

Mech Touch 6691

Chapter 6691: The Limit of the Pilot

Venerable Davia Stark broke through.

Every sensor that was able to get a read on the Amaranto Mark III identified the undeniable manifestations of a second apotheosis.

Red humanity just became a little stronger than before after welcoming the ascension of a new ace pilot!

Many human defenders immediately cheered as they saw their hopes of surviving this battle rise higher.

Many high-tier expert pilots of the expeditionary fleet sincerely transmitted their congratulations to Saint Davia Stark.

Although they were all jealous that she had managed to take this crucial step first, the powerful expert pilots all felt confident that they could grasp their own chance during this battle!

As Saint Davia Stark broke through, she became stronger in every way. Although her accumulation was not too great, the fundamental transformation sublimated her willpower and spirit until she was able to birth a new domain!

The cat head prow of the Spirit of Bentheim that previously showed off the majesty of the Larkinson Clan suddenly began to glow brighter while exuding a strong threatening aura.

Anyone who held even the slightest contempt towards red humanity immediately felt guilty, as if the source of the newly formed domain would come to them and force them to surrender their lives one day.

The powerful domain of the latest ace pilot of the Larkinson continued to expand and take shape. E energy radiation from the environment supplemented its growth and helped to solidify the ace pilot's new foundation.

In the meantime, the Amaranto Mark III underwent a transformation of her own. The recently upgraded mech eagerly absorbed a portion of the powerful feedback released by her battle partner, using the energies to boost her growth and become a better living mech!

The compatibility between the mech and mech pilot had already been high, but it rose even further as the energies moulded the sophisticated archemehch into a machine that better matched Davia Stark's domain and power expression!

The archemehch continued to glow bright. The unusually high concentration of hyper materials in her archemehch frame caused the entire machine to resonate with Saint Stark on a much deeper and stronger level than before.

The resonance meters shot up, breaking straight past the limit of an expert pilot and propelling all the way to 108 laves before hitting a ceiling!

If Saint Stark's accumulation was greater, then it may have been possible for her to surpass Saint Commander Casella Ingvar's resonance strength.

This was especially possible considering that the Miracle Couple technically designed the Amaranto Mark III as a partial ace mech rather than a pure expert mech!

At this time, Gloriana's bold and forward-thinking decision to replace the expert mech-grade resonating exotics with ace mech-grade resonating exotics seemed prescient.

Although the Amaranto Mark III was not entirely an ace mech, she had definitely risen beyond the limits of an expert mech from the moment the Design Department completed her most recent upgrade.

This brought so many benefits to Saint Stark. For all intents and purposes, she was already piloting a quasi-first-class ace mech in many ways that mattered!

Though a part of her components, hardware configuration and operating system parameters were still tuned to accommodate a high-tier expert pilot, it was quite easy to perform shallow modifications and retune the Amaranto Mark III until she became a proper ace mech like the Dark Zephyr Mark III!

It was unfortunate that the Amaranto Mark III could only complete this transformation in a workshop, but it didn't matter too much for the newly ascended saint as the classification of resonating materials was by far the most important variable that differentiated expert mechs from ace mechs!

All of this meant that unlike many other pilots who broke through a second time, Saint Stark did not face as many constraints from her machine!

In fact, now that Saint Stark's resonance strength had become so much stronger than before, she no longer felt as much strain when trying to resonate with ChargeMate and HeatMate.

The two resonating materials comprised of a classic combination among ace mechs that relied heavily on energy weapons.

One of them was capable of directly converting true resonance into electrical energy.

The other was able to reduce a lot of heat by expending true resonance.

Although the effects sounded simple, they were absolutely powerful under the right circumstances!

The stronger the ace pilot, the more he or she was able to benefit from these two resonating alloys!

At this moment, Saint Stark had only just become an ace pilot, so she was not able to tap into the greater potential of the two resonating exotics.

It was already enough that she was able to draw out a part of their strength and make her ace mech a little stronger!

With the power of her explosive forced resonance, Saint Stark was able to sidestep the fairly weak power reactor of the Amaranto Mark III and improve the living mech's energy output so that it faintly surpassed the threshold of a first-class high-ranking mech!

When combined with the Endex System Version 3.0 which just experienced a considerable boost in efficiency and effectiveness due to the most recent willpower sublimation, the Amaranto Mark III was able to output even stronger energy beams than before.

The best part about many of the changes and improvements triggered by Saint Stark's breakthrough was that it was all persistent rather than temporary!

The newly ascended ace pilot grinned as her shining eyes gazed at the enemies in the distance.

She could practically feel the fear emanating from the phase lords that were located so far away that their massive bodies had to be viewed through magnifying telescopic optical sensors.

She no longer saw the phase lords as threats per se.

Though she always had to remain on guard against these powerful alien foes, right now the power balance was firmly in her favor!

"Up close, I am at your mercy. From afar, I am the executioner who shall harvest your lives!"

Saint Stark did not yearn to be invincible and omnipotent.

She only asked for one thing.

She wanted the power to kill her targets no matter how strong they may be. The ace pilot knew that as long as her foes remained at extreme range from her own Amaranto Mark III,

As long as Saint Stark piloted the Amaranto Mark III, she knew without a doubt that nearly any enemy became vulnerable to her Instrument of Vengeance so long as they were in the open and far enough away!

It just so happened that there were still 5 high-priority targets flying in open space!

The slow and steady advance of the native aliens had turned from an intimidating display to a shooting gallery as far as Saint Stark was concerned!

"Stark!" The Saint Commander transmitted an urgent message to the latest ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan. "How long are you able to last?!"

"Not for long." Stark scowled.

"Even with your new mech?"

"My new ace mech allows me to stretch my grown legs without hitting any limits, but that doesn't mean much if I have already run a marathon beforehand. I can feel that my explosion of strength is temporary. You've experienced the same thing. You should know what it is like. My mech has little to no influence on how long I can last."

That was the only downside to breaking through in battle. Though she was incredibly glad that she had finally gained the strength and status that she needed to exact her revenge on those who preyed on humans that could not protect themselves, she would probably have to retire from the battlefield from the moment her forced resonance ran out of steam!

"Then make the most of it." Casella Ingvar succinctly said.

"Oh, I intend to." Saint Davia Stark grinned.

The Amaranto Mark III flared with greater power than before. The ace mech had not weakened by any measure compared to before. In fact, she had grown stronger and was able to absorb a lot more E energy with the help of a domain that was powered by forced resonance!

The entire Spirit of Bentheim suddenly darkened as the Amaranto Mark III absorbed much of the light from the surrounding environment.

The living mech's Divurnas alloy worked much more effectively than before. It sucked in a torrent of light energy and channeled it all into the Instrument of Vengeance.

The oversized rifle already glowed like a blazing hot white star. Previously, the weapon struggled to contain so many different energies at elevated quantities.

Now, the most recent wave of willpower baptism along with the much stronger application of forced resonance effectively caused the weapon's tolerances to expand in an explosive manner.

The Instrument of Vengeance's concentration of energy exceeded that of the previous instance!

The native aliens weren't stupid. Even if they had difficulty making sense of what was happening inside the eye socket of the cat head prow of the Spirit of Bentheim, they knew an attack was coming!

This time, the phase lords no longer stupidly postured their giant and very exposed true bodies in the open.

The alien gods may be prone to arrogance and conceit, but they were not stupid, especially if they have lived for hundreds if not thousands of years.

The 5 remaining phase lords completely shed any notion of dignity and hastily warp traveled to the rear of the closest alien battleships, intending to use their formidable hulls as solid cover!

Saint Stark let out a noise of irritation. If she wielded the previous version of the Instrument of Vengeance, then she would have been able to defeat this foolish countermeasure by bending her energy beam at an angle.

Unfortunately, one of the changes that Ves had made to the Instrument of Vengeance was to replace Opticonium in order to free up capacity to integrate ChargeMate and HeatMate to the Amaranto Mark III.

Saint Stark did not think it was wrong to make this swap. Without the additional power and tolerances provided by the two ace mech-grade resonating alloys, her earlier strike wouldn't have been able to become strong enough to assassinate Khaso Leiyen.

Since she was no longer able to bend her energy beam attacks anymore, she may as well attempt to wound and kill the phase lords by relying on brute force!

"You are next!"

She did not pull out all of the stops this time. The Two-Step Execution Crystal was an Ultimate Module that was not as suited in the current conditions. Using it was time-consuming and would force her to make fewer shots than she would like.

Besides, her latest breakthrough had improved her in a way that made it a lot easier for her to maintain her accuracy at this range.

As soon as she trained her rifle in the direction of the Eight Lord of Takansha, she decisively pulled the trigger.

Another exaggaratingly strong and thick bright light beam lanced across space before striking at the battleships that the other orven phase lord used as makeshift cover!

Just as Stark expected, the energy beam pierced through the multiple layers of azure energy shields as if they were nothing and pierced through the hull as if it was only a minor speed bump!

After the beam instantly passed through the other side of the thick hull, it pierced through the other layers of azure energy shields that were oriented towards the opposite side before finally slamming into the defenses of the Eight Lord of Takansha!

The alien was ready for the attack. He apparently specialized in defense, because he did not just rely on his native spatial barrier to resist this overwhelming strike, but also conjured up four more layers of spatial barriers in front of his true body!

Though the additional spatial barriers were significantly smaller and did not cover every angle of his body, the Eight Lord of Takansha was still able to put them in the way of the extremely powerful energy beam!

Three of the barriers broke in quick succession, but the fourth flared brightly before finally succumbing.

The native spatial barrier caught the remaining energy beam, but it had exhausted so much of its power that it finally fizzled out of existence.

The Eight Lord of Takansha looked weary, but relieved.

Then the eye socket of the Spirit of Bentheim began to glow again amidst the spreading darkness.

Saint Davia Stark was already preparing to launch her next strike!

Chapter 6692: Terror From Afar

The Amaranto Mark III's firing rate was still as slow as ever.

Becoming an ace pilot hadn't changed the awful long time it took to fully charge the Instrument of Vengeance.

However, the power of every attack was so astonishing that it captivated everyone's attention whether they wanted it or not. There was no choice as the damage output of the Amaranto Mark III was so exaggerated.

With every bright white energy beam that lanced out of her Instrument of Vengeance, the formidable alien battleships that were supposed to be strong enough to withstand the attack of expert mechs for a while became gutted.

Neither their azure energy shields nor their hull structures could offer enough resistance to block the incredibly penetrating attacks from the most powerful ranged mech associated with the Larkinson Clan!

The Eight Lord of Takansha grew distressed as his weakened spatial barriers failed to resist the onslaught of the powerful energy beam. The partially expended energy beam continued to lance forward and cut straight through his raiment before finally drilled a hole into his lower body.

The phase lord uttered a silent scream of pain that shook the surrounding space!

It was only due to the tiny delay generated by the continuous blockades that the orven lesser phase lord managed to move out the way just enough to avoid getting struck in the heart!

As the battleship that the native god used as a makeshift shield began to falter as her hull became stressed by secondary explosions, the Eight Lord of Takansha still sought to secure his life.

Since not even the largest alien hulls were able to block the Amaranto Mark III's piercing strikes, the orven phase lord figured out a better solution.

Space warped around him as he made his way to the Herald of the Void!

The greater phase lord in turn did not want to witness the fall of another native god, even if he belonged to another race.

The jureg greater phase lord uttered an alien command that saw the rest of his exalted peers converge upon each other!

The phase lords did not hide their fear towards the distant ace mech and adjusted their formation so that they lined up with each other.

The alien phase lords moved quickly despite their formidable bulk and mass. Since the position of the Amaranto Mark III remained static, the native aliens were able to trace the exact trajectory of the energy beams and adjust their formations accordingly.

At this time, the Herald of the Void used his much larger true body to serve as a physical shield for the 3 surviving lesser phase lords.

In the face of the extremely powerful and incredibly penetrating energy beams unleashed by the Amaranto Mark III in her forced resonance state, none of the lesser phase lords wanted to take their chances!

What a huge loss of face!

Back in their home territories, countless mortal alien individuals worshiped and looked up to Zren Divar, the Fatedriver and the Eight Lord of Takansha as gods.

Each of them enjoyed many years of life and had grown accustomed to being a part of the ruling class of their own societies.

How many years had it been since they were driven to such desperation that they had to take shelter behind the bulk of a greater phase lord?

It was ridiculous for them to hide from the firepower of a single ace mech, but they had no other choice!

In fact, the damage inflicted by the Amaranto Mark III was not necessarily higher than that of other ace mechs.

What made the Amaranto Mark III so much more threatening than the other machines was that she was almost fully designed to maximize her firepower.

The Amphis Extremis piloted by Saint Linda Cross was designed as an assault mech that possessed good defenses but also scored relatively well in offense and mobility.

The Mars piloted by Patriarch Reginald Cross placed greater emphasis on offensive power, but still made a number of compromises in order to keep its defense and mobility good enough to facilitate aggressive actions.

The Dark Zephyr placed the highest emphasis on mobility, and possessed relatively poor offensive power. If not for the fact that Saint Tusa temporarily borrowed the tier 3 Destroyer spear, the ace light skirmisher wouldn't have posed much of a threat against alien phase lords.

No matter what areas they excelled in, the vast majority of ace mechs were designed for dueling, brawling and intense dynamic maneuvers.

This was a common design direction due to the fact that ace pilots had a long tradition of dueling against other ace pilots.

They only saw themselves as their opponents. They could not stand the thought of losing against a peer because their machine was not able to keep up with the adversary.

The Amaranto Mark III clearly deviated from this pattern because the original intent of this machine was to take enemies out at a distance.

She was never meant to duel against a powerful opponent up close. The Larkinson Army always made sure to provide adequate cover and support for Venerable Davia Stark so that she would not have to do anything else but snipe her targets.

The living mech started out as the realization of the extreme firepower concept, and her third iteration only made this defining characteristic more pronounced!

Not only was her single-shot firepower incredibly damaging, her effective range was astounding as well!

The alien phase gods had nothing in their arsenal that could retaliate effectively against the extremely distant marksman mech.

The only vessels that could pinpoint the coordinates of the Amaranto Mark III and land effective retaliation hits onto the Amaranto Mark III were the high-tech puelmer heavy cruisers.

Their formidable transphasic hyper laser cannon batteries all swiveled around so that they were aiming straight at the Spirit of Bentheim.

While it was a lot more difficult for the heavy cruisers to land a hit on a moving capital ship, the Amaranto Mark III generated so much energetic activity that the puelmer targeting systems were able to calculate their firing solutions faster and with greater ease.

It was not always good to be able to generate so much energy. The Amaranto Mark III's energy emissions were so excessively high that they may as well be giant sign posts that told the native aliens where to aim!

Dozens of warship-grade laser beams lanced across space and largely managed to hit the Spirit of Bentheim!

Though many of the laser beams still missed due to minute errors and because of the factory ship's unpredictable course changes, the majority of attacks still struck her azure energy shields!

Fortunately, the attacks were spread out across the hull, so none of the shields broke.

Most of the energy beams struck near or at the bow section of the Spirit of Bentheim, but this happened to be the most well-protected part of the factory ship.

Although Saint Davia Stark did not excel in defense, her new Saint Kingdom was still able to weaken and dampen any attack that entered its effective range!

The Amaranto Mark III would have been fine if the enemy energy attacks managed to bypass all of those layers of defense.

The cat head prow of the Spirit of Bentheim provided excellent cover for mechs that sheltered inside the eye sockets. The threatening ace mech laid prone in order to minimize her silhouette towards the native alien forces as best as possible.

Saint Davia Stark did not worry about the incoming attacks at all and continued to focus on what she did best, which was launching powerful precision shots at her opponents!

Unfortunately for her, the Amaranto Mark III in her forced resonance state was unable to threaten the lives of any further lesser phase lords!

The native alien gods had traded away their dignity for safety. They were far more willing to cower behind their stronger peers so long as this act protected them from the wrath of a newly ascended ace pilot that already took away the life of an orven lesser phase lord!

No matter how much Saint Stark wanted to make her bright light beam attacks punch through the defenses of the Herald of the Void, her ace mech had reached her limit.

The only results produced by her eye-wateringly bright full-powered shots was to partially drain the greater phase lord's spatial barrier.

The Herald of the Void was not as easy to take down as the others! He had developed his body, his phasewater organs and his abilities much longer than the other phase lords. His much higher phasewater concentration amplified almost all of his capabilities.

This was not an enemy that a junior ace pilot could challenge on an equal level.

The only results gained by the Amaranto Mark III's powerful attacks was to exercise the Herald of the Void's phasewater organs and expose the strength of his spatial barrier.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar had enough of this display.

"Stark! Don't waste your firepower on the Herald of the Void. Even if you break past his spatial barrier, his exoskeleton shell can resist a lot of damage as well. You are better off investing your remaining energies into eliminating the most threatening alien warships. I have already designated the highest priority targets to you over the commandnet. Do your best to eliminate as many of them in the time that you have left. Every alien battleship that falls will save thousands of mech pilots and tens of thousands of other soldiers on this battlefield."

Saint Davia Stark scowled, but she did not reject Casella Ingvar's logic.

The Herald of the Void had quickly taught her a lesson that just because her offensive power had grown by a lot that this was not enough to pierce through the defenses of a greater phase lord.

Not yet.

Not alone.

As long as she consolidated her new state and learned how to channel her newfound powers more effectively, she might be able to threaten the jureg greater phase lord's life, especially if he was already engaged in battle by another ace mech!

The extreme range between the two sides worked against her this time. Being able to attack the native alien champions from such a distance spared her from any serious retaliation, but it also left the rest of the human defenders with no options to capitalize on the openings made by the Amaranto Mark III!

Davia quickly adjusted her targeting. Though her pride and ego screamed at her to continue to hammer the phase lords, there were still plenty of other aliens that deserved to taste her vengeance.

The superiority of an ace pilot over warships became a lot more evident for the following period as the Amaranto Mark III accurately struck the largest and most threatening alien warships.

Each of every piercing bright light beam pierced through the azure energy shields of the alien vessels and punched straight through the exterior hull and citadel before destroying the most critical power generators and other vital systems!

While most of the alien battleships that got speared by the Amaranto Mark III did not collapse or blow up right away, the damage they sustained was so severe that they had effectively become crippled before the proper battle even started!

After landing a crippling blow on the seventh battleship, the Amaranto Mark III finally began to dim, causing the surrounding light levels to return to normal.

The ace mech had withdrawn from her forced resonance state.

Saint Davia Stark had completed her breakthrough and had drained herself for the second time.

Her fatigue was very real. She could not stave off the wave of exhaustion that overtook her transformed body. The stresses she endured were too great. She felt as if her ballooning willpower had forcibly expanded her entire being, causing her to feel as if she had metaphysically grown larger.

This forceful growth process had certainly produced massive results, but the downside was that Saint Davia Stark needed to retreat and enjoy a long rest before she could slowly regain her fighting condition!

She felt unwilling to retreat from the battlefield so soon, but Stark possessed enough awareness that everyone had their limits.

"I am done." She said in a softer and much more exhausted voice. "I am withdrawing now as I am struggling to maintain consciousness. Good luck, Larkinsons."

"Thank you for your service, Saint Stark. We shall take it from here. You have given us an excellent opening play."

Chapter 6693: Failure to Capitalize

Saint Davia Stark changed the entire dynamic of the battle in an instance.

Though there were many Larkinsons that had high hopes for the marksman mech specialist after receiving her newly upgraded mech, few expected her to break through when the enemy forces were still too far away for most weapons to be able to land a hit.

Not everyone was able to match the legendary accuracy of puelmer laser gun batteries!

A buffer period took place as both sides took stock of what just happened.

The Amaranto Mark III never showed up in full view of the public to the dismay of the soldiers that became encouraged by her astonishing performance.

The Spirit of Bentheim possessed her own internal channels for mechs and mech-sized objects to move inside her interior.

This shrouded the new ace pilot in mystery. Many people would remember this day for the rest of their lives for this overwhelming display of ranged superiority alone.

The fight had to go on. Just because the native aliens unexpectedly lost a lesser phase lord was not a reason for them to abort their long-awaited offensive push to the final human stronghold in the Viola Magnifica System!

The native alien commanders evidently saw no point in any further posturing or showmanship.

The enemy forces advanced faster. The phase lords that previously came under threat were indignant at what a single human ace pilot and ace mech had put them through and were eager to earn back their lost face by crushing the human resistance!

Of course, the 3 remaining lesser phase lords did not stupidly fly in the open this time, but conspicuously remained behind the much more massive bodies of the two greater phase lords.

The alien assault fleets made their own adjustments just in case the Amaranto Mark III returned.

Their warships altered their formations so that the Amaranto Mark III wouldn't be able to pierce through several hulls at once.

It was rather amazing to see how the performance of just a single saint could curb the arrogance of so many aliens and reshape the dynamics of this battle.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar felt genuine gratitude towards Davia Stark for removing an important enemy chess piece off the board.

She only felt regret that the latest saint broke through a bit too soon for her liking.

If Davia Stark was able to hold her fire and wait until the native aliens had moved within the effective range of most of the guns of the human mechs and orbital defenses, then they could have taken advantage of the Amaranto Mark III's impressive firepower to take down one or two additional phase lords!

This was not an exaggeration. The Saint Commander truly believed that more enemy champions would have fallen if the timing of Saint Stark's breakthrough had been better.

Even if the Amaranto Mark III had lost the most crucial element of surprise, the ace marksman mech's extremely potent attacks was enough to weaken the spatial barriers of greater phase lord by a significant margin!

Certainly, the Amaranto Mark III's firepower was ultimately not enough to overcome the formidable defenses of the Herald of the Void, but what if Casella added the firepower of her Minerva Mark I along with dozens of Barons and thousands of Knights?

The massed firepower of all of those resonance-empowered mechs would definitely put the greater phase lord's defenses under much greater strain!

It would be even better if the Amphis Extremis piloted by Saint Linda Cross was able to approach the greater phase lord and hammer away at the enemy's battered defenses with the help of its ace mech-grade space suppression module and powerful mace!

The combined onslaught of all of these ace pilots and machines would have surely inflicted enough damage to kill or at least drive away the jureg greater phase lord before he even had a chance to demonstrate his combat prowess!

Alas, it was not to be. There was no guarantee that Saint Davia Stark would have broken through if she held in her urges and waited until the enemy forces advanced much closer. The guest pilot of the Larkinson Clan clearly struck at that specific timing because her machine made it possible and because she wanted to challenge herself.

In any case, the Saint Commander knew better than to look at a gift horse in the mouth. Even if it was not the horse she wanted, having one was better than having none.

"What do we do now, Casella?" Venerable Joshua asked.

"We wait. We adjust. We prepare. Despite this... variable... our plan has not changed all that much. The enemy force is too numerous for the loss of a phase lord and a dozen battleships to reverse the balance of power. The greater phase lords are the true threat. Their defenses are much tougher. Their attacks hit much harder. Their mobility is quite high as long as they are not being warp interdicted.

Their technological equipment has also received major upgrades. Without the presence of a senior ace pilot or the exceptional firepower of an offensive specialist like Saint Stark, I do not see a way for us to kill or cripple either greater phase lords."

"Davia Stark managed to kill a lesser phase lord when she was still an expert pilot. Saint Tusa managed to kill a greater phase lord by himself."

"Those are exceptional circumstances that cannot be replicated by us so easily." Casella retorted with a frown. "Saint Tusa borrowed the power of a tier 3 Destroyer spear. Davia Stark has completed an impressive feat, but she is out of action for the remainder of this battle. Our only hope of replicating the earlier miracle is for you or another high-tier expert pilot to break through on the battlefield. While I would like to be optimistic, as a mech commander I cannot base my plans on a low-probability event that historically almost never happens."

Joshua objected to that approach. "I think you can be a little more optimistic about our chances. It's different this time. While it is true that this is the first time that Davia Stark is able to properly pilot her shiny new Amaranto Mark III in a serious battle, she has worked hard to improve her practice according to Ketis' theories. If I, along with a handful of other high-tier expert pilots, manage to break through during this battle..."

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar would truly welcome the emergence of so many comrades who she had fought alongside with for years.

However, there was no proof yet that the Heaven Earth Man Trifecta could magically improve the breakthrough chances of every expert pilot that believed in the unproven theory.

"We shall see." Casella remained uncommitted. "We will switch from defense to offense as soon as the alien forces have suffered enough blows. However, breakthroughs alone may not be enough for us to slay one of the greater phase lords. As long as the Herald of the Void or the Lower Herdmaster remains in fighting condition, either of the two can collapse our defenses and drive us away from the star system."

This was the tyranny of a greater phase lord. The same applied to a senior ace mech. Both of them were so much more powerful than other forces that they could swing a battle in their favor almost by themselves!

Time passed by. Saint Commander Casella Ingvar and numerous other commanding officers continued to observe the advancing enemies while issuing orders to their troops.

Now that the aliens have suffered the first major casualty in this battle, their approach no longer appeared as intimidating as before.

The morale of the aliens had definitely taken a blow. The death of any phase lord was a huge deal in alien society.

Even gods could die.

The collapse of a phase lord, even a lesser one, produced a lot of ripple effects!

The most ardent and most organized worshipers of the deceased phase lord had lost their greatest backing.

The believers who genuinely considered the phase lords to be divine suffered crises of faith.

While the enemy warships behaved as if there was nothing wrong, their crews had likely grown a lot more discouraged than before.

If the humans were able to take out a phase lord with ease, then what about their ships? What about their stations?

If not for superiors and supervisors watching out for any alien crew members that began to express their doubts, many of the alien vessels would have slowed down by this time!

Instead, the alien officers pushed their warships to advance faster, allowing them to end the awkward period where no one was able to hit anything with any reliability.

As the alien armada was about to enter into the effective range of many ranged mechs, both sides finally began to open fire at each other with their ranged weapons!

Few projectile weapons had begun to open fire, but plenty of energy weapons did not show any restraint!

Laser weapons, positron weapons, plasma weapons and more crossed through space and either missed their targets or managed to strike at the enemy's defenses!

The native aliens trained their guns at the orbital fortresses for the most part.

While the titan shields of the targeted fortified space stations could withstand numerous warship salvos, their shield generators were not able to withstand so many sustained attacks!

One fortress got breached due to receiving the highest concentration of warship cannon fire.

The titan shield fizzled out, exposing the space station's metallic structure to the enemies.

The native aliens capitalized on this advantage and launched a few more energy weapon salvos that completely wrecked the most essential systems and compartments of the space station!

While the orbital defense network was steadily being degraded by the native aliens, the humans did not remain idle. They shot back with all of the guns they could bring to bear against the aggressors!

While the guns were unable to effectively target any phasefighters due to how small they were, they had greater success when targeting the enemy capital ships.

Unfortunately, there was still a noticeable gap in firepower.

It was at this time that the Star Dancer Mark II piloted by Venerable Brutus Wodin had begun to open fire.

Though he excelled at dogfighting, Brutus was still a relatively good marksman. His shots did not miss at this distance and he was always able to maneuver his machine at different angles in order to target the best weak points, as much as that was possible when dealing with heavily shielded enemies.

Those azure or transphasic energy shields could withstand only so many attacks, though.

The alien warships just appeared a lot more durable because they usually roll their hulls and made sure to present their weakest side away from the greatest threat.

Venerable Brutus happened to be fairly good at maneuvering around the battlefield and obtaining a superior angle to snipe down his adversaries!

He drew upon his skills and experience in order to flank and harass the enemy warships with his ranged attacks.

The Hexacris luminar crystal rifle may have become outdated according to modern standards, it was still a weapon that Venerable Brutus had used for years. He learned much of its quirks and issues and knew for certain that his mech weapon would land its shot exactly according to specifications.

"Come on, you misbegotten aliens! Your alien and patriarchal society rests on a foundation of sand. By denying the power of women in your uncivilized hierarchy, you deserve nothing but death!"

As the Star Dancer Mark II merrily flew further and further away from the human defensive lines, the machine continued to lure more enemies in chasing after the expert rifleman mech!

Even if the Star Dancer Mark II's attacks were not even able to penetrate through the powerful alien energy shields, the mere fact that this expert mech was able to infuriate the aliens could bring the human defenders another advantage!

Already, a sizable detachment of elite phase fighters had veered away from the main formation and had entered into pursuit against the annoying expert rifleman mech!

Chapter 6694: Evolving Alien Counters

The battle had begun in earnest.

Warships and mechs from both sides began to shoot at each other.

While the melee mechs of the human defenders had yet to go into action, they had already begun to maneuver across the battlefield in the hopes of finding favorable angles of attacks.

The native aliens did not underestimate the threat of these melee mechs. If left unchecked, these primitive machines wielding swords, spears or axes could debilitate a lot of alien assets with the help of their space suppression modules.

In order to prevent these melee mechs from weakening transphasic energy shields and disrupting the operation of warp drives with impunity, the native aliens had to stop or stall them no matter what it took!

The native alien armada had spent much of the last few weeks shipping in large amounts of phasefighters from afar. Many of them were piloted by alien conscripts that possessed little to no experience in actual warfare, but their hardware was largely superior due to the more copious use of phasewater technology.

The latest generation of phasefighter models especially stood out compared to the older models!

The human defenders quickly noticed that the phasefighters reacted faster and more responsively to different threats.

The strike craft had also become more accurate even as they made faster and more complicated maneuvers.

Their cannon hardpoints were able to angle their barrels at greater angles, and the automated tracking systems had become significantly more effective than before!

While a mech controlled by a professional mech pilot was usually able to throw off the AI-driven tracking systems for a while, it became exponentially harder to do so when two or more phasefighters were working hard to gun down the human machine!

These situations happened more often than not because the alien phasefighters easily outnumbered the total number of human mechs that remained in the star system!

The earlier rounds of skirmishing had caused both sides to suffer losses. However, despite the fact that the native aliens lost more small craft than the humans, the invaders were much better able to absorb these losses.

The removal of even a single mech had a much greater impact on the human forces due to how fewer of them were available from the start!

What was worse for the defending side was that the melee mechs often had to fight at a distance from their ranged counterparts.

This meant that melee mechs frequently found themselves in situations where they were outnumbered 2 to 1, 3 to 1 or even more lopsided ratios!

Fortunately, few of the pilots succumbed to the immense pressure. They had endured similar situations in the past and trusted in their skills and the strength of their mechs to see them through this chaotic battlefield.

Many melee mechs faltered and broke when they got strafed by multiple phasefighters swooping in from multiple directions, but many more managed to intercept the alien craft and quickly strip the alien craft of their defenses with the help of space suppressors.

Supporting fire from ranged mechs most certainly eased the pressure, but only under limited circumstances.

Their attacks largely bounced off the azure energy shields that protected the fragile frames of every phasefighter without much consequence.

Only the mechs armed with transphasic firearms were able to inflict much more significant damage to the alien craft, but they were in the minority because phasewater was still out of reach to more ordinary outfits and military units.

This was why it was crucial for the ranged mechs to coordinate their actions with the melee mechs.

Only by weakening and dampening the phasewater technology that made phasefighters so difficult to deal with were the ranged mechs able to quickly exhaust the defenses of the alien craft!

At first, this tried and true approach worked fine. Its simplicity was its strength. Most of the burden fell onto the melee mechs who needed to catch up to the relatively fast and agile alien phasefighters.

While the melee mechs were not able to catch up to their targets by themselves, their pilots had plenty of training and experience in working together to pincer or flank the enemy strike craft!

Space was big, the alien phasefighters could only travel in so many directions if they wanted to be useful on the battlefield.

Human mech officers carefully read and analyzed the movement of enemy units before instructing subordinates to box in their designated targets.

Plenty of alien craft were able to identify the trap in advance and urgently made turns that allowed them to escape the killboxes, but there were other alien phasefighters that failed to get out in time.

Though the human mechs were employing the best and most proven tactics to cope against their enemies, the aggressors were not willing to allow their small craft to perish like this without being able to generate enough value.

"Gunships!"

"Damn, the puelmer gunships have arrived!"

"Wait, those craft look different from the advanced puelmer craft!" A mech designer and analysts reported. "These gunships are single solid craft that are likely piloted by multiple alien crew members. Their architecture and material usage is distinctly orven in nature!"

The orvens had apparently entered the gunship game as well. While they hadn't taken the same route as the puelmers and formed their gunships out of combining the frames of numerous phasefighters together, their solution was much more economical and structurally sound!

From the perspective of observing mech designers, the gunships were clearly designed with a lot more patience, intent and direction than most phasefighters.

The orven gunships were also obviously designed in cooperation with treacherous cosmopolitan mech designers!

It was painful to see so many sound human design principles being used to improve and optimize the design of the brand-new orven gunships.

Even if the larger strike craft were not able to gain metaphysical enhancements like human mechs, their larger size and far greater capacity to accommodate weapons and other systems were already advantages by themselves!

"So this is what the native aliens have been holding back all this time!"

"Damn, their azure energy shields are much tougher!"

"They're slower and less maneuverable. They are three times easier to hit from afar."

"That doesn't help us all that much when we don't have enough guns to wear them all down!"

The orven contingent of the alien armada only deployed a couple of thousand of phasefighters, but they were already having a disproportionate impact on the battlefield.

The gunships were equipped with basic miniature warp drives that allowed them to travel pretty fast so long as their flight was not being interdicted.

Once a melee mech got close, the gunships began to show off their real strengths.

Each gunship easily surpassed a heavy mech in size and mass. Their more generous dimensions allowed them to accommodate much stronger azure shield generators and thick layers of transphasic hyper armor plating.

The latter was a radical departure from phasefighter design.

Whereas phasefighters largely tried to survive on the battlefield by relying on pretty decent energy defenses and mobility, gunships clearly tried to survive by banking on their much stronger energy defenses and armor systems that were no longer a joke anymore!

Though expensive, the gunships turned out to be excellent damage sponges at this scale of warfare.

A dozen ranged mechs focused their fire onto an orven gunship, but the latter's defenses proved to be so tough that it took a considerable amount of time just to take the larger craft out of action!

The orven gunship did not passively take the beating. It instead opened fire at its attackers and any other human mechs that sought to take advantage of the situation!

Powerful transphasic hyper positron beams spat out from multiple turrets and demiturrets.

Their calibers were significantly greater than the smaller guns mounted on orven-developed phasefighters.

Since the gunships were not only able to supply more energy but also manage the buildup of heat a lot better, their positron beam cannons were able to inflict serious harm onto any mech it hit, particularly if the target lacked azure energy shields or other effective forms of defenses!

"Be careful when you are being targeted by these gunships! The new alien craft hit much harder than phasefighters! A few of my friends already got killed because their cockpits got breached before they even had a chance to pull their ejection levers!"

What was worse was that the gunships had enough capacity to accommodate even more armaments!

When melee mech units easily caught up to these slower and less maneuverable craft, they suddenly found out that the orven gunships were equipped with weapon systems that were specifically designed to repel threats at close range!

Hidden gun ports slid open and revealed short but wide barrels that soon began to launch transphasic hyper shrapnel in multiple directions!

The spray of penetrating and incredibly deadly flechettes were so all-encompassing that hardly any of the nearby melee mechs remained unharmed from this devastating salvo!

The closer the distance, the more devastating the damage incurred by the unprepared melee mechs!

Many of them had lost power or floated erratically as their limbs malfunctioned and their internals got breached.

The more powerful melee mechs that were equipped with azure energy shields managed to retain their mobility, but their energy defenses had been overloaded in an instant!

"Press the attack! Try to maintain more distance and circle around rather than going in straight away. Watch out for any movement from the flechette guns and be ready to evade in an instant once they are on the cusp of opening fire! Stick to the blind spots of the gunships whenever possible!"

Despite being taken by surprise, the melee mech pilots did not lose their cool and tried to adjust to this latest enemy type as best as possible.

They quickly figured out that the gunships probably possessed a limited capacity of expensive transphasic hyper flechettes.

They also found that it was still possible to threaten the gunships without getting shredded to pieces if they attacked the gunships at angles where their flechette guns were not able to reach.

The rear was an especially good angle as there were only a handful of positron beam cannon turrets that could swivel directly to the rear. There were no flechette launchers that could do the same for this particular gunship model!

However, the native aliens had at least two ways to deal with melee mechs that tried to hug the rear of their gunships.

The orven craft were all equipped with a minimissile launcher. This module was able to launch small but potent transphasic minimissiles that were easily able to circle around and home in on the melee mechs that had been following from behind!

Another way the native aliens tried to prevent melee mechs from weakening the phasewater technology that was crucial to keeping the gunships protected against human firepower was to call for help from other alien craft!

The gunships by themselves possessed clear strengths and weaknesses. The humans could easily exploit the latter if the larger craft remained by themselves.

However, when multiple gunships grouped up and covered each other with their guns, it became multiple times more difficult just to take one of these heavy craft down!

When phasefighters were assigned to guard the gunships and drive away any melee mech that attempted to stay in the blindspots of the new orven craft, it became nearly impossible for the humans to quickly eliminate these powerful new assets!

"We need a better solution against these orven gunships because they are killing us faster than we are able to take them down!"

As the aliens became more adept with employing small craft in warfare, it seemed inevitable that they would resort to gunships to more effectively counter mechs.

Even though they were far larger and more expensive to construct than phasefighters, it didn't matter too much to the aliens as they had much more abundant resources at their disposal.

Considering that only a few thousand of them were already enough to sap the momentum of over a hundred thousand human mechs, it was clear that the defenders needed to deal with them sooner rather than later!

Chapter 6695: Countering the Counter

The appearance of the orven gunships proved that the puelmers were not the only one to realize the potential of this larger craft.

The native aliens had made greater strides in their attempts to improve and refine their solutions against human mechs!

"These gunships are going to be a bigger problem going forward." Ves remarked as he observed the battle by remote.

There was no way he would miss out on this battle despite the fact that he resided all the way over at the New Constantinople System.

Saint Stark's breakthrough already strengthened the clan by an enormous degree. Right now, he was hoping that more promising high-expert pilots would be able to grasp their chance and trigger their own breakthroughs.

While Ves initially did not think much of the native alien forces, it was clear that he had underestimated their ingenuity and the speed in which they were able to roll out their latest solutions.

Gunships represented relatively unknown territory to mech designers because few if any of them ever designed a craft of this scale.

They were bigger than heavy mechs. They traded all semblance of agility and speed for scale and capacity.

Their hulls were shaped like angular ovals, allowing them to accommodate more weapon systems and other powerful systems. Even the most mediocre engineers could easily stuff a gunship hull with large armaments and thick armor plating without needing to worry about running out of space too soon.

With the help of cosmopolitan mech designers, the orvens had whipped up a few gunship designs that were simple and fairly cost-effective given the size of the craft.

They were certainly not cheap, but it should not be difficult for them to generate enough value to pay for their hefty production costs.

"The gunships are more effective at repelling melee mechs than phasefighters." Ketis frowned in concern as she observed that even the Swordmaidens struggled to kill the hardy craft.

"Phasefighters rely on mobility more than anything to avoid getting caught. If a pair of melee mechs have already come close enough, then their azure energy shields will only delay their inevitable demise. These gunships are different because their energy defenses are strong enough to fend off melee mechs much longer than usual. That gives them enough time to repel their attackers with their flechette guns or wait for backup from other alien small craft."

The native aliens had begun to deviate even further from the pattern set by red humanity.

Instead of rigidly sticking to phasefighters that approximated the size and mass of human mechs, the alien races had begun to adopt a different form of strike craft that played a lot better to their existing advantages!

As Ves continued to study the performance of the new orven gunships as the battle unfolded, he could see that the aliens really made a wise decision to adopt these new craft.

The gunships were no longer operated by a single alien pilot. He loosely estimated that they should be crewed by three to five low-caste orven operators.

This worked out well because the orven gunship operators no longer had to split their limited training time in learning how to maneuver their craft, operate their weapon systems, keep up their defensive systems, and so much more.

Now, the orvens could assign different personnel to different training courses that solely taught them how to perform one responsibility well.

This approach towards specialized roles clearly caused the gunships to exhibit inferior coordination. The alien conscripts were not always of the same mind. The lack of experience and training made it so that the larger craft was unable to respond quickly and in a unified manner in the face of changing circumstances.

However, it was still worth it for them to be controlled by multiple orven operators as the aliens were at least competent enough to perform their main jobs!

The larger size, the lower mobility and the stronger defenses all played in its favor for this reason.

Whereas phasefighter pilots needed to be able to make quick decisions while their craft flew at great speeds, gunship operators could take their time to do their jobs right due to the slower pace of operation.

Ves bet that around half of the gunship operators used to serve on warships before they received a change in assignments. This was convenient as they were not only more disciplined and able to follow orders, but many of their skills also transferred over.

"The gunships are large and slow enough that they are easier to hit by long-ranged artillery fire." He noted. "They are also a bit more prone to getting hit by warship gun batteries. There is no way these craft can defend against direct strike from a large enough warship cannon."

"That is true, Ves, but all of our heavy guns are currently occupied with trying to repel the alien warships."

That was unfortunate. The warships, the defensive platforms and the orbital fortresses were under heavy siege from alien warships.

Although the native alien armada had lost numerous formidable warships due to Saint Stark's breakthrough moment, it still had enough hulls left to be able to force their way forward in time!

All of the big guns available to the human defenders had to train their firepower at the enemy warships for this reason.

Ves frowned for a moment before he spotted another movement on the battlefield. His expression eased. He even began to smile.

"Well, the orvens have certainly made a statement by unveiling their take on gunships, but it is too unfortunate for the aliens that their new strike craft are about to be confronted by one of their worst enemies in this particular battle.

Just a few seconds passed before thousands of resonance-empowered energy beams lanced from the Larkinson Army contingent and accurately slammed into the azure energy shields that protected a score of the new alien craft!

Thousands of Knights had opened fire at the gunships at once!

It didn't matter whether the small craft were not being affected by a space suppression field at the time they got hit.

The luminar crystal weapons wielded by notable ranged mechs such as the Nullifiers of the Battle Crier Mech Legion and the Fey Fiannas adopted by several other mech legions were all transphasic hyper weapons that could already inflict considerable damage onto the enemy energy shields!

When empowered by a touch of the Saint Commander's true resonance, the lethality of those attacks multiplied by several times, causing the gunships to enter into more precarious states!

Saint Commander Casella was Commandeering thousands more mechs at this time. Many of them were assigned to attack much higher priority targets. As one of the few ace pilots that was present on the battlefield, she was responsible for holding back the enemy phase lords as much as possible!

This was why she could not afford to allocate all of them to destroy the enemy gunships. It was only because Saint Stark managed to reduce the threat posed by the alien champions by assassinating one of them while tiring out the other that Casella was able to divert a portion of her Commandeered mechs address the threat posed by the enemy gunships.

She recognized that it would not demand a major effort on her part to solve the gunship problem!

As the Commandeered living mechs armed with powerful luminar crystal weapons repeatedly opened fire, the orven gunships had nowhere to hide aside from the larger pieces of debris that had begun to spread across the battlefield.

The azure energy shields of the orven gunships were designed to withstand the siege of several mechs at the same time, but they were not equipped to deal with several thousand temporarily empowered Knights!

Casella's ability to multitask through her Command Field was insane. She was able to control the Knights so well that their ranged weapons attained a hit rate of over 95 percent!

She probably could have raised this to 99 percent if not for the fact that she was Commandeering so many mechs at the same time.

The inferior mobility of the gunships worked against them. In the face of this onslaught from afar, the craft had turned into sitting ducks who could only rely on their strong azure energy shields to resist the initial attacks.

However, the luminar crystal weapons equipped by mech models such as the Fey Fianna and the Nullifier were able to fire their shots at a decent firing rate.

Resonance-empowered energy beams continued to strike at the initial gunships. Soon enough, their energy defenses disappeared, causing them to expose their armor!

The Commandeered mechs continued to open fire at the exposed gunships. Their transphasic hyper armor was actually of good quality, but they were ultimately not equipped to withstand so many powerful and accurate attacks.

The orvens lost a hefty amount of gunships in a much shorter period of time than anticipated!

This did not bode well for the remaining gunships. The human mechs that had previously been struggling to fight against these well-designed craft suddenly gained an advantage now that they enjoyed the fire support of one of the most powerful mech pilots taking part in this battle!

"This is exactly what the Saint Commander excels at." Ketis said as she viewed the unfolding battle in the command center of the Spirit of Bentheim. "Her ability to Commandeer so many different mechs gives us an enormous advantage in any fight against enemy small craft. It doesn't matter

whether they come in the form of phasefighters or gunships, both are vulnerable to superiority of mechs controlled and empowered by Casella Ingvar."

In other words, the Saint Commander was perfect for fighting against conventional enemy units!

The small fry were too weak to withstand attacks that had been blessed by the extraordinary willpower of an ace pilot!

The more valuable the enemy small craft, the more misery Saint Commander Casella could inflict upon it, as none of their defenses could equal that of a genuine warship!

While the orven gunships desperately trained their transphasic hyper positron cannons at the Knights, the superior mobility of the latter along with the greater distance made it a lot more difficult to land their hits!

The Saint Commander made sure to keep the Commandeered mechs moving in random patterns.

If the gunships wanted to increase their hit rates, they needed to get closer, but this was clearly impossible because their mobility was vastly inferior even without taking the amplification from true resonance into account!

There was only one reasonable choice that the gunship commanders could make.

"They're turning around! They're fleeing!"

"Don't let them get away!"

"Eliminate them all before they can come back and bite us when the Saint Commander isn't available!"

Many melee mechs went in pursuit of the fleeing gunships. While the mechs were still wary of getting blasted by flechette guns, they had learned enough to maintain a certain degree of distance from their targets.

The flechette guns possessed wide dispersal rates. The further away the mech, the less projectiles that would eventually hit the machine!

The mech pilots also learned to minimize their surface area towards the enemy gunships. By tilting their torsos to the side or by facing their foes with the head or feet first, they could drastically lower the amount of flechettes that would eventually rake through their armor and internals.

The clever melee mech pilots engaged in all of this while the ranged mechs Commandeered by Casella Ingvar continually showed off their prowess by downing gunships by the dozens.

"No escape!"

Alien phasefighters tried their best to interfere with the pursuit, but they could do little to divert the attacks launched by the Commandeered mechs.

Soon enough, only about 300 gunships managed to limp back to their respective carriers.

This was less than a tenth of the proud gunships that the orvens originally sent into the fray!

The Knights that previously hammered the orven gunships did not bother to attack the alien phasefighters.

The other mechs could handle them. The firepower of the Commandeered mechs was exceptionally potent compared to their unempowered states. This turned them into a sharp weapon in Casella's hand.

The Saint Commander scanned the battlefield for any other adverse situations that she could save with her abilities.

There were plenty of other precarious situations that she needed to defuse in order to lead this battle in the right direction!

Chapter 6696: Brawling Phase Lords

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar was one of the most powerful assets on the battlefield.

Even though her power and abilities were constrained by the limitations of an expert mech that she had already outgrown, she was still able to Commandeer a huge amount of mechs just fine!

What mattered the most was not the relatively small amount of true resonance that she was able to channel through her Knights.

The biggest reason why her Commandeered mechs performed so much better than usual was because she was able to control their operations directly if she chose!

In many cases, Casella felt that it was necessary to take control away from the mech pilots and reduce them to bystanders.

She did not do this because she was an egotistical control freak, but because her combat skills were simply so much better, especially when it came to controlling ranged mechs.

Casella was willing to retain more autonomy to her Commandeered melee mechs as her melee combat skills were not as good.

Even so, their mech pilots still had to move to the coordinates and attack the enemies that she designated for them. Casella could only make the most of her Knights if they moved in complete coordination with each other.

Although the results she achieved were remarkable so far, the pressure on her shoulders was extremely heavy.

The mechs she assigned to dismantle the curious orven gunships only comprised a small part of the forces that were under her direct control and blessing.

She was actually Commandeering a lot of Transcendent Punisher Mark III's and other powerful ranged mechs for the sole purpose of sieging the enemy phase lords from a far!

From her perspective, the confrontations between mechs and phasefighters were not that important for the time being.

It would certainly be bad if the mechs got beaten back by alien small craft, but so long as the scrappy human machines managed to keep the phasefighters at bay, there was no need for her to expend her attention and energy on giving them a boost.

The enemy warships were a more serious concern. For now, the CFA warships along with the many orbital defenses surrounding the fortress planet were doing a good job at putting the alien warships under pressure.

What the defensive platforms and orbital fortresses lacked in mobility, they made up for it with many layers of thick alloy armor.

While the exotics and hypers used to make the orbital defenses were not too expensive or high in quality, the structures were easily able to stack multiple layers of meters-thick armor plating without compromising much of their other functions!

Combined with modern and serviceable titan shields, the orbital defenses were just tough and sturdy enough to withstand multiple relentless salvos launched by the enemy warships.

Of course, the story may be different as the battle progressed. The lack of mobility meant that the orbital defenses were sitting ducks. They could not evade any attacks, nor retreat when their titan shields were on the verge of getting depleted.

The enemy warships were more flexible than that. Whenever their azure energy shield coverage started to look shaky, they were able to fall back and recover their energy defenses and conduct repairs.

This was a simple but effective tactic that the aliens relied upon to preserve their warships, especially after they lost a bunch of battleships due to Davia Stark's breakthrough!

If possible, Commander Casella wanted to direct the firepower of her Knights at these warships just before their energy shields were reaching their critical limits. Doing so would cause them to suffer real damage and may even cause them to get crippled as long as they sustained enough concentrated attacks.

However, she did not have the luxury to do this because the enemy phase lords needed to be taken care of as well!

Now that the five phase lords had moved into fighting range, they had begun to unleash the anger that they repressed since the Amaranto Mark III took away the life of one of their own.

The Eight Lord of Takansha was the weakest and most vulnerable phase lord. His threat level was limited, but that did not mean he could be ignored.

He still retained the ability to project remote spatial barriers that added an extra layer of defense onto heavily damaged and exposed warships.

The orven lesser phase lord was content to play a support role. He continuously projected one spatial barrier after another that successfully blocked numerous attack salvos launched by the humans.

Zren-Divar and the Fatedriver preferred to take more physical action. The orven and jureg lesser phase lords were all equipped with heavier and more threatening raiments.

The gun turrets mounted across the surface opened fire at warships, orbital defenses and the expert mechs that sought to stop them in their tracks.

Although the two martial lesser phase lords were powerful enough to crush any expert mech in a contest of strength, the C-Man and other powerful machines relied on their smaller sizes and superior mobility to evade every attack.

The expert pilots that had chosen to challenge the lesser phase lords did not dare to fly too close or commit too much to an attack. They constantly had to keep track of their opponent's movements and evade in time when the giant aliens launched their counterattacks!

So far, neither side was able to inflict much serious damage to each other.

The expert mechs did not have the hard power to break past the spatial barriers of the enemy phase lords so quickly.

Even as they attracted the firepower of numerous mechs and warships, the lesser phase lords were still able to withstand a lot of attacks for a time.

In order to deplete their defenses faster, it became vital for melee expert mechs to approach Zren-Divar and the Fatedriver in order to interdict their warp travel capabilities and weaken their spatial barriers.

"Our space suppression modules aren't working too well against these lesser phase lords. Their spatial barriers are so strong that we are only suppressing a part of their power."

"Ah!" Venerable Vincent Ricklin cried as the Fatedriver somehow managed to slam his C-Man with a giant ritualistic metal rod! "How did he manage to predict my movements? Is this guy truly able to forecast the future?"

This was not the only time that his C-Man suffered from attacks that he normally should have avoided.

The Fatedriver defied his predictions time and time again. The jureg lesser phase lord occasionally put himself in a position where he could easily counterattack the C-Man!

"This alien bastard is begging to grate my nerves. I need to teach him a stronger lesson!"

While the Fatedriver was uncommonly good at spotting opportunities only for him to exploit them, he did not reveal any other challenging traits. This was a specialized phase lord who was clearly working up to an excellent state, but had to go through a prolonged period of relative weakness due to missing several crucial phasewater organs.

Saint Commander Casella immediately concluded that the expert mechs would be able to cope with the Fatedriver for the time being.

Zren-Divar posed a significantly greater threat in comparison. He did not reveal any specializations or unique power expressions.

The reason why the Riot Mark II piloted by Venerable Rosa Orfan and several other expert mechs struggled to avoid damage in their bout was because Zren-Divar made significantly better use of his raiment than other phase lords!

The alien fought as if he was a giant mech or better yet a juggernaut. His raiment was clearly modeled after a first-class multipurpose mech, because it was loaded with many integrated weapon systems!

Plasma bolts, positron beams, gauss rounds and other attacks launched in the direction of the expert mechs.

While the Riot and the other machines were able to evade the majority of incoming strikes, there were too many for the expert mechs to avoid them all!

This caused the Riot's resonance shield to weaken and wobble in an instant!

"Hah! Is that the best you can do, orven? It will take far more than that to take me down!"

The orven phase lord that moonlighted as a juggernaut did not dismiss the expert mechs. Too many phase lords had already paid the price for underestimating any human mech.

Zren-Divar continued to lash out at the expert mechs that constantly circles around his true body and sought to wear down his defenses with constant attacks.

The occasional fire support provided by Casella's Commandeered mechs had saved the expert mechs from suffering more serious damage. Zren-Divar was aware of the presence of the powerful Saint Commander, but he had little choice but to allow the humans to play their tricks.

To the native aliens, the goal of this offensive was not to kill as many humans as possible. They instead sought to conquer the star system.

It was not necessary to crush each and every expert mech, especially if they possessed superior mobility!

Zren-Divar therefore focused on attacking the assets of the human defenders.

No matter whether they were carrier vessels or orbital fortresses, all of it was fair game as far as the alien was concerned.

The alien actually lifted a custom-developed plasma rifle and started to shoot out large and hot bolts that could overload azure energy shields in an instant and melt a serious hole through the hull of an enemy vessel!

The alien used a plasma rifle that was big enough to be mounted on warships to bring the hurt directly to the human defenders!

Venerable Rosa Orfan and the others were not willing to let that happen. The bright orange-coated Riot flew close in order to start spreading more chaos and instability.

The expert spearman mech tried his best to drain the defenses of the enemy, but even though he was merely a 'lesser phase lord' did not mean his defensive phasewater organs were below par!

For now, both Zren-Divar and the expert mechs that fought against this particular phase lord had entered into another temporary stalemate.

The balance could easily tip in one direction or another, so Saint Commander Casella needed to be ready as well in order to capitalize on the weaknesses shown by the enemies.

As threatening as the lesser phase lords may be, the human defenders had enough expert pilots and ace pilots at their disposal to contain and suppress Zren-Divar.

However, the phase lord soon gained the upper hand when he reached behind his back and activated a juggernaut-grade plasma sword!

The potent weapon might not have any transphasic enhancements, but the sheer heat and power radiating from the plasma blade were indications that the weapon was already effective at overwhelming defenses.

The plasma sword might not be as good as a saint arm, but no expert mech wanted to get struck by the energy weapon.

Venerable Rosa Orfan saw no reason to back off. Instead, she flew her outdated riot even more aggressively.

The expert pilot knew she was playing with fire by exposing her lastgen expert mech to an extremely well-equipped lesser phase lord.

Just getting whacked by the plasma sword a few times may be enough to break the Riot's resonance shield and dig through the armor plating that was supposed to keep the machine intact!

"Heh, I never wanted this to be easy." Venerable Orfan grinned as she grew more and more excited as the fight continued. "Come! Hit me if you can!"

The Riot was not the most mobile or agile of mechs, but the expert spearman mech was still able to evade the enemy plasma sword multiple times due to Venerable Orfan's powerful intuition.

She just knew in which direction the Riot had to evade in order to prevent adverse contact with the plasma sword!

All the while, the Riot occasionally swooped in to land another blow against the orvan phase lord's spatial barrier.

While the spear wielded by the Riot was not strong anymore by modern standards, Venerable Orfan demonstrated an unusual degree of patience and kept up his effort to whittle down her opponent's formidable energy defenses.

Her blood kept pumping faster in her veins as she barely managed to anticipate and evade one plasma sword attack after another!

Chapter 6697: Venerable Orfan's Resolve

The final battle of Viola Magnifica unfolded like a grand tapestry.

As both sides confronted each other, countless instances of desperation and heroism unfolded.

Alien phasefighters weaved and danced into each other in order to place the mechs chasing from behind into their crosshairs.

Pairs and trios of melee mechs did their best to box in the fast and agile phasefighters on a busy battlefield where attacks could come from many directions.

A large number of alien warships of many different shapes and sizes unloaded their firepower at the orbital defense network that protected the final human stronghold in the star system.

In turn, the defensive platforms and orbital fortresses opened fire with their weapons with no abandon, not caring that their excessively high firing rate was rapidly wearing down their electrical components.

"Shoot! Keep shooting! This fortress is going down anyway, so it doesn't matter if we are cutting down the lifespan of our positron beam cannons by 99 percent! Just make sure you don't exceed the limits too much or else the charging mechanism for our guns will blow up prematurely. The more alien ships we take down, the longer we hold our enemies back from storming our final line of defense!"

Everyone knew what they were fighting for. The Viola Magnifica System was destined to fall to the native aliens, but that did not mean that their resistance was futile.

Although the enemy benefited much more from attrition warfare than red humanity, the latter had no choice but to play this game if it wanted to prevent a rapid collapse.

Mechs fell when strafed by phasefighters or got shot to pieces by the storm of firepower unleashed by nearby escort warships.

Numerous warships succumbed under heavy fire as the orbital defense network constantly focused its collective firepower onto a small selection of warships for the purpose of eliminating them before they could retreat to safety.

For now, the orbital defense network was making good progress in eliminating most warships.

The larger vessels possessed a multitude of strong segmented as well as multi-layered energy shields, allowing them to withstand an amazing amount of punishment despite posing as larger targets.

However, their lack of mobility made it so that they were much slower to retreat to safety than other vessels.

The native alien commanders tried to adjust by sending other warships forward so that they could utilize their defenses to serve as temporary forms of cover, but it was difficult for them to cover every angle.

The warships could go down much faster if they were being assaulted by mechs. The fast and agile small craft could not only weaken the vessel's transphasic defenses with their space suppressors, but also attack the hulls through any open gaps in the energy shield layers.

It was unfortunate that the enemy phasefighters did everything they could to prevent that from happening.

The latest generation of phasefighters exhibited many improvements that enabled them to close the gap with human mechs. From the implementation of hyper technology to more generous use of expensive materials, the major alien races that deployed the strike craft showed little hesitation in squandering large amounts of high-quality resources to give them an edge on the battlefield!

Many mech designers who observed the ongoing battle from the safety of their offices or design labs frequently had to suppress their pangs of jealousy when they saw how even the most trashy cannon fodder units benefited from phasewater technology.

For red humanity, phasewater was a precious strategic resource that was increasingly becoming more and more difficult to obtain!

Even the linefighters that had earned a lot of war merits over the past months could hardly afford to redeem enough phasewater to construct a serviceable transphasic mech.

The demand had grown, but the supply had not kept up that much. Red humanity was only able to extract a fraction of the phasewater contained within alien salvage.

All of this meant that human mechs had to make do with less. The Larkinson Clan may be one of the few private organizations that was able to field transphasic mechs on a large scale, but that did not mean that other outfits could afford this luxury!

Right now, these mechs were struggling to survive when fighting against the enemy phasefighters. They could only rely on the superior skill and judgment of their professional mech pilots to stay alive on a dangerous battlefield.

With so many mechs and other assets struggling to hold their ground against the alien forces, there were not enough assets that could hold the native alien phase lords back.

There were plenty of low to mid-rank expert mechs among the mech forces. Plenty of soldiers had broken through since the start of the Red War.

However, nobody dared to send them in the direction of the enemy phase lords as they were far too weak to survive an extended engagement against the alien powerhouses.

Even high-tier expert mechs struggled to hold back the lesser phase lords.

The expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance contributed most of them to the fight.

Famed living expert mechs such as the Riot, the Everchanger, the C-Man, the Greenaxe, the Bloodripper, the Blood Star Mark II, the Star Dancer, the Valkyrie Krista and the Valkyrie Ursa were doing their best to hold back the 3 remaining lesser phase lords.

Despite the multitude of powerful machines, they were struggling to inflict meaningful damage while evading attacks that could heavily sap their resonance shields!

The Fatedriver was a hardy jureg lesser phase lord who possessed an unusual sense of foresight. Whatever phasewater organs he was making use of allowed him to predict his opponent's moves in advance and allow him to counterattack at accelerated speeds.

Venerable Vincent had to rely far more on his intuition than in any of his prior fights just to prevent his C-Man from getting bludgeoned by the Fatedriver's heavy metal rod!

Zren-Divar was an orvan lesser phase lord that wielded a deadly plasma sword that was largely derived from human technology.

Although it was not transphasic in nature, the phase lord-scaled energy weapon generated so much heat that brief contact with it was enough to overload an expert mech's resonance shield within seconds!

This was extremely troubling for the Riot. As one of the expert mechs that had undertaken the unenviable task of trying to stall the lesser phase lord up close, the outdated expert mech was showing his age in many ways.

The most important shortcoming was that the mobility of the armored expert spearman mech was not as good as the other machines. The Riot was designed to take hits head-on and launch counterattacks that struck just as hard if not harder.

That strategy did not work against a phase lord who wielded a weapon as powerful as a large plasma sword, so the Riot was forced to imitate more agile and mobile mechs such as the First Sword just to be able to fulfill his purpose!

The Riot barely managed to hold on for the time being because other expert mechs such as the Valkyrie Krysta and the Valkyrie Ursa were doing their best to distract the phase lord with their attack runs and their glows.

Of course, Zren-Divar hardly took notice of the famed glows of the Valkyrie mechs. This trick may be enough to scare inexperienced alien phasefighter pilots into paralysis, but the gap in strength between the orven phase lord and the Daughter of Death was not large enough!

The Riot spun around in a messy manner as the living expert mech barely managed to evade a fast and tricky swipe of the phase lord's plasma sword.

The heat emanating from the powered weapon was so great that the Riot's resonance shield had to expend a small portion of its power just to prevent the mech from suffering thermal damage!

Before the orven phase lord could press his attack, the Valkyrie Krysta and the Valkyrie Ursa coordinated their actions and simultaneously charged and thrust their own spears into the enemy's spatial barrier from below and behind!

Zren-Divar clearly wanted to keep chasing after the Riot, especially since the outdated expert mech was among the slowest in this fight.

However, if he did so, the two Valkyrie expert mechs of the Glory Seekers would continually assault his spatial barrier with repeated spear attacks at close range.

The updated transphasic hyper spears wielded by the two Valkyrie mechs might not hit too hard, but the relatively fast and nimble expert marauder mechs were able to launch repeated strikes without too many issues!

If Zren-Divar underestimated the threat posed by these two annoying machines, then his spatial barrier would quickly collapse.

He still enjoyed the protection of azure shield generators integrated in his newly developed raiment, but that would not last all that long against determined attackers!

The orven phase lord would definitely be in big trouble once he lost his energy defenses. The armor plating that comprised his raiment would only delay the expert mechs for so long as they targeted his weak spots such as his head or back.

The lesser phase lord was an experienced enough combatant to make the right for himself.

Rather than put his life and health at risk just to chase after a stupid expert mech, Zren-Divar much preferred to preserve his defenses.

He felt especially strong about this after witnessing the assassination of a fellow orven god!

The frustrated orven phase lord uttered a silent but angry roar before halting his pursuit of the Riot.

He subsequently spun around in order to sweep his plasma sword towards the two Valkyrie expert mechs, forcing both of them to abort their assault and evade before they got melted by the potent weapon!

By this time, the Riot had already turned back and performed a short charge that allowed it to thrust its spear right into the back of the orven phase lord's spatial barrier!

The integrated cannons mounted on the raiment worn by the phase lord were prepared this time. They lanced out with potent transphasic hyper positron beams.

The Riot was able to evade several of the charged beams, but his mediocre mobility ultimately prevented him from evading the final strike.

His resonance shield became shakier after getting hit!

Venerable Rosa Orfan growled as she found herself in a fight that was far from ideal for her. The Riot Mark II's inability to resist a proper strike from her current opponent's plasma sword locked out many of her tactics and abilities!

The Riot was designed to embroil his enemies head-on in a brutal slugfest, not dance around the enemy's attacks as if he was a light mech like the Dark Zephyr!

"Orfan!" Saint Commander Casella Ingvar shouted over a communication channel. "Your Riot is not doing so well against this martial phase lord. You should have better luck if you entangle the Eight Lord of Takansha instead. Let others take over your position."

"NO!" Venerable Rosa Orfan immediately shot down this suggestion. "I won't back down from this fight! That Eight Lord fellow is an arche masquerading as an orven. All he does is cover himself with lots of spatial barriers while trying to outrun his pursuers. His attacks are too feeble to make me feel threatened. What I need is an enemy that poses a true threat against my expert mech and myself. If I am not good enough to survive a dogfight against this Zren-Divar guy, then I do not deserve to live any further!"

Seeing old friends and comrades such as Dise and Davia Stark break through in recent times was spurring Venerable Orfan forward.

She was no longer willing to wait any longer to attain her own breakthrough!

While she would have liked to pilot the Riot Mark III, it shouldn't be necessary for her to pilot an updated machine to trigger her second apotheosis.

"If Dise can do it, so can I!"

Venerable Orfan felt that none of the ace pilots of the Larkinson Clan were as good as Saint Dise. She was the only one who managed to break through while piloting an expert mech from the first half of the Phasewater Generation.

This proved that she was the best out of all of the Larkinson ace pilots as her willpower was much stronger for it to be able to overcome the handicap of her outdated expert mech!

Venerable Orfan wanted this as well. She knew that there was no shortcut to attaining success through this difficult approach. Saint Dise had worked much harder and overcome greater challenges in order to complete her current attainments.

If Orfan did not want to be left behind by the woman she considered her peer and equal, then the former Flagrant Vandal officer needed to test her courage and fearlessness in a confrontation against the most powerful of the three lesser phase lords!

Chapter 6698: Cold Calculus

The Riot danced on the razor's edge as Venerable Rosa Orfan squeezed all of the performance out of the aged and outdated expert mech frame.

While the newer machines such as the Lionheart and the Blood Star Mark II were much faster, tougher and more responsive, the Riot Mark II was a relic of a bygone age, a product designed for the sole purpose of dueling opposing expert mechs.

It was clear to see for everyone with a bit of sense in mechs that the Riot was not faring well at all. Even if the living expert spearman mech was able to evade every plasma sword attack up to this point, the Riot only needed to make one mistake to suffer a crippling or even a killing blow.

The good news was that Venerable Rosa Orfan was performing at her peak.

She made no mistakes because she literally could not afford to make them. A slow response, a misread of the enemy's movements or an overextension could easily cause her Riot to get melted by the plasma sword!

The Riot's resonance shield would not be able to resist for long.

The mix of alloys that comprised his mech frame would only be able to resist for a short amount of time before succumbing.

True first-class mechs made use of harder and more sophisticated alloys that were able to resist a wide variety of physical and energy attacks. Their heat capacities were exceptionally high and could buy precious seconds of time for the mech pilot to move a machine out of the way of a plasma weapon.

Of course, mechs that were rated to resist plasma weapons more effectively were also ludicrously expensive.

During the time the Larkinson Clan developed the Riot, it was a fantasy to acquire and make use of such rare and powerful exotic materials.

To be fair, attempts had been made to help the Riot keep up with the times. His spear had been updated several times so that it gained transphasic and subsequently hyper properties.

The Riot also gained enough room to equip additional gear such as grenades and firearms.

The ExTrans Armor System that was unique to the Riot had also received updates over the years as the outer armor layer that suffered the greatest damage regularly got replaced by superior alloys.

Unfortunately, there were many other aspects about the Riot Mark II that could not be upgraded so easily. The internal architecture remained vulnerable and could not resist as much damage as the internals of archemechs such as the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

The Riot Mark II was still a good enough asset when used to fight against other human forces.

The living expert spearman mech was also adequate in fighting against most warships so long as the machine was able to catch up to the vessels.

What the lastgen expert mech emphatically was not supposed to do was to challenge a lesser phase lord directly and especially when the latter wielded a destructive plasma sword!

The Riot Mark II may technically be classified as a quasi-first-class expert mech, but he was much worse at resisting the damage inflicted by plasma than the newer quasi-first-class machines such as the Lionheart!

Given the disappointing performance parameters of the Riot Mark II, any sane mech pilot in control of this outdated machine would never choose to confront the lesser phase lord known as Zren-Divar.

It would have made much more logical sense for the Riot to lead the low-ranking expert mechs that were responsible for exerting pressure onto enemy warships.

It was too bad that Venerable Rosa Orfan was not a 'sane' expert pilot.

Her pride and self-esteem did not allow her to avoid this challenge!

Besides, her actions still had meaning. If the Riot did not take the responsibility of attracting most of the attention of this plasma sword-wielding phase lord, then another expert mech would have been forced to take the expert spearman mech's place.

That would subsequently lighten the burden on another dangerous phase lord, thereby raising the chance of accidents.

The human defenders could not afford to lighten their resistance against the 5 powerful phase lords.

The expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance fielded the most ace pilots and expert pilots out of all of the other forces stationed in the Viola Magnifica System, so there was no one to turn to for help.

For now, the situation was somewhat stable, but mech commanders such as Casella Ingvar knew how precarious the situation had become.

As an ace pilot herself, Casella understood what drove ace pilot candidates such as Venerable Rosa Orfan to flirt with certain death.

Expert pilots generally only broke through under the most extreme circumstances.

Having the right qualifications was not enough unless one possessed S-grade genetic aptitude such as the Chosen Human.

Everyone else had to rely on a strong emotional stimulus in order to push their mind states past their peak and into a whole new realm.

Casella only managed to break past her bottleneck at the cost of her brother's death.

She never wanted her glorious moment up to this date to become tarnished by this horrible event.

What price would others have to pay just to gain a chance to break through and survive this pitched battle?

Reality was not a fairy tale or an action drama. The heroes did not magically get to survive when they confronted the demon king.

Casella knew this well, because her brother was one of the many victims who failed his challenge against a phase lord!

The Saint Commander did not love the other Larkinson expert pilots as much as she did her brother, but she still cared for them in many ways.

They were all comrades who were united by their desire to protect the Larkinson Clan and to fight for red humanity's right to survive in this dwarf galaxy.

They had known each other for a decade. Casella considered them her friends and maybe even her family due to how often they had fought together.

Casella did not want any of them to die just to force their breakthroughs when they weren't necessarily ready.

The decision made by Venerable Rosa Orfan did not make much rational sense.

At least Venerable Benjamin Larkinson piloted a fairly modern expert mech. His Blood Star Mark II may have missed out on becoming an archemech, but the powerful offensive knight mech was able to resist a lot more direct impacts than the Riot Mark II.

Yet Venerable Orfan still took it upon herself to dogfight against the only phase lord that was able to punish mistakes with a brutal if not fatal strike.

Suffice to say, Casella had a bad feeling about this. Perhaps the lessons that Venerable Orfan learned from Ketis' new theory might spur on Venerable Orfan's breakthrough.

However, if the expert pilot overestimated herself or developed the wrong understanding of her own power, her ascension to sainthood may still be far away, which meant that she was at the verge of getting killed by Zren-Divar at any time!

"What do you think, Ves?" She asked the patriarch of the clan even as she used her neural interface to transmit orders to different mech units. "Venerable Orfan is unnecessarily putting her life at risk. She doesn't need to be so impatient. If she can wait until she has access to the Riot Mark III, I will not doubt that her breakthrough is only a matter of time. I can understand why she insists on challenging her limits now rather than later, but I still feel the need to pull her back and assign a safer task to her. Her ego might not like it, but she can suck it up. The needs of our clan comes before her own selfish desires."

"And what do you think the need of our clan is, exactly?" Ves asked with a smile.

The Saint Commander frowned. "Is it not your goal to quickly raise as many ace pilots of our clan as possible? The more saints we have under our banner, the stronger our foundation. Having more ace pilots at our disposal also helps to make other parties take us more seriously."

"All of that is true, Casella, but that only applies in the short and medium term. While it is important for us to have enough high-level combat assets available to defend ourselves from hostile phase lords and dastardly cosmopolitans, those aren't the enemies that we have to be worried about as long as we are able to overcome this difficult early period. There are much more terrible threats on the horizon."

"Threats such as...?"

Ves' expression grew grim. "I can't say. Let me just say that the ability to put up a fight against a god pilot or an ancient phase whale is the minimum requirement. We don't need this right away, but if we don't make enough progress to be able to defend ourselves against these powerhouses, our ability to survive in the long term becomes very small."

"Are you claiming that if we cannot produce a god pilot from our own ranks fast enough, we will be unable to resist the threats that may arise in the future?"

He slowly nodded. "You can say that. I have already said a bit too much, but I think it is fine since you are an ace commander. What matters is that you understand my attitude when it comes to expert pilots looking to force their breakthroughs to the point of putting their lives on the line. My policy is... let them try."

Based on her understanding of the patriarch, Casella already guessed he might respond this way.

"Why?" She still asked.

"Champions are admired and worshiped because they are fearless. They are strong because they possess the courage to do what others shy away from. While that doesn't mean that they must never retreat in the face of overwhelming opposition, it is up to the expert pilots themselves to decide when to retreat. Only by giving them enough agency to decide their own actions will they prove whether they have what it takes to not only become an ace pilot, but also prepare them to meet the much tougher demands of becoming a god pilot."

"That is many decades away." Casella argued back. "Applying god pilot criteria to expert pilots is too premature. Each mech pilot must grow step by step in order to reach the top of our profession. We cannot adhere to the excessively high criteria of a god pilot right away. We are still mortals, some more so than others."

"I know what you are trying to say, Casella, but it is too late to solve any problems and shortcomings when they become a peak ace pilot." Ves sighed. "They need to be able to handle themselves in this battle by relying on their own strength and judgment. Mech pilots are similar to mech designers in that both professions must learn how to independently solve problems. If neither of them exercises their problem-solving skills in the most stressful of circumstances, then they will never be ready to solve the ultimate test when they initiate the Mech Body Merger Process."

"So that is it, then? You want to allow these suicidal expert pilots to charge recklessly at the enemy phase lords in the hopes of in the hopes that they can gain so much more growth from this costly battle?"

Ves nodded again. "That is the gist of it. As far as I am concerned, our clan has already earned a profit with Saint Davia Stark's breakthrough. She is not a Larkinson, though. She'll be gone in less than a century, so we need to expand our ranks of ace pilots further in order to have enough of them to permanently keep our most important starships and bases protected. As far as I am concerned, we already have so many expert pilots that we can afford to make a few gambles."

In other words, Ves was psychologically prepared to lose a few expert pilots, even the old-time ones that he had known on a personal basis for many years, just to see if he could gain an ace pilot of the highest caliber!

Chapter 6699: Playing With Fire and Plasma

There were many theories that attempted to explain the variables that influenced the breakthrough chances of a high-ranking mech pilot.

While no one had managed to deduce the full and accurate formula or model that explained all of the variables that could affect this low-probability event, plenty of people had formed a lot of guesses and unproven theories.

Ves had developed his own understanding of what it took for mech pilots to break through.

The Heaven Earth Man Trifecta developed by Ketis possessed strong logic, but it was too general and did not have good ways to quantify its variables.

It was ultimately incomplete. It was a good theoretical model when expert pilots used it to strengthen their foundation and underlying qualifications to step up and become a greater version of themselves.

However, once they had done all they could to improve their breakthrough conditions, they still had to work hard to actually trigger this life-changing event.

That was an entirely different challenge.

Much of it was a mind game of sorts. Expert pilots had to push themselves to the limit and exceed it just enough to prove themselves worthy of becoming an ace pilot, but not too much to the point where they would likely die before succeeding!

As the Viola Magnifica System continued to become engulfed by war and death, an awfully large quantity of expert pilots that had ceased to grow any further had all chosen to place their trust in their recently improved foundations and seek greater challenges by confronting the dangerous phase lords!

Venerable Orfan did everything she could to stay alive while proving her valor in battle.

She piloted the Riot with greater skill and courage than in the past. The former soldier of the Bright Republic had grown far over the course of her service in the Larkinson Clan.

Though she had never let go of the traits that defined her personality, she had tried her best to become more responsible and more deserving of the help that the Larkinson Clan had provided her over the years.

Rosa Orfan realized that she could have never raised herself so high without the assistance of Ves Larkinson and the Larkinson Clan.

While she most certainly relied on her own qualities to become as powerful as she was today, she did not want to become a hero whose accomplishments were largely attributed to external factors.

She wanted to become strong enough to stand on her own two legs.

This was one of the reasons why she purposefully rejected the decision to wait until she received the Riot Mark III.

Venerable Orfan wanted to become a saint by relying on her own merits rather than attribute most of her success to the virtues of her luxuriously upgraded mech.

As the plasma sword wielded by the opposing orven phase lord once again whipped close enough to her scrambling Riot to pressure his resonance shield further, Venerable Orfan realized that she could not keep this up for long.

A few more near-misses like this would eventually cause her machine's resonance shield to collapse entirely.

The overstrained components of the Riot Mark II were already whining and groaning far beyond their usual levels due to how extensively Orfan pushed their performance.

She could not afford to tackle this challenge by leveraging 100 percent of the Riot's strength. That was simply not enough to make him last against Zren-Divar.

As the fight dragged on, the orven phase lord grew wise to the tricks of his tormentors.

The Valkyrie Krista and the Valkyrie Ursa were certainly annoying, but their attacks did not hit particularly hard.

Their compact luminar crystal rifles hardly stressed Zren-Divar's spatial barriers. Only their spear charges could inflict enough damage, but they needed to build up momentum first before their attacks could strike hard enough.

The only other way for the two Valkyrie expert mechs to deal a lot of damage was to stay close and repeatedly strike their spears at the spatial barrier.

As annoying as it was for Zren-Divar to turn around and swipe his plasma blade in the direction of the two Glory Seeker expert mechs, he still did so just to chase them away for a time!

The Valkyrie Krista and the Valkyrie Ursa may not be as old as the Riot, but the two machines were not designed to resist plasma weapons of this scale either.

What stood out from their combat approach was that Venerable Olivia Remus and Venerable Eona Ballentine took fewer risks when attacking the orven lesser phase lord.

Whereas Venerable Rosa Orfan frequently put her Riot within striking distance of the enemy's deadly plasma sword, the two Valkyrie mechs only dared to attack up close when Zren-Divar's back was facing their direction!

The short delay created by turning around to slash the plasma sword at their positions gave them enough of a delay to pull their lighter and more maneuverable machines out of the way with a much wider margin of safety!

It was pretty clear to outside observers such as Ves and Casella that the duo of Hexer pilots that had become known as the Handmaidens of Death did not deliberately push beyond their limits in the hopes of triggering their breakthroughs!

They were more than content with doing their duty and using the capabilities of their mid-tier expert mechs to harass and delay their opponent. Venerable Remus and Venerable Ballentine never thought about defeating their adversary in the first place. They already accepted the truth that their skills, experience and most importantly their expert mechs were not up to standard yet for them to realistically defeat this kind of opponent.

"We're outmatched, outgunned and outnumbered. Rather than hoping to defeat this phase lord with the three of us, we are better off trying to delay this big boy. If we are lucky, the other expert mechs have beaten back another phase lord and can team up with us to drive Zren-Divar away as well."

"If no help is forthcoming, then at least we have done our best to delay and distract this phase lord as long as we could. There is no need for us to go all-out and take risks when Madame Gloriana Wodin has already promised us to upgrade our expert mechs in the next couple of years."

The Handmaidens of Death clearly chose to make rational decisions. Even if they knew that this was not conducive to breaking through, Venerable Remus and Venerable Ballentine were not in a hurry to become ace pilots quite so fast.

Both the Larkinson Clan and the Hex Army already accumulated a number of ace pilots. That reduced the pressure of expert pilots such as the Handmaidens of Death. They could take the time to wait and polish their skills further.

Once the pair received their upgraded expert mechs, then they would try and push their limits, knowing that their superior machines could keep up with their ambitions.

While it was well within their right to adopt a more prudent and patient development strategy, the problem with taking so few risks was that their effectiveness in distracting their current adversary was quite limited!

Zren-Divar had already taken their measure. In his alien eyes, the two Valkyrie expert pilots were cowardly weaklings who lacked the resolve to win.

The pilot of the Riot was different. He could feel the intense hostility and determination from the human inside the cockpit. The false god of the Larkinson Clan was fully committed to defeating him during this battle.

This was why Zren-Divar took the threat posed by the Riot seriously. The expert spearman mech might not be as powerful as the other expert mechs on the battlefield, but when piloted by an aggressive human who did not fear him as much as she should, the Riot was doing a far better job at pinning him in place!

This was why their bout developed into an asymmetric contest where both sides worked to make their enemies falter by any means possible.

Neither of the two could expect to receive much support from their comrades and allies.

Saint Linda Cross, Saint Dise Larkinson and Saint Commander Casella Ingvar already had their hands full trying to slow down the relentless advance of the Herald of the Void and the Lower Herdmaster.

It was quite amazing how the three junior ace pilots, two of which were still being limited by their expert mechs, managed to keep the two greater phase lords preoccupied!

Even then, they still needed the fire support from CFA warships and orbital defenses in order to prevent the most powerful alien combatants from advancing too quickly.

The ace pilots could not afford to direct their attention and energy elsewhere because the greater phase lords may become free to inflict massive damage onto the orbital defense ring!

"Heh. I don't need the help anyway." Venerable Orfan muttered as she maneuvered her Riot for another risky attack run.

The Riot's resonance shield was on its last legs. Some of the heat of the plasma sword had already bled through the shield and begun to heat up the upper layers of the ExTrans Armor System.

Despite the obvious risks of continuing to persist in her attacks without any additional support, Venerable Orfan preferred it this way.

During the months-long Red Tide Offensive, Venerable Orfan had fought many battles under the auspices of numerous ace pilots.

Their power and perception were so high that they were often able to bail expert mechs out whenever they overextended and put themselves into vulnerable positions.

Although the ace pilots did not intervene too often, the awareness that it may be possible for them to take action had taken away much of the challenge of fighting against the native aliens.

It was understandable for the ace pilots to prevent expert pilots from getting killed too often. There weren't enough of them and they could always use more.

Even so, Venerable Orfan personally felt she did not need a babysitter in order to succeed.

Now that the greater protectors on the human side were fully engaged with the two greater phase lords, Rosa Orfan was fairly certain that this was the best and most authentic challenge that she could ask for at this time!

Her blood pumped faster and her body ran hot. The grin on her face grew increasingly more unhinged as she reveled in the danger that she voluntarily chose to embrace!

As her mood rose higher, she pushed her Riot harder, causing the expert spearman mech to charge a little faster and strike a little faster!

Her intuition grew sharper. She evaded the deadly plasma sword attacks with clumsy but undeniably effective evasive maneuvers.

Each time Zren-Divar missed his strikes, he grew increasingly more frustrated!

His tempo increased. He attacked harder and began to employ various spatial abilities to hinder the Riot's movements.

This was exactly what Venerable Orfan wanted to attain!

In the previous days, she managed to figure out that chaos was the element or concept that resonated with her the most.

Just like the Riot, Venerable Orfan liked to sow chaos among her enemies!

The more she could destabilize her opponent, the greater her advantage!

She truly did not fear the increasingly more aggressive phase lord. Her Riot continued to vindicate her trust and always evaded the incoming plasma sword without fail.

"Hahahaha! This is it! This is my life! I revel in the chaos of the battlefield!"

Venerable Orfan's mental state was so strong at this moment that she was able to shrug off most of the spatial disturbances by sheer force of will!

"Do you feel it, Riot?! This is what I was made for! This is what I am supposed to become!"

She could feel it! She could feel that she was approaching her upper limit!

Just as Venerable Orfan could pierce the invisible barrier that blocked her path to becoming a saint, sudden mutations occurred on the battlefield!

Over a dozen warship-grade laser beams attempted to strike the Riot from different angles!

Though Venerable Orfan's intuition had warned her of the acute danger a second or so in advance, that only gave her enough time to reflexively juke the Riot to the side!

Unfortunately, her expert mech got hit anyway as the powerful laser beams did not converge at a single point, but instead created a momentary grid.

It turned out that several puelmer heavy cruisers had quietly brought their primary laser cannon batteries to bear against the Riot. Their advanced targeting and prediction systems had spent precious minutes modeling the performance parameters and evasion patterns of the expert spearman mech before launching a coordinated surprise attack!

Their attempt was incredibly effective.

No matter what direction the Riot moved towards, the expert mech was guaranteed to get hit by at least two transphasic hyper beams!

The Riot's luck had finally run out because he was struck by three laser beams this time!

This was enough damage to exhaust his resonance shield entirely and melt a large amount of armor plating on the surface!

Getting struck by the puelmer heavy cruisers was not immediately fatal to the Riot.

What was truly dangerous was that the surprise attack interrupted the Riot's rhythm and halted Venerable Orfan's momentum for just a single instance!

Zren-Divar was already on the move. It was clear that he had been in quiet communication with the puelmer commanders as he had already begun to chop his plasma sword straight in the direction of the Riot a moment before the laser cannon batteries had opened fire!

"NO! ORFAN!"

The Riot tried to evade the deadly attack, but the accumulated stresses on his systems proved to be too great at this time. Some of the expert mech's components were a little bit slower to activate, and other parts were unable to perform at their full power.

This ultimately caused the Riot to get struck by the burning edge of the plasma sword!

Metal burned and half-melted parts flew out into a spray as Venerable Orfan's expert mech succumbed to the attack!

Chapter 6700: Fatal Attraction

Many people grew shocked when they witnessed the takedown of the Riot Mark II.

In one moment, the expert spearman mech impressed many observers by how well it outmaneuvered the lesser phase lord known as Zren-Divar.

The orven martial god was hardly an easy opponent to contain. He was armed with a plasma sword and also wore a high-tech raiment that shot out energy beams and occasionally boosted his movement with the activation of thrusters.

Yet the Riot performed exemplary under the circumstances. Venerable Rosa Orfan had mastered the art of piloting her expert spearman mech for many years. She knew exactly how far she could push her systems.

Through a combination of skill, judgment, intuition and guts, she successfully stalled an opponent that was much bigger and much more lethal than her expert mech!

If she was able to keep this up for a while longer, there was a good chance that she may actually be able to pierce her bottleneck and undergo her second apotheosis!

Yet just as her resonance strength began to grow past previous limit and break a new personal record, the puelmers had unexpectedly intervened!

The puelmers never built battleships. Their physical statures were small, so they had a different appreciation of size than most other races.

Despite boasting a length that was less than 1 standard kilometer, their heavy cruisers still earned a lot of fear and notoriety among humans.

Whereas orvens and nunsers all-too-frequently squandered huge amounts of resources to build the biggest and most massive homeships, the puelmers always sought to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of every cubic meter of hull structure.

Their guns did not boast the largest calibers, but the use of advanced and optimized high technologies caused them to hit harder and more precisely than the gun batteries utilized by other races!

It turned out that the puelmer heavy cruisers had been hanging back and used their long-ranged armaments to exchange fire with the CFA sub-capital warships.

However, the puelmer officers always paid attention to the fights between the champions. The clever aliens keenly understood that the downfall of phase lords would have a devastating impact on the alien armada.

If Zren-Divar perished or suffered a severe setback, morale throughout the alien fleets would plunge. The orvens would especially become discouraged as the humans managed to disgrace not one, but two of their gods!

This was why the puelmers chose to intervene. Their sophisticated computer systems had already built up an extensive model of the Riot's movement patterns and knew exactly where to aim their crazily accurate laser cannons in order to guarantee at least several hits!

Under normal circumstances, the Riot should have been able to resist enough laser beam attacks to withdraw and take shelter behind a starship or an orbital fortress.

However, the Riot had already eroded his safety margin by occasionally getting struck by the positron beam cannons mounted on Zren-Divar's raiment and getting a bit too close to the extremely hot blade of plasma sword.

Venerable Rosa Orfan knew what she was doing. She was aware that her expert mech's resonance shield had been dwindling. Instead of making the more prudent and logical decision to back off or at least fight less aggressively than before, she persisted in her aggression and made herself far too vulnerable to what happened next.

The Riot Mark II repeatedly played with fire and eventually got burned, both figuratively and literally!

What was worse was that the Riot played with fire when he was still in his Mark II iteration instead of the much more powerful and capable Mark III version!

This meant that Venerable Rosa Orfan could no longer shield herself from the Mark II's many technical inadequacies.

These might not matter much if she fought against more reasonable enemies, but by choosing to confront a lesser phase lord, these technical shortcomings and limitations may have become her undoing!

Many Larkinsons looked aghast when the Riot failed to evade the plasma sword that struck his exterior and melted or vaporized so much plating of the ExTrans Armor System that parts of the expert mech already split apart!

As the half-molten fragments of limbs, armor plates and more critical components sprayed into the expanse of space, the remnant of the Riot's mech frame floated away as if it was a broken and discarded puppet!

"Is she still alive?!"

"What is the state of the cockpit!?"

The Riot Mark II no longer maintained any active data connections anymore. His ability to transmit and receive signals had been completely destroyed due to the blow he had suffered.

The Larkinsons had to rely on their sensors and scanners to quickly ascertain the state of the expert mech and the expert pilot.

"The cockpit... is damaged and deformed, but it should still be partially intact!" Ketis analyzed based on the sensor readings and observation data. "I fear that the reinforced shell of the cockpit may have been breached. If that is the case, then Venerable Orfan may have suffered from severe exposure to thermal energy. Her piloting suit can provide limited protection against heat and burn damage, but she needs to be brought back in order to receive treatment right away!"

The Riot Mark II had been crippled, but his ExTrans Armor System had not completely failed. The dual mix of Unending alloy and more modern first-class transphasic hyper alloy plating had done its job and resisted just enough energy damage to keep the cockpit whole more or less.

This meant that Venerable Orfan could still be saved!

Doing so was difficult as the puelmer heavy cruisers were already preparing to fire their precise laser cannon batteries yet again.

"CEASE!"

The Commandeered Transcendent Punishers Mark III no longer bombarded the Herald of the Void, giving the greater phase lord more breathing room to pummel the Amphis Extremis.

The Saint Commander instead instructed the heavy artillery mechs to fire their massive Devora Cannons at the puelmer heavy cruisers that sought to take advantage of the Riot's inability to defend himself!

Hundreds of high-velocity transphasic hyper gauss rounds that were all empowered by the true resonance of an ace pilot soared across space and thundered against the segmented multi-layered azure energy shields of the alien heavy cruisers!

Even if their azure energy shield generators were stronger and better than the ones employed by other races, the puelmer vessels were still limited by their limited size and scale.

As the Transcendent Punisher Mark III's reloaded their Devora Cannons and prepared to fire another salvo of empowered siege attacks, the puelmer heavy cruisers quickly switched from offense to defense.

The alien captains and officers panicked! They no longer channeled a lot of power to their energy weapon batteries, but instead diverted all of that energy to their azure energy shield generators in order to bolster their defenses as much as possible!

Even so, Saint Commander Casella Ingvar did not intend to let the puelmer heavy cruisers off this time!

It had been a mistake for her to ignore the threat they posed against other assets. So long as they remained active and operational on this battlefield, they could easily shift their targets and take advantage of the weakness of other crucial expert mechs.

"Hold on for a while, Linda! I need to take care of these puelmer heavy cruisers right away! My Knights will remain busy for a time, but my Barons will still be able to support you during this time."

"Go ahead, Casella." The Crosser ace pilot responded even as her ace offensive space knight began to glow a lot brighter and hotter than before! "I have just activated the Volcanic Outburst Mode of my ace mech's Magma Vein System. I can hold back the Herald of the Void by myself if I have to, but only for a few minutes."

"Are you sure?!"

"Yes! Go save your colleague!"

The Saint Commander decisively pressed on with her rescue action.

While she agreed with Ves that the expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan should have the freedom to make stupid decisions, she did not want her old friends and comrades to die when there was still a chance that they could be saved!

In any case, the Riot Mark II's challenge had come to an end the moment the expert mech had lost the ability to fight, so Casella wasn't ruining Venerable Orfan's chances of attaining a breakthrough.

While Casella tried to use her Knights to put the puelmer heavy cruisers on the defensive, she used her Barons to put pressure onto the phase lord responsible for crippling the Riot!

The brand-new Karma Cutter mechs had already shown off a portion of their capabilities as they intervened in the mech battles and systematically took down one elite phasefighter after another.

The Saint Commander had retained 40 of them for the purpose of Enfeoffing them, causing the powerful quasi-first-class rifleman mechs to gain power that was equivalent to a low-tier expert mech!

Prior to this moment, Casella had utilized their rapid-fire Null Rifles to pelt the greater phase lords with highly disruptive Null Rounds.

Now, she quickly changed their assignments and commanded them to drown Zren-Divar with resonance-empowered hyper bullets!

While the volume of attacks put much greater strain on the spatial barrier of a lesser phase lord, Zren-Divar forcefully endured the attacks and continued to fly forward while raising his plasma sword.

He looked as if he was determined to finish the job even if he started to incur real damage!

The Valkyrie Krista and the Valkyrie Ursa no longer fought as cautiously as before.

The Handmaidens of Death did not want to see a respected female expert pilot perish in front of their machines, so they drove their expert Valkyrie mechs to assault and savage the orven phase lord in the rear!

However, Zren-Divar's spatial barrier still remained strong enough that he had the luxury to ignore the two annoying expert mechs for a time!

As the lesser phase lord easily caught up to the crippled and drifting Riot, he continued to weather the high volume of incoming attacks and forcefully chopped his plasma sword down onto the expert spearman mech!

"Fatal Attraction!"

Just as Zren-Divar imagined the Riot melting and splitting apart from his plasma sword, the Riot's crippled mech frame strangely drifted out of reach from his weapon at the last second!

At most, the broken mech frame's proximity to the plasma sword had caused a few more components to melt!

"Jannzi! Good job!"

The Bastion had come to the rescue!

The expert heavy space knight had always been hovering not too far away from the fights between the champions of both sides.

Venerable Jannzi knew that she would be of greatest use if she stood by and waited until an unexpected crisis or accident had occurred.

Though her relatively slow Bastion was not fast enough to catch up to the Riot and shield Venerable Orfan's machine from the coup-de-grace, Jannzi still had another trick up her sleeve!

She resonated with GT-535, the key resonating exotic that had been developed by Master Moira Willix during one of her past projects.

The resonating exotic granted the Bastion limited control over gravity.

This was enough for Venerable Jannzi to activate a resonating ability that caused her Bastion to form a gravitic link with the Riot, causing the two to converge upon each other!

While this temporarily saved the crippled expert spearman mech from total eradication, it still did not solve the threat posed by the angry lesser phase lord!

Zren-Divar continued to ignore all of the ranged attacks that were sapping his spatial barrier and continued to fly forward before swinging his plasma sword with fury or an angry native god!

This time, the phase lord did not want to be fooled again. He deliberately advanced closer and slowed the speed of his weapon swing so that he could exert much better control over his attack.

Venerable Jannzi had no other choice but to stand her ground and shield the Riot Mark II from harm!

"Maximum Defense!"