

Mech Touch 6891

Chapter 6891 The End of the Chase

Of course the Black Lord was armed with missiles.

The ace mech was not armed with generic missiles either.

The ones that exploded against the First Sword Mark III happened to produce more forceful explosions, making them good at pushing enemies away.

The first-class ace multipurpose mech also appeared to possess a sizable reserve of missiles. It continued to fire a salvo of missiles at clever intervals, thereby repeatedly interrupting the First Sword's momentum and causing her attempt to fail.

Since the First Sword Mark III lacked any form of point defense, the missiles quickly converged on the Larkinson ace mech and exploded!

The concussive forces unleashed by these simultaneous blasts were already powerful to shatter regular first-class multipurpose mechs. Even expert mechs could not avoid damage due to the resonance empowerment.

However, the physical damage inflicted by the missiles was not too strong. The First Sword Mark III remained effectively undamaged by the missile salvo.

That was all the Wind of Destruction sought to accomplish. Since his ace mech lacked superdimensional armaments, he needed to fight with his brains and keep his adversary on her toes.

Not only had the explosions thrown the First Sword Mark III out of her focused state, but her attempts to build up momentum failed at the most inopportune moments!

Saint Dise wondered how many times the Black Lord could reload its missile launchers.

She soon deduced that the Black Lord would not run out of missiles anytime soon. It was likely equipped with dimensional magazines, thereby allowing it to carry at least 5 times as many missiles in his speciation!

Her mind churned as she rapidly sought to devise a solution.

While her First Sword kept throwing herself in the direction of the enemy, only to get stymied by the missiles and the fine manipulation of a tier 2 Destroyer sword, she suddenly recalled that she had another way of dealing with incoming missile attacks aside from chopping them up with her own blade.

She sword fey that she previously dismissed made a return!

They swept forward and turned into makeshift shields. When the next salvo of missiles sought to interrupt and displace the First Sword Mark III, the sword fey all homed in on the incoming warheads and eliminated them in advance!

"I am coming for you!" She roared over the communication channel.

The Black Lord continued to back off while opening fire with its integrated weapons. It also swung the Sirocco at a faster frequency, thereby unleashing more destructive wind energy waves at the cost of making them weaker.

The First Sword Mark III's flight faltered for a bit. It was as if the ace mech and its accompanying sword fey was flying straight into a hurricane.

Yet Dise already employed a familiar solution that allowed her ace mech to temporarily ignore the exotic effects that were pressing her ace mech back.

"One Sword Breaks Ten-Thousand Laws."

The First Sword Mark III glowed in metallic silver before thrusting her greatsword straight forward.

Once again, the Decapitator opened a sizable gap in front that created a temporary tunnel where normal space reigned once again.

The Black Lord fired repeated salvos of missiles, yet the sword fey accurately intercepted each of them. The fey all got blown backwards, but they incurred no damage despite getting struck by resonance-empowered blasts. The hull-grade superdimensional alloys used in their construction along with Dise's resonance empowerment proved sufficient in keeping the blades sharp and straight.

This response successfully enabled the electric winged ace swordsman mech to come close enough to launch a proper attack.

The First Sword Mark III swung back her extended greatsword and resonated with the blade.

While this had the unfortunate effect of weakening the resonance empowerment of her flight system, Saint Dise only gathered her power for a brief amount of time.

When she decided that she had accumulated enough energy, the Decapitator swung forward in a broad sweep that unleashed a wave of silvery metallic resonance-empowered blades!

"Bladestorm!"

The attack vaguely resembled the destructive wind waves unleashed by the Black Lord, but worked quite differently.

The Bladestorm sword technique unleashed thousands of small sword energy attacks that spread across the space in and around the Black Lord.

No matter where the ace mech sought to evade, it could never avoid getting struck by at least a dozen of the blades!

Moments before the Bladestorm swept across the Terran ace mech, the machine activated its azure energy shield and also unfolded a thin but broad layer of armor plating from its arms.

The azure energy shield immediately got pummeled by numerous sword energy attacks.

It should normally be a lot more resistant against these strikes, but the superdimensional properties of the Decapitator had imparted them with greater effectiveness against transphasic shielding.

In the end, the azure energy shield just managed to remain intact due to the dispersed nature of the Bladestorm technique.

The downside was that its integrity had dropped so much that the Black Lord was forced to switch its azure shield generator off in order to avoid any damage and allow its systems to recover.

The First Sword Mark III already prepared her second power move.

The superdimensional ace mech adopted a stance that was similar to one of her previous ones.

However, when she thrust her greatsword outward, her forward acceleration mysteriously amplified, causing the entire ace mech to charge forward at an unmatched speed!

"Sword of Lydia!"

The powerful charge caught the Wind of Destruction off-guard, but the veteran ace pilot still managed to perform the correct response.

The Black Lord activated hidden boosters that gave the machine a powerful push to the side.

This enabled the Terran ace mech to barely avoid getting impaled by the superdimensional greatsword!

Saint Dise took this failure in stride and responded to the successful evasion attempt. The First Sword Mark III's electro reactant wings flapped and gave the machine a powerful impulse that abruptly changed her course.

The First Sword resumed her pursuit of the Black Lord!

In response to the incoming threat, the Black Lord launched another salvo of missiles, but this time programmed them to detonate shortly after they had left the missile tubes.

This caused the missiles to explode right between the Black Lord and the incoming First Sword Mark III!

The concussive forces generated by these explosions caused both ace mechs to get blasted away from each other.

The Black Lord keenly took advantage of this push to distance itself from its deadly adversary.

The First Sword Mark III briefly got pushed back as well, but to a lesser degree. Its superdimensional mech frame made it a lot more resistant against kinetic displacement effects.

This dance continued on for several more minutes.

The Black Lord continued to assail the superdimensional ace mech with relatively mundane but frequent attacks.

The Wind of Destruction clearly sought to outlast his sparring partner.

The First Sword Mark III on the other hand repeatedly attempted to close in and launch a powerful attack that would have ended the sparring session in her favor.

"Sword of Lydia."

"Bladestorm."

"Phase Cutter."

"Unbreakable Body."

Saint Dise employed multiple different sword techniques and special moves that she had developed over the years. Each of them produced enhanced effects now that she became an ace pilot, yet the suppression of her Saint Kingdom significantly weakened her damage output.

The differences in resonance strength still remained instrumental. The senior ace pilot keenly took advantage of his stronger willpower to inhibit the First Sword Mark III's every move.

The lower the distance between the two ace mechs, the more the disparity in Saint Kingdoms mattered!

This was the source of many frustrations for Saint Dise. Try as she might, she continually failed to keep her ace mech close enough.

The electro-reactant flight system struggled hard to keep the First Sword Mark III fast and agile enough to keep up with the Black Lord, but the latter relied on a number of tricks to stay at least a few steps ahead.

In one instance, the Black Lord even used its legs to kick at the approaching ace swordsman mech!

Saint Dise did not expect this move and reacted too late. By the time the Decapitator swung in its direction, the Black Lord had already launched away!

As the minutes passed by, the constant damage inflicted by the Black Lord's suite of weapons ultimately bore fruit.

While the First Sword Mark III's superdimensional energized armor system only bore light surface scratches, the persistent attacks rapidly drained her energy reserves.

Keeping the electro-reactant flight system active at full power did not help either. They accelerated the depletion of the ace mechs cells.

When the First Sword Mark III finally sputtered and lost her electrifying wings, the sparring session immediately came to an end.

While the living ace mech's high-quality power reactor was still able to generate a low but stable level of output, the energy being generated was far from enough to sustain high-intensity combat.

Saint Dise scowled as she sat inside the cockpit of her tired machine.

She still felt unwilling to admit defeat.

The First Sword Mark III was stronger than this. Dise failed to tap her full potential.

The ace pilot recognized that her lack of experience in piloting a ace mech of this caliber had prevented her from taking full advantage of all of the available opportunities.

Most egregious was her failure to effectively leverage her sword fey against the Black Lord. Her control over them was still too lacking. She also hadn't mastered the myriad of specialized drone mech skills that made mechs like the Fey Fianna so powerful in the right hands.

In short, Dise had lost a winnable match.

"I... lost." She said with a disappointed breath.

"You fought well enough for an ace pilot who is still in her first year." The Wind of Destruction responded in a calm voice. "Do not take this outcome too seriously. It was just a test."

It was as if it was no big deal for him to gain the upper hand against one of the first full superdimensional ace mechs in existence.

"That doesn't change the fact that I lost despite piloting a much more superior ace mech." Dise grumbled.

"I thought that a saint such as you would have learned the lesson that our willpower is the root of our strength. Technology is important, but all of the superdimensional alloys in the Red Ocean will not save you from losing due to shortcomings in skill, combat experience, conviction and grit. This is why I am telling you to take this loss in stride. You still fought as if you were an expert pilot during this match. You will outgrow that sooner or later. Once you train the necessary skills that better utilizes the new and enhanced capabilities of your ace mech, your First Sword Mark III may be able to defeat a true leapfrog challenge."

The advice made sense. Despite how much pride was in the line for him, the Wind of Destruction earnestly assumed the role of a mentor and offered genuine guidance to Saint Dise.

It was rather hard for Dise to go from being the most skilled expert pilot in the Larkinson Clan to a raw ace pilot that still needed to reinvent her entire approach towards combat.

However... Dise was not a woman who shied away from criticism.

If she wanted to improve and defeat the Black Lord under similar circumstances, then she clearly had to do her homework and learn how to pilot her upgraded machine properly.

She spent years familiarizing and mastering every single facet of the First Sword Mark II.

This enabled her to bring out the utmost of the expert mech's potential.

Now she intended to do the same for the First Sword Mark III. Her sword fey added an entirely new dimension of complexity, but Dise did not fear the additional challenges.

She knew that once she truly mastered the art of sword formations, it should be well within her capabilities to completely demolish a senior ace mech like the Black Lord!

Chapter 6892 Incomplete Tech Applications

The sparring session between the First Sword Mark III and the Black Lord satisfied most if not all of the human observers.

They all gained excellent insights into the performance of full high-grade superdimensional ace mech.

While the Fist of Defiance had shown what a god mech could do after undergoing a full superdimensional conversion, nobody could extrapolate the performance of the Invictus to ace mechs.

People couldn't predict how strong a superdimensional ace mech could become.

While the First Sword Mark III failed to live up to her full potential due to how recently Saint Dise was able to pilot a real ace mech, many knowledgeable experts were still able to take these factors into account.

Every mech designer was able to interpret the data and gain a much more accurate impression of how much of an advantage a full superdimensional ace mech gained over a conventional ace mech.

Superdimensional technology had yet to develop any applications that strengthened the mobility of a mech, but it was undeniable that melee weapons and armor systems gained an enormous boost in performance.

The Black Lord should have been able to crush a junior ace mech in terms of offense and defense, but the enormous difference in performance in these aspects allowed the First Sword Mark III to become a lot more competitive than normal.

Nobody missed the implications. They thoroughly became convinced of the value of superdimensional matter.

An hour after the sparring session came to an end, the Bluejay Fleet and the elements of the Premier Fleet had turned around so that they could journey back to the orbit of New Constantinople VIII.

Ves did not wait too long to organize another meeting in order to discuss the findings. He and a number of trusted and knowledgeable mech designers gathered in the conference room along with the two resident ace pilots.

Saint Dise still looked a little glum due to her poor showing. She clearly did not feel good about putting up a remarkably good fight against a much more powerful ace pilot.

Even if she intellectually knew that she was never supposed to win this lopsided matchup, Dise still found plenty of areas where she could have done better.

"Alright everyone." Ves opened the meeting. "Each of you should have generated plenty of insights about the performance of a superdimensional ace mech. Please share your notable findings with us so that we can have a better idea of what we are working with. The First Sword Mark III is our first full superdimensional mech, but she will certainly not be our last one. Even now, we are in the process of applying superdimensional tech to the Riot Mark III Project. Any lessons we can learn from our first should provide considerable assistance to our second."

Superdimensional mechs were still a new phenomena. Ves knew too little about them. This was why he was eager to collect feedback from others.

Given that Saint Dise did not appear to be in a good mood, he decided to address another individual first.

"Casella, please share with us your thoughts about the First Sword Mark III."

The Saint Commander calmly spoke up. "The performance of the superdimensional ace mech largely matched our expectations. The sharpness of the Decapitator is unparalleled, especially if Saint Dise is resonating with the SuperSunder Metal. This is by far the greatest advantage of the First Sword. Her armor system has also proven to be remarkably resistant against the attacks of the Black Lord. Defense should not be a concern unless the ace mech is fighting against adversaries armed with superdimensional weapons."

"What do you think about the First Sword's mobility?"

"It is... unbalanced, sir. The electro-reactant flight system is a marvel of high technology, but its energy draw is excessive to state the obvious. It is a mismatch with the First Sword Mark III as it rapidly drains the ace mech's energy reserves while active. However... this weakness can be mitigated to a large extent as long as the ace mech is equipped with an energy link array. Is it possible to mount this module onto the design?"

Everyone gazed towards the two mechers in the conference room.

"From what I have examined from the design, the First Sword Mark III is not natively designed with energy link technology in mind." Jovy Armalon responded with a hint of doubt in his voice. "I believe that the energy transmission systems are still robust enough to accommodate this additional module, but it is strange that the Mech Supremacist Faction has not chosen to add an energy link transceiver in the design when it is clear that endurance is a major limitation."

Saint Commander Casella supplied a possible answer. "The design team may have been forced to reject this option due to Dise's personal preference. She is a self-reliant warrior that prefers to vanquish her opponents by virtue of her own strength and skill. Energy link technology is a step too far. Just as how mechs in a dueling arena cannot tap external sources of energy, the First Sword Mark III must remain as self-contained as possible in order to satisfy Dise's honor and conviction."

The ace pilot in question nodded in confirmation.

"I understand the usefulness of energy link technology, but I do not want to become too reliant on it." Dise explained. "I do not want to lose much of my effective combat power once my machine is cut off from an energy link. If I cannot defeat a powerful opponent by relying on my strength and the strength of my ace mech, then I will need to train harder until I can make it happen. Simple as that."

"Thank you... for your clarification, Dise."

It was difficult to go against the principles of a high-ranking mech pilot.

While it was not outright impossible to persuade a stubborn pilot to change her mind, it took way too much effort to make it happen.

This was why most mech designers shrugged and agreed to the strange and illogical requests of powerful mech pilots most of the time.

This was why the First Sword Mark III was still not armed with a single ranged weapon and why she could not form an energy link with friendly units.

Nobody mentioned that Saint Dise may have been able to defeat the Wind of Destruction if her ace mech possessed both features.

Ves instead focused on other possible remedies.

"The absence of an energy link transceiver may not necessarily be a big deal. I believe that it is possible to use superdimensional matter to drastically expand the capacity of an energy cell. As soon as the Red Association has developed the first mature version of this product, I am fully in support of installing them into each of our ace mechs. Each of them can make good use of the massive boost in endurance. How long will it take for the RA to deliver?"

"Superdimensional energy cells are rather tricky to develop." Vector Loban said. "It requires us to develop a means to alter the structure and material composition of a block of superdimensional matter in dimensions outside of the material ones. It is like trying to fabricate a mech when you are standing outside of a completely isolated mech workshop. You cannot enter the workplace, but you can still try to create a channel to operate the production machines from a distance. That is what our scientists and engineers are trying to invent. This will likely take several months or half a year at most."

That did not sound easy. Ves did not think that the Larkinson Clan's own R&D institutions could complete such a project anytime soon. It was better to leave this job to the much more knowledgeable experts of the Red Association.

"Thank you for your input, Vector. I wish we can get our hands on superdimensional energy cells sooner, but for now, Dise will have to pay attention to how much energy her ace mech is burning during a deployment."

"I will not overlook something as obvious as this." Dise promised.

With that subject taken care of, Ves focused on the next issue.

"Is there a solution to the mobility problem?"

"That depends on whether there is a problem in the first place." Gloriana spoke up. "From my perspective, the First Sword Mark III already moves fast enough for an ace mech of her tonnage. The Dark Zephyr Mark III is somewhat faster, but he should be considering that his mech frame is shorter and lighter. It is quite respectable that the First Sword's electro-reactant flight system can improve her mobility to such an extent. The dramatic energy consumption that comes with full activation is an acceptable tradeoff in my opinion. It should not be necessary for the First Sword to keep her flight system active at full power during general engagements."

That was true. It was not necessary for the First Sword to activate her electric wings and blaze across the battlefield when there was no formidable enemy champion in the field.

Even then, most phase leaders weren't all that fast in the first place.

So long as they could enter into warp travel, a fast and agile mech would always have a mobility advantage!

"Can the electro-reactant wings be disrupted?" Alexa Streon asked.

"Probably." Ves said. "Those big electric wings are not entirely for show. They serve a functional purpose, though I do not understand the science myself. It is difficult to target the electric wings from the front, or else the Wind of Destruction would have taken advantage of this potential vulnerability. In any case, Dise should take care not to get ambushed from the rear. It will become much harder to escape a trap when the mobility of the First Sword is impaired."

This was a potential vulnerability, but not a big one.

"The bigger question is whether superdimensional technology can improve the performance of a flight system." Gloriana stated. "Transphasic flight systems are able

to increase the traversal speeds of mechs by a factor of 50 or more as long as there are no warp interdictors or space suppressors active in the vicinity. It is not inconceivable for superdimensional flight systems to attain warp factors that can reach as high as 100, 150 or 200."

A high warp factor made it easier for mechs to close the distance to their targets. The First Sword Mark III could clearly make good use of more powerful warp travel capabilities.

Jovy Armalon supplied what little information he knew about this subject. "The science behind that is also difficult to apply. The development of superdimensional flight systems will take longer due to the larger amount of interconnected parts and systems compared to much simpler energy cells. I can only advise you to remain patient. Proper superdimensional flight systems will likely mature in a year or two. Experimental versions may appear sooner than that, but they are liable to explode."

Though Ves liked to take a gamble now and then, he was not in a hurry to adopt every form of experimental tech.

The prefix was not meaningless. Experimental often translated into flawed and prone to triggering catastrophic outcomes.

Ves could not afford to impart so many risks onto the most important mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

"I guess we will all have to be patient. Like it or not, the immediate applications of superdimensional technology are mainly centered around melee weapons and physical defenses. We still have to wait for this new tech base to develop enhanced versions of ranged weapons, flight systems, teleportation systems and so on. I think that superdimensional matter has broad applications, but it will take a lot of time and research to realize them all. The First Sword Mark III is only a rudimentary version of a superdimensional mech. She can become much stronger once Ketis and her collaborators are able to plug her shortcomings with updated tech."

That excited Ves and the rest. As long as Saint Dise and the First Sword Mark III remained alive and active, they would definitely benefit from major advancements in the following years!

Chapter 6893 Depth of Sword Formation

After the conclusion of the meeting, Ves lingered behind in order to talk to the Saint Commander in private.

"How is Saint Dise holding up? Will there be any problems going forward?"

"No." Casella confidently replied. "When Dise initially received her First Sword Mark III, she had developed a large amount of conceit. Every ace pilot tends to develop a conceited mindset due to how much power they gained all of a sudden. In her case, the difference in power between the Mark II and the Mark III is so much greater that she had become wildly overconfident in her own strength. This is clearly an unwelcome development, so she needed this reality check. The Wind of Destruction has done us a favor by serving as the instrument that brought Saint Dise back to her senses."

Ves nodded in understanding. "I suppose that this is one of the hidden dangers of receiving a superdimensional mech. The advantages of superdimensional technology are much greater than phasewater technology and hyper technology combined. It is very easy to get caught up in the massive advantages that mech pilots tend to overlook their remaining shortcomings."

"No matter what rank mech pilots have attained, the attitudes that they must hold should be different depending on whether they are close to the start or the end of their current stretch of the journey. New ace pilots must never feel too confident in their own combat power because they must invest in their training and other growth measures in order to grow stronger. Peak ace pilots on the other hand must develop the most absolute possible sense of confidence in themselves, because their willpower is the only force that can sustain them when they attempt to traverse the road to no return."

In other words, mech pilots had to modulate their confidence in themselves based on the strength at their current ranks.

Saint Dise should not feel too comfortable at her current level. She needed to recognize in her heart and not just in her mind that she was incredibly weak as far as ace pilots were concerned.

Only then would she earnestly throw her heart and soul into genuine training.

"The Wind of Destruction did a good job at recognizing and exploiting the shortcomings of Saint Dise and the First Sword Mark III." Ves remarked. "Certain

problems will be easier to solve than others. For example, I expect that the RA will complete the development of the initial versions of superdimensional energy cells and superdimensional flight systems within two years. That is still an unfortunately long delay given that we are in a crucial period of time, but we don't have to do anything special in order to secure these upgrades."

"I am more concerned about the sword fey, sir. It is clear from the design of the First Sword Mark III that they have become a core aspect of the ace mech's combat system. It is highly unusual for a mech pilot to go from controlling zero spurs to controlling 33 spurs at once. Most professional drone mech specialists are not as extreme in making this transition. It is much more typical to start off with single digit spurs before slowly building up to 24 or 36 units. During this time, they spend years on learning and mastering increasingly more advanced drone control skills. From the basic extra limb control technique to the spurs-as-fingers technique, there is a well-established progression for mastering drone mechs."

"And Saint Dise arrogantly skipped this gradual progression, thinking that her extraordinary willpower will allow her to quickly master and control the sword fey by relying on brute force." Ves spoke.

The ace commander grimly nodded. "This is pure hubris on her part. Saints are indeed superhuman in many ways, but that does not necessarily mean we can master any combat or control skill in a matter of days. Drone mechs are deservedly considered one of the most difficult mech archetypes to master. The decision to turn the First Sword Mark III into a hybrid between a swordsman mech and a drone mech is ambitious, but also asks much more out of Dise. She must step way beyond her comfort zone and learn an entirely different set of skills from nothing. That is a challenge of its own."

Saint Dise was one of the foremost swordswomen of the Larkinson Clan. She rivaled Ketis in pure swordsmanship skills. What was important was that she knew how good she had become and always derived a lot of pride and satisfaction in this truth.

It was therefore a big hit on her ego to discover that her ability to control and employ living fey was actually inferior to the mech pilots who had already grown accustomed to piloting the Fey Fianna!

Despite her enviable rank, resonance strength did not necessarily correlate with skill.

Her upper boundary may have risen way beyond the human limit, but her lower limit still remained untouched!

This meant that it was very much possible for Saint Dise's drone control skills to be far inferior to that of experienced drone mech pilots.

"Now that Saint Dise has fixed her mentality, I think it won't take long for her to catch up and master the art of controlling her sword fey the proper way." Ves speculated. "The real learning curve does not lie in controlling the sword fey by themselves. It is the art of using them to channel sword formations. This is a completely new discipline that relies on using the sword fey to harmonize with the power of heaven to enhance their effects. During the sparring session, I hardly noticed any amplifications derived from sword formations."

The Larkinsons already had a pretty good idea of how formations worked. Both battle formations and the more recent qi formations practiced by Commander Melkor showed how positioning different elements into certain patterns generated a mysterious sense of harmony.

There were plenty of clues that stated that sword formations could generate power far in excess of what individual sword elements could accomplish as individual units.

This was why Ketis readily agreed to add so many sword fey to the First Sword Mark III.

"I have yet to hear of any other notable attempts of leveraging the power of sword formations." Casella said. "This is understandable as this is a completely new discipline that has yet to prove its strength in the modern era. In a period where we are all struggling to hold back the invading aliens, most groups are prioritizing design applications that can produce immediate results. This is why there is so much enthusiasm for superdimensional tech. As long as you have superdimensional matter in your possession, you can quickly convert it into an immediate power boost for any mech."

That was indeed a huge shortcoming of sword formations. Even if they truly held great potential, it took an extensive amount of time and effort to figure out how to draw it out. This could take years or even decades. That was far too distant for the people who prized short-term benefits!

"Do you think that Saint Dise needs help in order to discover effective sword formations?"

"It would help, sir. Given that not many parties aside from the Red Collective hold any interest in sword formations, it is up to us to advance our understanding in this field. Ketis and her 'reformed sword practitioners' may be able to pioneer the application of sword formations. Even without mechs, they can make use of superdimensional sword-shaped drones to leverage sword formations on a smaller scale."

"That... actually sounds quite promising. These sword drones can do wonders indoors and in urban environments. That said, I think that soldiers are better off using regular firearms in open terrain."

The application of sword drones only made sense if using them in special formations could produce far greater results than regular weapons.

If the Swordmaidens and other sword practitioners could truly derive a lot of strength from the use of sword formations, then this could turn into a new specialization of the Larkinson Clan.

Even if others picked the fruit of the Larkinson Clan's labor and learned how to employ sword formations as well, the Larkinsons would always be able to maintain a lead in this combat method!

"This is a big investment." Ves said. "If our clan is large and prosperous, it is no problem to divert enough manpower to this task. However, if the native aliens keep making progress, it is questionable whether we can retain enough manpower and resources to explore how to make better use of sword formations. Saint Dise will have to be prepared to do most of the work."

"Perhaps that is for the best."

They talked a bit more about the positioning of the First Sword Mark III in the Premier Fleet.

"Do you think that Saint Dise is enough to form a solid high-level core for the Premier Fleet, or should we look into recalling Saint Tusa or Saint Stark?"

"No. That should not be necessary." Casella shook her head. "It is better to let them roam around and fight where they think they are most needed. Saint Dise may have struggled to keep up with the Wind of Destruction during the last practice session, but her First Sword Mark III is much more suited to fight against phase leaders. She will do wonders once we confront a fleet that is protected by lesser or greater phase lords."

"Are you sure about that? What if the enemy brings way more phase lords and phase whales than we can comfortably handle?"

"Then our superdimensional ace mech will chop them to pieces one by one." Casella grimly smiled. "As long as our remaining forces are not under imminent threat, it is completely viable to send out the First Sword by herself and allow her to dismantle the enemy champions one by one. Her superdimensional armor system is highly resistant against both spatial and conventional attacks. Her superdimensional greatsword can easily part spatial barriers and cut through physical defenses with ease. Saint Dise will become a terror to the enemy phase lords. They are more liable to get in each other's way if they attempt to repel her ace mech."

Ves could sort of imagine this happening. A superdimensional ace mech was the worst nightmare of phase leaders.

Yet that did not mean that the First Sword was invincible. The Black Lord had ultimately won the sparring session.

"I think that your words may ring true under ordinary circumstances, but the story may be different if the phase leaders are armed with Saint Piercer arms. The native aliens have continued to supply their phase lords and phase whales with highly lethal spears. They have also shown off the capability to form other equipment such as physical shields. This tells me that the native aliens are gradually beginning to ramp up their production of their own form of superdimensional gear."

"Good." Saint Commander Casella grinned. "That will give red humanity an additional source of superdimensional matter. Relying on the Blue Dimension alone remains an unacceptable bottleneck to our civilization. I imagine that many more groups have begun to set their sights on phase lords that are equipped with Saint Piercer arms. Even if they are much more dangerous to defeat than other alien champions, the benefits of vanquishing them in combat are far greater. The only caveat is that the quality of their superdimensional gear is... mixed."

Saint Piercer arms were not all made out of armor or weapon-grade superdimensional alloys.

There were also alien pieces of equipment that were clearly made out of inferior hull-grade superdimensional matter.

While they still possessed a huge advantage over conventional materials, hull-grade armaments were liable to break when struck with other superdimensional arms.

Beggars couldn't be choosers. Ultimately, few groups cared about the underlying quality of the Saint Piercer arms. Even low-grade superdimensional matter could still prove useful to the right groups.

However, the real question was how the native aliens were able to get their hands on all of the superdimensional matter. Red humanity deeply wanted to figure out their source!

Chapter 6894 Red Collective Contribution

The Premier Fleet was getting closer and closer to achieving total readiness.

The arrival of Saint Dise and the First Sword Mark III plugged a huge hole in the fleet's capabilities. The Larkinsons no longer needed to fear the threat posed by enemy phase leaders.

When Ves checked the acquisition of first-class mechs, he noted that the Red Association continually shipped dozens of first-class multipurpose mechs to New Constantinople every couple of days.

The shipments were a bit irregular. The mechers had also fallen a bit behind schedule, but that was understandable considering all of the supply disruptions.

Still, Ves did not think that it would take too long for the Larkinsons to gain possession of 1000 first-class mechs.

Already, the Premier Fleet already obtained enough copies of the three chosen mech models to begin training for most of the mech pilots hired by the Premier Branch.

The Dracoloid first-class multipurpose mech model proved to be a menace when deployed alongside dozens of similar machines. The dragon mechs possessed a lot of mobility and looked intimidating if they charged at the same time. Enemy phasefighter pilots would definitely panic if their craft was beset by these mechs!

The Omega Thresher's melee capabilities were weaker, but nobody cared because the firepower of this first-class multipurpose mech model was superior.

Of particular note was the Datura Gravity Well Caster.

The gravitic weapon performed precisely as claimed. A single Datura was not able to produce a strong effect by itself, but when a dozen or more of them all launched their payloads in perfect coordination with each other, they were able to produce compound gravity wells that were able to generate much greater disruption on the battlefield!

As for the E-MULE, the first-class support mechs simply performed their roles without any complications. Its energy capacity was higher than almost any other mech, but it was not enough to sustain the consumption of a dozen machines.

However, in the absence of starships equipped with support link technology, the E-MULES still served as barely adequate substitutes. The support mechs were able to strengthen energy link and shield link networks and supply more juice to keep the recipient active and protected for a longer period of time.

Saint Commander Casella and the mech officers serving under her had already begun to conduct many drills in order to merge the three distinctive mechs into a cohesive force.

This proved challenging if Casella did not dictate the actions of the affected mechs.

The Dracoloids had a tendency to get in the way of the attacks launched by the Omega Threshers.

The Omega Threshers preferred to maintain their distance so much that they gave up ground too easily when approached by enemy units.

As described earlier, the E-MULES possessed limited endurance. If the mech pilots did not ration the energy at their disposal, then they might become useless far too soon.

To be honest, Ves was not particularly happy with the E-MULE model for this reason. He hoped that the development of superdimensional energy cells would solve this problem and enable his mechs to persist much longer on the battlefield without requiring support from friendly starships.

Of course, the premise of this was that the Red Association successfully developed superdimensional energy cells based on low to mid-grade matter. It was far too wasteful to expend the good stuff on mass produced goods.

As Ves witnessed the ongoing training sessions, he at least gained a bit of confidence in the piloting ability of the Premier Branch's mech pilots.

Only a minority of them had promoted their way out of the expeditionary fleet. The remainder consisted of recent recruits. Most of them originated from the Terran Alliance, but there were a handful of pilots who came from other planets.

The comprehensive training and education of these former first-class mech pilots enabled them to master the basics of their complicated machines fairly quickly.

Only the Dracoloid had a higher learning curve due to its non-humanoid shape.

The only issue that Ves had with this arrangement was that the new recruits had not proven their devotion and commitment to the Larkinson Clan yet. That was the one flaw that prevented Ves and the Saint Commander from feeling a strong sense of brotherhood with the mech pilots.

This shouldn't be a problem once the Premier Fleet became active and fought a dozen battles.

The bonds of brotherhood forged during active combat might not be as strong as the bonds formed by the soldiers of the expeditionary fleet, but they should at least reach a qualified standard.

This was important. Brotherhood may be all that these people have left if the Red War took a drastically worse turn.

Amidst all of the intensive training, Ves received more and more status updates about the delivery of two first-class capital ships.

The Eternal Vulcan Empire had already begun to dispatch the first-class fleet carrier to the New Constantinople.

Ves had waited for this expensive starship for a long time. He had diligently held up his end of the bargain by teaching the Vulcanite guest designers how to design living mechs.

By this time, even if the dwarven visitors were not yet able to design a living mech by themselves, their foundations in this field had become strong enough that they should be able to get started sooner or later.

They just needed additional help and instruction from the dwarven mech designers that did manage to succeed.

Ves had no doubt that these dwarven Novices and Apprentices were worth the price of a first-class fleet carrier.

This was because they would eventually be able to design basic living mechs that were completely tailored to the needs of the Eternal Vulcan Empire.

They should not be able to design Carmine mechs unless they gained greater comprehension of living mechs and learned the design principles of the Carmine System.

Considering that neither Alexa Streon nor Ketis Larkinson were able to design their own Carmine mechs, it may take a lot longer before any of them could reach this crucial point.

At least Ves had given them the possibility of replicating one of his most revolutionary design applications one day.

That was already a precious gift in itself. If anything happened to Ves, one of his multiple students could inherit his work on the Carmine System and eventually turn Carmine mechs into common products.

While the fleet carrier promised to drastically expand the mech capacity of the Premier Fleet, Ves actually looked forward to obtaining his first true warship.

The Tortuous Scream still needed to undergo her first trials, but they had already made the decision to skip this tedious process and deliver her directly to New Constantinople.

The short journey should be enough to identify imminent problems that needed to be fixed.

So long as the converted alien warship did not burst into flames, Ves was willing to believe that it would remain in one piece.

The alien battleship had already spent enough time at the E-66 Experimental Shipyard.

The Tortuous Scream would take a little longer to arrive due to the greater distance between the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact.

Once the warship arrived, Ves wanted to activate the Premier Fleet and begin his next campaign as soon as possible.

Rushing the fleet into battle generated many problems. One of the more concerning issues was that the staffing of multiple starships still remained a point of concern.

The crew of the Tortuous Scream largely consisted of green spacers that never trained to operate a vessel like this. Even the more experienced officers and non-commissioned officers had never actually served on a real warship in their entire lifetimes.

Even with the future installation of the SF-02 on the future flagship of the Premier Fleet, the smart AIs would only be able to provide indirect assistance due to the separation between human and alien computer systems.

As Ves thought how much authority he should grant the smart AIs in the Premier Fleet, a communication request interrupted his musings.

His chief of staff at the Red Collective contacted him outside of their scheduled virtual meetings.

That was highly unusual.

Ves accepted the call and leaned back in his office chair.

The physical projection of Eliza Mo Ragadan appeared in front of his desk.

The woman's impeccable control over herself betrayed no clues about what she wanted to talk about. Ves was not even able to read her spirituality due to her excellent cultivation.

"Good afternoon, Eliza. What is it you wanted to talk about that couldn't wait?"

"The Red Collective is aware of your efforts to prepare a small but elite combat force in order to do battle with the hostile aliens." The chief of staff spoke. "We couldn't help but notice that while the Red Association and the Red Fleet are well represented in the Bluejay Fleet, our own forces have remained absent aside from assigning a small bodyguard unit to you and your family. Our lack of commitment is inexcusable. After much discussion, the Phase Lord Department and the Enforcement Department have prepared two separate offers to you. Both are willing to dispatch a contingent of their elite cultivator units to you for the purpose of representing the RC in your battles against our common enemies."

That... sounded like a big deal. Ves hadn't really thought about it, but now that Eliza brought this matter to his attention, it did seem weird that the RC had yet to join the club.

He could easily figure out that it would be politically inconvenient for the collies to remain absent in his latest venture.

The mechers and the fleeters were clearly willing to contribute their own assets to the campaign, so the collies had no excuse to remain absent.

People would begin to ask uncomfortable questions on whether the collies supported their own upper councilor as he bravely dispatched his best troops to the frontlines.

The RC could not afford to show weakness in this regard.

While Ves found it logical for the collies to offer up their troops, Eliza's phrasing sounded a bit unusual.

"You said 'offers', as in multiple ones. Does that mean I can only choose one out of several?"

The female collie nodded her head. "That is correct, sir. It has to do with internal politics. The specialized Phase Lord Department and the more general Enforcement Department have developed an increasingly more serious rivalry with each other. I can tell you that this is partially deliberate as it is good to prevent their members from becoming complacent. Another reason why the two departments are competing against each other is that they have attracted different groups of backers."

"Oh? What makes them different? What do these departments advocate?"

"You should be able to figure this out without requiring any explanations." Eliza said as she crossed her arms. "The Phase Lord Department advocates the belief that human phase lords are the only meaningful classification of cultivator soldiers in the Red War. All other cultivators can only play an assisting role due to their inability to fight directly against alien phasefighters, warships and phase leaders."

In other words, the Phase Lord Department wanted to make human phase lords as dominant as mechs in other organizations.

Just as how mechs had completely become dominant to the point of taking over the space normally occupied by tanks, starfighters and other alternative combat platforms,

human phase lords sought to gain the same kind of primacy within the armed forces of the RC!

This was obviously bad news for other types of cultivator soldiers. The famous Apocalypse Wardens for example were extremely strong at infantry-scale combat, but it was a lot trickier for them to resist mechs and other large opponents.

Sure, they had that neat trick where they could merge their highly developed companion spirits and bring down the hammer against most large opponents, but it was not that practical to employ this powerful combination ability in a large and chaotic battlefield in space!

If the rest of the cultivator soldiers of the Enforcement Department had fallen into similar straits, then Ves genuinely could not see how they could be useful on the modern battlefield.

Chapter 6895 Red Collective Offers

Ves wanted to hear more details on what kind of forces the Phase Lord Department and the Enforcement Department were willing to contribute to the Bluejay Fleet.

Since both of them competed against each other, their offers should not be too bad, or else they would lose too easily to their rivals.

"Let's start with the offer of the Phase Lord Department. What can I expect?"

Eliza activated a projection that displayed a familiar troop of human phase lords clad in light blue and purple coated raiments.

"You should already be familiar with the Ur-Titan Phalanx. This is the first organized unit of human phase lords and serves as the model of all subsequent phalanxes. The Ur-Titans have come to develop a more defense-oriented approach towards combat. This is partially because they are assigned to guard duties more often than not, but it is also because they are equipped with heavier and more cumbersome raiments."

"Sounds expensive."

"It is." Eliza replied while switching the projection to display a different unit of human phase lords. "The Phase Lord Department has instead offered to send 12 soldiers of its

more recent Flesh Chopper Phalanx. Different from the Ur-Titans, the Flesh Choppers are armed with lighter raiments and large battleaxes."

"So what are they good at?" Ves asked even though he could already make a good guess.

"The Flesh Choppers are considerably more suited for offensive operations and have focused most of their training in this aspect. They can fight as a standalone unit or in a combined arms force. They can even be used in ambushes as they can hide their folded bodies inside a stealth shuttle until it is time for them to go into action. Doing this will deprive them of much of their equipment, though. Their raiments and weapons cannot change in size, so if the Flesh Choppers are used in stealth assaults, they will have to fight without their best gear at their disposal."

That sounded interesting. Even without any hard weapons and armor, Ves could easily foresee this being useful in many different situations!

As long as a stealth shuttle managed to get close enough to an unsuspecting alien fleet or stronghold, 12 human phase lords could appear by surprise and unleash devastation by relying on their scale and their spatial abilities alone!

Even in direct combat, 12 human phase lords that were trained to fight as a single unit could make themselves very useful in a variety of situations.

While their phase lord cultivation was relatively low, their gear along with their teamwork should enable them to hold out pretty well against multiple lesser as well as greater phase lords!

This was especially the case when Ves saw that their gear was relatively special.

"Is their gear superdimensional?" He questioned.

"Sharp observation. You are correct, but it is not what you think. Unlike the better-equipped Ur-Titan Phalanx, the Flesh Chopper Phalanx are only entitled to receive hull-grade low-concentration superdimensional equipment. The superdimensional alloys are 'watered down' compared to the high-quality ones used in your latest ace mech. While their defensive performance is inferior, they still offer considerably superior protection compared to transphasic equipment."

That made sense. It was more economical to lower the proportion of superdimensional matter in alloys. Such measures were very necessary so long as the supply of these essential materials remained limited.

While Ves was a little disappointed by the lower-quality gear, they should still offer plenty of protection and attack power against most enemies.

They should even hold a considerable advantage against many phase lords as superdimensional gear performed extremely well against their kind.

The only enemies the Flesh Choppers needed to worry about were alien phase leaders equipped with Saint Piercer arms.

It was much more suitable to dispatch the First Sword Mark III against any phase lords that wielded such weapons. There was no good reason to put the Flesh Choppers at risk. They could do a lot more damage if they attacked other hostile units instead.

"Is there anything else I need to know about the Flesh Choppers?" Ves inquired.

"They will arrive with their own starship that is especially designed to carry their superdimensional raiments and battleaxes. We have yet to develop the methods to produce gear that can dynamically change in size according to the proportions of their users."

Ves frowned when he heard that. Resizable artifacts were a big deal. He knew that the ancient cultivation community had developed this method.

His Oceancaller was a prime example of an artifact that could remain as small as a handheld flute to an enormous rod that a phase lord could wield like a staff weapon!

It was difficult to reverse engineer such a complex operation. Ves did not think that red humanity possessed the capabilities to reproduce resizable gear in the next decade.

That meant that whenever the Flesh Choppers wanted to fight, they needed to unfold their true bodies and painstakingly equip themselves with their phase lord-sized gear.

If their cultivation improved in the future, then they wouldn't be able to take advantage of their gains as their non-resizable gear could only accommodate a user of the same size as before!

This was one of the reasons why Ves wanted to develop a Polymetal mech as his 'raiment'.

A suit of armor that was made out of living nanomachines had no obligation to maintain the same sizes. It could dynamically encompass bodies of different sizes.

The only issue was that if Ves shrunk down, he would end up getting stuck with a lot of excess nanomachines.

Ves could either store the excess smart metal into the Vault of Eternity, or he could use superdimensional matter to create a dimensional pocket where he could store all of the stuff he did not need at the moment.

Neither solution sounded ideal to him, but in the absence of anything better, he could stomach the idea of forming his own pocket space.

He just needed to learn how to do that first.

His expression grew intrigued as he stared at the projected soldiers of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx.

Now that he thought about it, Ves had never properly taken the time to develop his combat prowess as a phase lord. This was a huge wasted opportunity and one that he may have to remedy sooner rather than later.

If he accepted the offer from the Phase Lord Department, then he would be able to get into contact with highly trained human phase lords.

It shouldn't be too difficult to get to know them and beg them to teach him a few appropriate skills.

Aside from that, Ves could even fight alongside them if necessary. It was much more reassuring for Ves to fight as a phase lord when there were up to 12 additional Flesh Choppers by his side!

"The offer from the Phase Lord Department certainly sounds compelling." Ves said. "What does the Enforcement Department offer in comparison? I can't imagine that they can dispatch qi cultivators that can match the sheer amount of might of 12 human phase lords."

Eliza Mo Ragadan nodded. "That is true. The Enforcement Department is working closely with the Cultivation Method Department and other groups in order to present a serious counterweight to the Ur-Titan Phalanx and the Flesh Chopper Phalanx, but it will take much more time and resources to fulfill this goal. This is why the offer from the Enforcement Department does not compromise frontline combatants at all. Instead, it has formed a sizable gathering of qi cultivators that specialize in multiple forms of support and utility."

The chief of staff's projection waved her arms, generating new projections that showed these qi cultivators in action.

Ves immediately recognized the familiar display of formation masters. These erudite robed figures predominantly consisted of math professors, theoretical physicists and other intellectuals that were good at abstract thinking.

After the start of the Age of Dawn, their existing intellectual attainments made them a natural fit for Formation Master Series of premium curated qi cultivation methods.

While the Larkinson Clan already had Commander Melkor Larkinson, he had chosen the path of a combat spell array master. With the help of his modified Fey Fianna, he was able to make use of specially designed formation anchor fey to quickly deploy spell arrays on the battlefield.

It was not suitable for formation masters to risk themselves in battle even if they had also formed Blood Pacts with Carmine mechs.

They were much more useful if they acted more like mech designers. They worked best if they remained in a protected location and continually devised new and more advanced battle formations and spell arrays.

The Larkinson Clan could always train more combat spell array masters to deploy the new qi formations in the field. The costs were considerable, but it was better than risking precious formation masters when it wasn't necessary.

Ves fully recognized the value of a group of formation masters. It would be difficult for the Larkinson Clan to raise them as the requirements to get started in a proper formation master qi cultivation method were too high.

Perhaps Aurelia and Marvaine possessed the qualifications to become formation masters, but Ves could scarcely think of anyone else that could succeed.

Ves also suspected that Gloriana and Alexa's companion spirits may be able to become formation masters if they applied themselves in this direction.

He did not think the two women were willing to do so, however. Alexandria and Maia both possessed very different inclinations.

"How many formation masters are included in this package?" Ves asked.

"Only 6, but do not underestimate them, sir. They are not the best of what the Red Collective have to offer, but they have all produced their own results. None of them are failures. What is important is that they possess humility and obedience to follow your directives. You only need to instruct them to develop battle formations or spell arrays that can produce a specific effect, and they will conduct their research as long as your requests are realistic enough."

Ves tried to think how useful this could be. "Does that mean I can 'order' spell arrays that can weaken transphasic energy shields, inhibit warp travel, interfere with sensor systems, divert the trajectory of ranged attacks or even dispel the hostility of enemy soldiers?"

Eliza smiled. "From my understanding of this field, qi formations can do all of this and more. Our formation masters have already developed a number of spell arrays that can produce the effects that you have described. Whether they are practical enough on a large-scale battlefield is not guaranteed, but the formation masters can continue to work on scaling them up until they satisfy your demands. In short, our formation

masters can significantly expand the versatility and fault tolerance of your armed forces."

This was an almost irresistible offer.

Sure, the Flesh Choppers still sounded attractive to him, but if he wanted to get his hands on more combat power, he could field a greater quantity of first-class mechs or recall one of the Larkinson ace pilots on tour.

It was much harder to obtain the capability to employ mysterious effects on a wider scale. The sheer amount of utility that qi formations could produce when deployed correctly could make a much greater difference to the Larkinson Clan!

"What else is the Enforcement Department offering?"

"Aside from formation masters, it is offering to send over small teams of qi cultivators that specialize in infiltration, interrogation, divination, gardening, mental recovery and more. Your clan will gain access to a wide variety of services that are otherwise difficult to obtain. It takes special training and exclusive knowledge to train so many productive qi cultivators. Each of the individuals that the Enforcement Department is willing to assign to your fleet are already effective enough in their chosen craft. While they still have a large amount of room for improvement, none of them require training in order to make themselves useful."

"That sounds really useful. I can make use of all of their services right away."

Chapter 6896 Priestly Order

The offer from the Enforcement Department intrigued Ves a lot.

Compared to the powerful soldiers offered by the Phase Lord Department, the Enforcement Department mainly offered support personnel.

Compared to human phase lords, support cultivators such as formation masters and gardeners did not sound as powerful.

Yet their work could have an amazing effect on the Premier Fleet.

They worked as force multipliers. They added value by amplifying the strengths of existing soldiers.

The question now was whether the force multipliers provided by the Enforcement Department were strong enough to exceed the benefits of having 12 human phase lords on the battlefield.

Ves was not entirely certain about it yet. He needed to know more about the eclectic mix of cultivators the Enforcement Department had managed to include in its proposal.

He gazed closely at Eliza Mo Ragadan. She had done an excellent job at maintaining her impartiality. She had not shown any obvious bias towards either of the two offers.

The two might not have spent much time in the same location, but they had spoken enough times over the comm that they had developed a tacit understanding with each other.

Her primary loyalty was in the Red Collective. She was a consummate careerist who had always made it clear that she served the Office of the Chief Councilor of the Upper Council rather than Ves Larkinson directly.

This was an important distinction. While Eliza would take reasonable measures to uphold his interests within the halls of the Astral Octagon, she possessed clear bottom lines that should never be crossed.

This made it hard for Ves to fully trust Eliza or pull her into his inner circle.

On the other hand, Ves also trusted her to faithfully fulfill her duties so long as they maintained a cordial relationship. There was no need for him to worry about whether she had any ulterior motives.

"What are the most notable groups of cultivators in the package offered by the Enforcement Department?" Ves asked his chief of staff. "Describe whatever cultivators you think deserve additional clarification so that I can make an informed choice."

"Hm. Aside from the formation masters that I have already introduced, there are three other groups of cultivators that deserve special attention. This is especially the case if you have chosen to accept the Enforcement Department's offer."

Eliza activated a new projection that showed a cathedral of sorts.

Hundreds of figures wearing a variety of robes stood in the center hall. Each of them wore very different outfits that each bore different symbols, cuts and colors.

Yet despite their differences, they were all men and women of faith. It did not matter what sort of gods they worshiped or doctrines they abided by in their respective religious organizations.

So long as they dedicated their lives to a greater existence, they were all individuals who promoted the spread of faith across human civilization.

Ves' eyes grew sharp. "This is the Priestly Order, right? I read a memo about its founding. The Coalition of Faiths pushed hard for its existence. A bunch of priests from many different religious organizations sought to create a formal organization that systematically trains and supervises priests who have engaged in contract cultivation with their respective gods. The supporters even managed to persuade the Red Collective to set up the Faith Department to organize all of this stuff."

"You are right. What you are seeing is one of the earlier gatherings of the Priestly Order. It has taken months for this organization to publish its first documentation. The texts describe the need to regulate the training and activities of cultivators that hold some form of religious office."

"I take it that the Priestly Order's take on cultivation has produced individuals that have gained special capabilities that are relevant to this discussion."

Eliza nodded. "The priests that have become a part of this order are starting to become known for their ability to apply blessings to people. They are constantly developing new methods on how to channel the power of a higher source in the form of beneficial effects."

"How effective are these so-called blessings?" Ves skeptically asked.

"The differences are not that obvious for the time being. The magnitude of effects are largely dependent on the blessing techniques, the strength of cultivation of a priest, the compatibility of the recipients and the strength of the deity being called upon. Under the most optimistic circumstances, our examinations have shown that the priests have been able to amplify the strength of general cultivator soldiers by 9 percent and human phase lords by 3 percent."

"..."

Ves did not look impressed.

That did not mean he dismissed this development. A boost of 9 percent for infantry soldiers and 3 percent for human phase lords might sound negligible, but it could mean the difference between life and death during crucial moments!

It took a disproportionate amount of time or funding to increase the performance of a group of soldiers by the same margins.

If all it took to gain these advantages was to allow a priest to swing an incense burner while murmuring strange words, then Ves had no problem with making use of this new force multiplier!

He just had to make sure that the recipients had the option to accept the blessing or opt out from it. Perhaps their own personal beliefs or philosophy prohibited them from receiving blessings from specific faiths.

"As I have mentioned earlier, the priests have only scratched the surface of what they can do with blessings." Eliza Mo Ragadan continued to explain. "The Priestly Order has become the foremost institution that seeks to innovate in this religious field. Its existence benefits every religious organization as it collectivizes research and development in this shared field."

That was a clever decision on the part of the Coalition of Faiths.

Ves should have been more aware of this, but he had neglected his duties as the hierarch of an organization that he had founded.

To be honest, he had shoved most of his responsibilities to his deputies within the Coalition of Faiths.

He had already formed a plan to resign from his post as hierarch and make room for a more dedicated leader. It would formalize the actual situation.

The reason why Ves no longer valued the Office of Hierarch was because he no longer needed it anymore.

He had already reached a level of power and influence that no longer made him so dependent on allies and business partners.

The ongoing developments of the Red War gradually put less emphasis on alliances and more emphasis on self-sufficiency.

Besides, it got extremely tiring for Ves to keep up with all of the politicking. He felt it was beneath him to schmooze with the representatives of different faiths. Most of them were too inconsequential to be of any use to a leader of his station.

His increasing disconnect from the Coalition of Faiths evidently caused him to overlook this emerging development.

The priest profession held a lot of promise.

The initial blessings showered by the initial batch of cultivator priests may be weak, but as long as they strengthened their methods and cultivation strength, their effects may strengthen over time.

"As far as I am aware of, every priest is able to call down a weak blessing with minimal preparations and requirements." Eliza answered. "However, a proper blessing ritual can produce more noticeable effects. This is where the priest invests his time and resources into preparing one. A good blessing ritual not only takes a notable amount of time to perform, but it will also consume expensive materials or objects that are valued by certain deities. Priests and other researchers are constantly working to

discover new blessing rituals while improving the existing ones. Their effects can vary depending on the rituals being used. Some can fortify the bodies of the blessed. Others can guide their attacks so that they can become more accurate."

Once these blessings were able to amplify the performance of a mech or human phase lord by 20 percent or higher, the priests would definitely hold a position of great respect in society!

Perhaps people may value them higher than mech designers or even mech pilots!

After all, whom among them would refuse a 20 percent performance boost that practically came for free?

"Tell me more about these blessings." Ves said. "Do these priests have to pay anything in order to make it work? Are the effects all the same, or are they different depending on multiple factors?"

"As far as I am aware of, every priest is able to call down a weak blessing with minimal preparations and requirements." Eliza answered. "However, a proper blessing ritual can produce more noticeable effects. This is where the priest invests his time and resources into preparing one. A good blessing ritual not only takes a notable amount of time to perform, but it will also consume expensive materials or objects that are valued by certain deities. Priests and other researchers are constantly working to discover new blessing rituals while improving the existing ones. Their effects can vary depending on the rituals being used. Some can fortify the bodies of the blessed. Others can guide their attacks so that they can become more accurate."

It did not sound as if the priests would be able to achieve any breakthroughs anytime soon. They were all pioneers to a field that red humanity scarcely explored.

However, the priests were currently in a position of weakness at this time. If Ves received a batch of them at this time, they should be more open to cooperation. It should also be easy for him to assert his authority over the relatively weak cultivators.

"Okay." He ultimately said. "These priests sound interesting. Perhaps they may not be particularly useful in the short term, but they should definitely come into their power in the mid to late term."

That was one of the big flaws to accepting them. The Larkinson Clan and the rest of red humanity needed instant benefits in order to hold back the invading aliens.

There was little point in planning to earn a big payout several years or decades from now if human civilization in the Red Ocean had already perished!

This was why Ves did not immediately commit to the offer extended by the Enforcement Department.

"Aside from priests, are there other notable cultivators that can be of use to my clan in the coming days?"

Eliza changed the projection to show a group of mysterious-looking figures clad in dark and ominous robes.

"Curse masters have shown tentative promise. As their names suggest, these are qi cultivators that have chosen to specialize in the art of casting debilitating curses onto other individuals. This is currently a highly regulated profession due to its sheer propensity for abuse. The curse masters that have been brought up by the Enforcement Department are constantly monitored to ensure that they do not make use of their accumulated knowledge to conduct any untowards rituals that target the wrong individuals."

These curse masters did not give off a homely vibe. The ones in the projected image looked as if they had already stained their souls.

It reminded Ves of the demons that he had worked with during his Demonforging attempts.

The difference was that curse masters still retained their humanity, while demons had completely degenerated into negativity.

That said, the curse masters exuded such an ominous vibe that no normal individual would like to stay in their presence.

"How do their curses work?"

"The curse masters can set up a ritual that is designed to impart a curse onto a targeted individual." Eliza explained. "The more expensive and elaborate the curse ritual, the better the results. This ritual can impart a harmful affliction to the target depending on the steps being followed and the ingredients being used. Distance is not a great hindrance."

"Is everyone susceptible to curses?" Ves asked in concern.

"Curses can be dispelled once they are identified, but it may be difficult to completely cut them off after they have reached an important threshold. Those with greater attainments in cultivation are able to detect and resist them to a greater degree. Most rituals related to curses tend to be more effective if they include samples of the target's organic body or a prized possession. It is still recommended that individuals contact the right experts from the Red Collective if they are affected. High-ranking mech pilots have proven completely immune to all of the curses that are known to us. Stronger ones may be developed in the future, but we do not think they can overcome the stubborn defenses of expert pilots or ace pilots."

This told Ves that the development of curses still remained at an early stage.

Chapter 6897 Ves the Influencer

There was a lot of depth in curses.

Ves should know. He swallowed a few enlightenment fruits that taught him about the subject.

Although his actual ability to cast a curse remained shallow, he still gained enough of a foundation to roughly understand the curse master profession.

He even used his own understanding to form an exclusive qi cultivation method that enabled the Larkinson Clan to raise its own curse masters.

Still, his own efforts paled in comparison to that of the Red Collective!

The collies had taken greater risks by actively contaminating the spiritualities of their curse masters with negative energies!

Ves could not believe the RC valued curse masters so much that they resorted to this extreme measure.

Such rituals permanently changed the lives of prospective curse masters. Their closer affinities to specific negative concepts should enable them to cast much more powerful curses than normal.

Was the tradeoff worth it? Ves did not know.

"Our curse masters have already discovered that they can strengthen their results if they are able to sacrifice a sample of organic tissue taken from the target." Eliza continued to explain. "The curse masters theorize that with a solid piece of organic sample, they may be able to cast a curse that is strong enough to debilitate phase leaders."

Ves' eyes lit up. "It would be great if this is the case! While the requirements are difficult to meet, the results will definitely be worth it if we are met by particularly powerful or tricky enemies. When combined with our superdimensional ace mech, our ability to decapitate the most powerful enemy leaders can become even stronger."

That said, it was not strictly necessary for the Larkinson Clan to accommodate the foreign curse masters.

Not only did the Larkinson Clan possess the capacity to train watered-down versions of their own curse masters, but they already had several means of their own to take down enemy leaders.

Still, taking along the curse masters of the Red Collective would help Ves get in touch with a much greater and more complete heritage on this profession.

He and his clan would be able to learn more about curse masters and how to get better at casting curses.

More importantly, the Larkinsons would also learn how to defend against curses cast by third parties, which was arguably even more important.

Ves knew that since the capacity to cast curses existed, there were bound to be groups that would abuse their power for their own selfish purposes. It was practically an inevitability.

Instead of burying his head in the sand, it was better to be proactive and learn everything he could about curses so that he could formulate proper defenses.

After Ves became satisfied with what he learned about the batch of curse masters offered by the Enforcement Department, Ves wondered if the collies had developed other interesting cultivator professions.

"Are there any other groups that I should take note of?" He asked.

"No more, I believe." His chief of staff replied. "The remainder are less developed and speak for themselves. You should have enough of an understanding of what you can obtain if you choose the Enforcement Department's offer. Have you learned enough information to proceed with your selection, or would you like to ask more questions?"

"I want to address one more issue, Eliza. I find it rather strange and suspicious that you collies present two competing offers to me. There is more to this internal rivalry between the different departments. Tell me the significance of my upcoming choice. What am I getting into? I have a strong feeling that my selection will generate ripple effects within the Red Collective."

The physical projection of Eliza studied Ves carefully before nodding in approval.

"Your political instincts are accurate. There is a greater dispute surrounding the decision of where the Red Collective should allocate its limited research capacity and resources. The Phase Lord Department is arguing that it deserves greater investment because it has already developed a mature if expensive pipeline to convert ordinary humans into powerful phase lords. The strength of an individual human phase lord is not particularly strong, but if deployed in a squad and bestowed with excellent equipment, our phase lords can pose a credible threat against many native gods. This is a good way to address the shortfall in ace pilots."

The proponents of human phase lords had good reasons to be confident. While Ves had not been paying much attention to the initial deployments of the Ur-Titan Phalanx, he had heard that the human phase lords were able to defeat a superior team of alien phase lords.

Just as expected, human phase lords that used to be elite infantry soldiers were able to rely on impeccable teamwork and mech-derived weapons and equipment to gain an advantage over their individualistic alien counterparts.

If Ves agreed to host a squad of Flesh Choppers, then he would have his own troupe of human phase lords at his disposal.

The increase in hard power sounded reassuring. The Flesh Choppers would not only be able to help with countering alien champions, but also help with wiping out enemy warships and fortifications, both of which fell in line with the Premier Fleet's objectives for the upcoming campaign.

However, Ves also had to consider the merits of the alternative offer.

"The Enforcement Department does not just represent its own interests, but also the interests of multiple other departments within the Red Collective." Eliza revealed.

"This coalition of departments have balked at the excessive requests made by the Phase Lord Department. Their goal is to steer the RC away from making an overcommitment on human phase lords. They prefer a more balanced development where human cultivators seek to master as many different paths as possible."

Ves narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "I can see how this dispute can affect a lot of people's projects, but I don't think that my choice alone affects the entire direction of the Red Collective. This is a political matter that should be debated upon in the Lower Council."

"Different factions are already preparing to hold this debate, sir. What they need is proof that their stance is superior to the alternatives. Everyone is paying close attention to your decision for this reason. If you accept the offer made by the Phase Lord Department, then the supporters of human phase lords will interpret this as your endorsement of their position."

Ves grew upset. "That is not my intention."

"I know that, but others may not necessarily believe that. Regardless of what you decide, you will make new friends and enemies. This is an inevitable outcome. Due to multiple reasons, you have risen to become one of the leading figures of red humanity

in the Age of Dawn. You have engaged in cultivation long before the founding of the Red Collective. You have proven to be a keen opportunist. For better or worse, you are seen as a role model to the members of the Red Collective. There are many people who are trying to imitate you in order to replicate just a fraction of your success. Each of your actions generates a significant amount of influence onto our wider society."

"Are you saying that I have become an influencer?!"

Eliza responded with a mirthful smile. "At least you are not one of those spoiled brats who are famous because they are famous. You are the best kind of influencer. By that I mean the kind that has proven to be a net positive to society. There is no reason for you to equate yourself with the 'celebrities' whose degeneracies have turned them into parasites who have not done anything productive in the sum total of their lives."

Ves dismissively waved his arm. "Enough meaningless flattery. Let's get back on topic. While I can understand what you are saying about how many people are paying attention to my decision, this is just one data point among many. What makes my choice so much more significant than that of others?"

"Your choice holds greater weight because we expect you to make excellent use of the capabilities of the cultivator soldiers and experts that we put at your disposal." His chief of staff replied. "Everyone has high expectations for your Premier Fleet. Despite its modest size and other shortcomings, you and your Larkinsons have a proven track record of defeating the strong with the weak. We believe that you will be able to help our cultivators unlock their hidden potential and give them a grand stage to demonstrate their capabilities in and out of battle."

In other words, Ves could provide the proponents of his choice with additional proof by winning fights with the help of the RC contingent.

No matter whether he chose to accept human phase lords or a more eclectic mix of qi cultivators, he was confident that he could whip them into shape and make them useful to his Premier Fleet.

So long as he did not suffer an embarrassing defeat, Ves' choices and actions would have a significant influence in the development trajectory of the Red Collective.

He knew enough about the RC that its finances and resources still fell far behind the RA and the RF. There was no way for the collies to catch up with the mechers and the fleeters in a short amount of time.

This meant that the RC carefully needed to manage its budget. It could not afford to engage in too much waste.

In the quest to engage in the most productive activities, the RC needed to decide whether it is better to go all-in on human phase lords or seek a more balanced development.

From Ves' perspective, the former was an excellent short-term choice, but the lack of investment into more diverse cultivation fields would cause the RC to fall behind in those areas.

The latter provided fewer benefits in the short term, thereby making it harder to win battles during this crucial stage of the Red War. Yet the benefits in the long term were much greater and more promising due to the sheer versatility and utility of all of those cultivator professions.

Ves frowned in thought.

He found it difficult to make up his mind.

The most logical choice to make was to accept the offer of the Phase Lord Department. It was much easier to make good use of the human phase lords. They were already qualified combatants and did not need a lot of time to integrate into his existing forces.

Having these powerful phase lords at his disposal massively increased the fault tolerance of his Premier Fleet and raised the threshold to defeating it. Even fewer enemy forces would think to challenge the Larkinsons!

This was especially the case if Saint Commander Casella Larkinson was able to Commandeer of Enfeoff the 12 human phase lords!

Ves could not imagine how much more powerful they could become if they wielded the power of true resonance!

Yet... as attractive as this sounded, was it truly essential for him to receive more muscle?

When Ves thought about the formation masters, priests and curse masters offered by the Enforcement Department, he could think of many ways that these experts could benefit his Premier Fleet.

While their knowledge and cultivation strength were still too shallow for them to display much power, this was an acceptable shortcoming.

Rather than strengthen the hard power of his Premier Fleet, Ves saw greater value in expanding its versatility and soft power.

The Premier Fleet lacked the support structure of a large state or superorganization. It relied too heavily on external sources for intelligence, technology, repairs and resupply.

While the cultivators aligned with the Enforcement Department could not address all of these shortcomings, they could still provide a lot of help in their own ways.

From being able to divine the locations of key leaders and supply depots to multiplying the combat effectiveness of his mech forces by 10 to 20 percent with a powerful blessing, Ves believed his clan would ultimately benefit more if it tapped into the greater potential qi cultivation!

Perhaps his personal bias may be getting in the way, but Ves did not have a good opinion towards phase lord cultivation.

Body cultivation was expensive and was lacking in depth. It relied on enormous accumulation of phasewater as well as the implantation of rare and difficult phasewater organs to bestow greater power to its practitioners.

If red humanity continued to lose territory, then its supply of phasewater would continue to decrease.

Ves did not think it was a good idea to bet heavily on proliferation of human phase lords when there was a good chance that phasewater was about to become a lot more scarce in the future.

Even if the war turned around, the argument still remained valid. It was simply too expensive to raise an army of human phase lords.

At least regular qi cultivators maintained their human proportions. It was much cheaper to outfit them with quality gear and feed them with modest doses of elixirs.

"I have made my choice. Please convey my gratitude to the Phase Lord Department for their thoughtfulness, but I have decided to accept the offer made by the Enforcement Department."

Eliza nodded with a serious expression. "If that is what you have decided, then I shall make the arrangements."

Chapter 6898 One Trick Ponies

Ves was sure that his decision had massive implications for the Red Collective.

Eliza Mo Ragadan had explained it clearly to him. The RC was running short on funding and resources. This inevitably exacerbates the disputes within its halls.

Though Ves did not think it was necessarily a bad idea to invest into the proliferation of human phase lords, it was too one-dimensional in his opinion.

The cost effectiveness of raising human phase lords was questionable. Unlike Ves, other humans needed to absorb a huge amount of phasewater just to transform their bodies.

In a climate where humans continually lost ground to the native aliens, how could the RC possibly justify the decision to invest in a resource-heavy means of body cultivation?

Even if the immediate combat effectiveness of a human phase lord was undeniable, it was impossible for red humanity to field thousands of them at a time.

There simply wasn't enough phasewater to cover for this expansion!

While Ves was aware that red humanity was able to earn huge windfalls of phasewater by defeating enemy phase leaders and salvaging their carcasses, this was not a stable source.

Plundering the battlefield only worked as long as humans won the battle and retained control over the star system.

In many cases, human forces suffered so much losses that they had little choice but to retreat.

This not only prevented them from salvaging the battlefield, but also surrendered all of the wreckage and phase lord carcasses to the aliens!

Therefore, relying on plunder to supplement resource shortages was not a reliable solution.

As Ves eventually sought out Casella Ingvar and reported his decision to her, the Saint Commander fell silent for a moment.

"Did you think I made the right call?" Ves asked.

"There is no right or wrong decision, sir. Both offers sound valid in my ears. They mostly present different possibilities. If you accepted Flesh Choppers, then I could have worked with them. With their low-concentration superdimensional gear, they should be able to make quick work of lesser phase lords. This is a nearly foolproof strategy against most adversaries. The Flesh Choppers can hold back the secondary threats, thereby giving Saint Dise all of the opportunities she needs to defeat the primary threat. Simple does not necessarily equate to ineffective."

Ves nodded in agreement. "You are right, though I am not accustomed to thinking that way."

"In fact, it is not necessary to deploy all 12 Flesh Choppers to the front. It is wiser to dispatch half of them at most, leaving the other half behind in reserve. The latter can guard our fleet and possibly use their raiments and their spatial barriers to block sneak attacks targeting our vulnerable starships. This is a much better way to employ the Flesh Choppers. It is more important to protect our fleet than to defeat our enemies."

It was difficult to estimate the combat power of a human phase lord equipped with low-concentration superdimensional gear. Ves did not have any solid references to base his estimates.

For now, he loosely predicted that a single human phase lord should be stronger than a high-tier expert mech but weaker than a junior ace mech.

They were much more suited to fight against alien phase lords than human ace mechs.

This meant that their strength was very much welcome in a campaign aimed against the native aliens.

Fighting the enemy without a squad of Flesh Choppers put the Premier Fleet at risk.

The only ace mech that would remain behind was the Minerva Mark II, which was not that powerful in individual combat.

The First Sword Mark III was wasted on defense. She was much more at home when going on the attack, which meant that the superdimensional ace mech had to fight far away from the Premier Fleet.

This introduced a very obvious vulnerability. Clever and prepared enemies might seek to lure Saint Dise away and ambush the starships of the Premier Fleet!

If Ves had chosen to accept the offer of the Phase Lord Department, then he basically did not have to worry about this potential danger. A squad of 12 Flesh Choppers was overkill in many situations, so it was no big deal to put them on guard duty.

Even if the Flesh Choppers were not particularly effective at defeating particularly powerful or devious phase leaders, they could at least delay the sneak attackers long enough to recall the First Sword Mark III!

Ves felt a little sorry for passing over all of that extra security.

"It is okay." The Saint Commander said as she noticed his turbulent feelings. "Our strategic plan originally did not account for contributions from the Red Collective. As far as I am concerned, the collies did not deprive us of additional protection. We just never received it in the first place. We can still complete our objectives without the Flesh Choppers at our disposal. I happen to agree with you that leveraging the mixed group of qi cultivators will eventually make us stronger than if we maintained our dependence on these human phase lords."

Ves picked up a sense of dislike in her tone.

"You don't approve of turning humans into phase lords?"

"No." Casella crossed her arms. "Humankind has often managed to vanquish their alien adversaries by stealing the strengths of the latter. However, this only works if the stolen solutions are a good fit for our race. I do not agree with the premise that making our own phase lords will increase our chances of winning the Red War. Unlike the native aliens, we are short on phasewater and lack a comprehensive heritage in this form of cultivation. It is also intrinsically designed for aliens, and is only truly compatible with the phase whale race. All phase lords are inferior copies in my opinion."

She identified many of the same problems as Ves. They both agreed that it was not appropriate to squander so much phasewater to nurture a handful of human phase lords.

"What do you think about the formation masters, curse masters and so on? As useful as they sound, none of these cultivators are able to stand up to the enemy like the Flesh Choppers."

Casella smiled. "That is completely fine as far as I am concerned. We are humans. We have established our own approach towards combat. Mechs and warships are all we need for direct combat platforms. You have correctly identified that we are deficient in support and logistical functions. This is where the mixed group of qi cultivators can mitigate our shortcomings."

"Do you already have an idea on how to make use of them? Their abilities are diverse, but they are still fairly weak and lacking in experience at this time."

"I have already taken that into account. We simply have to instruct them to specialize in a single application of their power above all else. The 'diviners' must be able to foresee possible ambushes that can lead to incurring a large amount of casualties. The curse masters should master curses that can weaken powerful phase leaders with keystone abilities that have a disproportionate impact on the battlefield. The formation masters should solely specialize in developing illusory spell arrays that can generate enough concealment to confuse enemy pursuers and buy enough space for us to retreat from a battlefield."

Those actually sound like solid ideas. Ves was glad that The Saint Commander already had a solid plan in mind for the RC contingent.

While the qi cultivators had many options at their disposal, it was clearly a mistake to urge them to pursue a broad skillset right away.

That might make them a lot more versatile in the medium and long term, but it would clearly not help the Premier Fleet all that much in the short term!

Therefore, the priority for the Larkinson Clan was to encourage the incoming qi cultivators to become 'one trick ponies'.

What was wrong with only mastering a single trick?

As long as a fireball became strong enough to hit like a meteor, then that was the only trick a wizard needed to attain victory!

The key was to decide what tricks the different qi cultivators should master first so that they could provide immediate value to the Larkinson Clan.

"I have a question, Ves."

"Ask away."

"Did the collies tell you who is responsible for covering the expenses of our latest guests?"

"The Red Collective will cover their normal expenses more or less." Ves responded as he recalled the contract he recently signed. "If the troops suffer losses or require supplies that are above the normal level, then our clan is obliged to pay for the additional spending."

"Hm. It is as I expected." Casella looked intrigued.

"What did you figure out?"

The Saint Commander smiled at Ves. "The Red Collective has extended a similar implicit offer to us as the Red Association and the Red Fleet. The collies are essentially daring us to take over the qi cultivators that they are placing under our care. Giving us room to cover for their extra spending is an obvious hint that we are permitted to train them as we see fit. We can deviate from the RC's policies and principles and impart our own outlook and methods to the guest cultivators. Their initial assignments will probably last years, and they can easily be extended to indefinite periods of time. Over the passage of time, the loaned qi cultivators will eventually become de facto members of our clan. The more they receive our training and investment, the deeper their attachment to us. It may not even take that long to convert them to our cause."

He could see that. If Ves or Casella managed to charm them and offer them lots of support that they could not obtain within the Red Collective, then it should be easy to capture their hearts.

Ves placed a lot of importance in this because many of the qi cultivators sent by the Enforcement Department belonged to elite professions.

It was much more difficult for private organizations to raise their own formation masters or curse masters. Only the Red Collective which had become the holy land of systematic cultivation could churn them out in slightly greater numbers.

The thought of it caused Ves to feel unwilling.

"We need to develop our own cultivation professions." He decided. "We can't surrender all of the initiative to the Red Collective. If we have our own specializations, then we always have a foundation to return to if we ever lose the RC's favor."

"Wise choice." Casella nodded in approval. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Not yet." He said. "I already have a few tentative directions in mind. I think it would be helpful to involve companion spirits. This is one of our intrinsic advantages. Having a companion spirit opens up a lot of new options. I think we can make use of that to devise paired professions that rely on two separate cultivation methods to produce a powerful combination that is greater than the sum of its parts."

Ves did not have any inspiration at the moment, so he intended to take his time on this. There was no need to hurry with this initiative. He would come up with a good idea sooner or later.

For now, it was better to familiarize himself with the strengths and weaknesses of all of the professions that he would soon be working with. Only by understanding what the Red Collective was good at would he be able to identify a gap that the Larkinson Clan could fill.

"Do not forget about our design spirits, sir. We can tie in their strengths as well, though it comes at the risk of making us more dependent on their existence and goodwill."

"I think the priests have already covered that aspect."

Of all of the professionals sent by the Red Collective, Ves felt the least comfortable about the priests.

While he could appreciate their ability to call down blessings onto friendlies, he was not as enthused about their devotion to different 'gods'.

Ves was not afraid of what would happen if the priests turned out to be charlatans.

He was afraid of the influence the priests might gain over the rank and file if it turned out that their prayers were actually effective!

Chapter 6899 Superdimensional Archetech

"The Riot Mark III Project is progressing slower than we prefer. We apologize for that, Rosa. New technological possibilities have presented us with unforeseen complications."

Gloriana's design lab possessed a different ambiance.

Ves liked to make his own design lab feel like home. It was the place where he spent most of his time. As an important source of productivity, he liked to decorate it with pictures of his family and snapshots of his living mechs in their most glorious moments on the battlefield.

He also decorated his desks and work tables with mech figurines that he casually made when he needed to think or yearned for a distraction. Many of them turned out to be masterworks due to his craftsmanship and the love he placed in their construction.

He also was not that strict when it came to cleaning up after his messes. He liked to conduct multiple small research projects at once and often let his machines run concurrently.

Anyone who took a look at his lab instruments would know that he had lately spent a lot of time on researching superdimensional matter. Multiple different samples of different grades were strewn about. Ves had cut many different pieces from the original bars and subsequently beat them up, placed them into freezers, attempted to melt them in a furnace and subjected them to high concentrations of gamma radiation.

Ves was sure he violated a few lab safety rules when conducting his experiments, but he did not really care. So long as his expensive machines did not blow up or threaten the safety of anyone that visited his lab, he occasionally chose to make use of shortcuts.

His time was precious. It was not in his style to follow redundant rules that were solely designed to prevent idiots from making beginner's mistakes.

Although even experienced mech designers like Ves could make mistakes from time to time, he accepted the risks of messing up. He could fully bear any accidents if they happened.

Overall, Ves believed that he succeeded in making his workplace reflect his personality. His design lab conveyed an informal atmosphere that made it easier for people to let down their guard and speak their true thoughts.

His wife liked to do things differently. She was much more sensitive about how she was perceived. As the director of the Design Department, her design lab turned into a vessel in which she imposed her authority over her subordinates.

Her workplace remained mostly clean and devoid of too many personal touches. Everything looked professional. The instruments were all perfectly placed and Gloriana tolerated absolutely no form of clutter.

She was a stickler for rules and insisted on following the safety regulations that she learned back when she was studying at Kelma University in the Hexadric Hegemony.

Gloriana also showed off her Hexer heritage in not-so-subtle subtle ways. From 6-sided tables to installing a shrine of the Superior Mother against a wall, she had made it abundantly clear that she still saw herself as a Hexer as well as a Larkinson. There was little contradiction between the two identities as far as she was concerned.

In order to 'balance' the religious display within her design lab, constructed a shrine dedicated to the Golden Cat against the opposite wall.

Ves had a feeling that the respective ancestral spirits felt amused more than anything.

They never rejected worship, but they did not see themselves as gods, or at least that was what he hoped.

Ves designed them to serve as guardian spirits. He liked to think that they had conscientiously fulfilled their original missions.

While it was hard to say whether the Superior Mother or rather his mother developed a literal god complex, he at least possessed enough assurances that the Golden Cat remained approachable.

That did not have any influence on Gloriana's preconceptions. She was raised from birth to treat entities such as the Superior Mother and the Golden Cat as gods.

With the rise of the priest profession, Ves was afraid that more and more people would adopt the same attitude.

Times were getting tougher. When folk had no other option, perhaps only faith could give them hope.

People no longer ridiculed those who sank to their knees and prayed to actual god pilots for salvation.

Ves inwardly shook his head. He did not visit Gloriana's design lab to muse about his concerns about the spread of faith.

He paid attention to his wife as she explained the primary reason behind the delays that affected the timeline of the Riot Mark III Project.

"Superdimensional technology is at the root of the problem." She patiently explained to Venerable Orfan. "Archetech is an alien tech base that is inherently good at assimilating many different materials. It is inherently compatible with phasewater due to evolutionary reasons and it has also played nice with hyper materials as long as we follow a new set of rules. Unfortunately, superdimensional matter has introduced a new set of problems."

She gestured towards an enclosed cube where a sample of archemetal rested in the center.

It was one of Gloriana's many attempts at incorporating superdimensional matter in an archemetal component.

The reason why she regarded it as a failure was clear on the surface. The archemetal component became affected by spatial instability and displayed minor cracks and warping.

Even if the damage was relatively light, it was already enough to turn this piece of archetech invalid.

Venerable Orfan frowned. "I did not realize that the problem was this big. I thought that superdimensional tech had a lot in common with phasewater tech. The former is supposed to be a souped up version of the latter."

"You are not entirely wrong, but the situation is much more complex than that." Ves responded. "Both phasewater and superdimensional matter share the same roots, but their expressions are still radically different. It is similar to how ordinary carbon and diamonds comprise the same element, but have radically different properties and applications. Phasewater is like a larva while superdimensional matter is the butterfly."

"You do not need to understand the science behind superdimensional matter, Rosa." Gloriana interrupted while giving Ves a warning glance. "I am working to combine archetech with superdimensional matter. I am sharing my research data with a number of acquaintances from the Mech Supremacist Faction in order to gain its support on this research project. I do not think it will take too long to obtain an initial solution to the problem. Your Riot Mark III Project will benefit from a superdimensional archemetal mech frame, though I estimate that its completion will be at least a month behind schedule."

Venerable Orfan took in the words. "So my Riot Mark III will boast a stronger mech frame than the Dark Zephyr Mark III and the First Sword Mark III?"

"Yes." Gloriana confidently said. "The Dark Zephyr has yet to incorporate any superdimensional tech. The First Sword Mark III is a full superdimensional ace mech, but because Ketis has refused my participation in the design project, it is not an archemech. Saint Dise is piloting a machine with a conventional mech architecture. It is simpler and easier to repair, though the internals of the ace swordsman mech are considerably more vulnerable to shocks and other forms of damage."

"Many internal components do not contain any superdimensional matter, as we have yet to develop circuitry and other sensitive parts that can remain stable when incorporating this new material." Ves added.

This was one of the defensive shortcomings of early superdimensional mechs such as the First Sword Mark III.

Their exterior was incredibly tough, but their interior not so much. Certain attack methods that could transfer damage deeper inside a mech frame may be remarkably more effective than trying to drill through the superdimensional armor plating.

However, it was not that easy to make this happen. Superdimensional armor systems were expressly designed to prevent such scenarios from taking place.

"So if I understand this right, my Riot Mark III will be a lot tougher and more resistant towards damage once it is done?" Venerable Orfan asked.

"Yes. Absolutely." Gloriana confirmed. "Even if we normalize the thickness of the armor systems between the First Sword Mark III and the Riot Mark III, the latter will still be able to withstand significantly greater damage without deteriorating as quickly. What we are not entirely certain about is how much of a difference that archetech can make in this context."

"I will not say no to any improvements in performance."

"We know. What I am fretting about is how we can raise the proportion of superdimensional matter into an archemetal component before reaching a limit." The female mech designer said. "I fear that the initial limit is lower than we would like to see. The internals of your Riot Mark III will therefore remain much softer than the exterior plating. The initial design application still remains experimental. You will need to take this into account when you finally receive your superdimensional expert mech."

"Your Riot Mark III will turn into a prototype superdimensional archemech." Ves tried to sum up the point as best as possible. "This means that your battle partner will not be able to draw out the greater potential of archetech and superdimensional tech. The archemechs that my wife and I will design later on will boast considerably tougher and more superior superdimensional archemechs in the future. In two years, I bet that such a machine can easily be 30 or even 60 percent more resistant to damage."

This was a massive jump in performance!

The prediction highlighted how poorly the initial version of superdimensional archetech would be made.

Gloriana and her mecher consultants could not afford to spend years on perfecting the fusion between the two techs. They needed to hurry up and develop the first viable application of superdimensional archetech no matter how flawed or rudimentary it turned out in the end.

Trying to design the perfect version of the Riot Mark III would probably set back the completion date by several years instead of months!

This rankled the director of the Design Department, but she had no choice. Venerable Orfan needed to get back into action. It was in the best interest of the Larkinson Clan to prioritize expediency over perfection.

Her enthusiasm for the Riot Mark III Project therefore became a lot more muted. She never really considered the expert spearman mech as her favorite.

As innovative as the Riot Mark III may turn out, she would much rather spend a few extra months to smooth out the kinks and refine the combination between superdimensional tech and archetech further.

Ves and Venerable Orfan were much more okay with the expected outcome. They would rather have a 'mediocre' mech at their disposal today than a 'perfect' mech several years later!

"Are there any other problems related to my upcoming expert mech?" Venerable Orfan asked.

"Yes." Ves responded. "As you know, we have long reserved a tier 3 Destroyer spear for the instance you turn into an ace pilot and develop enough willpower to contain its volatile nature. What we did not anticipate is for superdimensional weapons to steal the crown from Destroyer weapons. The previous bout between Saint Dise and the Wind of Destruction clearly proves that this is the case. The value of the tier 3 Destroyer spear has plunged as a result."

Venerable Orfan frowned. Any choices related to weapons had a very large influence on her combat effectiveness.

"Isn't it possible to combine the two together like you are doing with the armor system?"

Gloriana tentatively nodded. "Theoretically, what you say is plausible. We are aware that the Devos Ancient Clan and other Terran groups are already conducting research to address this need. We believe that their efforts will eventually bear fruit, but it may take a year or several years for the Terrans to succeed."

"That leaves you in an awkward position." Ves spoke. "We can either draw upon our reserves of high-grade superdimensional matter to fabricate a spear that can match the performance of a Saint Piercer weapon, or you can choose to wield the 'outdated' tier 3 Destroyer spear. What do you prefer, Rosa?"

This... was a difficult choice.

Chapter 6900 Test Dummy Mech

When Ves and Gloriana explained many of the complications that superdimensional technology had introduced to the Riot Mark III Project, it became clear that neither of them felt good about this situation.

Ves reached out and placed his hand on the expert pilot's shoulder. "Let me be straight with you, Rosa. The timing of the Riot Mark III Project is poor. We are working on it in a time where superdimensional tech has only recently become available to red humanity. That means that your expert mech has no choice but to become our experimental platform."

"So my battle partner has become your test dummy?"

"More or less. The Riot Mark III will serve as the prototype for all subsequent superdimensional archemechs. It is rather unfortunate that the timing has relegated him to this role. If you do not agree with this and want to wait for us to advance the development of fusing superdimensional tech with archetech, then you can request us to delay the completion of the upgrade by a year or two. We can guarantee you that we should have made much more progress in this research direction. We will also be able to implement other advanced forms of cutting-edge tech such as superdimensional energy cells and superdimensional flight systems."

In other words, the following two years was a period of great technological turbulence.

Just like the start of the Phasewater Generation and the Hyper Generation, the emergence of superdimensional tech represented the start of a new technological arms race. Many scientists and engineers who possessed the qualifications to obtain samples of superdimensional matter eagerly tried to translate their existing expertise into a large variety of useful new applications.

Ves actually felt a little envious at all of these researchers and mech designers for being able to tap into the power of superdimensional tech. Their attainments in materials science, metallurgy and other relevant fields gave them an excellent foundation to blaze new trails in this highly promising field.

Meanwhile, Ves had little choice but to stay in his own lane and continue to delve into the potential of hyper technology and E-technology. There was nothing wrong with this as both fields still offered a lot of untapped potential, but they no longer appeared as exciting as before due to the emergence of a brand new discipline.

It was irrational for him to feel jealous that superdimensional tech had overshadowed his favorite scientific directions.

It was better for him to set aside his useless thoughts and hand over the responsibility of worrying about the application of superdimensional tech in Larkinson mech designs to his wife.

Although Gloriana did not specialize into materials science, her design philosophy necessitated a firm grasp in the use of materials. Ves readily acknowledged that she was better in this aspect.

It should not be a surprise that in the absence of a more authentic expert such as Tristan Wesseling, Gloriana picked up the slack and took responsibility over this matter.

She was more eager than anyone to develop a successful fusion between archetech and superdimensional matter.

Gloriana was deadly afraid that all of the time and effort she invested into archetech became worthless overnight as superdimensional tech offered much more superior results.

Even though superdimensional mechs could only be made by using up extremely rare superdimensional matter, the Larkinson Clan happened to control the only known mechanism to open a gateway to the Blue Dimension!

While many other powers struggled to obtain even a scrap of superdimensional matter, the Larkinson Clan managed to fill entire vaults with the stuff!

Gloriana therefore felt threatened by the onset of superdimensional technology. She would never rest until she successfully reconciled her latest specialization with the latest trend.

At that point, her interests would become aligned with superdimensional tech, thereby making everything right again.

"Since my Riot is destined to become your testing platform, what other good stuff can I expect that won't be a prototype for later mechs?" Venerable Orfan asked.

She clearly wanted a boost to her self-esteem. She did not want her battle partner to get completely overshadowed by other machines. If the Riot still retained a few qualities that no other mech could replicate, then Orfan would still have an excuse to feel proud even if her mech was no longer the most impressive of the bunch.

"We are working on several design applications that should set your machine apart from the rest." Ves said. "For example, as a follow-up to one of our previous discussions, I am still investigating whether it is possible to integrate a more advanced version of the Carmine System into your mech. I have gained greater insights into Blood Pacts, and I think I can whip up a unique solution for you. However, I am not sure if I can get it done within a short amount of time. It may be necessary to reserve room for a Carmine System but decline to install it for the Mark III."

That caused Rosa Orfan to frown. "Forming a Blood Pact with a living mech improves my chances of breaking through, right?"

"That is just a guess of mine, and it is hardly absolute, Rosa. Just look at Jannzi and Joshua. Both of them have formed their own Pacts with the Bastion and the Everchanger respectively, but they are still stuck as high-tier expert pilots, same as you. A Blood Pact alone cannot make up for the difference. All I can tell you is that if you have already completed 98 or 99 percent of the journey, forming a Blood Pact

while piloting the Riot Mark III for the first time may give you enough of an impulse to push you over the edge."

The expert pilot nodded in acceptance. She recognized that it was a form of weakness to depend so much on obtaining a better mech to trigger a much-desired breakthrough.

According to the Heaven Earth Man Trifecta, her Earth score would definitely skyrocket, but there was a possibility that her obsession over the Riot Mark III would cause her Man score to plummet.

If the decline of the latter exceeded the growth of the former, then she would end up in a worse position than before. Rosa Orfan absolutely could not tolerate such an outcome.

However, it was easier said than done for her to stop caring about her expert mech. It was in the nature of every mech pilot to pay extreme attention to the mechs they entrusted their lives to. It would be a dereliction of their duty if they lacked too much understanding about their fighting gear.

"What about my spear? Is there any way for you to upgrade it without involving any of that superdimensional stuff?"

Ves looked thoughtful. "It is within my capabilities to modify the weapon. The Devos Ancient Clan has given me plenty of access about how to design and make Destroyer weapons. While I can't make any new ones due to lacking a supply of Destroyer particles, it should not be too troublesome to reshape its dimensions."

"I would like that, Ves. The Terrans like to make their spears a little too long for my liking. I can work with the current length, but I am much more comfortable if you can make it shorter. I also want you to change the shape of the spearhead. Can you apply more improvements to the weapon?"

"I can turn it into a high-level weapon artifact." Ves stated with a measure of confidence. "However, it is best to wait until we have improved the material design of the weapon as best as possible. The stronger the baseline, the greater the boost in performance once it gains an artifact spirit. I can offer several different options, including one that may turn the tier 3 Destroyer spear into a D-arm like the Bitter Scimitar. I don't think that it is wise to do so, though. This particular transformation is

much more dangerous than the alternatives. Trying to apply it onto a Destroyer weapon that is already dangerous and volatile in itself may compound the problem."

"What if I am willing to take the risks?" Venerable Orfan asked. "If I manage to become an ace pilot, I bet my willpower will become strong enough to suppress whatever the Destroyer spear has become."

"That is just your one-sided opinion, Rosa. Certain risks are worth taking, but this one is too reckless for my tastes. No. It is best to work with the existing foundation of the tier 3 Destroyer spear. Once the Terrans have developed a means of fusing Destroyer weapons with superdimensional matter, we will incorporate the new tech into your weapon before turning it into a high-level artifact. That should give your weapon enough of an edge against our enemies."

It didn't matter too much to Ves if the tier 3 Destroyer weapon was not able to live up to its potential. Once he converted it into an artifact, it gained the ability to grow and evolve the more the Riot Mark III wielded it in battle.

Ves always suspected that the Terrans never managed to tap into the greater potential of Destroyer weapons. Studying their theories related to the tech only reinforced his impression.

While the Terrans were rather vague about the origin of Destroyer particles, they always treated it as a dangerous but ultimately lifeless hazard.

He doubted whether their assumptions rang true. Ves always had a weird feeling whenever he came close enough to a Destroyer weapon. The particles that supposedly behaved without any logic or direction actually expressed hints of life.

Ves lacked any solid proof that could back up this notion, but he trusted in his instincts. If his senses told him that there was more to Destroyer particles than was apparent on the surface, then that was enough for him to act on this suspicion.

This was why he was eager to turn the tier 3 Destroyer weapon into a high-level artifact.

As long as he stuffed an artifact spirit into the powerful spear, Ves refused to accept that the Destroyer particles would docilely accept the presence of a new overseer.

Ves considered this to be a secret experiment of his. He wanted to see if he could provoke the Destroyer particles into shedding their disguises and show actual signs of life and self-awareness.

Of course, this experiment came at the risk of tearing the Destroyer spear apart. The Larkinson Clan would not only suffer a great loss if that happened, but Rosa Orfan would also be devastated if she lost the weapon she had been looking forward to wield for years.

This was why he needed to proceed carefully and make sure that the upgraded tier 3 Destroyer spear became tough enough to withstand internal struggle.

"Don't forget that the armor system will remain the star of the show." Ves reminded the female expert pilot. "The inclusion of armor-grade superdimensional alloys will make the Chaos Armor even stronger and more resistant against material attacks. This neatly solves one of the potential concerns that we previously had about this innovative armor system. The hyper technology and E-technology that Jovy and I plan to incorporate into the Chaos Armor will protect your battle partner against all manner of unconventional attacks and intrusions. Even the most abstract conceptual attack methods have a considerable chance of malfunctioning when striking your machine. This is an advantage that will always be unique to the Riot. The First Sword Mark III and future superdimensional mechs will not benefit from this feature."

One of the main reasons why Ves placed so much importance on the Chaos Armor was due to its intrinsic ability to scramble prophecies. The sheer amount of quantum shenanigans taking place inside the armor was enough to cause a lot of trouble to anyone that attempted to predict the Riot's future!

The price was that the living mech would become a lot more dangerous, temperamental and slightly more prone to malfunctions, but that was a necessary price to pay.

Ves believed the need for a wild card like the Riot Mark III had grown after he discovered that the Red Collective successfully revived the art of divination.

This meant that Ylvaine was no longer the only entity in the Red Ocean that was capable of reading future possibilities.

The more people took up the diviner profession, the more powers gained access to predictions of the future!

Even if these prophecies mostly ended up ambiguous and of dubious reliability, Ves hated the thought of others trying to predict his actions.

There were multiple possible countermeasures against divination, but Ves could think of no better solution of designing a powerful high-ranking mech that completely messed up any attempts to predict the future of the fleet it was serving on! The safety of the Premier Fleet depended on the effectiveness of the Chaos Armor!