

Mech Touch 6761

Chapter 6761: Kayana System

Saint Davia Stark and her precious Amaranto Mark III traveled to the Rubarthan Pact on a fast courier vessel.

The Red Association had built plenty of these small and cheap vehicles. Each of them were equipped with excellent superdrives, but did not really possess much in the way of defenses, weapon systems and transportation capacity.

That was fine because they were only ever used to transfer confidential information, high-ranking mechs and mech pilots from one zone to another.

Human High Command had begun to promote greater circulation of expert pilots and ace pilots.

Letting the same champions defend the same star systems allowed the native aliens to make extensive preparations in advance.

All high-ranking pilots and mechs possessed their own strengths and weaknesses. The longer they stayed in a single location, the easier it was for the native aliens to prepare targeted countermeasures.

This not only caused red humanity to lose crucial battles, but also exposed the expert pilots and ace pilots to greater dangers.

For this reason and more, HHC wanted at least some of these human champions to rotate from star system to star system. It should never be easy for the enemy to prepare targeted countermeasures.

This was especially important in the Upper Zones where the most important battles took place!

Therefore, the Rubarthan defenders of the Monroe Upper Zone located within the Inferno Spear Principality were fairly accustomed to receiving guests from other states and zones.

The fast courier vessel received an expected welcome as soon as she transitioned into the Kayana System.

Saint Stark had already conducted a bit of research on her next destination. The port system was one of the more important strongholds of the Monroe Upper Zones.

Now that the native aliens had pushed the frontlines all the way back to the 5th and final defensive band, Kayana was much heavier fortified than other locations.

The Rubarthans made good use of the time bought by the defenders of the 1st to 4th defensive bands.

Kayana III was the capital planet and the first to be colonized by the Rubarthans hailing from the Inferno Spear Principality. Its excellent location caused it to develop an ecosystem filled with life adapted to the presence of abundant quantities of medium to high-grade exotics.

What was even better was that the powerful exobeasts that evolved to incorporate these exotics inside their bodies usually combined them in all kinds of magical ways. Their organic carcasses and byproducts were filled with exotic reagents that had many wonderful applications in the biotechnology sector!

For these reasons and more, the nunsers who came to colonize Kayana III did not dare to terraform or risk the existing ecosystem. They conscientiously kept their terraforming limited to a local scope. Many tracts of land as well as ocean remained relatively undisturbed, allowing the indigenous exobeasts to live like usual.

The Rubarthans that arrived to conquer the Kayana System and claim this jewel of a planet for themselves recognized the wisdom of the nunsers approach. The arriving human colonists preserved the ecosystem of Kayana III while only slightly expanding their settlements.

In the planet's heyday, Kayana III hosted a vibrant and flourishing biotech sector. Many Rubarthans as well as foreign biotech research institutions and pharmaceutical companies decided to set up shop on the planet in order to take advantage of the biological wealth of the untamed planet.

The Hunting Association had also established a stronger presence as of late due to the mutations of so many exobeast.

However, the Red Tide Offensive had caused much of this prosperity to disappear.

Many civilians evacuated the planet while the local businesses had closed their doors forever.

Civilian infrastructure made way for military fortifications. The pristine nature of numerous lands had to make way for construction as well.

Though the Rubarthans did not wish to ruin the ecosystem of the entire planet as they still hoped to retake the Kayana System one day, they still tried to deny the attackers an opportunity to harvest a lot of profits from the planet.

Compared to Kayana III, Kayana VI and Kayana VIII-E were not as developed before the latest offensive.

Kayana VI was a renewable source of phasewater that had supplied the Rubarthans for multiple years.

Kayana VIII-E was a moon orbiting a gas giant that was both a source of high-grade exotics and resonating exotics.

On top of that, the asteroid belts of the Kayana System also possessed a lot of mineral wealth, though much of it was dispersed and hidden among worthless space rocks.

Saint Stark had never entered a star system that contained so much material wealth. She finally gained more understanding why Human High Command prioritized their defense so much.

Did she feel better about the fact that ace pilots such as herself had to let the citizens of the Middle Zones fend for themselves?

Not necessarily.

She at least recognized that the strategies chosen by HHC were more likely to preserve red humanity in the end.

There was little point in bleeding so heavily over low-value territories when the most precious ones had fallen in advance.

When the courier vessel entered a large space station that orbited over Kayana III, the Minerva Mark III was finally able to step out of her hold.

The Rubarthans had prepared a reception for the arriving ace pilot.

Dozens of pristine first-class multipurpose mechs stood in rows on opposite sides.

Officers and soldiers in dress uniform stood right in front of the massive feet of the machines.

Virtual banners hung from the ceiling while a big red carpet had been rolled out in the center.

The Rubarthans even played an uplifting tune that swelled the Rubarthans with pride.

Standing further away were civilian journalists. Their recorder bots eagerly took in the arrival of the Amaranto Mark III and zoomed in on the unusual appearance and tech of this exotic masterwork archemech.

Saint Stark was slightly taken by surprise at all of the pomp and circumstance.

She had already been informed by the Rubarthans that they would organize an occasion to greet her, but the ace pilot never knew that she would be met with so much attention.

Did Saint Tusa receive this kind of treatment all of the time?

Davia Stark did not let her surprise freeze her in place for too long. Her Amaranto Mark III only paused briefly before moving forward at a smooth, confident and controlled pace.

Though Stark kept her Saint Kingdom suppressed, she couldn't prevent it from spreading out and coming into contact with so many Rubarthan soldiers and mechs.

The soldiers were all happy to welcome her arrival. They were proud of themselves, but they could not deny that it was always good to receive additional help.

The Rubarthan mechs also presented Davia Stark with interesting sights.

Due to the Larkinson Clan's ongoing association with the Terran Alliance, Saint Stark had come into contact with Terran mechs a few times.

The differences between Terran mechs and Rubarthan mechs were obvious.

Compared to the former, the latter clearly favored ranged combat more.

Many Terran first-class multipurpose mechs were designed so that their long-ranged armaments softened up their opponents while their close-ranged weapons finished them off with great power.

In order to make sure that their mechs were lethal enough at close range, the Terrans made many design choices that limited the capacity for ranged armaments and devoted more space to enhancing anything that helped with melee combat.

The Rubarthan Pact on the other hand tended to treat their ranged armaments as primary weapons and their melee weapons as backup solutions.

The mechs gathered inside the spacious hangar bay of a space station all reflected this design approach. Their designs allocated a lot more capacity towards accommodating higher calibers, stronger capacitors and many other relevant components.

While the Rubarthan mechs could still swing a sword or bayonet in order to fend off opponents that came close, they would much prefer to back off and keep pelting their enemies with plasma bolts, energy beams, kinetic rounds and missiles.

Saint Stark felt a little more at home among these first-class multipurpose mechs. These were soldiers who had taken ranged combat to the highest level.

She suddenly understood a little better why the Rubarthans stared at her machine with so many hot eyes.

Everyone in the Larkinson Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance had already become somewhat familiar with the Amaranto, or at least her previous incarnation.

The Rubarthans probably never saw a machine like the Amaranto Mark III. She was simultaneously a seventh generation living mech, a masterwork mech, a transphasic mech, a hyper mech and a Solus mech, if only barely.

Yet it was not these technological identifiers that the Rubarthans fixated upon the most.

The ace pilot could deduce from the emotions of the Rubarthans within her Saint Kingdom that they admired and desired to pilot a machine like the Amaranto because she pursued an extreme that few of the locals were willing to commit towards.

The Amaranto Mark III was a mech designed around the concept of extreme firepower!

This not only reminded the Rubarthans of the famous Ragnarok piloted by the Destroyer of Mechs, but also gave them the belief that Saint Stark could assassinate any phase lord so long as her ace mech possessed a clear line of sight!

Their expectations were too high. Stark was reluctant to disappoint them by telling them that she could not one-shot every phase lord that appeared in her crosshairs.

As the Amaranto approached the other side of the hangar bay, she stopped before a podium that already hosted a number of Rubarthan dignitaries.

Saint Stark tuned out the boring boilerplate speeches. While she could feel that the Rubarthans were sincere enough, they couldn't help but use her arrival as an opportunity to play to their citizens.

"...please exit the cockpit of your fine masterwork mech so that you may address our citizens."

That was her cue to open up the cockpit of the Amaranto and emerge from the chest of her machine.

She floated down and soon faced her own mech as well as the many Rubarthan soldiers and mechs.

"I thank you for your warm welcome." She began to speak. She was not entirely comfortable with addressing the public, but she was not about to make a fool of herself. "In my youth, I looked up to the New Rubarth Empire as a state that continued to set an example for many states, including my own. It is an honor and a privilege for me to grow strong enough to earn your recognition and fight by your side."

Though Saint Stark did not harbor any special sentiments towards the Rubarthans, she still admired their history and how much they had done to curb the arrogance of the Terrans.

It was a shame that the Big Two came and reduced the New Rubarth Empire from a powerful star empire to a mere state.

"As a decades-long guest pilot of the Larkinson Clan, I may not be able to represent my hosts directly, but I can tell you that the Larkinsons also admire you. Many of its rules and customs are based on the meritocracy that you have exemplified across your history."

The Terrans possessed a longer heritage, but the Rubarthans had a greater influence on the societal development of modern human civilization.

"Here in the Kayana System, I arrived to do my part in protecting your colonial superstate and the many people who reside in your territories. I have come to observe,

to learn and to fulfill my purpose as the protector of all humans who are not able to take up the fight themselves. I hope that my performance in the coming weeks will be satisfactory! I shall endeavor to teach the invading enemy phase lords a lesson that they will not forget!"

The Rubarthans cheered! Even if her words were not that important, her attitude and the respect she had shown to her latest hosts had already endeared her to the locals!

Chapter 6762: Kindred Spirits

After concluding her speech, the Rubarthans made further arrangements to accommodate her stay.

They made sure to transfer the Amaranto Mark III to a deeper part of the space station where she would reside in a highly protected compartment whenever she was not in the field.

The hosts also provided tours and accommodations for the Larkinson mech technicians and low-ranking mech designers that accompanied Saint Stark and the Amaranto on the courier vessel.

Although the Rubarthans offered to let their own mech technicians and specialists who had studied the basics of archetech to help with servicing her ace mech, Saint Stark immediately shook her head.

"The Amaranto Mark III remains property of the Larkinson Clan. The patriarch himself has already reminded me that only Larkinsons are authorized to service and repair her in case she is damaged."

"Excuse me, 'her'?"

"Ah. I have forgotten that you are not familiar with living mechs. The Amaranto Mark III is not a simple machine. She is alive and intelligent, and I do not mean that the Larkinsons have installed her with an advanced AI chip. This is one of the reasons why the Larkinson Clan only entrusts its own trained and experienced personnel with the responsibility to keep mechs like my own in healthy condition."

This discussion and others reminded Saint Stark that it had been a long time that she had fought alongside soldiers other than the Larkinsons.

Stark had spent so much time among them that she could rightfully call herself half a member of the Larkinson Clan!

Even if she was not connected to their magical 'Larkinson Network', she was such a familiar face to them that they treated her with almost the same warmth and camaraderie they directed to all clansmen.

It was endearing. She genuinely liked the Larkinsons, or else she wouldn't be so satisfied with fighting alongside them. She only regretted that she would have to leave their side sooner or later.

Nothing lasted forever in this bleak galaxy.

While the maintenance crew dedicated to keeping the Amaranto Mark III in good shape settled into their temporary berths, Saint Stark was being led towards one of the luxury compartments dedicated to the most powerful champions in the Kayana System.

She could already feel their presence long before she arrived at their doorstep.

Unlike the tentative and nearly formless domain field surrounding Davia Stark, the domain fields projected by the older and much more powerful saints up ahead was much more developed!

Even if they were massively weakened due to being outside of their respective ace mechs, the pair of Rubarthan senior ace pilots still exerted control over the surrounding compartments like a pair of sovereigns laying claim over a small piece of the cosmos.

Saint Stark's domain came into direct contact with the domains of the two powerful ace pilots, and lost out directly.

The only reason why Stark was still able to keep her back straight and unbowed was because the two aces exerted so much control and discipline over their powerful domains that they accepted the entry of a third domain.

This was quite remarkable. Usually, multiple strong headed ace pilots couldn't help but clash against each other. Their strong willpower made it so that they were often unwilling to concede even if they were outmatched!

Bad blood could often arise among ace pilots who were not familiar with each other and did not share much in common. One of them always had to admit defeat and submit to the strength of the strongest in the gathering.

However, Saint Stark did not experience anything like this. Not only were the Rubarthan ace pilots remarkably open towards strangers, but they were also able to accept each other's presence with no discernable tension or friction.

That was even more impressive.

Stark had only witnessed this sort of harmony from the infamous Gemini Saints of the Gemini Family.

The Gemini Family went to extremes in terms of family planning and eugenics to produce a result like Saint Sandro Gemini and Saint Kaia Gemini.

Not only did the twin brother and sister grow up together without interruption, but they also married each other when they turned into adults!

Although many such Destiny Teams had failed to live up to their potential, the Gemini Saints were living proof that their warped schemes could bear fruit!

When the ace mechs of the two Gemini Saints merged into the Embodiment of Love and Sacrifice, the two ace pilots were able to lend their willpower to each other without any obstacles!

This effectively enabled their junior ace mechs to gain the effective combat power of a senior ace mech!

Right now, Saint Stark was convinced that her new mentors were capable of fusing their domains and lending their power to each other.

All of this matched with the records that Saint Stark had read about them, who just happened to be twins as well.

Their ace mech, which unfortunately came with a perplexing name, was not a typical machine of its kind.

The Lamia Kailamassu was a dual-pilot ace mech!

It was as if a pair of ace mechs like the Embodiment of Love and the Embodiment of Sacrifice decided to physically merge together... and never come apart again.

This was even more extreme as far as Saint Stark was concerned!

There were advantages to integrating their strengths so closely... but if anything bad happened to one of them, the other would also suffer the same fate!

Saint Stark would never make such a heavy commitment, but that did not stop her from respecting those that were willing to take this risk.

After a final but largely redundant security inspection, Davia Stark finally passed through the hatch.

She entered a white space that was covered by shiny and reflective marble-like materials.

A huge amount of internal space had been devoted to creating a white and largely tiled interior compartment that was largely devoid of furniture and other obstacles.

The huge amount of negative space might seem disturbing to most visitors, but Saint Stark immediately appreciated the sparse decor.

The large compartment only contained a minimal amount of tables, couches, chairs and cabinets.

The furniture was all crafted to the highest standard, yet seemed incredibly simple and monotonous. Most of it came in simple combinations of black and white. There were no tints or patterns to add more complexity to the decor.

No artworks adorned the walls either. The only concession to aesthetics was the large wall on the far side of the compartment.

The occupants of this space had chosen to turn the entire bulkhead surface into a projected panorama that showed an enhanced view of the large space station, the planet it was orbiting, the orbital defense ring, the predominantly Rubarthan starships in the vicinity, the red backdrop of the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy and the subtle golden glow emanated by the distant Messier 87 Galaxy.

The view was breathtaking in spite of the fact that Saint Stark could easily see it for herself when she deployed her ace mech in space.

What struck Saint Stark the most out of this entire compartment was that it conveyed a sense of peace that was far more natural than Lufa's glow.

There was a distinct lack of human intimacy in the decor. The designers went out of their way to remove any overt human factors from the environment.

That was the reason why Saint Stark felt so at peace. She had many grievances towards humans and aliens, so entering a private space that was completely devoid from all of those complicated aspects was relaxing.

She already felt she could drop her mask and let out her true self. There was nobody here aside from a pair of Rubarthan ace pilots who suffered similar pains and sought relief through isolation.

Saint Stark's Larkinson-issued knee-high boots clacked particularly loudly on the tiled deck.

Her two mentors sat close to the projected display. They sat on a simple black leather couch while enjoying their company in silence.

When Stark moved close, the female sibling turned her head.

"Welcome to the Rubarthan Pact, Saint Stark, retainer of the Larkinson Clan."

Davia Stark inclined her head. "Thank you, Saint Jerivern Chevor."

The male sibling turned his head to face the new arrival as well. "Come sit with us. We all know why you have come. The HHC thinks that ace pilots with scars such as yours will benefit from spending time in our company. So let us do that. We will not be able to enjoy moments like this too often in the near future. The native aliens will soon be done mustering their forces on a determined assault."

Stark moved around and sat at a modest distance from the twins.

She stared at the two ace pilots with open curiosity.

Aloretzi and Jerivern Chevor had gone through a lot of ordeals to get to this position today.

Known as the Stewards Siamesia, the two were actually born as Siamese twins!

It was fairly rare for them to be born in this day and age. This was especially the case in second-rate states as medical technology was good enough over there to nip these problems in the bud.

For whatever reason, their family hadn't been able to detect the problem in time. This gave their mother no choice but to birth them as two babies sharing the same bodies.

Fortunately, there was no problem with separating them afterwards. They just needed to grow long enough for their health to grow strong enough to withstand any potential complications.

Despite being able to grow up as two healthy and more importantly separate children, the twins still remained as close to each other as if they were still merged as one.

Stark couldn't help but stare down at the empty sleeves on the left sides of their bodies.

The two ace pilots strangely lacked their left arms.

The Stewards Siamesia naturally detected what their new guest was staring at. Few people could help but take notice of their imperfect conditions.

"You have read the stories about our arms, correct?" The male Chevor spoke.

"I have." Stark nodded. "The two of you fought in the military of your former second-rate state. The conduct of the armed forces of both sides was... deplorable. War crimes and avoidable civilian deaths took place with such great frequency that it broke your illusions about the glory of warfare."

Jerivern closed his eyes. "That is true. From the moment the straw broke the camel's back, we broke through and became expert pilots. We also made a vow that we have upheld to this day. However, that did not absolve our culpability in past crimes. Even if we did not kill the weak and defenseless ourselves, we enabled the ones that did. That was unforgivable to us, so we cut our arms as punishment and as a permanent reminder to us that we can never allow ourselves to be used as tools to conduct indiscriminate massacres ever again."

Saint Stark's eyes grew sharper for a moment. "Do your sympathies extend to the native aliens as well?"

"To be honest, Davia, we never considered the aliens when we made that vow." Jerivern admitted. "This is one of the lingering doubts that we must solve if we want to come closer to taking the final steps. Do not misunderstand us. Despite our vows and restrictions, we will not stand by and let the native aliens massacre innocent humans under our watch. We have chosen to contribute in a fight in our own ways while simultaneously ensuring that we will never turn our strength against the people we are obligated to protect."

Saint Stark knew that he meant all of it with all of his heart. His domain conveyed absolute belief and sincerity in his vows and principles.

What was impressive was that Aloretzi was of one mind with her twin brother. The two's thoughts aligned so well that there was not a single difference!

Stark slowly began to smile in relief. She felt for the first time that she was in the presence of kindred spirits.

Chapter 6763: Struggling To Make A Difference

Saint Davia Stark had often been told that high-ranking expert pilots tended to be... weird and eccentric.

Some had deviated further beyond the realm of normality than others.

They did not understand.

From the moment a human stepped onto the path of godhood, they started a journey that compelled them to continuously temper their willpower.

The difference between a good expert pilot and a bad expert pilot was their degree of commitment and dedication to their cause.

How well did they abide by their promises? How much did they follow the spirit of their vows as well as the letter? How extensively did they spend their time on training and pushing their skills to the next level?

All of these factors and more determined how far high-ranking mech pilots could go. The worst of them inevitably stalled while those who stayed true to their convictions would be able to reach the very end.

However, it was not easy for these champions to stick to their original vows.

As willpower cultivators, these people gained power by setting rules on themselves and following them no matter the circumstances.

Rules gave them structure. Rules gave them direction. Rules prevented them from becoming the monsters they despised.

However, too many rules could be detrimental to their success. They could bind the hands of champions and prevent them from doing what was necessary.

The Stewards Siamesia had obviously chosen to follow a far more difficult road than their peers.

Their horror towards unjustified violence and bloodshed had scarred them so much that they had made one of the most drastic and impactful vows a mech pilot could make.

"We vowed not to kill people anymore." Alorezi Chevor declared with so much earnesty that it seemed as if he had just made this promise yesterday. "We do not deny that humans will always be entangled with killing and wars for as long as they live, but that does not mean we wish to make things worse. By promising ourselves that we will never stain our blood with the lives of others, we are attempting to change a society that is all-too-obsessed with warfare. By setting an example and spreading our values to those who are willing to listen, we hope to usher in an age where peace becomes more common than war."

As Saint Stark continued to bask in the calming and non judgemental presence of the twin saints, she became fascinated by how they were able to cope with such a heavy restriction.

"I can understand why you fight so hard to establish peace, Alorezi." Saint Stark said as her eyes glazed back to her past. "War is horrible business. It is interesting to observe that we have decided to fight back in different ways. You have chosen to change the people around you through restraining your killing edge. I have chosen to usher greater peace by killing the ones responsible for spreading war."

They were kindred spirits. Just because they chose to solve the same problem in different ways did not make them ideological opponents. Everyone had their own ideas, and so long as they shared a common cause, they possessed a natural affinity with each other.

"You may call me Alo." The male twin said with a smile.

"And you may call me Jeri." The female twin echoed. "Our names can be a handful for most people, after all. We agree with your analysis. All three of us bear the scars of warfare unrestrained. The slaughter of civilians and the unjust killing of those who

pose no threat to anyone is a phenomenon that must be eradicated from an enlightened civilization. Alas, people who align with our sentiments are far too rare in this day and age. Too many people have grown up in a society that glorifies mech pilots and combat. They have no idea that true warfare is nowhere near as clean and glorious as the unrealistic battles that are depicted in action dramas and virtual reality games."

War had become baked into the DNA of human civilization since the Age of Conquest.

Humanity struggled when they initially ascended to the stars.

The bright-eyed and optimistic people of that early age soon encountered many setbacks as they found themselves to be a young civilization located in a stagnant galaxy that was already divided by many older alien civilizations.

Not only did humans fail to expand their power and prosperity, but the unequal treaties and trade agreements imposed by their more powerful neighbors threatened to reduce their territory to a client state!

Instead of rolling over and allowing themselves to get trapped in a perpetual cycle of suppression and exploitation, humans under the leadership of the Supreme Marshal rebelled against this malaise and waged war against enemies that enjoyed far greater advantages!

It was the unlikely but explosive success of this aggressive approach that forever cemented the human race's love for war.

It had become a matter of belief to many people. They always thought that every problem could be resolved by fighting over it. War had become more than an extension of diplomacy. It had become a cause in itself.

Saint Stark narrowed her eyes. "Since you seek to inspire change among the people, why did you join the New Rubarth Empire? It is well-known that the Rubarthans are the originators of the Societal Revival Theory. It has become the go-to excuse for many politicians and leaders to declare war when they couldn't think of any better reason to throw countless lives and assets into the meat grinder."

The mere mention of the infamous social theory was enough to break the serenity of the Stewards Siamesia.

Their twin domain fields grew more agitated for a moment. While they exhibited excellent discipline and control by suppressing these fluctuations, they did not hide their contempt towards the theory and the ideology it spawned.

"The New Rubarth Empire is not perfect." Jeri plainly admitted. "No state or group is perfect. Its history with the Terrans has indeed anchored the Societal Revival Theory into the heart of their culture and institutions. Yet what makes the Rubarthans tolerable is that they see themselves as better and more enlightened than others. Are their beliefs justified? Everyone has a different answer to that. At the very least, they strongly adhere to the established laws and convention of warfare. They almost never violate the rules of engagement. This has given us greater confidence that the Rubarthans are more open to the kind of change that we wish to make."

Both Alo and Jeri Chevor were originally citizens of the Phylore Union. They had readily turned their backs on the unremarkable second-rate state after witnessing the deplorable conduct of its armed forces.

To be fair, the enemies they were fighting against did not shy away from brutality either. Both sides held deep grievances towards each other.

However, it was the vicious cycle of grievances and massacres that had formed between these two rival states that spawned a pair of saints as unique as the Stewards Siamesia.

They recognized that the only way to stop the cycle of senseless bloodshed was to push in the opposite direction!

Saint Stark simply doubted whether the two had made the right decision by starting to enact change among the Rubarthans first.

"How much have you accomplished?" Stark asked. "Have you managed to sway the minds of enough Rubarthans to make a difference?"

Alo Chevor shook his head in disappointment. "No. We have not made nearly enough of a difference. The inertia we are fighting against is too strong. As powerful as we

may be, the New Rubarth Empire is governed by too many vested interests, from the Star Emperor to the thousands of princes. There are god pilots above our heads whose words and actions are at least a thousand times more impactful than what we have tried to do for multiple decades."

The male twin couldn't help but grow a little depressed due to their lack of impact since they began their lifelong quest, but the female twin tried to soothe him by spreading a calming influence through her domain field.

"You are exaggerating, brother. We have made a difference among millions of Rubarthan as well as foreign soldiers who have fought alongside us over the years. Even if this is only a drop in an ocean, change is always slow at the start. We have done the best we could in a society that is set against us in the first place. Everything will change if we are able to cross the road to no return and become god pilots. By that time, our voice will carry exponentially greater weight, especially since we are fighting for the Rubarthan Pact as opposed to the much larger New Rubarth Empire."

That was a very important distinction. The New Rubarth Empire was a behemoth that had already accumulated a sizable continent of god pilots.

Here in the Red Ocean, everything was smaller! Only two god pilots had dedicated themselves to protecting the Rubarthan Pact.

This meant that any ace pilot that broke through in the following decade would be able to wield far greater influence than back in the old galaxy!

However, Saint Stark spotted a very glaring flaw in their plan.

"Does it make sense to advocate for peace and non-violence when our entire civilization is locked in a war of extinction against the native aliens?"

"As we have stated earlier, we do not think that all wars are unjustified." Alo responded. "We can debate on the rights and wrongs of our initial invasion of the Red Ocean. What I do know is that many people who are not involved in the decisions at the top do not deserve to suffer for their missteps and miscalculations. My sister and I would love nothing more for both sides to stop fighting each other and agree to live alongside each other in peace."

"That... sounds awfully like what a cosmopolitan might say." Saint Stark tactfully mentioned.

"We are not cosmopolitans." Alo responded in a heated tone. "This is not the first time that others have tried to tie us to the Cosmopolitan Movement, but I can clearly state that we value human lives far more than alien lives. While I think that alien civilians do not deserve to get killed when there are clear alternatives available, we have an obligation to defend humanity's rights and interests over others. You would never hear a cosmopolitan saying that, as they are fundamentally convinced that aliens should be completely equal to humans."

Davia Stark relaxed a bit. Alo's domain field echoed his words, making it clear that he truly meant what he said. There was no ambiguity or deception in his words.

"Even so, there are many humans that are so spooked by our enemies that they want to eradicate all alien life from this dwarf galaxy to end their threat forever. If we are able to turn this war around somehow, we may get a chance to do so. Would you condone such actions?"

"We would never condone the indiscriminate slaughter of the innocent." Jeri said. "In this rare instance, we are in agreement with the cosmopolitans. That does not mean that we are tyrants who will force others to abide by our personal code. We do not have the right to do so. If people think that weak and powerless alien civilians can still pose a credible threat to them in the future, then they are free to continue their cleansing actions. We merely hope that we can make enough of a difference in society to voluntarily sway the Rubarthans and other people so that they do not have to commit so much bloodshed to achieve their goals."

"Killing stains the soul." The male Chevor stated.

"Killing invites reprisal."

"Too many people have come to revel in warfare and violence. It has become so common that it is nearly impossible to convince these glory hounds that it is wrong to derive enjoyment from gratuitous violence. They are our strongest opposition within our society. There are too many interest groups who wish to see us fail rather than succeed."

"That is... a sad state of affairs." Saint Stark frowned. "This is why I can never bring myself to tie my hands by making a vow similar to yours. Sometimes, the only way to enact real change... is to give your adversaries a taste of their own medicine."

"..."

Chapter 6764: How To Survive the Cold

The initial discussion with the Stewards Siamesia had been incredibly enlightening to Saint Davia Stark.

She had never spoken to high-ranking mech pilots that share similar goals as hers. The Chevor twins were among the few people in human civilization that not only found war distasteful, but dedicated the rest of their lives to making it less prevalent than before.

Above all else, the Stewards Siamesia fought for a future where humans no longer needed to kill each other in wanton violence in order to gain purpose in their lives.

It was very clear that the two Rubarthan saints clearly focused their thinking and ideology on humans. Alien lives did not enter into their consideration at all. Their advocacy only extended to human-on-human conflicts.

The Red War forced them to confront situations and dilemmas that involved races other than humans. This introduced a whole new set of problems, but also allowed the twins to think about the same topics from different angles.

This was actually good for the Chevors. By thinking about these problems and figuring out satisfactory resolutions to them, they steadily closed the loopholes in their conviction and were able to bring their ideals closer to reality.

Even so, it was clear that there was still a considerable distance between the two. Reality was never simple. No ace pilot or god pilot for that matter had the power to reshape society by themselves.

Perfection was not necessary. What mattered was that the high-ranking mech pilot remained true to his purpose and never made any compromises on what truly mattered.

In other words, the journey was more important than the destination.

Every purpose and conviction presented a challenge to expert pilots and ace pilots. How well they navigated these tests determined how well they tempered their willpower and how much they increased their qualifications to reach the ultimate rank.

The indisputable fact that only a hundred or so god pilots emerged among an uncountable number of mech pilots proved that the standards of passing were exceedingly high!

It was already hard enough for mech pilots to trigger their apotheosis once or twice. The requirements were high from the beginning and became more stringent at higher ranks.

Yet the chasm between a peak ace pilot and a god pilot was so much more insurmountable that only the most exemplary and legendary ace pilots were able to cross this impossible divide!

Saint Stark already had a basic understanding of how much ace pilots needed to work in order to cross the road to no return, but when the Stewards Siamesia frankly described their own journey and struggles to attain their current strength, she was able to learn a lot of lessons of wisdom.

This was an important part of the mentorship process. Ace pilots could learn from other ace pilots. All that was required was for the mentor to trust the pilot of the younger generation.

This was why compatibility was such a big deal.

HHC did not try to match Saint Stark with the Stewards Siamesia out of superficial reasons.

They genuinely calculated that the two senior ace pilots would take a liking to the newly ascended saint.

Stark learned more in an hour than she did in years.

Her eyes changed as she became more cognizant of the challenges ahead.

There was no hard bottleneck preventing a starting junior ace pilot like herself from reaching the limit of a senior ace pilot.

However, there were still plenty of pitfalls that could cause an ace pilot to stumble, slow down or even stop progressing entirely!

"When you become an ace pilot, your Saint Kingdom has become the primary means in which you impose your own will onto reality." Alo Chevor explained. "Its qualities are directly related to how well you have abided by your convictions and how extensively you have solved the issues surrounding them. You must understand yourself if you want to alter the universe around you. This means that you must also have the courage to confront yourself and ask the questions that you would rather avoid."

Saint Stark grimaced. "I know what you mean. Confronting ourselves is one of the most difficult things to ask from anyway. Every human prefers to cling to his or her delusions."

The male twin nodded in a sagely manner. "Yet it is this mortal instinct that is hindering us from growing our willpower. No saint is perfect. We are all human enough that we depend on lies, ignorance and misdirection to maintain our pride and self-esteem. This may sound detrimental, but it is actually not. These lies and false platitudes are like clothes that keep us warm on a winter's night. If you try to strip yourself naked in a single instant, you will quickly freeze to death."

Davia Stark caught on the implications of his words.

"Are you saying... that we should not be so eager to engage in introspection and expose the truth about ourselves?"

"Yes." Alo grimly said. "Why do you think that ace pilots spend decades or even a century to reach the peak of their ranks? It is because we cannot bear to strip our clothes too quickly. The parts of us that are still mortal remain our greatest weakness. It is an even greater vulnerability than our mortal human bodies as far as we are concerned. If we tear our clothes from our body too quickly or in a clumsy manner, we

risk doing more damage than we can tolerate. We may even die if we do not take any safeguards."

Stark shuddered when she learned of this possibility. She had never heard stories about ace pilots thinking themselves to death, but she figured that there were too many people that had a vested interest in maintaining the heroic reputations of those saints.

She did not think that Alo was spreading falsehood. It was difficult to imagine that an ace pilot of his caliber would still engage in deception. He wouldn't lie even to his enemies.

"Is... this a warning about the consequences of rushing my progression?" Stark asked in a slightly uncertain tone.

Aloretzi Chevor shook his head. "Not entirely, my guest. My description applies to the Milky Way. Things work differently in the Red Ocean. The exotic radiation from Messier 87 has changed the rules somewhat. If we use the earlier metafor, then you can believe that the reason why we must strip down our clothes at a slow pace is because we need to give ourselves time to adapt to the colder and harsher environment. E energy radiation accelerates this process. It passively makes us stronger and more resistant to the cold, so we can safely strip down our clothes several times faster than before. It will not take long for new ace pilots such as yourself to reach the threshold to god pilot. This is a blessing as well as a curse."

"I can understand why you would call it a blessing, but why is it a curse?" Davia Stark frowned as she couldn't figure out the reason.

"That is because being able to train yourself to survive the cold air when naked is never our final goal. Each of us are not satisfied with remaining stuck as saints. We all desire to become god pilots. That requires us to pass a more extreme test. You can think of it as diving into an ice lake and trying to survive in the water on a permanent duration."

"It is impossible for humans to do that unless their bodies are highly augmented!"

"That is correct, Davia." Alo Chevor affirmed. "This is why we must grow strong enough to do the impossible. We must ascend our humanity and turn into a higher existence. We cannot do this by our willpower alone, but it is vital to our transformation. What actually helps us transform are our ace mechs. In this metaphor,

you can think of it as the mechanical shell that will contain our minds. The process of transferring ourselves to the mechanical shell is extremely painful and difficult to complete. We must temper and grow our willpower to such a strong extent that we can endure the suffering and remain cognizant enough to complete the steps. Oh, and we must do all of this while diving into the cold and deadly lake!"

In this metafor, the act of jumping into the freezing lake was equivalent to stepping on the road to no return!

It was no wonder that not a single god pilot candidate could come back after starting the Mech Body Merger Process!

Saint Stark learned a lot of insights from this metaphor and warning.

First, exotic radiation from Messier 87 evidently made it easier and faster for expert pilots as well as ace pilots to realize their potential and grow stronger.

This was probably because the Heaven component of the Heaven Earth Man Trifecta was a lot stronger in the Red Ocean than in the Milky Way.

Yet high-ranking mech pilots never relied on external conveniences to become strong unless they were mech commanders.

Their willpower was the ultimate source of their strength, and it was inherently focused on the self.

God pilots had taken this to an extreme. They were able to tolerate the least amount of flaws or weaknesses!

This was why being able to progress faster did not necessarily translate into being able to survive the road of no return.

Second, a good mech could substantially increase the success rate of the transformation process. Stark needed to raise her Earth score to the highest possible level in order to provide adequate support during the most difficult test of her career.

In the past, the most successful god pilot candidates of the Milky Way relied entirely on the excellence of their ace mechs to ascend to godhood!

It was exceedingly difficult to make an ace mech that had the makings of a god mech.

Super-class materials were too scarce, and only the very best mech designers were able to draw out their greater strengths by making use of the most advanced high technologies.

Ever since the Great Severing occurred, the Red Ocean gradually became more rich in resources. Even the Kayana System became a lot more valuable due to the emergence of many hyper materials.

Did this mean that it was easier for the mech designers residing in the Red Ocean to design qualified god mech candidates?

Stark certainly hoped so. Ves and Gloriana were still awfully young. While they were most definitely talented and innovative, they were too far away from becoming Star Designers.

That meant that when Saint Stark would finally be ready to start the Mech Body Merger Process, the main designers of her battle partner would likely still be Master Mech Designers!

Most peak ace pilots that were finally ready to make the attempt tended to make use of mechs that were at least partially designed by Star Designers these days. This slightly contributed to a higher survival rate for those who tread upon the road to no return.

Stark hoped that with all of the wonders introduced by E energy radiation, the Miracle Couple could transform the Amaranto into a work comparable or greater than the ace mech piloted by the Stewards Siamesia!

"We can't do this alone." Stark concluded. "We can only rely on ourselves to polish our willpower. It will be our fault if we do anything wrong. When it comes to our ace mechs, we have no choice but to rely on the work of mech designers. If they make a mistake, we will be the ones who will suffer the consequences."

"That is why it is vital that you work with mech designers that you can trust and believe in." Alo said as he nodded in agreement. "You must seek out those who understand your needs and possess the competence to design machines that match or exceed your expectations and maintain good relations with them. This comes easier to some ace pilots than others. From what I have learned, you are quite lucky in this regard. You enjoy the privilege of piloting a remarkable ace mech designed by one of the leaders of his generation."

Stark couldn't help but swell with pride. "Professor Ves Larkinson is a madman that knows how to produce results. His wife is also a perfect assistant."

Chapter 6765: The Importance of Convictions

After a fruitful talk, Saint Stark gained a much better understanding of the difficulties she needed to overcome to become a peak ace pilot.

More importantly, she also gained a slightly greater understanding of how hard she needed to work in order to raise her chances of making it past the chasm that separated ace pilots from god pilots.

From the moment she gained a powerful Saint Kingdom, Davia Stark already had to begin her preparations to successfully complete the infamous Mech Body Merger Process.

Just thinking about the depressingly low success rate could drive any ace pilot to despair.

Making an attempt was no different from trying to win the lottery by using their lives as payment!

So many heroes in the past had tried their best. Their preparations were excellent. Their ace mechs had received improvements that put them several generations ahead of the prevailing standards. Everyone thought that they must be the exception to the rule.

Yet no matter how confident they were and how strong their willpower had grown, they picked a fight against reality, and reality won out in the end.

"Becoming a god pilot is not an entitlement." Aloretzi Chevor summed up in a grave tone. "It is a reward for all of the pain, hard work, successes and strokes of luck that

you have experienced over your active career. Blind effort alone will not get you very far. You need to be thoughtful of your words and deeds, and you must constantly stay true to your convictions. Nobody else is forcing you to impose inhuman demands on yourself. Only you must do the job of motivating yourself to suffer in pursuit of greater strength. Your progression as an ace pilot is a long rehearsal and practice session for the time you step on the road to no return."

That last remark was an interesting opinion.

"Are you saying that the Mech Body Merger Process is like trying to grow from a junior ace pilot to a peak ace pilot all over again?" Stark questioned.

"Partially, my guest. Obviously, the duration is not nearly as long, but therein lies the challenge. You must do everything I have mentioned before in a highly compressed timeframe. Speed is of the essence, but you must produce results as well. You must produce a lot of results. Not only must you confront any of the remaining illusions and falsehoods that you have overlooked, you must also prove your convictions in the most dramatic fashion possible. Your feats must be far beyond the realm of mortals in order to prove that you have the makings of a god."

Stark picked up an unusual piece of information. "Wait. Is that why all of those god pilot candidates attempted to complete legendary deeds? It is not the acts themselves that matter, but how extensively they advance your goals and ideals that is important."

Jeri Chevor clapped in response. "Exactly, Davia! You are picking this up quickly. That makes this conversation easier for us. When you tread on the road to no return, you should not think of remaining cautious and trying to play it safe. From the moment you take this fateful step, you must cast aside all restraints and do whatever it takes to reach your goal without compromising your morals and principles. You must set an impossibly high demand for yourself, and try to meet it in a timespan that is so short that no mortal or halfgod can make enough progress."

"And do not try to game this process." Alo warned Stark. "The few ace pilots that tried to set a challenge that sounds difficult but is actually easy for them to solve by relying on loopholes have all become fallen heroes. God pilots cannot lie to themselves. Trying to become one while engaging in self-deception is the height of stupidity. You will know in your heart what challenges you set are difficult enough to prove your conviction."

That was important information. Saint Stark would have learned it sooner or later, but it was best to understand it early so that she could make advance preparations.

As she processed the information, she gradually began to frown when she stared at the twin saints.

"Since the ultimate challenge is related to your convictions, what sort of test do you intend to subject yourselves to, if I may ask? Unlike most ace pilots, you have made a vow to never kill again. How are you supposed to complete a deed that exemplifies your principles? Will you try to convince the Rubarthan Pact to embrace peace? Will you convince the aliens to stop fighting against red humanity?"

"Those are fine goals, but the standards you have set are too high." Jeri chuckled for a moment. "The test should be difficult enough that only god pilots can pass it. That is enough. You do not need to go any further. The road to no return is all about proving you deserve to become a god by achieving the results of one while you are still an ace pilot. You need to punch above your weight in such an impressive way that reality itself is willing to bow down to you to facilitate your breakthrough."

"Think about the feats that other god pilots have accomplished in order to trigger their third breakthroughs." Alo said. "The Light of Sol is one of the simplest examples that you can find. Speed is his obsession and conviction. It is clear that his aspiration is to move as fast as the speed of light in realtime. No mortal pilot or machine had done it before. The Terran used the utmost of his exceptional god mech candidate and leveraged his willpower to the utmost in order to break the barriers that stood in his way. From what we can gather, he was literally burning his own life in order to produce enough speed to break reality to such a strong extent. That has sublimated his willpower so much that he managed to pass the impossible threshold. That chance was enough for him to complete the Mech Body Merger Process and successfully become a human god."

Saint Stark envied the Light of Sol. The famous Terran god pilot did not have to deal with so many choices and confusion.

His conviction was really simple, so it was rather simple to devise a challenge that was beyond his ordinary capabilities, but could still be overcome if he just pushed himself a lot harder than before.

Others did not enjoy this privilege. Davia Stark and the Stewards Siamesia were both driven by far more complex social goals and convictions.

What they sought was to produce a profound change in human society.

It was one thing to play into the values and beliefs that people actively supported.

It was another thing to enlighten people who were unwilling to change their minds!

Stark frowned deeper. She gained a much better understanding of how difficult it would be for her to complete the Mech Body Merger Process.

The twin saints clearly sensed the changes in her mood.

"Do not assume the greatest burdens right away." Jeri advised. "Take this one step at a time. Planning is important, but it will take at least several decades before you must seriously consider these matters. For now, you must invest much more attention on growing your resonance strength. This is essentially increasing your combat power in a short amount of time."

"There are several ways to grow your resonance strength as an ace pilot, much of which you should already know." Alo continued. "What is different from back when you were still an expert pilot is that your growth no longer affects your resonance shield, but your Saint Kingdom. Since it covers such a large volume around your ace mech, it is far more than a defensive tool. It is the domain in which you have much greater control over the space. The extent that you can manipulate reality inside your domain is directly tied to your resonance strength. Your resonance strength is directly affected by the strength of your convictions and how your understanding of yourself has grown."

The female twin spoke again. "Convictions do more than raise the numbers of your resonance meter. They shape your domain field according to your beliefs. You should already be able to feel it yourself. Our domains should make you feel more at peace. Your domain makes us feel that you are willing to use the power of light to take lives in order to save lives. These short and overly simplistic descriptions are enough to describe the essence of our existence. Our domains literally announce who we are to the outside universe. The greater our confidence in our convictions and beliefs, the stronger our domains become."

It all came down to convictions. The rules and goals that high-ranking mech pilots strove for were all means to refine their willpower and prove that they were worthy to ascend to godhood.

Saint Stark's heart grew heavier when she made that realization. Quitting was not an option. Once she made a vow, she had to see it through for the rest of her life.

That may not be a problem for some high-ranking mech pilots, but what if her conviction involved tearing down the hypocritical mechers and fleeters?

Perhaps it might not be a problem to pursue the downfall of the RA and the RF in an age where aliens became irrelevant, but this was different!

If she tried to topple them both when they were the best bulwarks against alien aggression, then Saint Stark could not bring herself to make life worse for human civilians!

Fortunately, all was not lost. She did not have to complete a goal that was too immense in scope. Perhaps she might be able to get away by assassinating the worst of the Red Two.

Of course, there was no way she was willing to share these thoughts to others. Saint Stark quickly set aside these subversive ideas and focused on the present.

"My domain is rather rudimentary at the moment." Stark said. "Do you have any advice on how to develop it quickly enough to make a difference in the next fight?"

"If you want to produce quick results, then figure out how you can best mirror your strongest purpose and convictions into your domain field." Jeri suggested. "Yours involve a combination of light, killing and salvation. We cannot share any insights related to the concepts of light and killing, but we do have an extensive understanding of the concept of salvation."

Alo shook his head. "Let us not share too much, sister. Everyone's understanding is different, and that is how it should be. Even though we are not completely aligned with each other. It is the slight differences that make our long-time cooperation all the

more stronger and fruitful. Davia, we can share tips and reference information to you, but you must never blindly copy our methods and approach. You are a very different ace pilot, so you must devise your own solutions."

"I understand, Alo. I am already accustomed to doing so in the Larkinson Clan. I am still curious to what you have to say about salvation and how you can possibly apply it on the battlefield."

"Due to our vow to cease taking lives, we cannot achieve an impact on the battlefield in a direct manner by killing enemies such as yourself. We have to be more indirect about making a difference. This is why we are deliberately piloting an ace support mech." Jeri stated. "The amount of enemies we have killed is an invalid measure of our combat results. We can only measure our success by counting how many friendlies we have saved from worse fates. Our Lamia Kailamassu is therefore equipped with a rich suite of non-lethal solutions that can enhance friendlies and disrupt friendlies. What we have sacrificed in killing potential, we have gained in our ability to support our own side better than most of our peers."

Chapter 6766: Underestimating Aliens

Insights translated into power.

Though Saint Stark only talked with the Stewards Siamesia for hours on end, she had made a lot of gains.

The twin saints parted the fog that covered many issues. Stark gained a lot of clarity, allowing her to put a lot of stuff into context.

In the cases where she did not receive outright answers, Alo and Jeri still pointed Stark to the right direction, allowing her to form her own conclusions that were not tainted by the opinions of others.

By the time the new ace pilot left the personal chambers of the Stewards Siamesia, her head contained so much new knowledge that she couldn't sleep for the remainder of the day due to needing to process all of the new ideas she became exposed to. Her eyes continued to shine even as she sat in the lounge chair of her guest room.

The next day, the Stewards Siamesia invited Saint Stark to bring her ace mech out for a spin.

This would be an excellent opportunity for the guest pilot to put her new insights into practice under the supervision of not just one, but two experienced ace pilots!

There was just one concern.

"It will be impossible to hide the presence of my ace mech once we get serious." Stark seriously stated. "My Amaranto Mark III is difficult to detect when she remains dormant, but she will turn into a lighthouse in the dark as soon as she charges up her Instrument of Vengeance. It will be too easy for hidden alien observers to pick up the emissions and gather important intelligence. We will lose the element of surprise."

"Then let it happen." Aloretzi Chevor stated without concern.

"Pardon?"

The male twin gave the guest pilot an important lesson. "The native aliens assigned to fight in the Upper Zones are not as poorly equipped and impulsive as the ones who are allocated to the Middle and Lower Zones. The latter are almost always treated as disposable. Their intelligence support is much lower, which often makes them prone to falling for ambushes and other surprises. That is not necessarily the case here. There is a far greater prevalence of archships lurking in the shadows. If your intuition is powerful and sensitive enough, you may be able to sense their presence, though it will be difficult for you to pin-point their coordinates. I can guarantee you that this star system is currently hosting at least half a dozen archships, each of them lingering in the vicinity of our strongholds and other strategic sites."

"That... is not good."

"Furthermore, the cosmopolitans are most certainly providing intelligence support." Jeri Chevor added. "We have done our best to root them out, but despite the measures we have taken to drive away their infiltrators and informers, they have resorted to more secretive forms of intelligence gathering. Their high familiarity with our technologies allows them to hack into our sensors and databases and covertly steal sensitive data."

Alo subsequently crossed his arms. "The alien commanders in charge of conquering our Upper Zones are also much more serious and professional at their jobs. You will rarely see incompetent leaders among them who have only managed to obtain repeated promotions due to nepotism and corruption. Ever since the native aliens admitted that

we are not as weak as they expected, they have followed instructions of their cosmopolitan advisors and focused on purging and rectifying their military hierarchy. Some alien races are slower to enact changes than others, but time has proven the value of reforms. The leaders who failed to clean house often end up suffering much heavier losses. If they remain stubborn about sticking to their old ways, they eventually end up dying or resigning in disgrace."

Saint Stark froze. It sounded as if the native aliens had shed more of their complacency and had gotten just as serious as their human foes!

If this was the case, then any competent enemy would have been able to gather the clues of the Amaranto Mark III's arrival by this time.

"Okay, I can see why it is futile to put in so much effort to hide my arrival." Saint Stark conceded. "We can still deny them information about the exact performance of my Amaranto Mark III. I can assure you that after the latest upgrades that have elevated my Amaranto to a proper first-class ace mech, the rate of fire of her mech rifle has drastically increased."

"Let the aliens watch." Alo nonchalantly declared. "Look, Davia, I can understand your desire to hide your new capabilities and retain an information advantage, but you are thinking as a mortal rather than a god. As a saint that has taken two steps away from your human nature, your role and responsibilities have fundamentally changed. Do you remember what we told you yesterday? Your journey as an ace pilot is a rehearsal of your final struggle to ascend to godhood. You must cherish the following years as opportunities to learn how to fight and thrive as a war deity as opposed to a strong human."

That was an exceedingly bold approach! Saint Stark felt incredibly conflicted by Alo's advice. It was not in her nature to volunteer critical information to enemies that would certainly make use of it to mitigate their own losses.

Back in the Larkinson Clan, the people around her were of the same mind. They were highly cognizant of information warfare and always tried to limit the amount of secrets they exposed to both allies and enemies.

It was therefore quite a culture shock for Stark to hear the Stewards Siamesia advocate for the opposite approach!

Jeri reached out and placed her hand on Stark's shoulder. "Do not take my brother's words too seriously. He is speaking from our perspective. You see, the two of us prioritize saving lives over killing enemies. One of the strategies we use to promote our cause is to discourage our adversaries from launching an attack in the first place. By showing off our strength, we can send a clear signal that anyone who attempts to launch an attack on our position will encounter serious setbacks. In the worst case scenario, none of their attackers may return."

Though the Stewards Siamesia vowed to never kill anymore, they had no objection to letting the expert pilots and other forces by their side do the killing in their stead.

Of course, the two saints imposed strict criteria on the conduct and behavior of the soldiers who received the honor of fighting in their presence. Only those with honor and integrity in their hearts received the necessary approval to fight with the twins.

Saint Stark could understand the reasoning behind their approach towards information control, but she could not agree with it herself.

"If I expose everything I can do from the start, the aliens may delay their attack, but they will come sooner or later. By that time, they will have made plenty of preparations in advance, thereby limiting my effectiveness once the fight breaks out. Your suggestion may end up counterproductive. More human soldiers will end up dying as a result."

The Chevor twins frowned, but did not take offense at Stark's questioning. They must have confronted similar doubts in the past.

"It is difficult to calculate the consequences of different choices." Alo said. "Our words are not entirely groundless, Stark. We have commissioned our staff to conduct a study. It has clearly revealed that the star systems watched over by other senior ace pilots tend to get attacked 16.5 percent more frequently than star systems that enjoy our protection. Our deterrence strategy is working, though it is admittedly not as effective as we wish. In the long run, the lower frequency of attacks results in many more lives being saved from the ravages of the battlefield."

"I see. Well, I can see how this works out well for you, but I... need to fight in order to prove my own conviction." Saint Stark stated in a slightly guilty tone. "I may not be a good match for you after all. Back in the Larkinson Clan, I am surrounded by people who are eager to seek confrontation against the aliens."

"We are not surprised." Jeri said in an understanding tone. "The alien forces assigned to fight in the Middle Zones are relatively tame from our perspectives. I can assure you that the alien phasefighters and warships that are tasked with conquering the Upper Zones are much more terrible. Once you survive your first encounter against them, you will understand why we wish to deter our enemies as much as possible."

That actually caused Davia Stark to look even more forward to fighting the Upper Zone aliens.

From everything she had heard, these aliens were better in every way.

Their hardware was a lot more expensive and powerful.

They all came from the main military organizations of the major races.

Their fleets were not padded by the shabby and less disciplined troops from the lesser races.

Their leadership was a lot more professional and competent, and they took intelligence gathering as seriously as the humans.

Stark realized that she still maintained the same attitude she held whenever she was preparing to fight against the aliens invading the Middle Zones.

That was a mistake.

She needed to take her new enemies a lot more seriously than before.

Perhaps it might be a lot harder to knock them down with her upgraded ace mech than she initially thought!

The twins smiled when they saw that Stark realized her mistake.

"Good." Alo said with a satisfying smile. "Ace pilot or not, underestimating the enemy is a sin even for halfgods such as ourselves. You can be confident in your abilities while respecting the strength of your enemies at the same time. No one who dares to fight against a saint is weak. The least we can do is to take them seriously."

"Come. Let us go to our ace mechs, Davia." Jeri encouraged as she began to walk again. "At this stage of your development, you will need all of the practice that you can get. Hiding your capabilities is less important than learning how to leverage your Saint Kingdom more effectively. With the lessons you received yesterday, you must be eager to try out new ideas."

She was right.

Ultimately, Saint Stark valued the opportunity to flex her power and discover new ways to apply her strength.

If she had to let the hidden archship get a good glimpse of her performance, then so be it. The Stewards Siamesia were no pushovers. The Kayana System shouldn't fall too easily due to their presence.

As the Amaranto Mark III deployed into space, she immediately flew towards her next waypoint where she could fire her arms without worrying about hitting friendlies.

The Lamia Kailamassu emerged from the fortified space station a bit later, but demonstrated much greater mobility and easily caught up to the ace marksman mech.

Although the Amaranto Mark III's new power reactor supplied a lot more power to her flight system, her nature as a mech with relatively poor mobility could not be changed!

"Your mobility is... limited." Alo said. "This is not a surprise, but we will experience greater difficulties covering your escape should the aliens overrun our defenses faster than we can respond."

"I can take care of myself."

"You are underestimating your enemies again. It is not just the phase lords that can potentially catch up to you even if you flee with your transphasic flight system working at its highest setting. There are special alien strike craft or sub-capital warships that can jump ahead or warp travel much faster than any of our own units."

Jeri also added a warning. "Do not forget about the archships either. They are not limited to passive observation. One of their favored means of attack is to prepare an ambush alongside our escape routes. The arche are cunning and they know us well enough by now to correctly predict where our ships will flee. If we are not able to expose or drive away these stealthed alien vessels in advance, you may end up getting struck by dozens of transphasic missiles launched at relatively close ranges."

Chapter 6767: Not An Attack

The Amaranto Mark III and the Lamia Kailamassu warmed up. They flew in space and flared their Saint Kingdoms in an effort to get used to each other.

Ace pilots usually did not like to fight too close to each other. Their Saint Kingdoms worked best if they could completely claim dominion over the space around their ace mechs.

When two or more ace mechs fought in close proximity to each other, their Saint Kingdoms interfered with each other's operations.

One's version of reality often collided with another's version of reality.

There were ways to mitigate this conflict. If the ace pilots became more familiar with each other, they were able to tolerate each other's presence to a greater degree.

They could also make agreements with each other to cede ground at certain times in order to allow the ace pilot who could make the greatest difference give full play to his abilities.

However, all of this took a lot of time and effort. The ace pilots of the Golden Skull Alliance had to train and fight alongside each other for several months in order to reduce the interference to an acceptable level.

Saint Stark did not have as much time to get accustomed to the Saint Kingdoms of the Stewards Siamesia.

However, this was not as bad as it sounded, because it turned out that their Saint Kingdoms were abnormal.

When the Amaranto Mark III came into close contact with the Lamia Kailamassu, the overlapping Saint Kingdoms of the latter did not repel the Saint Kingdom of the former!

This was a remarkable result. Saint Stark immediately deduced that their lengthy talk yesterday had done much to close the distance between herself and the twins, but this was not enough to achieve such a harmonious result!

The only other answer that made sense was that the Chevor siblings were inherently accommodating towards other friendly ace pilots.

"Your Saint Kingdoms remind me of the Command Field of an ace commander." Stark said as she continued to grow more comfortable within the Saint Kingdoms of the Stewards Siamesia. "There is a quality about you that makes me feel as if you will never pose a threat against me. You also have no fear that I will ever turn my powerful gun against your ace mech."

"If the only tool you have is a hammer, then you tend to see every problem as a nail." Alo Chevor spoke inside the dual cockpit of his unusually looking ace mech. "You have only ever fought alongside mechs built for violence and mech pilots who are trained to kill. Your cognition as an ace pilot subconsciously regards them as potential threats. The more powerful they are, the greater your vigilance. This is an instinct that is extremely difficult to counteract. Time and concerted effort may allow you to lower your guard, but it is an uphill struggle."

Jeri added more clarification. "Ace commanders, at least the traditional ones, do not evoke your instinctive urge to defend yourself because they have sacrificed personal excellence in order to divide their power among their units. We do not trigger this instinct either because we are the equivalent of harmless rabbits according to your judgment and willpower. While we can still debilitate you or assist other units in taking you down, you fundamentally do not see us as threats to your life or cause."

That... sounded extremely strange to Saint Stark. She could understand the surface explanation, but she felt that there were far too many flaws and loopholes.

There was no way the Stewards Siamesia and the Lamia Kailamassu were harmless!

Saint Alorezi Chevor and Saint Jerivern Chevor were the most famous pair of peak ace pilots in the Red Ocean. They had survived many battles and ordeals and climbed their way up to the cusp of godhood.

The Lamia Kailamassu was no harmless rabbit either. It was a large and fairly bulky ace mech that was designed to accommodate a lot of support modules.

It may be 'harmless' in that the powerful senior ace mech did not carry any lethal armaments. It did not even possess arms and legs as its distinctly non-humanoid form caused it to resemble a thick shuttle more than a real mech!

Even though the Lamia did not look as if it could hurt a fly, it had plenty of high technologies that could make an enemy's life miserable!

This should have been more than enough reasons for Saint Stark to recognize the potential threat and hindrances it posed, but there was a strange aspect about the Saint Kingdoms of the twins that automatically caused Saint Stark to lower her vigilance.

She shuddered in her piloting chair. She had a strong suspicion that the Stewards Siamesia somehow managed to 'hack' her Saint Kingdom!

"There is nothing to fear, Saint Stark." Jeri said as she could clearly sense Stark's discomfort through the fluctuations of the latter's Saint Kingdom. "If we harbor any form of ill intent towards you, your Saint Kingdom will not fail you. Trust in our instincts. They will never lead you astray. My brother and I are saviors, not killers. Salvation forms a large component of our domain. We provide save haven to anyone under our protection."

"I see."

That must be why Saint Stark felt so comfortable alongside the Lamia Kailamassu. The teal-and-violed striped mech came across as a friendly and reliable companion.

As soon as the two ace mechs had reached their coordinates, Stark looked around.

They had reached the rear side of a moon. The satellite blocked most of the line of sight to the larger planet and all of the assets in orbit. Any stray shots would collide onto the surface of the moon before threatening anything serious.

Not that it mattered. Ace pilots possessed such good control over their machines that their attacks should never be able to inflict undesirable collateral damage.

"Now that we have warmed up, what will we do next?" Stark asked.

"First, we shall test the condition and resilience of your Saint Kingdom." Alo replied as he sounded slightly more eager than before. "What you will experience next will be alarming, but know that there is no actual threat. Please keep your trigger finger in check."

Before Saint Stark could ask what this was all about, the soothing and comforting Saint Kingdoms of the Stewards Siamesia abruptly changed in character!

"Ahh!"

Saint Stark's willpower flared and her Saint Kingdom became a lot more defensive as the Lamia suddenly turned into a source of great pain and unwillingness!

The fresh junior ace pilot's vision doubled. Half of her awareness remained in the present, but the other half of her awareness had gone back to the past!

She was back in the Komodo Star Sector.

She was no longer a powerful ace pilot who managed to snipe a lesser phase lord to death by herself.

She was reduced back to the time where she had inexplicably broken through as an expert pilot.

Davia Stark thought that she had gained the power to stop or slow down the relentless advance of sandmen, but she was horribly wrong.

Her mech was too weak.

Her willpower was too feeble.

The mech forces of the third-rate states broke like twigs when trying to stop the sandman fleets by force.

The tide of sand led by the relentlessly inhuman sandman admirals scoured all of the planets in the way.

Every populated planet that was filled with millions or billions of people turned into lifeless sandballs by the time the aliens from beyond the border of human space were done.

The Sand War progressed too quickly. None of the third-rate states were prepared to resist the invaders or organize any mass evacuations.

When the captains of many starships heard wind that their current destinations might be next, they closed the hatches and commanded their vessels to depart as quickly as possible.

What pained Davia Stark so much at the time was that far too many of these starships fled a star system under threat with half-filled or almost empty holds or passenger cabins!

Billions more lives could have been saved if the captains and crews of those starships made more earnest attempts to take away every life worth preserving such as the children and the adolescents.

Instead, Stark had to witness the planets where the paltry evacuations failed the young and the innocents from death!

Davia Stark may have been able to dismiss such a failure as an exception or mistake, but as she fought against the sandmen fleets in one star system after another, she repeatedly witnessed the same antics.

Humanity let her down.

Instead of coming together to stall the aliens and save more lives, these craven cowards never thought beyond themselves and chose to leave for safety, not caring that they could have evacuated so many more civilians!

Saint Stark was no stranger to these tragedies. Not a week went by without thinking back on all of these miserable sights.

She had witnessed the best and the worst of humanity during the Sand War.

Unfortunately, she saw that there were far more of the latter than the former!

This realization and others hurt her so much that it had shattered her belief in humanity and shattered her force of will!

Though she eventually managed to recover with the help of Ves Larkinson, Davia Stark could never forget about the sights that drove her to despair.

Eventually, her double vision started to abate. The ace pilot blinked as she recognized that she had fully returned to the present.

She immediately grew alarmed at what just happened!

"How long?"

Stark was already able to acquire the answer by calling up the data from her ace mech.

"You remained in a trance for a duration of 34.6 seconds." Saint Alo Chevor announced. "During this time, your ace pilot practically froze and coasted forward

through inertia. This has made your Amaranto vulnerable. Enemies would find it much easier to launch an attack on your machine."

Stark grew morose and angry at herself for failing to maintain her vigilance.

Somehow, the Saint Kingdoms of the Twins Siamesia had effortlessly pulled her into a nightmare illusion and kept her distracted for over half a minute!

This was unacceptable!

Even if the twin saints were impressively strong for being able to dominate the mind and will of a fellow ace pilot to such an extent, this was no excuse for Saint Stark to drop the ball in the field!

"What... what did you do?" She asked in a slightly hoarse tone. "How did your attack slip past my defenses?"

"We did not attack you." Jeri Chevor said in a gentle tone. "Not truly. You may be a saint that many mech pilots must look up to, but in our vision you are a vulnerable puppy that is covered with scars. We tried to 'save' you by treating your scars with a method that is admittedly rough and overbearing. Your sudden and unexpected confrontation with your past traumas has consumed you utterly. This did not take place under our direction. Instead, it is a consequence of your own weaknesses. The reason why it took over 34 seconds for you to pull yourself out of your distraction was because you lack enough control over yourself."

That... made a disturbing amount of sense. Saint Stark did not like how the female twin twisted the mental attack so that it no longer became a hostile act anymore.

It was definitely an attack, one that happened to be so effective that it could completely circumvent the famously strong mental defenses of a high-ranking mech pilot!

However, so long as Alo and Jeri did not see it that way, it appeared that their brand of truth prevailed.

This was the advantage of possessing much higher resonance strength.

In a dispute between two Saint Kingdoms, the stronger one would always succeed in imposing its version of reality!

The Stewards Siamesia had taught several memorable lessons to Saint Stark.

Chapter 6768: The Lamia Kailamassu

Saint Stark felt humiliated.

Before they engaged in a proper spar, the Stewards Siamesia overpowered her in an instant and stuck her in an illusion that left her completely defenseless.

Yet was she really as vulnerable as she appeared?

"Do not feel too upset, Davia." Jeri tried to console the ace pilot and her bruised ego. "The gap in power between us is too great. My brother and I worked together to pull you into a condensed therapy session. Anyone as strong as you would have succumbed to our willpower. Now that you have experienced it the first time, you can guard yourself against the next attempt. It will take considerably greater effort for us to distract you when you are fully alert."

"One of the other reasons why you blanked out for more than half a minute is that you and your living mech never sensed any serious threats." Alo added. "The intuition of an ace pilot still remains sharp. If there were any enemy units nearby that sought to capitalize on your weakness, your intuition should have noticed the danger and triggered a defensive response. That would have pulled you out of your distracted state in a very short amount of time. At most, your time to react to an incoming attack is shorter than usual."

"THEY RIGHT ABOUT THAT." The Amaranto took the initiative to speak to her battle partner. "WHATEVER THEY DID TO YOU DID NOT AFFECT ME, THOUGH MAYBE IT IS BECAUSE THEY DELIBERATELY LEFT ME OUT. I THINK THEY COULD HAVE DISTRACTED ME IN A SIMILAR MANNER."

Saint Stark felt a lot more mixed about the Stewards Siamesia. They were serious about never killing anyone, but their powers and abilities were so disruptive and difficult to defend against that they could easily set up their enemies for elimination.

She faintly suspected that the two deliberately tried to be vague and confusing about their disposition.

Were they a threat, or were they harmless?

Was their treatment an attempt to cure people, or lead them to their deaths?

How many other 'non-lethal' tricks did their ace mech have up its sleeves?

All of these questions and more made the Lamia Kailamassu more and more unfathomable. Its strange and exotic name further added to its mystique. Saint Stark realized more and more that peak ace pilots were anything but simple!

While the enormous gap in strength and capabilities was enough to demoralize any mech pilot, ace pilots were made of sterner stuff.

Saint Stark eventually managed to bounce back.

Instead of blaming herself for succumbing to her weaknesses, she became determined to plug them up and become just as strong as the Stewards Siamesia!

Only by gaining just as much power would she be able to get rid of her feelings of inferiority and be able to win in a direct confrontation against the pair of saints!

Her shifting mood directly affected her willpower, which in turn affected her Saint Kingdom.

The dark red energy field surrounding the Amaranto roiled faster and glowed brighter. Saint Stark may be weak at the moment, but she believed she could eventually grow strong enough to defeat the opponents she struggled against in the past and present!

"Good." Alo said in an appreciative tone. "You have passed your first test. We have witnessed other ace pilots requiring hours or days to pull themselves back together and adopt the proper mindset towards an obstacle they cannot surmount as of yet. They always get back on the right track eventually, but it is how fast they are able to bounce

back that matters the most. Your speed shows that you are not a stranger to setbacks, and that you are already accustomed to vanquishing them by working hard."

"Flashy abilities and strong technology are important components of your ability to project power on the battlefield, but they do not comprise the core of your strength." Jeri lectured. "Your willpower determines the ceiling of your combat performance. A weak will cannot adequately draw out the strength of a technologically superior ace mech. For now, you and your machine are severely out of balance in this regard. Your Amaranto is considerably stronger than you. It appears that the Larkinson Clan truly attaches a great amount of importance to you. Your greatest priority at this time is to reduce the gap between yourself and your mech as quickly as possible. This is the best way to raise you up to a more adequate standard that you will need to combat the native aliens."

Though Jeri's words generated Davia Stark, the guest pilot was not a weak and fragile flower. She could take the criticism. She knew that as long as she worked hard to become stronger, many of her problems would go away.

Her fighting intent rose. Though she had no intention of killing or inflicting severe harm on the Lamia Kailamassu, she was eager to prove her strength and show that she was not a brittle champion!

"What do I need to do next?" She asked with an aggressive growl.

Alo responded with a surprising question. "How well can you defend against attackers who have managed to get close?"

"Pardon?"

"How often have you been forced to fend off attackers that have entered within melee striking distance of your Amaranto?"

"...Too long."

"As expected." Alo sighed. "We all understand that your ace mech is entirely designed towards sniping enemies at longer ranges. This may have worked out for you when you were fighting alongside the Larkinsons, but that is mainly because your enemies

permitted you to fight at your ideal ranges. Here in the Upper Zones, the threats we face are more serious and capable."

Saint Stark frowned. "The aliens do not field mechs of their own. Their phasefighters do not pose that much more of a threat whether they are close or far."

"That is where you are wrong." The male twin retorted. "The native aliens are equipped with much better and stronger tech. They infrequently make use of teleportation tech that can overpower warp interdiction fields and other anti-teleportation countermeasures. There are greater phase lords that have been able to use up a great amount of energy to forcibly open space rifts only a few kilometers away from your ace mech's position. They can also cooperate with the arche to smuggle themselves closer under stealth. If you cannot defend yourself against a phase lord emerging at close range by surprise, you are already as good as dead."

Saint Stark had read about such instances. She also watched battle footage where stuff like that occurred.

It didn't happen all that often, though. It was costly for them to overcome all of the countermeasures set up by the human defenders. The units that teleported forward by surprise also became exceptionally vulnerable to retaliation and always endured heavy attacks from multiple directions.

Still, Davia Stark acknowledged the point. The aliens would learn sooner or later that they needed to shut her Amaranto down fast!

"I can believe that the native aliens invading the Upper Zones may have a way to get close to my ace mech. Do I need to improve my ability to defend myself at close range?"

"We highly advise you to do so." Alo said. "There are ace pilots who specialized in ranged combat in the past that underestimated the means employed by the native aliens. Our inherent belief in the superiority of the human race automatically makes us dismiss the possibility that our enemies can be just as cunning, clever and insidious. They will learn the power of your Amaranto and seek to defeat your machine by exploiting your obvious weaknesses. Anyone can clearly tell from observation alone that your ace mech is not supposed to fight at close range."

With that said, the two promptly started to spar up close.

Saint Stark did not have a good time. Her oversized Instrument of Vengeance was largely designed for ranged excellence. The masterwork luminar crystal rifle was not a good weapon to use at closer ranges.

Sure, Ves had added a plasma bayonet at the front, but it was clearly just an afterthought.

The practicality of using a long, thick and heavy as a makeshift polearm was quite poor!

This was especially the case when the arms of the Amaranto were not optimized for swinging large and heavy rods with great force.

Even if the Amaranto limited her attacks to repeatedly stabbing the plasma bayonet straight forward, the strain and exertion on the arms were considerable due to imbalance.

What was worse was that none of her attacks had any discernible effects!

Stark wondered whether the Lamia Kailamassu could even fight in melee combat. The fat oval support mech lacked any visible limbs to hold onto external weapons and swing them around.

It turned out that the Lamia did not need any external weapons.

Its own bulk and mass already served as its own weapon!

The ace support mech engaged in melee combat by utilizing its superior bulk and mobility to fly around like a wrecking ball!

The strong true resonance generated by not one, but two peak ace pilots allowed the dual-pilot ace mech to get away with tricks and maneuvers that could never be done with just one ace pilot!

The Lamia Kailamassu zipped around with far greater speed than her transphasic flight system should be able to produce, and she made such impossibly tight turns that it looked as if the ace mech made a near-instant 90 degree turn!

Frankly speaking, the dual-pilot ace mech defied the laws of physics with every second with how crazy it was able to move!

If the Lamia Kailamassu was a light skirmisher or another melee mech, then it should readily be able to take advantage of its extreme maneuverability to win most duels against slower and less graceful mechs!

However, the fat oval-shaped ace support mech had no swords and spears. It didn't even have a sharp edge on its surface.

The only means of attacking physically up close was to ram its bulk into its target!

Though the Lamia Kailamassu clearly held back to an extent, the ace support mech evaded the bayonet stab by relying on its excellent evasion ability before promptly crashing into the Amaranto Mark III!

The ace marksman mech did not suffer any serious damage, but she was uncontrollably flung backwards while struggling to maintain hold of her Instrument of Vengeance!

This shame repeated several times before the Stewards Siamesia finally took mercy on the poor guest pilot.

"Your performance is abysmal." Alo Chevor did not mince his words. "It is understandable that you cannot match the performance of an ace melee mech at close range, but you are too unprepared against the worst outcome. At our level, we cannot afford to remain vulnerable to our glaring weaknesses. Ace pilots are prone to dying the most when their enemies successfully exploit a gap in their defenses. If you want to live long enough to step on the road to no return, then you must work on this shortcoming of yours."

"My Amaranto was never designed to fight by herself." Saint Stark attempted to excuse her poor showing. "She was always meant to be accompanied by another Larkinson mech of the same caliber."

"We are not asking you to become a jack of all trades and dilute your greatest advantages." Jeri responded. "We only want you to put a greater effort into guarding against the worst outcome. You can still do this fairly quickly as long as you develop your strength correctly."

"And what is the correct method?"

"Haven't you noticed it already? In our early exchange of blows, my brother and I did more than passively empowering our ace mech with our true resonance. We actively used our Saint Kingdom to distort reality in specific ways that enabled us to maneuver so fast and tight. As for you, your Saint Kingdom remained static all of the time. Not once did you actively leverage its possibilities to enhance your ace mech in a specific manner."

Davia Stark widened her eyes.

She never thought about that! Now that she had been informed, she understood that she hadn't been fighting back at her full strength! She had only ever actively employed her Saint Kingdom when shooting at targets from afar.

Now she became aware she could make good use of her Saint Kingdom to give her an edge in melee combat.

Davia Stark became determined to fix this shortcoming by the end of the day!

Chapter 6769: Tough Therapy

The next few days pushed Saint Stark to her limits.

The Stewards Siamesia took their responsibilities of mentorship seriously. Given the current war climate, the saints did not wish to relent in their attempts to bring Davia Stark up to a more satisfactory standard.

"Mercy in training is nothing less than cruelty during these times." Alo ruthlessly said. "We will keep you here for as long as the power reactor of your ace mech can last. There will be no rest or respite because our enemies will not give you any. You may employ whatever measures you can muster in order to fend us off. Do not hold back.

You may try to kill us. You will not succeed, but attempting to do so is a good way for you to hone your killer instincts."

What ensued was a training session as well as a torture session!

The Lamia Kailamassu continued to collide against the Amaranto Mark III's mech frame with deliberate and unstoppable force!

Each time, the bulky ball-like dual-pilot ace mech maneuvered around at speeds belying its considerable mass and volume. Its stature may be a fraction of the size of a phase lord, but Stark had an illusion that its force and momentum were equivalent to that of a greater phase lord!

Fortunately, the Stewards Siamesia understood exactly how much physical force the archemetal frame of the Amaranto Mark III could endure.

It was admittedly not much. If not for the strong reinforcement properties of archemetal, the Amaranto Mark III would not have been qualified to engage in melee combat against opponents of the same level!

"Pathetic!" Alo admonished as the Lamia Kailamassu evaded the plasma bayonet thrust with disturbing ease before bouncing the lighter and feebler Amaranto away like a pinball! "Is this the best you can do?! Your reflexes are too dull! Your experience in defending yourself at close range is worse than that of an expert pilot! Your judgment is too prone to deception! Any martial phase lord can cripple your ace mech with a single successful teleport strike. A greater phase lord can snap your proud machine with a single attack, masterwork or not! He wouldn't even need a Saint Piercer to make it happen!"

The Amaranto Mark III recovered control over her trajectory and attempted to bring her Instrument of Vengeance to bear against the circling Lamia Kailamassu.

The dual-pilot ace mech had just distanced itself from the ace marksman mech and appeared to be building up a lot of momentum.

This was a fantastic chance for the Amaranto to lean towards her strength and let loose a shot!

Saint Stark began to grin as she resonated with her oversized luminar crystal rifle. She already commanded her companion spirit to possess the Instrument of Vengeance while also beseeching Ylvaine to help her predict her tricky opponent's highly tricky evasive maneuvers.

At the same time, she resonated with the ChargeMate that was integrated into her ace mech to speed up the accumulation of power in her luminar crystal rifle.

Stark did not bother to resonate with HeatMate as that would slow down the previous effort and induce unnecessary strain. Her machine still remained relatively cool and had just begun to glow brighter as the mech frame's vast amount of hyper materials began to pull in the power of light.

She also drew out a lot of additional power from the supplementary Endex System Version 3.0. More and more E energy got pulled in before being converted into pure electrical energy that facilitated the charging rate of the Instrument of Vengeance.

There was no way the Stewards Siamesia would allow the Amaranto to charge her primary weapon to her limits, but Stark did not consider this possibility in the slightest.

Instead, she just wanted to build up as much of a charge as possible in two seconds or less so that she could give her opponent a nice whack.

Yet before her Instrument of Vengeance built up a 10 percent charge, the Lamia Kailamassu teleported forward in defiance of the Amaranto's Saint Kingdom and smacked straight into the archemch, causing her to tumble away in a humiliatingly easy fashion!

That was not even the worst that happened!

The dual-pilot ace mech charged at an angle that wretched the Instrument of Vengeance away from its owner!

The luminar crystal rifle helplessly spun into the distance as a result. It took quick thinking on Davia Stark's part to use her Saint Kingdom to arrest the weapon's launch and pull it back to the Amaranto.

Stark did not give up on using her rifle as it was meant to be wielded. She resumed the charge, but the Lamia Kailamassu did not mess around and immediately flew close before smacking away the rifle from the Amaranto's hands yet again!

The junior ace pilot grew incredibly irritated! She felt as if her sparring partner was constantly splashing water in her face!

"Let me get off a shot!" She snarled in frustration.

Alo's response was direct. "No."

"Why not?!"

"Why train in an area that you already excel at? We all know how good you are at eliminating enemies from afar. Training your marksmanship at this stage will not make you that much stronger. Your shortcomings are too great, but unlike other marksman mechs, the unusual construction of your machine has blessed you with a stronger mech frame than normal. You have never taken full advantage of that. We must correct that as soon as possible. The longer you remain a sitting duck against enemies at close range, the less you deserve to launch any shots. DEFEND YOURSELF!"

The sparring session continued. The Amaranto got knocked back so many times that it was a miracle that its more delicate parts hadn't shaken loose.

Each time, Saint Stark tried her best to evade the charge attacks.

She failed every attempt.

The twin saints remained merciless. They held in back when it came to inflicting damage, but they had no qualms about employing their greater strengths to ensure their ace support mech smacked the Amaranto around like a ragdoll time and time again.

It was an interesting if punishing exercise for the first 10 minutes, but as the sparring session stretched on for an hour, Stark had accumulated a lot of frustrations!

The two Rubarthan ace pilots had not limited themselves to physical therapy. They had also begun to use their overlapping Saint Kingdoms to induce mental hallucinations onto Stark!

In one moment, the Amaranto looked ready to thrust her plasma bayonet into what would hopefully be the Lamia Kailamassu's trajectory.

In the next moment, the ace marksman mech froze for an instant before resuming her attack, which the Lamia Kailamassu easily managed to evade!

Davia Stark wanted to rely on her intuition to predict the Lamia Kailamassu's attack angle, but Alo and Jeri's Saint Kingdoms had abruptly pulled at her mental scars, causing her to confront the horrors she had witnessed in the past.

Though Stark had tried her best to extricate herself from this forced recollection, she still remained distracted for several crucial seconds!

Though Stark had already instructed her living medch to take control as quickly as possible and act according to her best judgment, it simply did not work out as well as she hoped.

As much as the Amaranto had learned from her ace pilot, the living mech was fundamentally unable to match the skills, judgment and supernatural intuition of a genuine saint.

The performance of the Amaranto merely matched that of a well-trained if unimaginative elite mech pilot at best.

The living mech was no different from a child in front of a pair of ace mechs that had reached the cusp of godhood!

Aloretzi and Jerivern steadily ramped up the usage of their Saint Kingdoms. They even began to employ additional measures to add to the confusion.

The Lamia Kailamassu engaged in infrequent and unpredictable teleport hops. The machine could appear in any direction. It could show up right in front, to the side, down below or even behind.

What was worse was that its teleportation module was so confounding that it could even switch the orientation of the Lamia Kailamassu!

For example, when the dual-pilot ace pilot charged from the front, it could instantly teleport behind the Amaranto while simultaneously turning her 180 degrees around, allowing her to launch straight into the unexposed rear of the Larkinson ace mech while retaining most of her inexplicably reversed momentum!

This was an incredible cheat!

With the help of two sources of extremely potent true resonance, the Lamia Kailamassu's teleportation module was able to violate the laws of nature to a baffling extent.

It did so in complete defiance of Davia Stark's Saint Kingdom!

The domain field might as well not exist by how domineeringly her adversary pulled off one reality-defying feat after another.

"I need to catch my breath!" Stark complained. "Can you give me a minute to rest and thin?"

"No. The enemy will never let you off, so neither will we. It is better for you to falter now than later."

The Stewards Siamesia had been truly serious about abusing the Ameranto until she had completely expended her energy reserves!

Stark began to regret the most recent upgrades. The first-class power reactor and vastly more effective energy cells kept the Amaranto Mark III Revision 2 going a lot longer than before.

Combined with the 'renewable' electrical energy generated by ChargeMate and the Endex System Version 3.0, the ace marksman mech was loyally fulfilling her purpose in keeping her fed with lots of energy as long as possible!

Though Stark found it tempting to employ tricks to drain the energy reserves of her ace mech faster, she resolutely refused to do anything that cut this punishing sparring session short!

The sparring session reached its second hour, then its third.

The Amaranto Mark III's energy reserves finally started to reach a distressing level, but the machine was still able to fight, not that it mattered.

The only consolation was that Saint Stark was gradually able to learn how to cope with the repeated mental and physical abuse.

She gritted her teeth, but instead of complaining about the torture, she kept herself silent and worked hard to perform better than before.

Her ace mech gradually found ways to lesson and mitigate the consequences of getting slammed by the Lamia Kailamassu.

She learned how to anticipate the charging attacks to a better extent. She learned how to reduce the impact damage. She learned how to arrest the Amaranto's tumbling faster. She also learned how to keep hold of the Instrument of Vengeance.

Her Saint Kingdom played an indispensable role. The Amaranto alone could not do it. Stark had gradually come to realize that the only way to defeat an effect empowered by a Saint Kingdom was another effect empowered by a Saint Kingdom!

Stark did not attempt to weaken the Lamia Kailamassu. It was hopeless for her to directly contest her will against two peak ace pilots.

She instead focused on empowering the defenses and other physical parameters of the Amaranto Mark III.

This produced much more successful results as she was still able to retain her dominion over her own ace mech!

At the same time, Saint Stark's growing fury and frustrations caused her mental fortitude to grow.

She tried everything to block the mental intrusions, and she found that strong emotions was a good shortcut to mitigate the unwanted hallucinations.

The stronger her anger, the more effective her defiance!

Her determination to retain his focus became an increasing obsession to her. The Stewards Siamesia had repeatedly humiliated her by making her vulnerable time and time again.

There was a limit to how much Saint Stark wanted to be reminded of her flaws and vulnerabilities!

"GET... OUT... OF... MY... HEAD!"

Saint Stark miraculously managed to push away the 'non-lethal' mental intrusion entirely as her fury exploded!

Her rebuke came accompanied by a dazzling explosion of light that turned the Amaranto Mark III into a giant flashbang!

Though it did not stop the Lamia Kailamassu from colliding into the ace marksman mech shortly afterwards, at least Stark managed to protect her awareness this time!

"Good job, Davia! It took you long enough. I was afraid it would have taken you 4 hours to figure out how to defend your mind and will."

"SCREW YOU, ALO!"

Chapter 6770: Confidence and Weakness

"Purging Light!" Stark roared.

The largely depleted Amaranto Mark III mustered up all of the light energy she could gather and released it all in a single omni-directional explosion!

The resonance-empowered light wave instantly cleansed and purified the junior ace pilot's mind, causing her to shake off her traumatic recollection and fully regain her focus.

The expanding explosion of light was too weak to repel the incoming Lamia Kailamassu, but it at least gave Stark enough time to quickly adjust the Amaranto's posture so that her feet touched the surface of the dual-pilot ace mech first!

The Amaranto struggled to maintain her footing, but she was able to extend her legs and launch herself to the side with just enough skill and control to maintain control over her flight!

The ace marksman mech subsequently spun around on her axis and swiped her plasma bayonet in a sweeping slash!

The Lamia Kailamassu teleported right in the path of the plasma bayonet, just as Stark predicted!

The plasma bayonet glowed brighter and hotter as Stark poured all of her hatred and frustrations into the tip of her Instrument of Vengeance.

"Light Arts!"

The drastically more powerful and lethal bayonet struck the exterior of the Lamia Kailamassu, only to do nothing aside from leave a miniscule scorch mark on the resonance-empowered armor plating.

Even if this amounted to practically zero damage, it was already a considerably impressive accomplishment that a dedicated ranged machine was able to leave a visible mark!

"Are you tired already?" Alo said in genuine concern that sounded like a taunt in the current context. "Do you want to stop and rest now that your ace mech is close to running dry?"

"No." Stark snarled in response. "I will not stop until my machine cannot keep up anymore. My tech is allowed to fail, but my willpower must never break."

She was determined to fight to her limit as the Stewards Siamesia intended!

She would not accept any other outcome!

The Amaranto exerted the utmost of her flight system and maneuvered around the Lamia Kailamassu as best as possible.

Though she was not able to avoid most collisions, she at least tried to ensure she landed a good hit whenever the two ace mechs came close.

As first-class ace mechs that possessed vastly more power than standard first-class multipurpose mechs, each collision between the Lamia Kailamassu and the Amaranto was enough to crumple practically every other small craft!

Yet the absurdly strong and thick armor system of the former and the exotic archetech construction of the latter enabled the two machines to withstand these forces quite well.

Of course, neither machines could endure this level of violence for hours at a time without the reality-defying properties of their Saint Kingdoms.

After many repeated collisions, Saint Stark understood to a much greater degree why the Stewards Siamesia opted to dual-pilot a single ace mech.

The advantages outweighed the disadvantages.

Rather than pilot two separate machines and disperse their power, they stuck to each other on a permanent basis and essentially doubled up their true resonance.

The maximum resonance strength an ace pilot could reach was 1545 laveres.

Hitting this figure meant that they were being held back by their bottlenecks. The only way to overcome these barriers was to step onto the road to no return, and that was not a trivial decision to make.

This meant that ace pilots could remain stuck at 1545 laveres for decades or even centuries at a time.

From the General Axelar Streon to the Mace of Retaliation, each of them were biding their time while doing their best to accumulate as many advantages as possible for their ultimate attempt to ascend to godhood.

Before they began their ultimate challenge, the amount of true resonance they were able to employ would remain constrained by their ceiling for a long time.

It was due to this limitation that the Lamia Kailamassu was stronger than pretty much every other individual peak ace mech!

The powerful machine resonated with two peak ace pilots. The degree of reality distortion of two nearly identical Saint Kingdoms allowed it to get away with pulling off feats that only god pilots perform!

To put it in a different way, the Lamia Kailamassu possessed an effective resonance strength that did not come anywhere close to 3090 laveres, but was definitely a lot higher than 1545 laveres!

Saint Stark was unable to estimate an exact number. The lavere scale was not linear, but was instead determined by a complicated formula that completely went over her head.

The resonance meters of the Amaranto Mark III were unable to measure the combined resonance strength of two Saint Kingdoms working together in total synchronicity.

Whatever the case, the combined willpower of the Stewards Siamesia was just so strong that Saint Stark still had no way in hell of gaining supremacy anywhere outside of the physical boundary of her ace mech!

This was the ultimate reason why Saint Stark continually failed to gain the upper hand in these bouts.

The tech used to power up both mechs were impressive.

The Lamia Kailamassu was truly worthy of its fame. It served its pilots extremely well even though it had only shown off a fraction of its capabilities during hours of constant sparring.

The amount of super-class materials stuffed inside her sizable mech frame was considerable.

The dual-pilot ace mech exerted a lot more strain in order to apply constant pressure onto the Amaranto, yet it did not falter even once!

Its defenses, mobility and endurance parameters were frankly ridiculous!

If not for the glaring absence of any overt form of offensive capabilities, Saint Stark would have been tempted to call it the perfect ace mech.

The Amaranto never stood a chance.

That did not mean that Saint Stark wanted to deliver a poor performance.

Even if her foe was virtually undefeatable at her current strength and means, she still wanted to keep her head high and protect her pride!

She knew that if she bowed her head even once and admitted that she could never get the better of her adversary, her journey to become a god pilot would come to an end.

As tiring as it was to fight for over 5 hours straight, Stark had come close to thinking about calling it quits, yet she always squashed these thoughts as soon as they emerged.

She could never give up! She had a mission to complete! She had a cause to fulfill!

The blood of the innocents stained her soul. Her desire to enact retribution burned eternal.

Her willpower flared and her Saint Kingdom became reinvigorated.

Despite the increasingly more exhausted state of her ace mech, Saint Stark continued to fight as if she had just started!

Even so, her willpower was not endless, and neither was the energy reserves of her machine.

Stark squeezed the utmost of her Amaranto as well as her own willpower. She felt she had never explored the depths of her capabilities as much as she did today!

By the time the Amaranto had finally begun to dim, the Lamia Kailamassu eventually ceased to attack any further.

The Stewards Siamesia knew exactly when the Amaranto had reached her hard limits.'

"That is enough for today." Saint Jerivern Chevor announced as if she had not exerted herself in the slightest. "Your performance just now is much better than at the start of this training session. Are you satisfied?"

"No." Stark growled as she breathed heavily. "I am not. I got a lot better than before. My instincts improved rapidly to the point where I can predict your attacks in advance 10 to 20 percent of the time. I managed to develop an ability to purge my mind and will from your distractions. I have developed the prototype of an ability to strengthen

the plasma bayonet of my rifle. I also made a huge amount of progress in my melee weapon handling skills as well as my short-ranged maneuvering skills."

"Yet you are still not satisfied."

Stark let out a sigh. "No ace pilot should remain satisfied with their current level of strength. The moment you become content with what you can do, there will be no reason for you to grow any stronger. The road to power is endless. I have not even traversed most of it. There is still far too much room for improvement. I cannot fall into the trap of complacency just because I managed to become a lot more competent at fending off enemies up close. It has only been a single day."

"You maintain the correct attitude. Good." Saint Alo spoke in satisfaction. "Not just any ace pilot can become a god pilot. One of the strongest contributors to a successful ascension is necessity. The weaker you think you are, the more you desire strength that is far beyond your current level. If you check your arrogance and fear enemies that are on a different level than you, then you may have a slightly greater chance of surviving the Mech Body Merger Process. It certainly does not help if you think you are already invincible against all enemies."

That made a lot of sense, but there was a part of Saint Stark that instinctively objected to this viewpoint.

"What of our pride? What is our confidence? There are many sources that emphasize the importance of confidence and belief in your own strength as the foundation of your willpower. I know this to be true. If I think of myself as weak, my willpower becomes brittle and easier to break."

"That is one of the persistent tests that any expert pilot and ace pilot must endure." Jeri answered. "You must find a balance that works out for you. I can tell you that overconfidence will cause your growth to effectively cease. At the same time, a complete lack of confidence in your current capabilities will weaken your Saint Kingdom to the point that it will fail in protecting you from lethal harm. Neither extremes will lead to good outcomes. You must establish a balance where you can maintain enough confidence to keep up your performance, but also retain enough awareness of how lacking you are to motivate yourself to grow stronger."

"That doesn't sound too difficult..."

"It is when you consider that leaning in one direction to another can influence whether you will live or die, Davia. In a fight against a powerful opponent, you need an abundance of confidence in order to perform at your best. However, the lack of perceived shortcomings will make it so that you will never improve past your ceiling. On the other hand, if you maintain the assumption that you are weaker, then you may not fight at your best, but an opportunity may arise where your urge to grasp greater power will trigger a minor or major breakthrough moment, thereby allowing you to reach a new level of strength. This works even if you have already become an ace pilot."

One approach sounded safer, while the other was rife with risk.

Saint Stark thought back on the expert pilots and ace pilots that she knew of. There were plenty of them that possessed an abundance of confidence. How were they able to break through?

"I find it hard to accept that it is that simple." She said.

Alo chuckled in amusement. "That is because it is not. This is an oversimplified way of looking at how we fight and improve. Our realities are much more complicated than a single two-dimensional spectrum. I believe that ace pilots fare best when they score high in both areas. They must have supreme confidence in their own fighting prowess, yet simultaneously feel incredibly insecure about their current level of strength. Only when you can maintain both attitudes at the same time will you reach your best possible state."

"That... sounds impossible."

"Just a few years ago, people assumed that norms could never pilot mechs. Now they can. Nothing is impossible, Davia. Out of every human, high-ranking mech pilots such as us are best at altering our own reality. That is what you must rely upon to maintain two opposite states of mind. So long as your willpower is strong enough, everything is possible."