this recommendation.

This was the only way for them to decline a challenge without making themselves look too weak or cowardly!

"Those of you who possess greater confidence in your ability to survive a confrontation against a phase lord are free to take your chances with the enemy," Casella said. "Be mindful of their superior equipment. If you are not already an ace pilot, then limit your sights to the lesser phase lords. I am sure that many of you high-tier expert pilots seek to pursue your breakthroughs in this battle. The addition of one or two ace pilots can make a massive difference in this battle. Other forces will

provide as much support as they can to provide you with cover, but do not expect too much from them as the enemy has brought a large amount of warships and phasefighters to bear against us. You must ultimately rely on yourself if you intend to use the enemy lesser phase lords as your whetstones."

The virtual briefing room became charged with energy. A lot of high-tier expert pilots looked either pensive or eager.

A pitched battle like the one that was coming was the best opportunity for them to

realize their breakthroughs.

Each of them felt their chances were considerably higher than before. They had

learned about Ketis' revolutionary Heaven Earth Man Trifecta and used this theory to increase their qualifications for advancements.

This made the battle important for Swordmaster Ketis as well. If the adherents of her new theoretical framework managed to break through at a higher rate than usual, then that would definitely serve as a powerful piece of evidence that her Heaven Earth Man Trifecta was valid to the mech pilot profession!

The expert pilots were already convinced by it. Not only did it explain Dise's impressive breakthrough, but they also felt the benefits of focusing on developing the concepts or elements that would comprise their future domains. Several high-tier expert pilots had already decided to stake their lives on a

breakthrough!

Chapter 6686 The Other Mech Commander

After the high-ranking mech pilots of the Golden Skull Alliance completed their meeting, they entered the cockpits of their mechs and prepared to launch,

Many of them were looking forward to proving themselves or breaking through in battle.

"Today is the day." General Ark Larkinson told himself as he interfaced with his Lionheart. He sentimentally stroked the armrest of his piloting chair. "It is only in a time of great need that heroes

are able to rise. The stage is set for my imminent ascension. I will prove that I can be the savior and protector that my subordinates and many others expect me to be for them. I have been playing this role for my entire career. I am ready to showcase my skills on a grander stage."

Just like many other expert pilots, Ark had developed a strong fascination for the Heaven Earth Man Trifecta. It explained so much why his progress had stalled for so many years.

Back in the old galaxy, it was pretty normal for expert pilots to slowly hit their bottlenecks and stall for a number of decades.

At first, the expert pilots believed that ordinary accumulation would see them through. When their expected rewards failed to manifest, they grew more desperate. In order to attain their sainthood, they became more proactive and sought more challenges to temper their willpower and prove their mettle.

Unfortunately for most of them, their efforts failed to yield results. They all felt as if there was an insurmountable gap between their current rank and the next one.

Ark felt grateful for moving to the Red Ocean. The Great Severing had been a disaster to many people, but it also presented rich opportunities to those who yearned to pursue greater power.

With the arrival of E energy radiation, humans were able to harness the power of a massive galaxy to fuel their own cultivation.

Although high-ranking mech pilots initially believed that the initial wave of systematic cultivation introduced by the Red Collective brought them very little benefits, Ark's opinions had changed after he learned about Ketis' theory.

The mech general understood now why the Red Collective released a number of auxiliary qi cultivation methods that were supposed to increase a mech pilot's affinity towards the classical elements and a number of other concepts.

It turned out that even mech pilots needed to embody one of the many concepts of the heavens in order to form their own domains!

Willpower alone was not enough to transform mech pilot into a god in the form of a human as well as a machine.

Although Ark did not yet understand the underlying reason why swordmasters and evidently high-ranking mech pilots had to master an element or concept in order to continue their progression, that did not stop him from obsessing over the concept of idolatry.

There were numerous moments where Ark wanted to take this a step further and present himself as a literal god to his fans and worshipers, but that was way too premature in his opinion.

Even he understood that he only possessed the qualifications to present himself as a literal deity when he became a god pilot!

Until he reached this critical point, Ark needed to be more measured in his ambitions and focus on attaining more immediate goals.

"Besides, a saint is already one step away from becoming a god. This is already good enough for the time being."

His appetite was not small. Ark had long grown dissatisfied with remaining stuck as a 'venerable' while numerous Larkinsons who belonged to a generation younger than him were already being referred to as saints!

What rankled Ark the most was that whenever he contacted the members of the Larkinson Army and the expeditionary fleet, the only mech commander that they truly admired was their 'Saint Commander!'

The fact that this title had become synonymous to Casella Ingvar filled Ark with a deep sense of unease!

It was not difficult for him to feel the lingering resentment that Casella held towards him. Even after all this time, she still blamed him for the death of her brother.

As a Larkinson, Ark could understand her pain and loss, but he did not agree with her decision to ascribe all fault to him. Both he and Imon had taken the conscious decision to challenge the Faceless Warrior in the Duqaste System.

Ark's expression turned grave. The botched raid on Duqaste IX still weighed heavily on him, not because one of his most important subordinates got killed, but because he failed to break through during that critical time.

In hindsight, it had been a mistake to conduct a stealth raid on the alien-held Duqaste IX with just a single stealth ship that only had enough room to accommodate a handful of expert mechs.

The decision to leave virtually all of the 77th Warborn Mech Division behind in orbit of Duqaste VII had proven to be a fatal error!

Ark recently began to wonder if he would have attained his cherished breakthrough if he brought a large audience to the raid. Not only would he and his Lionheart be able to put up a much better fight, but the mere act of showing off his combat prowess in front of hundreds of thousands of mech pilots and support personnel should have provided him with enough admiration and worship to propel him to sainthood! Alas, Ark had remained ignorant of the young Swordmaster's theory on what it took for 'willpower cultivators' to break through. He had unknowingly sabotaged one of his better chances of advancing to the next rank because he mistreated his own source of power.

"No more. Ignorance is not an excuse anymore. Now that I understand who I truly am, there is nothing left that can stop me from breaking through."

General Ark's willpower burned with confidence in the certainty that the variables were much more favorable this time!

Instead of conducting a lone surprise raid with a handful of expert pilots and the crew of a small stealth ship, he would soon deploy onto a battlefield where millions of human soldiers fought by his side!

So long as he performed admirably in front of them all, Ark would definitely attract a huge amount of attention, far more than he would have received if he was just fighting alongside the 77th Warborn.

There was only one obstacle standing in the way between him and his imminent

ascension.

Though Ark felt nearly assured that he would be able to become the Larkinson Clan's next ace pilot, he would not be their only ace commander.

The 'Saint Commander' had already taken a step in advance!

That young brat Casella Ingvar acted all high and mighty now that she possessed both great power and great authority. While she was not wrong in throwing her weight around, Ark felt as if she was constantly irritating him by acting as if she was better than him. Just because she gained a head start did not mean she would remain ahead

for long!

"Today is the day that I finally get to catch up." Ark grinned with expectation. "The difference between you and I is not that great."

Casella's growth had become stalled due to the time it took to upgrade her precious Minerva to a first-class ace command mech.

While Ark was aware that his Lionheart also needed to undergo a round of upgrades in order to bring it up to the same standard, he could probably convince his nephew to speed prioritize his needs over any other Larkinson expert pilot or ace pilot.

They were family, after all! The only person who may be able to gain a higher priority was his own father Benjamin!

However, his old dad was not the sort of person who put his needs above the needs of his children. Benjamin would definitely give way. His patience was immense. He had been waiting for half a lifetime to regain his ability to pilot a mech. He could wait a

half wear to a waar before his Blood Star received an unarada

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The issue with his father was not a big concern to Ark. What truly concerned him was

Casella. The woman had talent and a keen grasp on command. Just because Ark disliked her did not mean he underestimated her. Casella was good at earning the respect and admiration of those who served under her command.

Why wouldn't they? Many mech pilots dreamed of becoming her Knight or even better her Baron. Everyone who became a vessel of her true resonance all seemed to gain more inspiration on what they needed to do in order to bring them closer to their own

breakthroughs.

Though their beliefs had yet to be validated by any hard data, that did not stop the superstitious mech pilots from making the assumption that getting empowered by the Saint Commander practically doubled their breakthrough chances!

How could Ark compete against this killer weapon? His extraordinary command style was completely different from that of Casella.

Whereas she was more than willing to entrust her power to her subordinates, Ark

instead fed off the admiration and worship of his men in order to enhance his own

personal power!

The two were pretty much opposites as far as they were concerned. Neither of the two could remain dominant at the same time. One approach must

vanquish over the other.

While Casella's distinctive command style made it very easy for her to build up her popularity among the masses, Ark identified a clear weakness in her command style.

It was impossible for her Knights and Barons to give her the capability to defeat a phase lord.

As helpful as Commandeering and Enfeoffing a bunch of standard mechs may be, ants would still remain ants even if they grew a lot bigger and more menacing.

The general of the 77th Warborn ultimately believed that his own command style

would ultimately prevail because concentrating much of the strength of an entire mech force onto a single champion gave the mech division the best chance of

defeating a singularly powerful phase lord!

Ark's belief in the correctness of his own command style caused him to make a

forceful decision.

"The Saint Commander believes that high-tier expert pilots like myself should only

settle for challenging one of the four lesser phase lords. Feh. As if I will fall for her trap and let her hog all of the attention."

The glory of fighting a lesser phase lord was considerable, but it was far from enough for him and his Lionheart to attract the admiration of the masses.

Only by challenging one of the two formidable greater phase lords head-on would he

be able to distinguish himself on the battlefield! Although it was exceedingly dangerous for him to challenge such a mighty powerhouse in such a solitary fashion, Ark needed the best possible stimulus to trigger his breakthrough, and this would surely do the job!

"According to the intelligence, there are two greater phase lords leading the assault.

The Herald of the Void is a strident loyalist of the Red Cabal and a member of the jureg race. His defenses are formidable and he is skilled at brawling. The Lower Herdmaster is a nunser god whose skill in many different weapons has earned him the right to wield a Saint Piercer arm." Neither greater phase lords were easy to oppose.

The Herald of the Void was equipped with the best raiment and also possessed an

extremely hard exoskeleton shell that was proportionate to his enormous size. Ark would not be able to accomplish much if all of his attacks kept bouncing off the jureg greater phase lord's many defenses.

The Lower Herdmaster's defenses were not as high, but any attack from his Saint Piercer had a chance of killing his Lionheart with a single strike! Ark would have to

fight a lot more carefully than he would like, or else he would end up as the next Imon

Ingvar!

"Which greater phase lord should I challenge?" He wondered.

Chapter 6687 Joshua's Courage

Venerable Joshua was another hopeful who sought to accomplish a breakthrough today.

Though he held no animosity towards Tusa, Casella and the other ace pilots, he couldn't help but feel that he was falling increasingly further behind the longer he lingered at his current rank.

Of course, Joshua shouldn't complain considering that he managed to become a peak expert pilot so quickly with the help of those expensive general cultivation elixirs.

It used to be normal for expert pilots to fight and train for multiple decades until they were finally ready to seek their breakthroughs starting from their sixth, seventh or eighth decade of life.

Patriarch Reginald was an example of such an ace pilot. Back then, his breakthrough in the old galaxy was considered early by the standards of the time.

The earlier, the better. There were many expert pilots who only hit their limits when they were about to fall from their prime when they celebrated their hundredth birthday, causing their breakthrough chances to plunge.

Joshua wanted to avoid this outcome at all cost!

The battles going forward were only becoming larger and more difficult. Red humanity appeared to be doing fine at the moment, but that was only because the frontlines were still relatively intact.

Once the fourth defensive band fell and the fifth defensive band came under siege, the native aliens would probably begin to send their raiding fleets around the final defensive line and begin to terrorize the industrial star systems that suddenly became a lot more vulnerable!

That would probably put red humanity on the backfoot and exacerbate the shortage of resources and war materiel.

Though Joshua was only one pilot among many, becoming a saint could do much to alleviate the pressure. The more the people living in the star systems behind the defensive lines came under threat, the more he felt responsible for doing what he could to spare them from the threat posed by the aliens.

This was why this battle that was destined to end in a withdrawal for red humanity became so important to Joshua.

He did not really care for Viola Magnifica per se. What he cared about was that this was shaping up to become a battle where the threat posed by the incoming phase lords were great, but not to the point where resistance became pointless.

Saint Linda Cross and Saint Commander Casella Ingvar would have struggled to hold

back the two greater phase whales by themselves, let alone 4 additional lesser phase lords.

However, Saint Dise's surprising breakthrough slightly tilted the balance back in favor of the defenders just enough to significantly increase the success rate of this defensive action.

Venerable Joshua judged that the situation was still manageable enough that he could do his part and display enough courage and heroism to break through.

He could not do it alone, of course.

"Are you ready for action, Joshua?" His beloved wife asked over the communication channel.

"I am, though I would feel a lot more reassured when deploying into the field if you board one of the evacuation ships that is on the way out of this star system."

Ketis shook her head. "No, I need to be here. I am a warrior and the holder of the Heavensword no less. My honor as a swordmaster does not permit me to miss this fight. I have advised multiple expert pilots such as you on how to use my new theories to figure out how you can raise your breakthrough chances. It is only fair for me to stand by their side and express my confidence in my own judgment. I at least want to show solidarity to all of the hopefuls. There is a real chance that not all of them will return with their lives intact once they have deployed."

According to the strategic value of Viola Magnifica, this was not yet a battle that needed to be fought to the death.

However, it was hard for expert pilots to show a lot of restraint, especially when they were working towards their next major breakthrough!

Trying to tell the likes of Venerable Rosa Orfan and Venerable Vincent Ricklin to rein in their urges, take less risks and withdraw sooner rather than later would probably fall on flat ears!

"At least tell me the kids aren't aboard the Spirit of Bentheim anymore."

"Don't worry, Joshua, I have already sent Kirian and Mayra away. It is not their time yet to prove their mettle."

Joshua smiled when he thought back on his children, One of the reasons why he felt the need to step up was because he wanted to fight for the future of his son and daughter.

If red humanity fell, so would his clan and family!

The Red Ocean might not be native to humans, but if Joshua was willing to fight hard to turn it into a reality!

"Everchanger."

"YES. JOSHUA?"

"I will be approaching this fight differently than the last few times. I need you to cooperate with me more extensively than ever."

"THAT IS A HARD REQUEST TO MEET CONSIDERING THAT OUR COOPERATION ALREADY RANKS AT THE TOP AMONG THIRD-ORDER LIVING MECHS. THE ONLY MACHINE THAT CAN SURPASS OUR TEAMWORK IS JANNZI AND THE BASTION. IT IS TOO LATE FOR YOU TO REQUEST VES TO INSTALL A CARMINE SYSTEM INTO THE COCKPIT.

"I wasn't talking about that." Joshua shook his head. "I need you to help me cope with our latest 'team member! I haven't had enough time to practice with the Bitter Scimitar. The 'D-arm' is really powerful, but the personality that is hiding inside the weapon still remains awful. The fact that we have to store the blade in a separate shielded container says much about the safety and reliability of this new weapon." "ARE YOU EXPECTING THE BITTER SCIMITAR TO SABOTAGE YOU DURING THE FIGHT?"

"Maybe, but that not my main concern. I will be attempting to establish greater cooperation with the Bitter Scimitar. I am hoping that once the fight begins, the battle will make an impression on the violent weapon. Even if it still doesn't accept me as a partner and a wielder, I still hope that the D-arm will stop kicking up a fuss while we are surrounded by enemies."

"THAT SOUNDS TOO MUCH LIKE WISHFUL THINKING, BUT... MAYBE YOU CAN MAKE IT WORK. THE BITTER SCIMITAR RESENTS YOU, BUT IT LIKES TO SHED BLOOD AND INFLICT HARM ON OTHERS. MAYBE YOU CAN COME TO AN ACCORD WITH THE WEAPON WHERE IT WILL COOPERATE WITH YOU IN EXCHANGE FOR MAKING A PHASE LORD SCREAM"

Venerable Joshua momentarily shuddered. "I am not sure that recklessly indulging in the Bitter Scimitar's lust for blood is a good way to develop a healthy relationship with

the D-arm."

"FORGET ABOUT HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS. A WEAPON THAT IS STEEPED IN SO MUCH EVIL AND SIN AS THE BITTER SCIMITAR IS DYSFUNCTIONAL DOWN TO THE VERY CORE. IF YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE A BREAKTHROUGH, THEN YOU NEED TO PROVE THAT YOU ARE IN CHARGE. YOU EITHER MAKE THE SCIMITAR SURRENDER TO YOU, OR YOU WILL BE THE ONE TO BOW TO THE D-ARM."

The everchanger was right to voice his doubts and concerns. The third-order living mech had plenty of 'scuffles' with the Bitter Scimitar as well.

The gift presented by Ketis and Ves was a metaphorical double-edged sword. Joshua could not bring himself to reject the immense power offered by the blade, but the constant resistance was inhibiting his attempts to use the new D-arm to the fullest. "One way or another, I will solve the problem posed by the Bitter Scimitar." Joshua spoke with determination. "I cannot afford to let the weapon fight against me when I am doing my best to fight and survive in a confrontation against a phase lord." "Just to be sure, you will be challenging a lesser phase lord, right?" Ketis asked over the communication channel.

Joshua nodded. "I am not suicidal. I will leave the greater phase lords to the ace pilots who are left and whatever warships and mechs that are willing to offer fire support. I will be taking the fight to the lesser phase lords. They are still dangerous, but my

Everchanger can take a beating."

"THAT'S RIGHT."

"Do you have a target in mind already? I hope you are targeting one of the erudite

lesser phase lords. I don't want you to fight against a martial lesser phase lord. One of the reasons why your D-arm comes in the form of a scimitar is that it is simpler to wield than a straight sword. You only need to perform slashes. Even so, your bladesmanship is still woefully inadequate if you are ever fighting against a true

martial warrior."

Joshua's self-esteem took a hit, but he was able to take it. "I am not fighting one of the alien tough guys. My more enthusiastic colleagues such as Orfan and Vincent have already set their eyes on Zren-Divar and the Fatedriver. I will probably go for the Eight Lord of Takansha or Khaso Leiyen. The intelligence reports don't really have much information about them aside from figuring out that they like to keep their distance and manipulate space from afar."

"They are both orven native gods. The orvens sure have a lot of them." Ketis mused. "If

I look at the images of the Eight Lord and Khaso Leiyen, I have the impression that the

Eight Lord of Takansha may be trickier than the other. Khaso Leiyen comes across as a more aggressive, emotional and straightforward enemy. His fighting methods are likely simpler and more direct."

"So do you think I should test my mettle against Khaso Leiyen?"

Ketis paused for a moment. "It depends on how strong they are and what abilities they have. From what little intelligence that we have on hand, I think it is better for you to

challenge the Eight Lord of Takansha."

"Reason."

"You struggle against enemies with more pronounced strengths." Ketis said. "Before

you say anything, I know that you have improved and made up for a part of your shortcomings. That still does not invalidate my point. You are piloting an expert hero mech. Your Everchanger is incredibly versatile, but perfect versatility is an impossibility. Compared to enemies with extreme mobility or other pronounced strengths, your Everchanger is still limited by how much he can keep up. My intuition tells me that Khaso Leiyen may break your limits to such an extent that he will not

give you enough time to recover."

...

Though Joshua accepted Ketis' logic and agreed with it, his willpower did not allow

him to shy away from a lesser phase lord just because the enemy had the potential to exploit one of his weak points.

The expert pilot was tired of losing due to the inherent limitations of piloting a hero

mech.

Perfect versatility may not exist in reality, but Joshua became increasingly more determined to come close to it as possible!

If he always abided by his limitations, then he wouldn't have been able to break

through in the first place!

"Ketis."

"What is it, Joshua?"

"I love you, but I don't agree with you. Sometimes, a man has to do what is right. If this

Khaso Leiyen fellow poses a greater threat to our forces than the other lesser phase

lord, then I feel obliged to challenge him even if the matchup is not ideal. I am a hero. The Everchanger is a hero mech. Both of us are made to challenge the strong." "... At least you sound like a hero." Ketis sighed. "Whatever. Do what you want. Just remember that you are not only fighting for yourself. Our children and I do not want to see you return in a coffin. The upcoming battle is a final act of resistance before we depart. This is not a fight to the death. That comes later"

"I know. You don't need to remind me. I will definitely find a way to stay alive long enough to participate in the next battle, and the ones that come after"

Chapter 6688 Extreme Range Competition

The battle had begun.

The leading elements of the native alien forces had entered into extreme weapons range and began to test the defenses set up by the humans.

Numerous distant alien warships utilized their laser cannon batteries to lightly rake the energy shields covering the orbital fortresses.

At this range, it was hard to ensure that the weapons would hit their targets. Even if the orbits and trajectories of the large orbital fortresses remained completely the same, the extreme range amplified every mistake caused by dialing in the wrong angles.

This was why the human defensive forces did not bother to fire back at the distant enemies. It would only waste energy, wear down components and provide more information to the aliens.

The attackers had different ideas in mind.

"Those aren't ordinary alien ships. They are puelmer heavy cruisers!"

"Damn, almost all of their laser beam attacks are landing at our fortresses. Their titan shields are taking a more serious beating than expected!"

Although the orbital fortresses were unlikely to go down due to the probing shots launched by the enemy warships, the fact that the puelmer vessels were able to maintain such a high hit rate at such an unreasonable range was already impressive! This instance fully validated the theory that the puelmer race had invested their latest and more up to date assets to this star system!

The puelmers proved once again that they developed the most advanced sensors and targeting systems among the major races of the Red Ocean.

It was hopeless for anyone to shoot down the vessels. The puelmer heavy cruisers were much more mobile than the orbital space fortresses. They utilized their superior mobility to frustrate humans who thought that they could return the favor.

The puelmer warships continued to fire their laser cannon batteries at the defenses. The rest of the native alien forces took their time to cautiously move forward without risking any of them overextending.

It took a lot of time and trouble to make multiple different fleet elements move in a coordinated fashion towards a target.

Until the native aliens were ready to start the main battle, the puelmer heavy cruisers not only continued to fire their laser gun batteries without concern that they will overheat or miss to many shots.

In fact, the puelmer heavy cruisers slowly started to become more accurate. The native aliens were testing the field performance of their powerful transphasic laser cannon batteries and calibrating their settings in real-time!

"This is a mind game." Saint Commander Casella warned the members of the Golden Skull Alliance over a communication channel. "The aliens are testing our patience by attacking us in a steady and irritating fashion. They are showing off their extreme range strike capabilities as well as the technological improvements of puelmer assets. They are exploiting a universal weakness of every sentient being, and that is our unwillingness to take a beating without dishing it back."

No matter whether it was the laser cannon batteries mounted on the orbital fortresses or the handful of RF warships that remained in the Viola Magnifica System, none of them could guarantee that they could achieve a better result.

The competition was rigged from the beginning. The human defenders relied on a lot of 'fixed' defenses to help them weather the storm. All of these were much easier to target at long range than moving objects such as phasefighters and warships at such exaggerated distances.

"These arrogant bastards need to be taught a lesson!"

"Don't we have long-ranged combatants of our own?"

"There's the new Amaranto piloted by Venerable Davia Stark, Will she take action against the aliens? The new crystal rifle that comes paired with this upgraded mech looks incredibly wicked."

The Saint Commander of the Larkinson Clan grew more and more concerned about the current trend.

The advanced puelmer warships were definitely wearing themselves down by firing their laser cannon batteries so many times, but the aliens made sure to keep the firing rate low to give their advanced weapon systems plenty of time to cool and rest.

If this continued to take place for half an hour to an hour, the one-sided laser beam attacks would definitely destroy the moods of most of her troops!

Even if they had not yet sustained any physical damage to their mechs and bodies, the psychological effects generated by all of the sequential laser beam strikes was enough to disrupt the mental balance of all but the strongest of mech pilots!

It was not easy to counter this clever tactic. Unless the human defenders did anything proactive that could raise their morale and give them hope that their side possessed advantages as well, the differences in morale between the two forces may prove decisive!

No matter what, red humanity could not afford to remain passive.

The Saint Commander decided to open up a private communication channel. "Venerable Stark."

"Saint Commander." The older woman greeted with a mild degree of respect.

"How are you and the Amaranto doing?"

"We are operating at good to optimal conditions." Venerable Stark responded. "I believe my Amaranto Mark III has remained undetected while hiding at my current firing position. My new Instrument of Vengeance has already warmed up. I have yet to charge it at full power because my mech and weapon will produce a strong light show that anyone can notice. The mech designers have also warned that charging the weapon in advance and keeping it in a highly energized state for too long also stresses and damages the luminar crystals. My primary targets have yet to make an appearance, so I see no reason to prepare to fire my weapon right away"

Casella nodded in understanding.

The Amaranto Mark III was a specialized precision machine that should only save her firepower for the most crucial enemies. It was a huge waste to expend her formidable shots on phasefighters and enemy escort vessels.

Even so, Casella wanted to learn whether Venerable Stark was amenable to opening fire in advance.

"Are you able to land a hit if you charge up your weapon and target one of the enemy's larger warships? It would be ideal if you can hit one of the puelmer heavy cruisers." Davia nodded without hesitation. "I can guarantee a hit on one of the enemy capital ships. I am 80 percent certain that I can hit one of the puelmer heavy cruiser. That said, I do not see the purpose in taking a shot at this time. I am saving my firepower for our true enemies. The phase lords will decide whether we will be able to make an orderly retreat or collapse like a house of cards,"

Casella frowned. "Is the advantage of surprise that important to you, Stark?"

"Yes. The enemy does not know about the full power of my Amaranto Mark III. In fact, almost no one from our side understands what my new and improved machine is capable of. I would like it to stay that way because I need every scrap of advantage that I can obtain to make my debut strike as memorable and effective as possible."

"When and who?"

"When the phase lords show up." Stark responded. "I will pick my target based on many different factors. I can't tell you who I intend to put under my sights because I don't know enough about them yet. Only when I can observe them clearly will I be able

to gain a feel which one makes for a good target."

The Saint Commander paused in thought. Perhaps the situation that they were currently in was not as dire as she thought.

Sure, the harassment from the puelmer heavy cruisers was wearing people down, but

this downward trend could easily be reversed with one powerful counterattack!

The Amphis Extremis lacked long-ranged striking capabilities. As powerful as Saint Linda Cross and her new machine had become, that did not change the fact that the

latter was solely suited to close to mid-range assaults!

Out of all of the expert mechs in the Golden Skull Alliance, none of them could come

close to matching the previous or current iterations of the Amaranto in long-ranged

striking capabilities.

Casella may have become the Saint Commander, but her Minerva Mark I was not only limiting her performance, but also never really possessed notably strong ranged combat capabilities from the start.

The Everchanger suffered from a similar problem. The expert hero mech may have received a massive upgrade in melee combat power, but his ranged striking

capabilities had fallen behind.

Venerable Joshua was no marksman either. He did not have the skills to strike targets at such an extreme range!

Perhaps Venerable Brutus Wodin of the Glory Seekers may be closest to matching

Venerable Stark in marksmanship, but both expert pilots approached combat differently.

Brutus was much better than Stark in terms of evasion and maintaining steady aim while his machine was maneuvering and evading wildly. He was much more comfortable when fighting at mid-range.

All of these expert pilots and associated expert mechs would begin to shine when the two sides had come closer to each other.

Right now, there was only the Amaranto Mark III.

Time passed by. 20 minutes came and went as the native aliens continued their slow advance.

The appearance of so many warships and phasefighters generated even further psychological oppression on the human defenders.

At the same time, the strong show of force by the attacking side boosted the morale of every alien soldier, thereby increasing the chance that they would perform at their best in the coming fight!

The disparity in morale could easily cause hundreds of thousands of additional human casualties!

The native aliens decided to amp up the pressure by finally unveiling their gods.

"They've come!"

Two massive bodies and four less massive bodies appeared behind the main fleet elements.

Just no the intelligence unnnected the native

and 4 lesser phase lords to the Viola Magnifica System.

Nobody who was able to observe the powerful alien leaders could shift their eyes away

from the two greater phase lords. Their bodies were so much bigger than that of their lesser counterparts that they could already approximate the size of large battleships if

not larger!

The biggest one was definitely the Herald of the Void, a jureg martial greater phase lord with a penchant for brawling and wrecking.

That did not mean the Lower Herdmaster was much worse. The nunser martial

greater phase lord made up for his relative lack of stature by wielding one of the notorious Saint Piercer spears.

While the appearance of these phase lords indeed caused a lot of humans to lose a bit

of fighting spirit, this did not apply to Venerable Davia Stark. Her eyes practically lit on fire as she observed her primary targets. She set her sights

on each of the 6 phase lords and tried to decide which one she should grace with the first proper strike of her Amaranto Mark III!

Her Amaranto Mark III had already begun to charge up. Davia's fighting spirit continued to grow, causing her to resonate stronger and stronger with her recently upgraded machine.

The Solus Gas integration that was responsible for keeping her machine relatively

unnoticeable was struggling to hide the rapidly growing energy emissions of the powerful marksman mech.

Her nearly full hyper archemetal mech frame caused a lot of light from the surroundings to dim, only to amplify her own light emissions! The greater the accumulation of energy, the brighter the mech shone! The sixth generation living mech also began to pull energy from other sources.

The modern Endex System Version 3.0 supplied both electrical energy and E energy to

the machine, allowing the Amaranto to charge up faster without generating a greater energy vortex in the surrounding area.

Venerable Stark also struggled hard to resonate with both HeatMate and ChargeMate. It was an uphill battle for her to resonate with the two ace mech-grade resonating exotics. She felt as if she was struggling to lift a shuttle with her mind and willpower

alone. She had to fight hard for each measure of progress and constantly keep up her efforts for fear of losing all of her gains!

Though her efforts took a toll on her, the results were worth it as both the mech frame and the oversized Instrument of Vengeance began to glow like miniature stars!

The Amaranto Mark III had almost reached her strongest state!

"Activate Ultimate Module."

The Two-Step Execution Crystal integrated in the new Instrument of Vengeance was primed and ready to show off its capabilities.

Though Venerable Stark did not think it was necessary for her to rely on this Ultimate Module at this range, there were other reasons to use it aside from helping her calibrate her shots at extreme ranges.

Stark only needed to add one final enhancement to her charged attack. "Phase King, bless me with your power and teach these phase lords who have truly mastered the power of phasewater."

The design spirit readily answered her call. The Instrument of Vengeance had been turned into a blessed weapon, just like the Instrument of Doom.

This meant that the Phase King was readily able to descend onto the luminar crystal weapon and amplify its transphasic capabilities to a massive degree!

At this point, both the Amaranto Mark III and the Instrument of Vengeance had reached and maybe exceeded their upper boundaries!

If the living machine remained in this state for too long, she was liable to explode!

Many outside observers grew confused or concerned when one of the eye sockets of the Spirit of Benthaim's cat head prow began to shine like it contained a dazzling star.

Venerable Stark did not intend to give them enough time to deduce the truth. She cycled her aim to all six phase lords before she ultimately chose a target.

"It's you!"

The Instrument of Vengeance instantly shot out an bright white resonance-empowered light beam whose passage briefly lit up the entire battlefield!

"Wow!"

"How powerful!"

"Wait... she missed?!"

The Amaranto Mark III missed her initial shot!

As impressive as the transphasic hyper light beam looked, all of that energy went to

waste if it ended up hitting nothing until it dispersed into harmless heat and photons. "How could Venerable Stark fail to hit her mark?!"

The enemy phase lords already began to express their contempt and amusement. The

one that was targeted looked especially smug at the fact that he did not even have to test his defenses against this powerful strike! "The phase lords... they're laughing at us! They think we are weak!"

Chapter 6689 The Second Shot

The shot launched from one of the cat eyes of the Spirit of Bentheim's iconic prow had missed the mark!

Granted, any rifleman mech that attempted to strike a target from so many kilometers away would have missed anyway. It was just too difficult to control so many variables and keep the rifle of a barrel at the perfect angle to secure a hit.

As the native aliens gloated at the incompetence shown by the powerful marksman mech, the human defenders grew dismayed.

How come the puelmer heavy cruisers were able to maintain consistent and accurate laser beam fire at such enormous distances while their best marksman failed to land her own shot?

In fact, it was a bit unfair to compare the two with each other. The puelmer warships exclusively hammered the largest orbital fortresses that all followed constant and predictable trajectories.

Any human mech would struggle a lot more to do the same!

Mechs by nature were originally designed to fight at much closer ranges than typical warships were capable of. For centuries, they had been designed to fight and defeat other mechs, so they naturally gravitated towards improving their close to mid-range combat capabilities.

In other words, they were handicapped in long-ranged shooting contests from the start. This made it so that fewer people held expectations that they would 'win' this competition.

Venerable Stark did not take notice of what other humans and aliens thought about her performance.

She and her battle partner were still fully focused on their primary goal and mission. The initial shot missed, but they were already preparing to launch their second shot! What few people noticed as they reacted to the dramatic miss was that the Spirit of Bentheim's eye socket still glowed bright!

Although the energy levels of the Amaranto Mark III and the new Instrument of Vengeance had dipped, they were already beginning to return to their prior peak levels.

It turned out that the powerful marksman mech had only discharged a portion of her accumulated power!

It was a testament to the excellent design and powerful specifications of the Amaranto Mark III that many people mistook her partially charged attack as a blow that the mech was only able to launch at full strength!

Venerable Stark had a better appreciation of the difference in firepower and lethality between the Amaranto Mark II and the Amaranto Mark III.

"I can do better. I can do much better."

At this moment, Venerable Stark and her machine were busy trying to use the data gathered from the calibrating shot to finetune the decisive execution shot.

This was a process that should normally happen within a few seconds at most, but Stark decided to break from this standard routine.

Her next shot had to strike true, so Davia Stark was more than willing to impose additional delays in order to further calculate the best firing solutions.

The Two-Step Execution Crystal had already run the numbers and proposed minute adjustments to get the angle just right.

This would only remain valid for a short time, and its accuracy steadily dropped as the enemy phase lords maintained their advance towards the final fortress.

The mech and rifle glowed brightly once again. It was amazing to see how much energy they were able to absorb after the big upgrade. The Amaranto was most definitely a peak performance mech that only needed to make a few moves to turn the tide of a battle!

Was she capable of repeating her miracles? Did she have what it took to deter enemy phase lords with her Instrument of Vengeance alone?

"Get ready!"

Venerable Stark's momentum rose to a new peak, Her fighting spirit blazed with excitement and expectation. Her focus narrowed to the point where she had consciously cast aside most of her calculations and became solely focused on making sure her next shot hit her target.

All of the previous factors that made her attacks so much more powerful than before fell into place once again.

The offensive hyper materials integrated in the archemetal frame.

The ace mech-grade resonating exotics.

The Endex System Version 3.0.

The high saturation of phasewater.

The massive increase in size of the Instrument of Vengeance.

The blessing from the Phase King.

The Two-Step Execution Crystal's protocols for the critical execution shot.

All of these separate factors combined into a total package where mech and rifle turned into one extraordinary superweapon.

The line between the two practically blurred as they sucked in the surrounding light. in an unscientific manner and glowed extremely bright as a response!

As Venerable Stark quickly dialed in her settings, she decided to go all out and bet everything on this single shot.

"Vail, it's your turn."

"Chip chip!"

A dark and shadowy companion spirit emerged from her head. Vails' aura was tinged with the curse of death. Its aura made a strong contrast with the light-filled mech, but Vail was still able to enter the Instrument of Vengeance without effort and add her own modest strength to the impending attack!

The companion spirit's ominous properties happened to resonate well with the Two-Step Execution Crystal.

This was what Venerable Stark relied upon to give the execution shot additional meaning.

Just like her companion spirit, Stark herself was also able to imbue additional power into the already overloaded attack that was still in the making.

Even as her Instrument of Vengeance started to transmit a few warning signals due to holding back so much power, Venerable Stark still forced herself to squeeze out a bit more strength.

Just like every other expert pilot, Davia Stark had been studying Ketis' new theory.

After consulting with Venerable Dise, Stark worked hard to discover and develop her own 'element!

There were certain expert pilots who already knew what their element was supposed to be. Venerable Vincent Ricklin was a clear example of this. He knew exactly how he wanted to shape and express his power.

There were also other expert pilots who needed to do a lot more thinking and self-exploration in order to find out the best way to harmonize with the environment.

Fortunately, Venerable Stark managed to find her central concept rather easily after a bit of soul-searching.

Before she became an expert pilot, she was just an ordinary woman and a mech pilot.

Davia Stark still looked back on the days she spent in the Komodo Star Sector with fondness.

Life was not easy for her at the time, but she had learned to enjoy the simple pleasures

in life.

Then the Sand War came and ruined everything,

Due to the Big Two's neglect of the border regions, the sandman race were allowed to

invade humanity's borders and raze planet after planet. So many star systems fell in such a short amount of time that no second-rate state was able to organize any

proper resistance against the tide of sandmen!

After breaking through in desperation and almost giving into despair, the Davia Stark that emerged from these traumas was a completely different woman from before.

The Venerable Stark of today was no longer able to appreciate the simpler pleasures in

life because she was no longer able to return to her previous state.

She had lost her humanity and made up for it by becoming an avenger. Vengeance was the overwhelming purpose that drove her to fight, to challenge herself

and to persist in her life.

If she was not so driven by the need to take revenge against those who harmed her and many other people, she would have taken away her life already, because there was

nothing else that could fill the void in her heart!

Davia Stark was broken woman. Her return to strength did not heal all of her wounds. It just made her functional enough to fight and nothing more.

As the flames of vengeance burned brighter and hotter inside her heart, she felt as if

she was forming a connection with the primal human desire for retribution.

She was fighting more people than just herself!

How many red humans had died to the native aliens since the start of the Red War?

How many parents had lost their children?

How many children had lost their parents?

How many families broke apart and how many friendships became severed when the native aliens ruthlessly slaughtered every human in their path?

The vast majority of people who died and those they left behind were too weak and powerless to take revenge against the murderous aliens.

They were ordinary civilians. Only a minority of them served in a military organization, and only a tiny fraction of them possessed enough agency due to

piloting a mech.

Other than that, the people who were locked in grief after learning about the depths of their families and loved ones resonated with Venerable Stark like nothing else!

As the unfulfilled desire to take revenge began to converge upon Venerable Stark, she took a deep breath as she felt herself swelling with violent and less controllable power! She did not dare to hold this power for long, especially when she was already struggling to contain the other potent and unstable element of her expert mech.

The expert pilot instead channeled much of the desire for vengeance into the

Instrument of Vengeance.

This caused the luminar crystal rifle to output even more energy emissions!

Its charge had not grown by much, but it began to take on strange properties. Negative E energy radiation channeled into the Instrument of Vengeance, causing it to harmonize with the collective human desire to exact retribution upon the native

aliens.

It was at this moment that Venerable Stark no longer felt alone anymore. There were millions if not billions of people who held the same desire for revenge as

her. Their reasons and motivations may vary, but they could all agree on the best way to satisfy their cries.

At this point in time, Venerable Stark was no longer just a high-tier expert pilot with a massive chip on her shoulder.

She had become the focal point of all of red humanity's imperative to punish the native

aliens for their many transgressions!

It did not matter to Venerable Stark whether the aliens were in the right and that they

were only defending their own native territories.

Stark hated the aliens with a vengeance. They were all the same, whether back in the Milky Way or here in the Red Ocean.

The only good alien was a dead alien!"

With that thought in mind, Venerable Stark tried her best to combine the power of

human retribution into her mech rifle, causing the bright weapon to grow hot with

surging anger.

Stark felt as if her rifle and mech had become a vessel that was solely designed to deliver the power of collective human retribution to one of the culprits who were chiefly responsible for all of the killing!

As her state rose to an unprecedentedly high peak, she felt powerful and omnipotent

like nothing else!

She had never wielded so much might in the past!

While the Amaranto Mark III was able to endure a lot of stresses due to her quality materials and exquisite archemeh design, the machine had already exceeded the time limit on how long she was supposed to contain all of the combined energies!

Venerable Stark delayed no further. "Execution Strike."

The massive bright light beam that shot out of the Spirit of Bentheim was so much

thicker and more powerful than the previous strike that it temporarily overloaded many sensors!

Everyone's eyes became seared by the bright white line that crossed right across space and off into the distance!

The passage of this distorting and extremely penetration energy attack was so extraordinary that even the heavens bowed before its passage!

Though it happened far too quickly for people to observe this effect, the bright light

beam continually gathered more light as it passed through space. This caused everything around the beam to plunge into darkness, as if nothing on the battlefield existed aside from this overwhelmingly powerful attack! Though the bright light beam only lasted for an instant, the concentration of energy

was so immense that the phase lord that Venerable Stark set her sights upon was unable to react and defend against this surprisingly powerful follow-up attack. The Execution Strike shattered his spatial barrier in an instant, overwhelmed the azure energy shield that served as a second layer of protection and drilled through the armor plating of his raiment!

Even then, the energy beam still hadn't expended all of its power! The retributive light tunneled through the massive body of the phase lord like a hot knife through butter and even had enough energy left to exit from the other side!

The entire battlefield seemed to go still as both humans and aliens struggled to make sense of what had happened.

Chapter 6690 The Mortality of Phase Lords

Venerable Davia Stark exhaled.

Her Amaranto Mark III, which once shone so bright that it looked as if the cat head prow of the Spirit of Bentheim was about to explode, had dimmed now that she had discharged all of the accumulated energies in her execution shot.

The last shot had taken too much out of her. It was far too difficult for her to concentrate multiple sources of energy and mix them together without causing them to explode.

The Amaranto Mark III and the reinvented Instrument of Vengeance were both stellar pieces of engineering for being able to channel so much power without causing anything to explode or melt.

Even so, Venerable Stark had pushed several delicate components to their limits and beyond. If not for the fact that her true resonance was able to temporarily boost their tolerances, the Instrument of Vengeance would have shattered into pieces, releasing so much catastrophic energies that her Amaranto Mark III would have struggled to stay in one piece!

She was thankful that this outcome did not come to pass.

Stark had put her complete faith in her machine, and the Amaranto Mark III rewarded her for it. The powerful mech was designed for the future and could handle way more loads than her previous iteration.

The only limit to her power was her lacking power reactor and her pilot.

Venerable Stark had become the weaker partner in their relationship.

This was why she already felt exhausted and worn out after letting loose a single serious attack.

She did not regret it, though. She had deliberately sought to leverage as much of her willpower and mental strength as possible. Stark sought to push everything she had in a single overwhelming attack to ensure she was able to land the most decisive blow against a phase lord.

The enemy 'gods' might not deserve to be called this way, but they were undeniably difficult to damage.

Ordinary attacks did not cut it. Their spatial barriers and energy shields were ridiculously strong and could soak up a lot of attacks.

If Venerable Stark wanted to make a difference, then she needed to rely on releasing a single strike with all of the power she could muster.

She had done so. If this gambit of hers ended in failure, then she would have to sit out the rest of the battle while being reduced to a passive participant in the battle.

Right now, Venerable Stark only cared about one thing.

How had her target fared when his massive true body got speared by the extremely Execution Strike?

She was far from the only individual who wondered about that. Many other people had trained their sensors in the direction of the phase lord in question.

The Amaranto Mark III did not target either of the two greater phase lords. Venerable Stark wisely believed that the probability of failing to meet her goals was too high.

She instead wanted to target one of the four lesser phase lords.

Stark did not know much about them. The scouts and intelligence services only collected a limited amount of data. Observing them through the excellent sensors of the Amaranto Mark III granted her better insights on her targets.

Of the four lesser phase lords, she quickly dismissed the two martial-oriented ones. Their mastery over spatial manipulation was usually inferior, but they made up for it by training and upgrading their physical prowess. Their flesh was usually denser and more fortified with tough exotic materials.

With the help of phasewater organs, their bodies also gained numerous different ways to contain and repair heavy injuries. Combined with the fact that martial phase lords were much better conditioned against pain and were able to keep fighting even when they were partially crippled, they were just better at resisting the Amaranto Mark III's attacks.

The same could not be said for the erudite phase lords. They usually amounted to scholars, politicians and other upper members of a society.

No matter what race they belonged to, the individuals at the top rarely fought in person.

Instead, they were the ones that ordered others to fight on their behalf!

The two crudite phase lords just happened to be orvens, which was good news.

Venerable Stark and the expeditionary fleet had fought against many different orvens over the years. She was intimately familiar with the biologies of mortal orvens. The physiology of their phase lord counterparts may have mutated a lot, but the most important organs should still be in the same places.

Of the two orvens, one of them came across as more cautious and reserved while the other possessed a more aggressive bearing.

The Eight Lord of Takansha looked as if he would rather be elsewhere than on the battlefield.

The orven lesser phase lord respected the threat posed by red humans a lot more seriously than his peers and conjured up multiple spatial defenses around him to

Though his peers thought he was being silly for acting so cautiously, the phase lord was of a civilian origin. War was too frightening for an academic like himself! Khaso Leiyen on the other hand felt excited about killing as many humans as possible. Whether he was motivated by greed for the rich rewards promised by the Red Cabal or the desire to shed as much blood as he could, the more aggressive phase lord was already prepared to wreak havoc onto the human defensive positions. Whatever Khaso Leiyen specialized in, he had clearly selected phasewater organs and honed his spatial abilities with an offensive focus. This orven phase lord carried himself like a wrecking ball, or at least a god who was able to summon as many wrecking balls as he wanted.

That made him the most suitable target in Stark's eyes.

Her judgment may be wrong, but she believed in her eyesight and intuition.

It was clear that she made the right choice.

The instant her Amaranto Mark III unleashed the most powerful attack that she had launched up to this point in her existence, the two erudite lesser phase lords reacted very differently!

The Eight Lord of Takansha was clearly a lot more prepared to defend against surprise attacks, because he only twitched for a miniscule amount of time before he reflexively generated multiple layers of spatial barriers around his entire true body!

In contrast, Khaso Leiyen was much slower to react. He was not able to strengthen his spatial barrier or activate any other defensive measures from his raiment or his

phasewater organs.

By the time he properly registered the attack heading in his direction, the overpowering light beam had already successively pierced through his spatial barrier, his azure energy shield, his armored raiment and his flesh!

Though the laser beam was proportionally thin compared to the formidable stature of the lesser phase lord, it still managed to pierce through several phasewater organs as well as his heart before escaping through his back!

As the light levels returned to normal on the battlefield, everyone tried to see what happened to the lesser phase lord.

Khaso Leiyen was absolutely not in good shape anymore. He keeled over and held the hole in his chest where the attack had pierced through.

Phasewater-infused blood leaked out from the holes on his front and back. The amount of blood leaking from his body was not as much as it could have been, but that

was actually a bad sign in this case.

His heart was not circulating the blood in his veins anymore.

Phase lords or not, so long as their true bodies were still modeled after the biologies

of their race, their weak points still remained the same!

A mortal orven individual would die if his heart got stabbed by a spear of light.

The same did not necessarily apply to an orven phase lord.

The physique of a phase lord was an impossibility in biological terms. It worked

through principles that nobody fully understood.

Yet for all of their ability to defy the laws of physics, no amount of phasewater could

make up for the absence of a heart!

This was not necessarily a fatal wound to every phase lord.

Some martial phase lords implanted their bodies with phasewater organs that could

promote the flow of blood in their bodies.

They were effectively second hearts that also happened to grant them additional insurance in case their real hearts got destroyed!

As Khaso Leiyen's alien expression conveyed shock and disbelief as he feebly raised his hand to cover the hole in his chest, it became increasingly more clear that he did not possess this backup organ.

The other five phase lords froze in place. They no longer conveyed as much arrogance and confidence as before.

They all stared at Khaso Leiyen in silence.

None of them moved forward to help the critically injured native god.

Whether it was because they were frozen in shock or because there was nothing they could do to treat the injuries of another phase lord, Stark did not know.

All she cared about was that Khaso Leiyen was on his own.

Was he capable of recovering from this wound?

That became less likely as the orven phase lord remained hunched over while suffering from a huge amount of pain.

His body was not healing.

His wounds were growing worse.

The destruction of his heart was so great that:

working condition.

I was impossible to restore it back to

As Khaso Leiyen tried to make use of his elevated control over his own physique to apply emergency solutions, he despairingly felt that his strength was leaving his body! His control over the fabric of space had taken a hit after multiple phasewater organs got destroyed, but now his healthy organs were faltering as well! Meanwhile, his psyche grew less stable as he felt a dark and murderous force

enranging through his true body

The true resonance that empowered this mysterious force not only added enough

power to this force to elevate it into a serious threat, but also made it much more

difficult for Khaso Leiyen to remove.

The heavily injured phase lord gradually figured out that this mysterious force was one

of the contributing factors that made his wounds worse!

Not only that, but it was hindering his true body in several other ways. It was like a

parasite that devoured his body from the inside.

The orven phase lord coughed blood that was concentrated with a moderate amount.

of phasewater. The alien god raised his hand and looked at his own blood stains.

He looked down at the hole that had been cut through his rainment. If he was able to bend his back further, then he might even be able to see the space on the other side of the hole!

The alien opened up his mouth and spoke a few alien words before growing still.

"Is he... dead?"

"Life signs are dropping! Spatial activity has plunged by over 90 percent. Body temperature is beginning to drop. The lesser phase lord known as Khaso Leiyen has either entered into hibernation... or died at the hands of Venerable Davia Stark"

From the moment Davia Stark acknowledged the final result of her dramatic shot, she closed her eyes and felt an unprecedented period of peace and serenity.

For a tiny moment of her life, the ghosts of all of the people that haunted her dreams and waking hours left her alone.

She had fulfilled her purpose as a vessel for people's desire to exact vengeance against the culprits responsible for their demise.

Though Khaso Leiyen likely had not participated in the massacres that saw many humans lose their lives, he was still representative of the native alien regimes that sought to exterminate the extragalactic invaders!

Therefore, the death of this orven phase lord satisfied the long-held wishes of a huge amount of people, both dead and alive!

Now, these people seemed to reward Venerable Stark for her dedication. More and more E energy radiation began to flow in her direction.

A certain part of her will and spirit began to sublimate as she gained a much better realization of her purpose and goals in her second life!

"I... am... VENGEANCE!"

Apotheosis came for her like a mother welcoming back her lost daughter!