

Mech 4131

Chapter 4131 A Strong Mech

The mechers still took a fair amount of time to complete their comprehensive examination of the Mars.

On the one hand, Ves felt happy that the people who appreciated mechs the most were so fascinated by his latest collaborative work.

On the other hand, he grew annoyed that it would take more time for the Mars to deploy for the first time.

That was not to say that Ves and the others did nothing throughout the inspection. Master Amphi Helecos regularly called them up in order to provide technical answers about their design choices or their latest innovations.

The questions made it clear that the mechers were genuinely interested in several different aspects of the Mars.

Once Master Amphi finally satisfied her extensive curiosity, she finally permitted the Cross Clan to proceed with the test.

It was as if the mechers were in charge of this session.

"Are you ready, Reginald?"

"I have always been ready." The powerful expert pilot seemed to have come awake at the news. The Cross Patriarch had been conserving his energy for the entire day. "I knew my time would eventually. No one can deny me from my new expert mech."

The Mars was an enviously strong machine. It featured the latest tech and more phasewater than most organizations had in their possession. All of the wealth and power put into its frame had produced a combination that also happened to turn into a masterwork mech.

Given all of these attractions, Ves found it admirable that Patriarch Reginald displayed enough control to hold back his desire to pilot his new machine right away!

The man's formidable force of will became more active as he rose to his feet. He looked up at his waiting expert mech with an intense stare.

Ves had the illusion that the two were already resonating with each other despite being separated by a moderate distance.

As Reginald's suited form began to lift from the hangar bay floor, Ves issued a warning.

"Ah, I almost forgot. When you interface with the Mars, be careful. While it is already obvious that the mech is different from the ones we made before, it is a little more special in that it already has a developed personality."

"I know." Reginald gruffly said.

"I designed the Mars to be a more adversarial partner to you. Don't expect it to roll over for you. It will not only challenge you, but resist you if you cannot come to a consensus with it. Don't get taken by surprise by this. I hope you can find a way to cooperate with your new mech."

"Hmph. Understood."

Reginald continued his approach until he reached the opening of the cockpit. He took one last look at the exterior of his pride and joy and admired its aggressive, martial appearance up close.

The fiery red coating, the streamlined martial motifs and the crested helmet that was capable of projecting a red plume all turned the Mars into a facsimile of its mythological namesake.

The expert pilot knew that as long as he entered the cockpit, he would gain his greatest chance of getting closer to becoming the war god that he had always fantasized about.

"Father..." Reginald gently held the thick cross that was hanging from his neck. "From today onwards, I will no longer look up to you again. If you were still alive, I would force you to start looking up to me after this day has passed."

After issuing this extremely arrogant-sounding declaration, Reginald decisively entered the cockpit and took his seat!

Meanwhile, Ves had retreated to one of the observation rooms aboard the Hemmington Cross. Professor Benedict and the other mech designers were already standing behind their work stations. Each of them had received the news as well.

"Is everything ready?" Ves asked.

Benedict nodded. "Everything should be in place. I have received word from your clan that their expert mechs are deploying into space within a minute."

"Good, though we aren't in a hurry to conduct live combat tests. Our expert mechs don't need to be in a hurry."

"The pilots just want to see the Mars in person." Gloriana remarked. "Can you blame them for wanting to take a closer look?"

No one in the Golden Skull Alliance was more curious about the performance of the Cross Clan's flagship mech than the ones who would be fighting alongside it in the future.

The Larkinson expert pilots were all proud of their own mechs. Who could blame them? Each of them were works of art and many of them happened to be masterworks!

However, their stars would soon be eclipsed by an even greater celestial body from now onwards. There was no way that any of the Larkinson expert mechs could surpass the Mars on any front, at least with their current designs!

Due to the need to leave a few expert mechs behind in Davute, the Larkinsons eventually deployed their first seven ones into the field this time.

This meant that the C-man was conspicuously absent, saving Venerable Vincent from suffering another awful bruise to his ego.

In any case, a lineup that consisted of the Dark Zephyr, the Amaranto, the Riot, the First Sword, the Shield of Samar, the Everchanger and most interestingly the Minerva was a powerful force on any battlefield!

Each of their expert pilots had seen combat and many of them had made notable gains even after the expeditionary fleet had settled in Davute.

Yet none of them were able to get close to Patriarch Reginald in terms of resonance strength, combat experience and many other factors.

The gap between them was still as wide as ever, and it might turn even into a greater gulf after today!

"Let's just hope Reginald will allow us to retain our dignity this time." Venerable Joshua hoped.

Back inside the Hemmington Cross, a pair of Crossers mechs carefully towed the dormant Mars out of the hangar bay and into open space.

The initial activation of any expert mech could be an explosive event, and many people expected the Mars to produce an even greater spectacle this time!

As such, everyone patiently waited until the towing mechs brought the Mars far enough away to avoid accidentally harming any nearby mechs and starships.

Once the mech designers confirmed that everything was still in order, Patriarch Reginald finally received the greenlight to start.

He closed his eyes and thought back on all of the struggle and effort that took him this far.

In the end, he could not stop thinking about his father.

The prospect of finally being able to catch up to Saint Hemmington Cross with the help of arguably the most powerful second-class expert mech in the region if not the new frontier in its entirety had finally given him the mental backbone to stop looking up to his greatest mentor, teacher, parent and role model.

An invisible restriction seemed to fade from his spirit. It was as if Reginald had finally shaken off a set of shackles that had bound him in place for many years.

He felt incredibly free and light at the moment. His mind was on the cusp of floating away, but this was not the time for him to indulge in this strange sensation.

It was time to start.

Reginald decisively pushed the button, causing the cockpit and subsequently the entire expert mechs to come to life in earnest!

A powerful red corona immediately surrounded the Mars as Patriarch Reginald achieved immediate resonance with his expert mech.

The Mars was like a waking volcano. In a matter of seconds, it turned from a dormant machine into a force of nature as its activation allowed Patriarch Reginald to channel his formidable strength through its frame!

Not only that, but the Mars was finally able to establish a proper man-machine connection with the expert pilot.

As soon as the two were able to communicate, a bit of tension emerged as the Mars did not immediately bend in front of Patriarch Reginald's formidable will and vice versa.

"I am in control here." Reginald said as he tried to dominate his new expert mech.

Surprisingly enough, the Mars was able to speak right from the onset!

"THAT MAY BE TRUE IN THE PAST, BUT I AM DIFFERENT FROM EVERY PREVIOUS MACHINE YOU HAVE PILOTED. I AM THE MARS, A WAR GOD IN THE FORM OF A MECH. I AM NOT A HORSE FOR YOU TO RIDE AS YOU WISH, BUT A PARTNER THAT YOU SHALL LISTEN TO IN BATTLE."

That seemed to trigger Patriarch Reginald! He immediately became emotional, causing his resonance bond with the Mars to roil!

"No one tells me what to do anymore! I am stronger than you, Mars! You should be the one to bend to my will instead of the other way around!"

If the Mars could let out an exasperated breath, it would.

"I AM NOT ASKING YOU TO SUBMIT TO ME, REGINALD. I AM ASKING YOU TO ACKNOWLEDGE ME AS AN EQUAL PARTNER."

Though the Mars sounded quite reasonable for demanding a partnership that characterized almost every mech pilot's relationship with a living mech, it was too bad that Reginald was too insistent on having his way!

"No matter what you say, I will not accept any compromise! You will kneel before me or I will destroy every shred of you. NOW BEND BEFORE MY WILL!"

The Mars was shocked at Reginald's uncompromising attitude! The expert pilot never displayed such stubbornness during their prior passive resonance sessions. It was as if the Cross Patriarch transformed into an entirely different beast when he entered the cockpit!

Outside observers grew increasingly more concerned as the Mars began to exhibit strange activity.

Ves frowned as he observed the increasingly more severe signs of stress from the incoming telemetry.

The patterns matched those of a problematic interfacing attempt. The chances were likely that the expert pilot and the expert mech weren't getting along!

"What did you do, Ves?!" Gloriana accusingly asked as she turned her head. "This is your fault, right?"

"What?" Ves looked stumped. "I don't know what's going on. Why are you blaming me all of sudden?"

"Patriarch Reginald is having difficulty coming to terms with the Mars. There is no reason why that would happen unless you messed with it. What did you do that could create such a conflict?!"

Ves thought back on the adversarial personality he had imparted to the Mars.

"Well... maybe it is because I powered up the Mars by blending its spiritual foundation with bits of Venerable Ghanso and Venerable Foster..."

"I KNEW IT! DID YOU EVER STOP TO THINK WHETHER IT WAS A GOOD IDEA TO TRANSPLANT ELEMENTS OF TWO OF OUR MOST STUBBORN AND INTRACTABLE ENEMIES INTO A FRIENDLY MECH?!"

Now that she pointed it out, it did sound like a bad idea in hindsight.

As Ves tried to account for himself, the struggle between Patriarch Reginald and his expert mech continued to rage with no immediate end in sight!

The true resonance generated by the two began to wobble as they continued to remain opposed towards each other.

Just when it seemed that the opposing personalities would begin to produce anti-synergy, one of them suddenly exploded in strength!

Patriarch Reginald Cross was so affronted by his expert mech's continued defiance that his patience had run at an end!

"I WILL NEVER SUFFER HUMILIATION AGAIN, ESPECIALLY NOT DUE TO MY OWN MECH!"

An explosion of light, power and force instantly engulfed the entire space around the Mars!

It was unlike anything that the observers had ever seen!

For a moment, Ves and many others thought as if an enemy saboteur had secretly triggered a superbomb near the Mars!

It was only a few seconds later that they realized that the massive explosion was not triggered by setting off a warhead, but because a transcendent human had forcefully burst his way into the next rank of his profession!

Everyone in the fleet became utterly shocked and fascinated by the continuing outpouring of power!

There was only one possible explanation for why the Mars was able to channel power that vastly exceeded what any of its high-tech systems could release!

"Patriarch Reginald Cross... has become a Saint!" Ves stated the obvious.

Chapter 4132 Fusion of Power

What was it like for an expert pilot to undergo a second true apotheosis?

Few humans were able to answer this question.

Unlike expert pilots who could emerge from any significant gathering of mech pilots, ace pilots were much scarcer.

States with populations of trillions of people might have no more than just a handful of ace pilots in their service!

This was how scarce they tended to be! The circumstances that could foster an ace pilot were so harsh that it was practically unheard of for third-rate states to be able to produce one in their midst.

While no one had ever fully figured out all of the variables that needed to be favorable in order to produce an ace pilot, the mech community did manage to formulate a few widely-recognized rules.

First, in order for an expert pilot to advance to ace pilot, they needed to be close to the threshold. Only high-tier expert pilots as defined by their peak resonance strengths had a chance, however faint, of bridging the enormous gap.

Second, expert pilots needed to be physically fit and healthy. Body augmentations could either help or hinder them depending on their nature. What was important was that the expert pilot felt good under his or her own skin. Any sense of discordancy or alienation could ruin the pilot's chances of advancing any further.

Third, an expert pilot needed to be tested and experienced in battle. Practice and training could only do so much. True soldiers and warriors needed to be tempered in actual battle.

While there were pilots who were able to undergo their first apotheosis by luck and happenstance without ever entering an actual battlefield, no such exceptions existed for ace pilots.

Fourth, a good expert mech was indispensable. The expert mech did not necessarily have to be as insanely powerful and extravagant as the Mars, but it at least needed to possess enough power and capacity to channel the strength of a high-tier expert pilot with plenty of room to spare.

There were conflicting theories about whether it was important if the expert mech needed to exceed an objective standard of performance or whether the expert pilot merely had to think that way. The former assumption was objective while the latter was more subjective.

Whatever the case, either demand stopped most third-rate states from facilitating the growth of their high-tier expert pilots because their ability to afford the best materials and the most expensive components were much more limited.

However, there was one notable wildcard, which was the existence of masterwork expert mechs.

No matter the quality of these machines, as long as their performance was at least decent, expert pilots were as much as a thousand times more likely to advance to the rank of ace pilot if they were lucky enough that their customized machines reached this level of quality!

They were also exceedingly rare as the vast majority of Masters were unable to consistently pump them out. That was also what made the Mars such a great accomplishment in the mech industry and why Professor Benedict deserved a lot of recognition for his feat!

Most people considered the aforementioned demands to be the most basic and essential conditions to make a second major breakthrough possible.

States and organizations that could not fulfill all of these four essential demands had no business thinking about producing ace pilots in their midst. They probably still had trouble generating enough expert pilots most likely!

Even if these groups were able to satisfy all of those conditions, developing ace pilots was anything but assured.

This was because every expert pilot needed to go on a long and extensive mental evolution. Studies on this subject failed to present a systematic method to develop this aspect, which meant that many expert pilots had to rely on themselves to grope their way forward.

What certain insiders did know was that expert pilots needed to develop a more powerful motivation to pursue greater strength.

In order to push themselves past the bottleneck that blocked their way forward, they needed to build up a powerful impetus that could forcefully breach their mental barrier and allow their willpower to undergo a comprehensive transformation.

Just as ordinary mech pilots needed to find a cause or conviction to fight for, expert pilots needed to go a step further. They often had to fulfill a more concrete mission or meet a specific requirement in order to achieve their major breakthrough.

Whether it was a coincidence or not, Patriarch Reginald not only met all of the other requirements, but also satisfied the requirements that he needed to conquer in order to prove himself worthy to reach the next stage of his extraordinary profession!

The result was a phenomenon that was almost unique and that few people had the privilege to witness in person!

Every member of the Cross Clan as well as the Larkinson Clan and the Glory Seekers in the current fleet watched on with awe and joy as the most powerful among them had attained a legendary status!

"The Cross Clan has arisen anew!"

"Reginald is just like his father!"

"A Saint! We are led by a Saint again!"

The status of ace pilot was supreme in nearly every corner of human space, but the Crossers possessed a particularly special regard for these extraordinary mech pilots.

As former Garleners who still retained large parts of the culture of their former state, the Crossers not only saw high-ranking mech pilots as champions, but also warlords who possessed the absolute right to lead them on and off the battlefield.

As Ves briefly took his gaze away from the control panel to observe the reaction of the various Crosser staffers who manned the other workstations, he could hardly find any difference between their worshipful gazes and the intense fanaticism displayed by the most extreme Hexer and Ylvainan believers.

While the Crossers were largely secular in their outlook towards life, the way they venerated their patriarch to an even greater degree than before made it seem as if they were worshiping a living god!

"Maybe that isn't too far from the truth." Ves quipped to himself.

The power that Patriarch Reginald Cross unleashed upon the moment of his second apotheosis was absolutely awe-inspiring!

Anything in the vicinity would have been blasted to pieces if Reginald did not make any attempts to control his outburst!

The power of this outburst was comparable to that of a serious attack from a genuine ace mech like the Olympus Mons, if not more!

What was even more impressive was that Patriarch Reginald, or Saint Reginald depending on which title he found more important, did not lose control over his power again!

Unlike expert pilots who were often a bit too weak and unfamiliar to be able to control their new and overflowing power, ace pilots were much more mature and proficient in controlling their own strength.

Their willpower was also insanely strong and Patriarch Reginald was no exception in this regard.

In fact, as his sizable and energetic Saint Kingdom slowly took shape around the Mars, it looked as if he was particularly insistent on maintaining control over his own mech and power expression!

All of the power exuded from the Mars was far from what is customary of an expert mech!

The high-tier expert mech that Ves had witnessed such as Venerable Damira Planat's Erin Tear or Venerable Orthox de Massie's Gatecrasher were both powerful in their own sense, but the Mars vastly exceeded these machines in terms of might!

And this was before the Mars even properly exercised its capabilities in combat!

As Ves glanced towards his control panel and other projected displays, he quickly realized that not every piece of data was reliable anymore.

The Mars was undergoing so many extraordinary processes that it had trouble measuring and recording accurate data!

There was at least one meter that happened to be working in good condition, though.

Professor Benedict had put a lot of effort into installing a stronger and more high-end resonance meter into the Mars in order to account for exactly this kind of situation!

"If this meter is truly accurate, then... Reginald resonance strength has skyrocketed to 134 laveres!"

Sure, this might not sound impressive if this measurement was compared to the resonance strengths of the top ace pilots of humanity that capped at 1545 laveres.

However, compared to Patriarch Reginald's previous record of 60 laveres, this was a drastic jump in strength!

The lavere scale was not linear. A jump of 74 laveres represented an exponential or qualitative leap in effective power and combat ability!

From what Ves had learned from other sources, the increase in power that Reginald experienced was rather exaggerated.

"Most high-tier expert pilots continue to develop their strength in various ways even if they are hindered by their bottlenecks." Professor Benedict explained as he continued to examine the various data feeds and the central projection that showed off the ongoing spectacle centered around the Mars. "When they finally overcome their

bottlenecks by making up for their greatest weaknesses, they will quickly make up for lost time and catch up to the state they should have reached if they weren't blocked by their mental shortcomings."

Patriarch Reginald was almost just as talented as his late father. He developed quickly as an expert pilot and only slowed down when he approached the limits of this rank.

Now that he got over this mountain that was previously insurmountable to him, there were no more obstacles that could prevent him from developing his resonance strength for a long time!

"Reginald shouldn't have to worry about any bottlenecks until he pushes onto the barrier that separates him from advancing to the rank of god pilot."

"That is true, but there is a major difference in strength between strong and weak Saints." Professor Benedict cautioned. "Reginald has only become junior ace pilot just now. He still has many years to go before his resonance strength exceeds 800 laverses. At that point, he will be considered a senior ace pilot and someone who can truly guard an entire state."

There were no true qualitative differences between junior ace pilots and senior ace pilots. The mech community decided to create an artificial divide between them in order to better differentiate the strength of younger and less experienced Saints to their older and more developed counterparts.

In general, a junior ace pilot stood no chance of defeating a senior ace pilot, but this was only a guideline, not a hard rule.

What this meant was that the Cross Clan was still a distance away from attaining greater impunity.

It would take quite a few decades if not a century for Saint Reginald Cross to truly be the bulwark of his clan!

"Saint Hemmington Cross never managed to become a senior ace pilot..." Ves recalled.

The late clan leader's presence was still enormous in the Cross Clan, but Reginald had a good chance of surpassing his father this time!

"The Mars is moving!"

Ves stopped thinking about the future and turned his attention back to the present.

Now that Patriarch Reginald had regained control over himself, he was still filled with energy and was eager to vent it all out in a massive, extended spurt!

"Engage the target dummies!" Professor Reginald ordered!

The Cross Clan had already deployed several swarms of drones and battle bots into space.

Now, these automatons simultaneously woke up from standby and began to engage the Mars without displaying any fear or hesitation towards the prospect of fighting against an ace pilot!

Many of the bots happened to be armed with ranged weapons. Upon receiving a specific order, they began to fire their laser or kinetic guns with deadly force.

Unmanned combat machines or not, when several thousand of them fired their weapons at once, not even an expert mech would feel comfortable in the face of so much absolute firepower!

However, as the formidable amount of automated machines unleashed their lethal volleys, none of their shots ever came close to harming the Mars.

Even before the energy beams and kinetic rounds struck the Abasis Armor, they stopped hundreds of meters away from the expert mech.

Patriarch Reginald's new Saint Kingdom had effortlessly blocked them from advancing any further!

Though Ves already knew what to expect from it, seeing it in action was still a wondrous moment.

"This... is the power produced by the fusion of technology and willpower."

Chapter 4133 Initial Weapons Test

Patriarch Reginald did not appear to be in a hurry to wipe out the bots that unloaded enough firepower to threaten a capital ship!

The volume of fire was incredible. Even if the drones and battle bots weren't particularly strong on an individual basis, their numbers exceeded that of a full mech regiment at the moment!

This meant that the new Saint already displayed the ability to effortlessly resist the firepower of a full ranged mech regiment!

It did not even look as if Patriarch Reginald was breaking a sweat during the ongoing bombardment!

His Saint Kingdom or domain field remained remarkably stable. No matter how many mosquitos attempted to pierce this large spherical energy field, if Reginald did not want their attacks to pass through his zone, he could impose his will onto reality and make it happen!

"Amazing." Gloriana uttered. "This is the most distinguishing difference between Venerables and Saints. It is not surprising to regard the former as preparatory ace pilots."

An expert pilot was highly limited in their ability to distort reality by leveraging his force of will. They heavily relied on their mechs to amplify their strength exertion through resonance, and they only managed to do so reluctantly and in a limited fashion.

Ace pilots on the other hand possessed an abundance of power and control. Their domain fields were not only larger versions of resonance shields, but they also marked a territory as the exclusive property of the ace pilot.

These characteristics had caused the mech community to refer to these extraordinary energy fields as Saint Kingdoms.

Every Saint was a ruler of his own domain!

In general, there were two effective ways to overcome the insane defenses of a Saint Kingdom.

An opponent could rely on another ace pilot to compete against an opposing one on an equal basis.

If ace pilots were hard to come by, then the only other way to overcome a Saint Kingdom was by relying on massed firepower.

The latter was the more common if stupidest means of breaking open an ace pilot's defenses.

Right now, two whole minutes had gone by and the Saint Kingdom around the Mars still didn't show any signs of destabilizing!

"This is ridiculous!" Ves gasped. "I get that Patriarch Reginald is really strong now, but the Mars is still an expert mech!"

Professor Benedict did not look surprised, though. "You know just as well as I that the Mars already straddles the line between expert mechs and ace mechs. Most of the tech and the materials that we have invested into it already meets the standard of an ace mech. The greatest shortcoming of the Mars at the moment is that it is lacking in ace mech-grade resonating materials. The ones that we have put into our mech are mainly attuned to the strength of expert pilots."

There were different ways to categorize resonating materials. One of the most important ones was to determine which kind of high-ranking mech pilot could best leverage their extraordinary properties.

The majority of resonating materials were expert mech-grade. That meant that they were effectively utilized by expert pilots as long as they were compatible with the specific materials.

There was a higher grade of resonating materials that were not so easy to make use of. Expert pilots who attempted to resonate with them would find that they were trying to squeeze water from a stone.

Even if they were compatible, the difficulty of resonating with ace mech-grade resonating materials was too great at their stages!

This was also the main reason why Professor Benedict did not choose to integrate any ace mech-grade resonating materials into the current iteration of the Mars.

It did not matter if Patriarch Reginald's chances of breaking through were high. He would not have been able to resonate with the Mars to begin with when he activated the mech for the first time!

None of these considerations applied anymore. The current reality was that Reginald had advanced to ace pilot. This meant that the current configuration of the Mars had already fallen behind the times!

"You'll need to replace the old resonating materials with ones that are suitable for ace pilots, right?"

"That is correct, Ves. This will be an incredibly difficult technical process. First, I need to obtain the right materials, but they are much rarer and they are also far more demanding as a rule. Trying to integrate them into the Mars without ruining its configuration or breaking its masterwork state will be one of the most difficult upgrade projects that I will be embarking upon in my career as a mech designer."

"Do you need any assistance?"

"Hahaha. No." Professor Benedict firmly shook his head. "These matters are far beyond your level. In fact, many of them go over my head as well. Only an exceedingly small proportion of mech designers possess the qualifications to develop ace mechs."

"Will you be able to accomplish all of this by yourself, then?"

"Not a chance in hell, but who says that I will be alone? I have already formed an arrangement with the Unbounders. While it will still take years to elevate the Mars into a proper ace mech, I will get it done eventually."

Without the help of Ves and his fellow colleagues, it seemed. That was a pity. He would have liked to take part in this interesting endeavor.

Meanwhile, the new Saint apparently had enough of testing the strength of his new domain field.

After letting the bots expend their firepower towards the Mars without any clear results, the Mars finally began to make its first offensive move!

Ves completely threw every other consideration aside and leaned closer in order to observe the powerful expert mech closely.

"The Mars is priming the ARCEUS System!"

Ten powerful integrated energy weapon modules charged up at once. With two on the wrists, three in the chest, two on the lower legs and two at the sides of the head, the Mars had more than enough weapons to unleash devastation!

Different from the Olympus Mons which was primarily geared towards melee combat, the Mars was a hybrid mech that excelled at throwing up massive firepower from a distance.

This meant that its threat radius was extremely wide. As long as any opponent was within its line of sight, they turned into eligible targets to the Mars!

Once the ARCEUS System had charged up and locked onto the various targets, all ten integrated energy weapons fired at once!

Each of the sophisticated weapon mounts possessed the ability to split their beams. Patriarch Reginald took extensive advantage of this feature to split the firepower of each of his energy weapons so that they fired at least ten lesser laser beams at different targets!

In other words, the Mars effectively fired over a hundred resonance-empowered laser beams at once!

Each of them soared through space at the speed of light and hit their targets with unerring accuracy!

Despite the fact that each beam only possessed a fraction of the firepower of the originating weapon, the high base power of the ARCEUS System along with its transphasic and resonating properties meant that the shots already surpassed the power of that of a typical ranged expert mech!

Ves and many other observers were completely astounded by this amazing sight!

Some of the bots that got struck were high-quality machines that were clad with premium armor. Yet even then the incoming beams managed to pierce through their frames entirely, devastating every armor plate or vital internal component in and around the path of the deadly lasers!

Although the more knowledgeable among them already understood that the Mars was theoretically able to achieve this outcome, seeing it happen in reality was still a major shock.

It might not be a big deal to destroy over a hundred bots with a single salvo this time, but on an actual battlefield the Mars would likely be able to achieve the same result when fighting against actual mechs!

"The Mars only needs a single moment in order to put a hundred combat machines out of action. What if it fires its weapons repeatedly?"

Patriarch Reginald was evidently curious to know the answer as well, because he was far from done with testing the ARCEUS System!

The integrated energy weapons charged again before they fired an identical salvo, this time aiming at a hundred different targets!

Every bot in the ARCEUS System's sights went down without exception. The accuracy displayed by the Mars was also impressive in itself.

Part of that came from the superhuman skill of an ace pilot. Another part of it came from the excellent sensor and targeting systems of the high-tier expert mech.

When both of these elements were excellent, it would be hard for light mechs to evade the expert hybrid mech's attacks!

The Mars fired again and again. Though it took a few seconds for it to be able to engage its ARCEUS System again, the consistency and reliability of the transphasic energy system was commendable.

It was not easy to output so much firepower without straining the expert mech's more delicate components!

However, the exceedingly powerful ARCEUS System as well as the incredible efficiency and tolerances of the Magma Vein System ensured that the Mars could fire its weapons like this for a long time!

Salvo after salvo tore out entire chunks of the bot swarm. The volume of fire that was pouring in the direction of the Mars visibly weakened at a rapid rate.

Once the final set of resonance-empowered transphasic laser beams took out the pathetic-looking bots that remained, none of the swarms that the Cross Clan had procured at great cost remained intact!

A lot of people turned speechless due to the sheer amount of awe they felt at this overwhelming display of superiority.

It was nearly impossible for a mech force to rely on quantity to overcome an ace mech!

Even if the Mars was not able to output so much fire at once, it could easily leverage its superior mobility and defensive power to circle around and whittle down the enemy cannon fodder over time.

Either way, the advancement of Patriarch Reginald completely turned the Mars into a beast on the battlefield!

One that was capable of defeating entire mech forces by itself!

"If the Mars in its expert mech configuration is already this powerful, how much more dominant will it be once it becomes an ace mech?"

Ves shuddered at the thought. The performance of the expert hybrid mech's resonance parameters would receive a major boost, allowing it to distort reality much more extensively than was currently the case!

Paired with the fact that Reginald would definitely be growing his unleashed resonance strength at a steady rate, the Mars was destined to become an unfathomably strong ace mech in a few years!

Professor Benedict grinned. "Now that we have seen how well the Mars fares against a tide of mechs, let us see how well its ARCEUS System can defeat an enemy starship."

The Cross Clan would never volunteer an actual starship for target practice. That was far too wasteful.

In order to provide the Mars with an approximate target, the Crossers instead decided to conduct the test in the vicinity of an asteroid belt.

There were plenty of chunky targets in range that could withstand a heavy amount of punishment before breaking.

Now, the Mars had set its sights on one of them. There was an asteroid with a high metallic content that happened to be several kilometers thick.

Even if its material composition was not as tough as that of a typical warship, its mass and thickness were still difficult for other weapons to drill through!

However, the Mars only charged its central chest weapon. It was the largest weapon module of the ARCEUS System and was designed for just these occasions.

This time, Patriarch Reginald pulled out all of the stops. He did not order the chest weapon to split its output, but instead wanted it to remain whole and concentrated.

After charging and empowering it with multiple forms of energy, the chest weapon finally outputted a dazzlingly bright red energy that struck the target asteroid and burned straight through its rocky interior as if it was made out of paper!

Though the massively empowered beam took its time to melt through all of the material, it eventually escaped right out of the opposite side of the asteroid before striking another one floating further into the distance!

"...Imagine if that was a starship."

Chapter 4134 Superior Performance

Everything about the Mars lived up to its promise.

It performed like a veritable war god like its namesake, and that was when it was still technically an expert mech!

Everyone who had the privilege to witness it demonstrate its awesome power in this nameless star system felt incomparably insignificant in front of such a powerful war machine.

"The Mars is like a warship but with only a hundredth of the footprint." Gloriana aptly contextualized the insanely powerful expert mech's performance in combination with its new ace pilot. "If we were testing the performance of a battlecruiser at the moment, I don't think any of us would feel surprised at the power that the vessel is able to demonstrate. We humans are already hardwired to expect superior performance from physically imposing objects. This is also why we tend to fear the phase whales the most out of all of the native races of the Red Ocean."

She made a good point. Everyone indeed developed a general sense of power by looking at the size of a war asset.

The dimensions of a mech or warship turned into a shorthand measurement of their combat effectiveness.

Of course, size was hardly the sole factor that determined their power. Their tech played an important role as well, hence why people started to divide these assets into three different power levels.

On paper, the Mars was classified as a second-class high-tier expert mech. This created the suggestion that it would not perform that much better than the Bolvos Rage.

Yet there were multiple factors that turned the Mars into a completely different beast than its predecessor machine.

The insane tech put into the Mars was one reason. Patriarch Reginald's incredibly breakthrough was another reason.

Together, they produced an incongruous result that completely caused a lot of people's minds to crash as they found it difficult to come to terms with the current performance of the Mars!

Equating it to a warship was a useful way to contextualize the Mars, but the fact that the two were closer in performance than was apparent on the surface also signified how insane it was to possess this combination of expert mech and expert pilot!

As the Mars continued to explore the limits of its firepower by readily engaging its ARCEUS System at different asteroids, the firepower but more notably its endurance truly matched that of a warship that was armed with main cannons that were larger than the frames of entire mechs!

Warships were already strong to begin with. By leveraging the advantage of scale to the utmost, these vessels overpowered their opposition by relying on brute force.

The Mars was different. It was smaller and more maneuverable at shorter ranges. It was also a lot smaller and therefore a lot harder to pin down at range.

This provided it with significant advantages if it was ever confronted by a hostile warship.

Even if the Cross Clan had yet to equip it with a minidrive, the inherent advantages of the mech already enabled it to maneuver around an actual warship with ease. This would allow the Mars to escape the firing angles of the most devastating naval weapon systems!

This was an unreasonable tactic that essentially made it impossible for a warship to defeat the Mars at close range.

Even from a distance, it would be incredibly difficult for the warship to land a lot of hits on a small, fast and maneuverable target.

All of this meant that Professor Benedict successfully attained his goal of developing a mech that was powerful enough to fight against alien warships and powerful exobeasts!

The Cross Clan and the Golden Skull Alliance possessed a lot more options against those types of enemies from now on. It was no longer the case that their entire forces were unable to fight against these native threats.

"Alright, that is enough for the ARCEUS System. It is already beginning to reach its limits after firing so many times." Professor Benedict said.

As much as the ARCEUS System was designed to support extended operation, the intensity in which its weapon systems fired in the past few minutes was a little too much. Everything possessed limits and even a super-expensive transphasic energy weapon system was no exception.

The Mars subsequently tested out its other capabilities. Though it was lacking its shoulder-mounted missile launchers at the moment, it still possessed another ranged solution in the form of its custom shotgun.

Not only was it equipped with a dimensional ammunition drum, the weapon was also capable of firing a variety of different shotgun rounds.

This time, the Cross Clan decided to fill its ammo drum with a mixture of cheap and expensive rounds.

The Mars rapidly flew closer to a nearby asteroid and pointed its weapon straight at the surface.

A silent explosion erupted from the muzzle as it spat out an extremely powerful transphasic slug!

Though the velocity of the projectile was incomparable to that of an energy beam, the transphasic round partially phased through the solid matter of the asteroid while at the same time transferring a huge amount of kinetic energy along the way!

The result of this was that the transphasic round was able to penetrate well into the interior of the asteroid without wasting too much of its destructive potential at the outer surface of the target!

"Let's see how much damage a non-transphasic shotgun slug can do in comparison."

The slug created such a giant crater in the asteroid that it was as if it was a planet that had undergone a mass extinction event!

"If the target was a starship, then the non-transphasic round is not effective at taking down the targeted vessel." Sara Voiken observed. "The key to taking out starships in the most effective manner is to disable or destroy their vital systems. Dealing damage to their hulls is not useful in comparison. The only thing that will do is make it easier for follow-up attacks to penetrate into the interior."

In other words, a transphasic round was drastically more effective at taking out large targets than a non-transphasic round.

"How much phasewater did it take to produce that transphasic round?" Ves critically asked.

"...Let's not talk about that."

Unless the Crossers were able to recover the fractured and broken remains of the transphasic slug, firing this expensive projectile was no different throwing a precious drop of phasewater out of the airlock!

Fortunately, there was no rule that stated that the Crossers had to keep supplying the hungry shotgun with transphasic ammunition.

As the Mars kept firing the weapon, it began to blast out in many different ways.

One shot released a conventional hail of pellets that rapidly spread out and dug in lots of tiny holes on the surface of an asteroid.

Another shot impaled a target with metal nails that reacted with each other and generated a current.

The next shot bombarded the target with incendiary pellets that rapidly grew hot and erupted into flames.

The performance of each of these projectiles were stronger than usual as Patriarch Reginald was able to enhance their power through resonance.

However, the shotgun wielded by the Mars was only moderately more powerful than the shotgun of the Bolvos Rage.

This showed that aside from the difference in ammunition capacity, the shotgun paired with the newer expert mech was heavily reliant on the quality of its rounds to deal damage.

It was much more economical to rely on the ARCEUS System to destroy the opposition. Energy was cheap and could be generated by tons of cheap and efficient sources. It did not cost a fortune just to fire the energy weapons a couple of times!

Ves shrugged. "It's okay. The shotgun is an extra option against powerful targets."

The ARCEUS System was designed to be the main weapon system of the Mars. It was integrated into the expert mech and was not designed to be removable. Everything else was extra as far as he was concerned.

Once Reginald had his fill with testing out the new shotgun, his expert mech began to pull out its new standard melee weapon, which happened to be a transphasic axe.

After he resonated with the one-handed weapon, the Mars charged at an asteroid and launched a devastating-looking chop!

While the attack did not produce an exaggerated result such as slicing a kilometers-thick asteroid in half, the energy released by the strike managed to pierce right through and penetrate over a hundred meters beyond the surface!

The penetrative capabilities of the transphasic axe was incredible, and fully proved why certain people started to believe that phasewater technology would become a new qualifier in high-end mech combat!

It was a pity that the initial testing session did not leave any room to test how the Mars was able to handle the Whale-Cutting Saber, but that could be done at a later time.

"Let us get the other essential tests out of the way first."

The next few minutes were relatively boring as the Mars proceeded to flex its defensive and mobility capabilities.

First, the Crossers bombarded the Mars while Reginald purposely withdrew his Saint Kingdom.

Though this removed an essential defensive layer from the expert hybrid mech, its Abasis Armor was more than capable of picking up the slack!

No matter whether the frame of the mech was struck by energy beams, solid projectiles or exploding missiles, it remained completely impervious throughout this entire sequence!

In fact, the mech did not even suffer any visual marks as most of the damage hit an invisible spatial barrier that wrapped just above the surface of the expert mech.

So long as it was powered by resonance, the Abasis Armor would always be able to display an unreasonable amount of defensive power!

"Let us see the performance of the shield generator as well."

Even though the Mars incorporated a high-quality compact shield generator, its defensive power was the worst out of all of the options. That was because Professor Benedict did not choose to integrate the mech with a larger defensive module.

Still, the shield generator could still be handy in emergencies, so it was not a useless feature.

"Let's see how fast it can move."

The Pulsvar V-1 flight system stole the show this time. It already provided the Mars with speed comparable to that of the Gatecrasher in its base form.

When it began to activate its transphasic mode, the Mars accelerated up to 200 percent faster in any direction, which made people have the illusion that they were looking at an expert light mech instead of a heavier machine!

The only downside to this mode was that the Mars began to devour energy at a scary rate. This meant that it was not that wise for the expert mech to accelerate at its maximum rate while at the same time output a lot of energy beams with its ARCEUS System.

"The Mars is not designed for hit-and-run attacks." Juliet remarked. "It is meant to enter within effective range of any target before relying on maximum firepower to neutralize the threat."

The Mars was an assault-oriented machine that was effective at pretty much any place on the battlefield, but would feel most at home at short to medium ranges.

With high defenses and a stupendous amount of firepower, it was most ideal at fighting against powerful opponents head-on! The Mars was not a sly skirmisher like the Dark Zephyr or a glass cannon like the Amaranto.

The mech was named after a war god because it was truly designed to embody one in the form of a mech!

Ves and the other mech designers were more than satisfied with the demonstrated performance of their work. They couldn't have asked for any better and there were plenty of areas where the expert mech exceeded their expectations!

Soon enough, the initial testing session was approaching its end.

Only one test remained on the agenda.

"It's time for the exciting part... at least, that was our original intent."

At this stage, the Larkinson expert mechs were supposed to come forth and test how well the Mars was able to fight against a bunch of expert mechs.

Ves previously maintained faint hope that his clan's champions would be able to earn at least some respect before they tapped out of the sparring session.

That hope had faded after witnessing the full might of the Mars with a newly advanced ace pilot.

There was no way that this was anywhere close to a fair fight!

"Do you think our expert mechs will last more than minute against the Mars?" Gloriana asked.

"They better."

Chapter 4135 Willpower Disparity

What should have been the most exciting part of the testing session instead turned into an execution.

At least that was what it looked like. While the Crossers all maintained their excitement and their enthusiasm at the explosive performance of their new ace pilot and expert mech, the mood amongst the Larkinsons was completely different!

Sure, the Larkinsons were initially happy when they saw that the strongest mech pilot of their allies had reached an unprecedented level of strength.

Even though it was a pity that Reginald was not a Larkinson, he was still a solid ally and friend of their clan.

Then they realized that their proudest expert mechs were about to test their mettle against the very same ace pilot!

As much as they celebrated Reginald's successful advancement, they could vaguely tell that his power was far more than what the Larkinson expert pilots could compete against.

They only had to recall the awful time when the Olympus Mons piloted by Saint Yila Mayorka easily crushed the best efforts of the Larkinson champions to land a single blow onto the dwarven ace mech.

Even if Reginald had only advanced a short time ago and even if the Mars was technically still an expert mech did not provide much solace to the Larkinsons.

The power of this transphasic expert mech was too exaggerated!

As one of the first high-end expert mechs in the Red Ocean that featured an extravagant collection of transphasic mech parts, the Mars was most likely the strongest second-class expert mech in the Krakatoa Middle Zone!

As for the Larkinson expert mechs, while each of them possessed numerous unique features that allowed them to punch above their weight, there was only so much ingenuity could do to compensate for an absolute power gap.

Ves was not optimistic about the coming display at all, but he did not have any ideas for calling off the test.

First, he and his fellow mech designers needed to gather essential data on how the Mars performed against more extraordinary opponents.

Second, his own expert pilots needed to be taught a lesson. A solid defeat would most definitely cause them to feel more pressure again. Once they realized their own inadequacies, they would surely do their best to close the gap to Patriarch Reginald as much as possible!

Third, he and Gloriana needed to see precisely how bad the gap was between their old work and the Mars. They had already decided to upgrade the first generation of Larkinson expert mechs with high-end heartland-level components.

From the incredible performance of the Mars, it already became clear to him that they also seriously needed to consider the decision to integrate transphasic components in their old work.

How much they needed to prioritize this matter depended on how this coming confrontation unfolded.

He opened a communication channel to the pilot of the Minerva.

"You're in charge, Casella. I won't tell you what to do, but I need as much data as possible. The longer you last and the more varied the actions you undertake, the more useful data that you will generate. Try your best not to fight too monotonously or get beaten too quickly."

Commander Casella Ingvar made a sour expression. "We will try our best, sir, but frankly speaking most of this battle is out of our hands. We are at Patriarch Reginald's mercy."

"I am sure he is curious to see how much of an advantage he possesses against our expert mechs."

Though Professor Benedict had already instructed Reginald to prolong the battle, who knew how much the newly-ascended Saint would listen.

Now that he had obtained power beyond almost every person in the galaxy, Patriarch Reginald must definitely have grown a lot more conceited than before!

His father already exhibited this personality flaw. The chances were great that the son was barely any better in this regard!

Ves just hoped that Reginald would be able to hold himself back long enough to conclude this fruitful testing session in a productive manner.

"Our expert mechs are going hot!"

Casella had already issued her first orders. She had immediately split her forces into two groups.

The Amaranto mounted against the Shield of Samar. The expert rifleman mech used the shoulder of the expert heavy space knight as a support for its formidable luminar crystal rifle.

Venerable Davia Stark did not hold back in the slightest! She not only charged her Instrument of Vengeance rifle at full power, but also activated the Overcharge resonating ability, which temporarily tripled the output of the Amaranto's power reactor!

If that wasn't enough, she also resonated with the Illustrious One, allowing her to activate the Passing Light ability, which had proven to bypass resonance shields in the past!

Activating all of these abilities at once and at full power was extremely strenuous to Venerable Stark. She had to resonate with multiple different entities in a different manner at the same time.

This compelled the middle-aged woman to split her concentration, making so that she had less attention to spare on her own defenses!

Fortunately, the Shield of Samar provided more than adequate cover to the Amaranto, allowing the latter to invest itself fully into its next attack!

"It's rare to see the Amaranto fire a maximum power shot." Ves looked interested as he rubbed his smooth-shaven chin.

In truth, there was one more way to empower the Amaranto's next attack further. However, that required Ves to manually resonate with his masterwork mech and transfer Blinky so that the Amaranto's next attack would be empowered with Worclaw energy.

While Ves was incredibly curious whether an attack of this magnitude was enough to threaten the Mars, he did not choose to employ it this time.

Not only was the MTA watching these proceedings like a hawk, Ves would feel enormously drained and tired after he made this move.

He would have to spend weeks to recover to his peak, which meant he wouldn't be able to rely on this trump card during this entire time!

"Maybe I should have a little more faith in Venerable Stark and the Amaranto." Ves hummed.

When the Amaranto finally let loose, its Instrument of Vengeance spat out a thick and bright light beam that instantly soared toward the Mars and struck against the exterior of the Saint Kingdom!

At first, the beam seemed to pierce through this insanely strong defensive bubble, but then it stopped after traversing just a dozen meters.

"...That's it?" Ves bewilderingly asked.

He knew the power of the Amaranto's full-powered shots quite well. Its power not only came from its custom luminar crystal rifle, but also came from the various enhancements that only this specific combination of expert mech, design spirit and expert pilot could produce!

Yet despite pooling all of their power together, the Amaranto failed to make substantial progress in overcoming the new expert hybrid mech's first layer of defense!

The other two Larkinson ranged expert mechs added their firepower to the mix as well.

The Everchanger's Vitalus rifle along with the Minerva's Irvan rifle not only shot in unison, but also targeted the part of the domain field that had just been pierced by the Instrument of Vengeance!

Yet despite striking the exact same spot at very similar angles, the Patriarch Reginald's Saint Kingdom continued to hold strong!

This level of performance was almost consistent with that of the Olympus Mons!

This was yet another illustration of the notion that the power of an ace mech was largely derived from the ace pilot.

The latter weighed substantially more than the former. This explained why a half-step ace mech like the Mars was still able to project a formidable domain field despite not containing any ace mech-grade resonating exotics!

For their part, the Larkinsons did not give up on their effort. The Amaranto, the Everchanger and the Minerva continued to launch persistent attacks, trying out many different attack methods.

They cycled through different luminar attack phase crystals to see which beam type posed the greatest threat against Reginald's Saint Kingdom.

None of them seemed to be particularly effective, though. Laser beams and positron beams simply winked out as Reginald straightforwardly willed the photons and particles out of existence once the energy entered his Saint Kingdom!

Slicer beams disappeared even faster as they weren't as spread out over a wider area.

Reginald did not even bother to stop the disruptor beams from striking the Mars. While they were supposed to behave similar to EMP attacks by disrupting any electrical systems, the Cross Clan's flagship project was too well-shielded, well-defended and well-constructed for it to be vulnerable to these attacks!

The only beam types that worked a little better were kinetic beams and light beams.

The former was made up of kinetic force which meant that Reginald needed to suppress it through brute force.

The latter were specifically effective against all manner of extraordinary phenomenon.

The Larkinson expert mechs with ranged weapons eventually settled on light beams as their primary mode of attacks. The expert pilots could all observe how Reginald's Saint Kingdom needed to put substantially more effort into stopping the light beams from corroding its integrity.

Yet despite the best efforts of Venerable Stark and company, their ranged attacks lacked the punch to overcome this insanely powerful barrier!

"It's not enough." Sara Voiken shook her head at the sight. "Domain fields are an expression of an ace pilot's ability to control the surrounding space using their mental power or willpower. It is well-known that ace pilots, even newer ones, are able to impose so much control over the reality around them that they can warp and manipulate any form of mass and energy in their reach as long as they are piloting decent mechs. It is apparent that the Mars in its current incarnation provides more than enough amplification for Patriarch Reginald to effectively control matter and energy at a strong enough level to snuff out any relatively weak attacks."

In other words, unless the expert mechs were able to consistently launch attacks that were at least as powerful as the Amaranto's full-powered shots, they wouldn't be able to whittle down the physical integrity of the Mars in the slightest!

All the attacks were doing so far was exhausting Reginald's force of will over time, which was quite futile because the ace pilot had plenty of mental capacity to spare after his explosive breakthrough!

Ace pilots were much greater than expert pilots in every single aspect. Their endurance was no longer comparable to that of expert pilots now that they had overcome their second major bottleneck!

Ves had long been proud of the extreme firepower that he managed to bestow upon the Amaranto, but it was surprising how access to new technology along with entering a more dangerous region could change his attitude.

While he felt it was acceptable if the Everchanger and the Minerva weren't able to overcome this challenge, the lack of threat from the Amaranto towards the Mars was a significant letdown!

The Amaranto was supposed to be his answer against singularly powerful individual threats! If it wasn't able to threaten the Mars when it was in its peak form, then how could Ves rely on it to take on other powerful threats in the future?

"I definitely need to upgrade her rifle in a future design round!" Ves vowed to himself.

At this moment, he suspected that not even ten expert rifleman mechs identical to the Amaranto was able to pose a serious threat to the Mars. Their collective firepower still wasn't great enough to overcome the incredible defensive threshold of Patriarch Reginald's Saint Kingdom!

"Our melee mechs are about to close in on the Mars!"

Ves perked up a bit when he saw that the other Larkinson expert mechs were about to go into action.

Yet when the Dark Zephyr approached first by virtue of its speed and entered the 'bubble' that denoted Reginald's domain field, the expert light skirmisher abruptly slowed down to the point it was frozen into place!

Even its powerful resonance shield that provided the mech with essential protection against outside influences collapsed like a bubble!

"This..."

"The disparity in willpower is too great." Professor Benedict calmly pointed out.

"Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson is still a low-tier expert pilot. No matter how many tricks he can pull off in battle, when it comes to a straightforward contest of resonance strength, he has no chance of resisting!"

This was why the mech community often thought that it would be suicide for expert mechs to fight against ace mechs at closer ranges.

As long as the former entered the Saint Kingdoms of the latter, they directly subjected themselves to the whims of the opposing ace pilot!

"This is pure willpower suppression!"

Chapter 4136 Battlefield Domination

Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson did not feel good at the moment!

Though he may act a bit careless at times, he wasn't a stupid expert pilot. He trained diligently and also studied plenty of books in order to increase his understanding of other mechs.

Light skirmishers generally fared badly against hybrid mechs. The latter were usually armed with a multitude of ranged weapons. Although these guns weren't particularly powerful, their quantity meant that they could output a lot of shots at a target.

If enough of this rain of fire struck a light skirmisher, the latter machine would definitely get into trouble due to its light armor and low damage tolerance!

It spoke a lot that the Mars did not even engage any of its weapon systems against the approaching Dark Zephyr.

This left the expert light skirmisher free to move close enough to enter the range of Patriarch Reginald's Saint Kingdom.

It was only at that point that Tusa realized why so many people advocated against this action.

An expert pilot trying to approach an ace pilot was no different from a mouse creeping up to a cat!

Tusa felt completely suppressed when he entered Reginald's domain field. This went beyond technology. Even if his Dark Zephyr was stronger, it hardly wouldn't have made a difference.

No enemy expert pilot could ever make him feel so utterly helpless and without power!

"It's not only that...!"

There was more to Reginald's willpower expression than straightforward suppression.

The man's unique upbringing, battles and other harsh experiences had shaped him into a warrior that pursued both glory and victory and battle.

This not only shaped his prototypical domain back when he was an expert pilot, but also affected its traits now that he had advanced to ace pilot.

This was what made Saint Kingdoms so special and compelling. The unique traits of ace pilots were much more obvious after experiencing so much growth and evolution!

There were some Saint Kingdoms that embodied fire. Any mech that entered these fields would spontaneously grow hotter and overheat even if they weren't running any intensive systems!

There were other Saint Kingdoms that centered around controlling time. They could literally freeze time in an area so that every incoming projectile or energy beam froze as soon as they entered into range.

Weirder and more unusual Saint Kingdoms also existed. There was one that enhanced the performance of every friendly expert mech. There was another one that rapidly drained the energy reserves of opposing mechs. There was even a Saint Kingdom that could convert enemies into allies!

The one that Patriarch Reginald acquired wasn't as perverted as that, but it was still hard to deal with by opponents who entered into his range.

Tusa gritted his teeth as he and the Dark Zephyr tried their best to resist the overwhelming mental pressure exerted by Reginald's powerful presence.

Yet all the expert pilot could do was to make sure he did not bow his head and admit his inferiority in front of Reginald.

"I... won't... submit!"

Patriarch Reginald's Saint Kingdom centered around battlefield domination.

The ace pilot considered himself to be a leader, a champion and a warlord in the same vein as his late father.

As such, he developed an obsession of achieving martial superiority on the battlefield!

Though Reginald wasn't interested in the finer points of rulership and governance, what he truly valued was to become the strongest and most powerful warrior in any battle!

He not only wanted to become the top dog, but let everyone know it, especially his foes!

This strong and persistent desire turned into an obsession that shaped his Saint Kingdom into one that not only acted on the minds of living mech pilots such as Venerable Tusa, but also acted upon both mechs and attacks!

No matter whether they were alive or not, Reginald demanded the submission of all of them! The fact that he did not even let off light photons was a testament to his need for recognition!

As the other expert mechs entered the Saint Kingdom shortly afterwards, they too became directly exposed to the same effect.

The Riot with its unusually chaotic resonance shield fared a bit better against the pressure. The mech was not only thicker and more powerful than the Dark Zephyr, it also happened to have a defensive design spirit in the form of Qilanxo.

Qilanxo was able to provide a decent amount of help in allowing the Riot to maintain control, but the design spirit's influence only extended up to a point.

As Reginald actively noticed the Riot's increased resistance, he concentrated more and more of his formidable willpower onto the expert spearman mech.

Eventually, the Riot lost control as well as its resonance shield broke apart after being subjected to the overwhelming power of an ace pilot!

"Agh!" Venerable Orfan roared in frustration. "Goddammit, Riot, move! The Mars is just over there! At least get close enough so that I can land a single hit. This is embarrassing!"

While the Riot got stalled due to Reginald's active efforts, the First Sword was able to move forward, much to everyone's surprise.

Part of it was due to the protection granted by its design spirit. Qilanxo shared a special relationship with both Orfan and Dise, so she was able to provide more assistance to their expert mechs.

However, this was not enough for the First Sword to maintain control under this extreme pressure.

The true reason for the First Sword's continued resistance was due to the special qualities of the expert pilot!

Just like Ketis, Venerable Dise was a Swordmaiden who had trained her entire life to overcome enemies that were stronger and more intimidating than herself.

Dise excelled as a hunter and got more excited when she confronted more formidable opponents.

Though an ace pilot was well above her ability to defeat, she did not want to suffer defeat so easily!"

"If I can't pass this test, how can I ever protect my fellow sisters in future battles?!"

Venerable Dise's protective desires along with her thirst to challenge the most powerful opponents on the battlefield combined into a form of resistance that was a bit more effective against the mental suppression that Reginald exerted from his Mars!

However, once the ace pilot directed more and more of his formidable will towards the First Sword, the expert swordsman mech slowed down its advance.

Venerable Dise might be strong enough to prevent total paralysis, but her expert mech was not as resistant!

By forcibly freezing the First Sword in place, Reginald effectively took the expert mech out of action!

Right now, none of the Larkinson expert mechs demonstrated any effectiveness towards the Mars!

Though Reginald's Saint Kingdom became easier to destabilize now that he was forced to split his concentration and willpower to support numerous simultaneous actions, his recent advancement had strengthened him so much that he was still able to support this herculean effort!

"Ace pilots are too unreasonable." Ves bitterly said.

Though he already foresaw that this result could happen, to see how an ace pilot was completely able to dominate the champions of his clan was like rubbing salt in a wound.

Ves already intended to invest fairly big in the upcoming upgrade projects for his older expert mechs, but now it became truly obvious how much he needed to put in a lot more money and resources to bring the expert mechs closer to parity!

"Benedict, can you tell the new Saint to give our expert pilots a break?" Ves asked.
"Although it is nice to observe this interaction, we aren't collecting any further data at this point."

"I will pass on the word."

Soon enough, Saint Reginald slowly retracted his Saint Kingdom. Though it had suffered a lot of repeated attacks, it was far from reaching its limit.

"C'mon!" Venerable Orfan suddenly roared over the communication channel. "Stop moping about and put up a fight! The Mars should be a lot more beatable now that we don't have to resist a Saint Kingdom anymore!"

The Larkinson expert pilots all regained a bit of morale and began to assault the Mars in earnest!

They followed Casella's original plan and used a combination of ranged suppression and hit-and-run attacks in order to grind down the defenses of their formidable opponent.

At first, this routine proceeded decently enough. While the Mars was far from defenseless at close range, the three Larkinson expert melee mechs brilliantly coordinated their maneuvers and always attacked the Mars from three different directions!

This way, Patriarch Reginald needed to choose which expert mech he wanted to block and repel.

If not for the fact that the Abasis Armor easily resisted every ranged and melee strike, this combat approach would have distressed any powerful opponent!

"What kind of nonsense is this?!" Venerable Orfan complained as the Riot's spear bounced away from the exposed rear of the Mars. "Even the flight system is protected by its own phasic shield! How much tech and power did the mech designers manage to cram into this unreal machine?!"

Even though all of the Larkinson expert mechs aside from the Shield of Samar were in the process of pounding the Mars with attacks, the machine covered with a state-of-the-art transphasic armor system easily withstood all of the energy and forces that would have crushed any other expert mech at this point!

No matter whether the Larkinson expert mechs concentrated all of their attacks on a single point or dispersed them across the frame of their target, none of their efforts succeeded in inducing any stress on the Abasis Armor!

The brand-new high-tier expert mech remained as spotless as ever!

The Larkinson expert pilots tried out almost every solution in their arsenal.

For example, Venerable Joshua resonated with Helena and imparted the Everchanger's next ranged attacks with death energy, only for the gray energy beams to splash harmlessly across the red-dotted surface of the Mars.

Venerable Dise also channeled her most powerful and penetrating sword techniques as the First Sword swung its masterwork mech sword.

Yet no matter how much First Sword struck the Mars with its sharp sword, the war god in the form of a mech did not display even a single scratch.

The transphasic defenses of the Cross Clan's new flagship mech was simply too strong!

It was not for nothing that Professor Benedict and the Cross Clan resolutely invested 11 whole kilograms of phasewater in order to equip the Mars with a full application of Abasis Armor.

The Mars had no weak points! Every single part of the expert mech was as resilient as the shield of an expert heavy mech, if not more.

Compared to a much larger and more massive machine like the Shield of Samar, the Mars was a much more convincing defensive powerhouse!

This was rather ironic as the Mars was actually an offensive mech.

After letting the Larkinson expert mechs hit its Abasis Armor without achieving any significant results, Patriarch Reginald finally decided that it was time for him to reciprocate the attacks.

The Mars did not utilize its shotgun nor any of its other powerful and unusual attack methods.

It simply employed two different weapons to fend off against two types of opponents.

First, the Mars employed its transphasic axe to overpower the melee mechs that sought to attack it up close!

Second, the Mars warmed up its ARCEUS System and fired its liberal amount of integrated energy weapons at the distant ranged mechs!

"Ahh!"

The transphasic and resonance-empowered attacks hit hard!

The Shield of Samar lost its formidable resonance shield after suffering repeated attacks from the ARCEUS System.

Though its massive Unending alloy tower shield was not as easy to overcome, its surface rapidly heated up as a multitude of powerful energy attacks pounded against its surface.

What was worse was that the transphasic nature of the incoming attacks also bypassed a portion of the armor!

Other expert mechs fared much worse against these powerful energy attacks. The Minerva was forced to hide behind against the Everchanger, which in itself had switched over to a brand new design spirit in order to take a bit of the edge off the incoming energy beams.

Venerable Joshua found that while Qilanxo and the Phase King were both capable of bolstering the Everchanger's resistance against transphasic attacks, the absolute gap in power between the two mechs was simply too great!

"How is it able to turn so fast?!"

If that wasn't ridiculous enough, even the Dark Zephyr wasn't able to gain any advantage at close range!

The Mars was not only capable of chopping the thinly-armored expert light skirmisher in half with a single heavy swing, it was also able to rotate and accelerate at a much more accelerated pace than normal!

By activating the Pulsvar V-1 flight system's transphasic mode, the Mars moved almost as quickly as the Dark Zephyr.

This not only allowed the Mars to catch up on expert light mechs, but also enabled it to maneuver around other melee mechs only to strike them at unblockable angles!

Suffice to say, the sparring session did not last much longer at this point.

By the time the Mars slowly powered down its active systems despite not having reached the limits of its endurance, each and every Larkinson expert mech looked completely listless!

Perhaps the expert mechs still had plenty of fight left in them, but their expert pilots were thoroughly convinced they could do nothing against their horrifyingly powerful opponent!

The Cross Clan's new superstar and his fantastic masterwork mech were simply too dominant in battle!

Chapter 4137 Option of Last Resort

Every Larkinson expert pilot exited their cockpits and left the hangar bay with bitter expressions.

Each of them were accustomed to pulling out miracles on the battlefield. It was a significant letdown to know that they could do nothing at all to suppress or repel Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Mars in a serious battle.

Sure, the Larkinsons may have withheld a few tricks such as battle formations, but it was doubtful that those solutions could have overcome the absolute gap in power as well.

The Mars was for all intents and purposes an ace mech-level combat asset as far as everyone was concerned.

Though the expert mech technically did not contain the full set of components that corresponded to ace mechs, its extraordinarily powerful pilot was more than strong enough to close the gap!

As such, the Cross Clan had gained an absolute advantage over the Larkinson Clan in terms of martial strength.

It did not matter if the latter outnumbered the former in terms of expert mechs and ordinary mechs.

The presence of a single ace pilot was enough to completely skew the results of any battle!

This was a gap that the Larkinsons could not close for a long time!

After all, in order obtain an asset that could compete fairly against Patriarch Reginald and the Mars, the Larkinson Clan first needed to cultivate its own ace pilot!

As the Larkinson expert pilots all exchanged morose glances with each other, it became clear that none of them would be closing the gap anytime soon.

They first needed to become mid-tier expert pilots and then high-tier expert pilots before they could think about making this life-changing step.

Depending on their talent, training and whether they had access to a masterwork expert mech, this growth process could take decades!

That was a lot of time the Larkinsons would spend without enjoying the protection of an ace pilot of their own.

While the clan was fairly good at producing new expert pilots, each of them had to start from the beginning, so they were no help at all in any top-level combat scenarios.

The only faint source of hope was Venerable Davia Stark, who had developed much more than her peers.

The problem was that she was technically a guest pilot who did not commit to serving the Larkinson Clan on a permanent basis.

So even if she was actually a mid-tier expert pilot, she wouldn't stick around to protect the Larkinsons forever.

However, her head-start did make it so that she was the most likely expert pilot among them to advance to ace pilot first.

This meant that the Larkinsons would still have to rely on Venerable Stark to protect the clan for the remainder of the time she was fighting alongside her current compatriots.

Venerable Joshua clenched his fist. Though it was not unjust for him to be unable to threaten the Patriarch Reginald in the slightest, he still felt inadequate after their bout.

"I need to do more to catch up. I can't take everything for granted anymore."

The Larkinson Clan enjoyed so many successes as of late that he had unconsciously lowered his training intensity.

Though he was still fairly earnest in his desire to grow stronger, he had spent more time with Ketis ever since she had given birth.

Joshua valued his identity as a father quite a lot! As someone who cherished life in all forms, to be able to raise his own child provided him with a sense of joy that was indescribable.

Although his mentality underwent a lot of changes after he started to embody the role of a father, his skills improved slower than he liked.

"I need to step up my training and figure out more ways to defeat strong opponents." Joshua decided.

Now that he thought about it, he always relied on others to cover this area.

Part of it was because Joshua wasn't particularly good at dueling. He was an all-rounder as a pilot and his Everchanger did not possess any pronounced strengths.

Another part of it was because he never saw the need to excel in this aspect.

However, the traumatic encounter against the Mars told him that he would definitely regret it if he did not do something about this shortcoming!

What if Patriarch Reginald Cross wasn't available to stop the enemy's most powerful champion?

What if Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise already had their hands full with stopping other champions?

There weren't a lot of Larkinson expert mechs left that could fend off these sort of peak threats!

At this time, Venerable Joshua truly wanted to step up and become closer to a fearless warrior like Patriarch Reginald!

From the surging combativeness that emanated from the other Larkinson expert pilots, Joshua clearly wasn't alone in his new resolve.

Back in the observation room, Ves and the others wrapped up all of the data from the initial testing session and already began to draw preliminary conclusions from what they witnessed.

"Defense is the strongest side of the Mars, at least for now." Sara Voiken stated first. "Reginald's Saint Kingdom combined with the Abasis Armor are so intractable that not even a warship should be able to overpower these defensive measures in an instant."

Professor Benedict did not quite agree. "That is only relative to weaker and more mundane threats, young lady. The Mars is ultimately an offensive mech. In order to ensure that it packs a sufficient punch, we did not do our utmost in maximizing its defensive power. Against a genuine ace mech, the Mars will have to play on a much more even ground. At the very least, Reginald's Saint Kingdom will probably get neutralized by the opposing ace pilot's Saint Kingdom."

An area could not accommodate two kings. If different ace pilots tried to lay claim to the same area of space, they would inevitably collide with each other, causing them to cancel out each other's domain fields!

This was why Saint Kingdoms weren't prioritized any further. They might be extremely useful in helping ace mechs fight against warships and weaker mechs, but it took other measures in order for them to defeat opponents of the same kind!

"How does the Abasis Armor fare in comparison to other ace mechs?" Ves curiously asked.

"From what I have been told, it is more than adequate enough to keep up in battles against other ace mechs." Professor Benedict reassured everyone. "Although there are ace mechs that possess even more exotic defensive solutions, few of them enjoy transphasic armor systems at the moment. The Mars will not find itself wanting because of inadequate defenses."

That provided everyone with a bit of relief. They already wanted to count on the Mars to block any enemy ace mechs if they showed up in the future.

The mech designers swapped more opinions and insights. Each of them had plenty to say about the Mars. Most of their opinions were positive, but not everything was perfect about the high-tier expert mech.

Gloriana pointed out a particularly concerning weak point. "The endurance of the Mars is pretty remarkable, but a large proportion of its performance is directly reliant on the health and state of its pilot. What this means is that the Mars will fight a lot better if

Patriarch Reginald is in a good mood, but if he is injured or in the wrong mind state, then his mech will not be able to perform up to our expectations."

"There's more." Ves added. "Even if Reginald is in a good mood, there are a lot of aspects of the Mars that directly rely on true resonance in order to deliver the best possible performance. The domain field, the Abasis Armor, the transphasic axe and every other resonating exotic that we put into the design are all highly effective as long as Patriarch Reginald has willpower to spare. While we don't have to worry about the Mars running on fumes as long as we end up in an ordinary fight, if the battle happens to drag on for many hours or if one enemy group arrives after another, pilot exhaustion will become a real concern."

This was a pretty major issue. When expert pilots and ace pilots strain their minds and will to the point where they ran themselves ragged, then there was no easy way for them to restore their willpower in a short amount of time.

Only a good sleep and an extended rest would allow them to restore their reserves. This could take as much as an entire day if not more depending on many factors.

There were no stimulants or medicines that could hasten the recovery of their extraordinary willpower.

This was unlike mechs that normally only had to swap out their depleted energy cells for fresh ones in order to get ready for another round of fighting.

Therefore, it was quite realistic for a situation to occur where the Mars was still able to fight for many hours, but because Patriarch Reginald had already repelled one wave of enemies with difficulty, could not deploy again as a second wave of enemy was about to descend upon the Golden Skull Alliance!

"This shows that we cannot offload all of our responsibilities to Patriarch Reginald and the Mars." Professor Benedict eventually concluded. "We need to offload as many of them to our other assets as possible. We shouldn't employ the Mars against enemies that can easily be wiped out by our regular mech forces."

"You mean we should treat the Mars as a trump card?"

"More of an option of last resort. If possible, we should keep Reginald and his powerful mech in reserve. It would be best if the Mars does not fight at all. Regular threats should be dealt with by our regular mech units. More potent threats should be handled by our expert mechs and other special solutions. We should only bring out the Mars when we encounter an enemy that we cannot solve with the aforementioned means."

This was the best arrangement, all considered. The Mars could easily crush weaker opponents, but why bother with letting that happen? The Larkinsons and the Cross Clan

possessed plenty of formidable mech units. Their other mech pilots needed the practice as well!

Keeping the Mars in reserve also ensured that the Golden Skull Alliance would have a fully-charged 'weapon of mass destruction' at its fingertips at any point during a hostile encounter.

It would be a tragedy if the Mars wasted much of its power resisting against regular opponents only for a hostile ace mech to show up at a later point!

"We can discuss our strategies and doctrines at a later date." Ves said. "Leave this job to our generals and military personnel. We should focus on our real jobs. Are there any shortcomings of the Mars that we should address, either in the short term or in the medium term?"

The Mars was about to undergo a years-long upgrade process, but that did not mean it would get dismantled right away.

Professor Benedict and his Unbounder buddies would merely spend a lot of time puzzling over a revised design. Once they successfully completed the upgraded design would they truly take the precious machine apart!

Therefore, there was still room to make relatively minor tweaks that ensured the Golden Skull Alliance would enjoy the strongest possible protection for the coming years.

"We have yet to equip the Mars with a minidrive." Juliet Stameris pointed out. "The high-tier expert mech would become a lot more effective in spaceborn battles if it is equipped with this module."

"How easy is it for us to get our hands on a minidrive?"

Professor Benedict's expression turned angry. "It depends on how much phasewater you are willing to pay to the few companies that manufacture minidrives. If you are willing to pay the 'prevailing market price' of double the phasewater needed to fabricate a minidrive, then these high-tech firms will eagerly oblige us. If you try to negotiate with them, they will put you on a waiting list that is so long that it will take decades before we can get our turn!"

"Haven't you tried to acquire any of those companies?"

"It is not as easy as you think." The Senior shook his head. "The profitability of these companies are so high that their market valuations are high as well. The cost to purchase them is astronomical. Besides, many of them are already owned by first-class groups with extremely powerful backgrounds. We won't be able to get our foot in the door."

This was a major problem. The Mars wasn't the only mech that was slated to be equipped with an optional minidrive. The C-Man along with many other expert mechs were awaiting their own modules as well!

Chapter 4138 The State of the Colonies

"So how powerful is the Mars exactly?"

"We don't know."

"You don't know?" Tristan Wesseling raised his eyebrow.

Perla Monater, the diplomatic attaché that might also be a spy, shrugged her shoulders.

"We weren't able to observe or obtain any records of those initial testing sessions. What little intelligence we have been able to learn over the years is that the Mars not only showed dominant performance in ordinary scenarios, but was also able to compete against the MTA's own mechs."

"What?! Truly?!" Tristan looked shocked!

Although it wasn't unheard of for second-class ace mechs to be able to give the MTA's standard mechs a run for their money, the Mars was technically an expert mech at the time.

For it to be able to 'compete' against the MTA's own machines was an impressive technical accomplishment!

"Wait, how exactly did the Mars fare against the mechs of the MTA?" Tristan frowned. "Was it able to fight on even ground against just a single MTA mech, or did it manage to pressure an entire squad?"

The latter case was unlikely, but it was still within the realm of possibility.

"We don't know, and that has made it difficult for us to estimate the actual combat power of the Mars at that point in time." Miss Monater said. "What is important is that the Mars had already reached a level of power that completely ruled out the possibility of defeating the Larkinson Clan on a military front. If there was a faint window of opportunity in the past, the breakthrough of Patriarch Reginald Cross closed it up. Even if Ves Larkinson occasionally exited the stronghold of Davute to visit less defended star systems from time to time, he did not forget to drag along his pals from the Cross Clan."

From what he learned of the Friday Coalition's colonization effort in the Red Ocean, the price of organizing an attack on the Golden Skull Alliance was simply too great!

The colonies set up by the Fridaymen enjoyed a slow start due to the devastation of the Komodo War.

The citizens and leaders of the Friday Coalition understandably invested most of their attention and resources in the conquest and rebuilding of their expanded holdings in the Komodo Star Sector.

While this was undoubtedly the correct decision, this prevented the state from channeling too much funding, resources, starships, mechs and manpower to the new frontier.

The colonial Fridaymen already experienced enough difficulties in fending off the Hexers in exile.

How could it possibly spare the tens of thousands of mechs and dozens of expert mechs to launch a second deep strike against the Golden Skull Alliance?

Their first disastrous attempt already showed how bad of an idea it was to attack a military alliance that seemed to be able to pull out one trump card after another!

"So have you truly ruled out a military solution against the Larkinson Clan?" Tristan critically asked.

"I can't say. I am just a footsoldier." Miss Monater replied. "However, let me note that our enemy is not the Cross Clan or even the entire Larkinson Clan. Our greatest overarching threat in the Red Ocean is the mech designer known as Ves Larkinson. We will be happy if he is removed off board, but since that is not possible with our current means, we will have to form a compromise with the man."

The way she sounded implied that while the Friday Coalition had decisively ruled out any chance of defeating the Larkinson Clan on the battlefield, its agencies had never given up the opportunity to assassinate their key target!

Tristan felt conflicted about this. From what he knew about Ves, the man never took the initiative to provoke a conflict.

Though he made a number of bad choices and eventually stood on the opposite side, Ves was the victim in this vendetta.

On the other hand, Ves had done more damage to the Friday Coalition than any other mech designer. Though he was avidly not a Hexer, he was married to one. Not only that, he actively supplied the Hex Army with extremely troublesome mech models that riled up their radical soldiers!

Mechs such as the Valkyrie Redeemer not only delayed the Hex Army's defeat, but also led to the deaths of billions more Fridaymen soldiers and civilians who got caught up in the violence!

Was it fair to ascribe all of those deaths and tragedies before the feet of Ves Larkinson?

Not really.

Tristan was a mech designer himself. He also understood the helplessness of mech designers who were unable to control the actions of their own customers.

However, the Hexer mechs designed by Ves were hardly ordinary market products. They were commissioned products that were expressly designed to empower the Hexers so that they could kill more Fridaymen!

It was not wrong to designate Ves as the greatest individual threat and risk factor towards his state.

Tristan had the illusion that the fate of the Fridaymen colonial states was in his hands!

"If I fail... will our colonies in the new frontier get wiped off the map?"

Perla Monater shrugged again. "I truly can't say. We are working on multiple initiatives to even the odds and give our colonies a better chance of survival. Personally speaking, I don't think that any of the initiatives are likely to succeed. You can think of it as buying a hundred lottery tickets. We are hoping that one of them will win the jackpot, though the chances of that happening still aren't great."

Tristan looked troubled. "So I'm just a lottery ticket to our state?"

His handler for this mission chuckled. "I would say that you are the super deluxe lottery ticket. The best way for us to melt the contradiction between the Larkinson Patriarch and our state is to speak with him directly. You are the Fridayman that is most likely able to talk with him under amicable circumstances. That is good enough for us to pin our hopes on your efforts."

"You certainly aren't making it easier for me to bear this heavy responsibility."

"Well, tough luck, Tristan, because you can't avoid it. We find it important that you realize the stakes of this attempted negotiation. If you are able to get into a talk with him, we don't want you to fall for his notorious charm and allow him to take over the initiative. He is not called the Devil Tongue for nothing, though that particular moniker is not that well-known in the Red Ocean."

The two fell into a heavy silence. Tristan looked up the information on the Larkinson Clan and its extensive network of allies and business partners and found it difficult to imagine that Ves would take him seriously.

The Friday Coalition might be bigshots in its native star sector, but out here in the new frontier there were many rising powers that held more sway!

"We need a lot of leverage." Tristan emphasized. "The Larkinsons are doing fantastic on the mech market. Their most powerful military ally has gained a powerful ace pilot whose ace mech is probably done at this time. Their ties with the Hexers are still close due to his wife along with the Glory Seekers acting as bridges. Ves has nothing to fear from our state and he knows it. We can't employ coercive means to extract concessions."

"We don't intend to do so at all." Miss Monater quickly said. "Given his emotional decision-making pattern, the risk of provoking a backlash is too great. We will solely give you a list of incentives that you may offer to him in order to secure a deal. We have noticed that appealing to his greed and desires has consistently worked for parties that have gone on to become his partners."

"Where is this list you are talking about?"

"We are still working on finalizing it." Miss Monater pressed her lips. "The list is highly... political, as you can imagine. Every coalition partner has a different idea on what concessions we should prepare to give to a single individual."

Tristan hadn't heard of this yet, though in hindsight he shouldn't have been surprised.

"Oh? Can you tell me what the different coalition partners think about this initiative?"

"Officially, I cannot divulge anything of the sort. I am not even eligible to hear any details at my level. However... I do not want you going in blind. I think it is better if you understand our side of the equation to a greater extent as well."

This caused Tristan to develop a different impression of Perla Monater. He initially thought that she was just a typical diplomat or spook who treated this as a typical mission.

Now, he began to develop other thoughts.

"What do you think I should know?"

"Well, let's start with the divided structure of our state. Our coalition is not really united, which I am sure you already know."

"Oh, I know. I know quite well." Tristan said.

He had dealt with plenty of that during and after the Komodo War! The competition between the different coalition partners had only intensified after the Hexers ceased to be a threat in the Komodo Star Sector!

"Well, let me state right away that all of that ugliness has affected us as well. For example, the Gauge Dynasty is the most reluctant about negotiating with the Larkinson Patriarch."

Tristan snorted. "Figures. The Gauge Dynasty was always arrogant before the Komodo War. Now that Gaugers had not only retained most of their strength after the devastating conflict back home, they have become insufferably pushy against the other Fridaymen."

"As you say, the Gauge Dynasty has become more powerful because it indeed suffered less than many other coalition partners. This not only allowed the Gaugers to invest more resources in their own colonies, but also encouraged them to push less hard for reconciliation."

"Wait, what?"

"Yes, I'm not kidding, Tristan. The Gauge Dynasty thinks that it possesses the power to safeguard its colonies in this dwarf galaxy."

"It sounds like there is more to that story than what you just said?"

"You would be correct." Miss Monater nodded. "We believe the Gaugers are secretly hoping that the conflict against the Hexers would last for a while. You see, the aggressive Hexer raiders that have been harassing our colonies are not stupid. If they have a choice between raiding a lightly defended colony and a heavily defended colony, they would choose the former in most of the cases."

Tristan understood the implication. "Which means that the colonies of our weaker coalition partners suffer many more attacks!"

"Exactly. Let us review how the coalition partners fared in the Komodo War, shall we? First, you have the pair of weaklings. The Puffer Clan and the Vanguard Group were anemic before the war had even begun. Their lack of military strength and contributions during the great conflict has left them with the smallest shares of the spoils, which is fair but does not help them catch up to the other coalition partners."

The Journeyman Mech Designer turned sympathetic towards these bottom groups. "The Puffers and the Vanguarders should be the ones who are most desperate to reconcile with Ves. They probably have the weakest colonies in the Red Ocean."

"Correct. The Hexers have already inflicted heavy damage onto their settlements, causing the Puffers and Vanguarders to fall even further behind in this colonial race."

"What about the next two coalition partners?"

Miss Monater grimaced. "Their colonies are in bad shape as well. The Carnegie Group and the Vermeer Group both suffered untold devastation in its core territories during the Komodo War as the Hex Army left a trail of devastation during the initial invasion. Though the two coalition partners received a lot of compensation for the damages that they have suffered, they are obliged to invest most of their resources in rebuilding their old cities and infrastructure. The citizens of the two coalition partners would not be able to accept any decision to divert a huge amount of funding and resources to a handful of distant colonies that are hundreds of thousands of light-years away!"

"That's... understandable."

Tristan fully understood this sentiment. He was a citizen of the Carnegie Group and wanted his people to be able to rebuild their old homes and businesses after the war.

However, ever since he traveled to this dwarf galaxy, he understood the strategic importance of maintaining colonies in this neighborhood. It would be too shortsighted to neglect the settlements that offered the folks back home easier access to phasewater and other valuable trade goods!

Chapter 4139 Fractured From Within

"I take it the Carnegies and the Vermeers aren't faring too well either, correct?"

"Yes. Their colonies are suffering just as many attacks as the ones founded by the Puffers and the Vanguarders. You can say that the settlements of all four coalition partners are easy marks to the Hexers."

That did not sit well with Tristan. The four weakest coalition partners didn't deserve to get beat up so much. They suffered many injustices over the years and could never do anything about their grievances because of their lacking military might.

"What about the remaining two coalition partners?"

Miss Monater adopted a wry expression. "What do you think? The Gauge Dynasty and the Khonsu Clan have retained most of their strength after the Komodo War, and were therefore able to dispatch more mechs and starships to the Red Ocean. Their colonies are the strongest on a comparable basis and that has made the Hexers leave them alone for the most part. The longer the Hexers continue with their harassment campaign, the greater the disparity between the top two and the bottom four will grow. Therefore, as far as the Gaugers and the Khonsus are concerned, they are not so eager for the Hexers to stop their bullying actions!"

This stance was completely contrary to what the Friday Coalition stood for. The union of partners might not hold that many common ideals, but every Fridayman should have been united in their common goal of resisting the Hexer people!

For the arrogant Gaugers and Khonsus to not only do anything to lend a hand to their weaker partners, but also make convenient use of the Hexers as proxy raiders went too far!

"Aren't they afraid that their colonies would collapse next once the Hexers are done with the weaker ones?"

"That's the thing, Tristan. The two are highly confident that they can use this buffer period to rapidly build up their colonies into strongholds. They actually have a decent chance at doing so as the Gaugers and the Khonsus are the only groups to build up their strength. Everyone else is constantly engaged in so many fights and skirmishes that they are suffering from constant attrition."

The scheme of the Gauge Dynasty and the Khonsu Clan were so obvious now that Tristan obtained the full story.

The two just wanted to hole up in their hills and look down as their old enemies and their unqualified partners tore each other apart!

Once this conflict proceeded long enough, everyone would suffer so much damage that the mech forces that the Gaugers and the Khonsus had painstakingly built up could easily sweep the depleted obstacles that remained in the new frontier!

Of course, what the two strongest coalition partners wanted to see the most was the Hexers wiping out every Carnegie, Vermeer, Puffer and Vanguard colony by their own power.

This would save the Gaugers and the Khonsus from doing the dirty deed themselves! All they had to do was to 'avenge the fallen' and roll up the Hexers as the rabid women had exhausted their forces after fighting in so many battles!

"The Gauge Dynasty and the Khonsu Clan will have the last laugh at this rate!"

The implications and ripple effects of his mission became even more convoluted than before.

It wasn't enough for Tristan to decide the future of the Friday Coalition's colonial ambitions in the Red Ocean. His negotiations could also alter the balance of power between the different coalition partners that made up his state!

As Tristan struggled to understand his vastly expanded responsibilities, Perla Monater moved to his side and softly padded his shoulder.

"I can understand that you would rather not undertake this important duty in the first place, but if you think about it carefully, would you rather be the person to control the outcome of the negotiations or do you want to leave this vital responsibility to another Fridayman?"

"..."

Perla smirked. "Let me tell you that the Gauge Dynasty would have loved to push forth their own representative in order to control the proceeding, but everyone correctly recognized how this would have resulted in another disaster."

"Because of Lady Aisling Curver."

"Primarily, yes. It doesn't help that the Gauge Dynasty has also been the strongest proponent to launching the original deep strike operation against the Golden Skull Alliance."

"Hahahaha!" Tristan couldn't help but burst out in laughter. "Let me get this straight. Years ago, Ves became one of the Gauge Dynasty's most wanted enemies. The Gaugers wanted to kill or capture him so badly that they even agreed to deploy an expensive deep strike fleet carrier. Yet now that the Hexers have become a convenient source of pressure towards the weaker coalition partners, the Gaugers don't want to reconcile so quickly."

Though Tristan had long been exposed to the internal division of the Friday Coalition, he and his fellow Fridaymen always assumed it was a fact of life.

The rivalry and infighting between the coalition partners hadn't been that bad when the state was in a time of peace. Very little events took place that encouraged the Gauge Dynasty and the others to plot against their fellow brothers.

All of that changed in a short amount of time. The outbreak of the Komodo War as well as the coincidental opening of the Red Ocean caused so many changes and opened up so many new opportunities that the strongest coalition partners recognized that there was a great chance to widen the distance from the weaker partners even further!

The greed of the Gauge Dynasty and to a lesser extent the Khonsu Clan had grown so rapacious that they invested most of their attention on plotting the downfall of their close compatriots instead of their common enemy!

Was this what the Friday Coalition had descended into these days? Had the Komodo War and its uneven outcome towards the different coalition partners corrupted his state to such an extent that it was creeping towards self-destruction?!

Tristan's eyes suddenly sharpened. He scooted a bit away from Perla Monater and regarded her in a different light than before.

"Who do you work for, woman?!"

"What do you mean, dear Tristan?"

"Don't treat me like a fool. I may have been a sheltered mech designer once, but I've dealt with way too many schemes when I took part in the rebuilding operations back in our home star sector. You may look like an agent of the Friday Coalition on the surface, but from the way you've been manipulating me all this time makes me think you are partial towards just a part of our state."

The diplomatic attaché did not look ashamed at all for getting exposed. She hadn't been trying that hard to hide her true loyalties in the first place, so perhaps this was all a carefully staged routine.

"Clever, clever. You do not disappoint me in this regard, Mr. Wesseling. Your ability to read other people and discern their true motivations will be essential in the times to come. There are way more people paying attention to our initiative than you think. Perhaps other people will approach you in the future who will speak on behalf of other interest groups. You can talk to whoever you want, but don't lose sight of your true loyalties."

"And what are my true loyalties, exactly?" Tristan cynically asked. "Evidently, it is no longer enough to describe myself as an envoy of the Friday Coalition when it is already fracturing from within."

Miss Monater crossed her arms. "Since you're so curious, I will let you know who I am truly speaking for. I'm a citizen of the Vermeer Group, and I feel it is my duty to guard the interests of my fellow comrades from my home."

"...Isn't it taboo for people who work in state-level branches such as you to put your own coalition partner ahead of the other five ones?"

"We're no longer stuck in the past, Tristan. We live in a post-Komodo War era where the Hexadric Hegemony no longer poses a common and existential threat to our home state. Without this Sword of Damocles hanging over our heads, our greatest threats are no longer the lunatic women from afar, but the brothers-in-arms that used to cover our backs. While there are many Fridaymen who are slow to accept this new reality, I am not one of them. I am a child of Vermeer first and a citizen of the Friday Coalition second."

"I see."

Her unabashed description of her true allegiance put Tristan in a difficult spot. He had this mission and traveled all the way to the Davute System on the assumption that he would be undertaking a role for the good of his entire state.

It was only now that he realized that the Coalition had become so splintered that it was impossible for him to satisfy every coalition partner at the same time.

If he was able to accomplish anything in a future talk with his old friend Ves, he was keenly aware that he needed to make hard choices about which concessions he favored!

No decision could be separated from the taint of factional politics. A straightforward promise of withdrawal from the Hexers was no longer universally good to the entire Friday Coalition. There were selfish people within the state that were more than happy to continue to allow their former archenemies to continue their harassment campaign!

Tristan let out a deep breath as he pressed his fingers against his forehead. For an instant, he felt incredibly tired by this nonsense.

It did not help that he never enjoyed a proper break since the outbreak of the Komodo War.

The closest thing to a vacation that he enjoyed was the lengthy transit to the Krakatoa Middle Zone, but all of that traveling around did not grant him enough rest to deal with these complexities with a fresh and sober mind.

"Okay, Vermeer woman. Now that you have informed me whose side you are on, what do you want me to do?" Tristan asked with a hint of impatience.

"There is no reason for you to be on guard against me. Our coalition partners are both on the same boat. Both of their territories suffered a lot of damage from the Hex Army's invasion. The Fortune Legion and the Blue Cavalry both bore the brunt of the Hexer offensive as well. That has turned both of our coalition partners into the Gauge Dynasty and Khonsu Clan's new punching bags."

"So what you're saying is that what is good for Vermeer is also good for Carnegie, is that right?"

"Correct." Miss Monater confirmed. "We happen to enjoy an important advantage in this initiative. Patriarch Ves Larkinson might not think highly of the Friday Coalition, but of all of the coalition partners, his regard towards the Vermeer Group and the Carnegie Group should be the highest. We were the first to expose and introduce the Novice Mech Designer that he was back then to the world of true mech design. Without the opportunities we extended to him at the Leemar Institute of Technology, he would have never been able to step up his career at such an early stage. We hope that he still retains enough pleasant memories of that important time in youth to grant us extra allowances."

Tristan's expression turned skeptical. "I would say that you are being overly optimistic about your expectations. Will Ves truly allow his nostalgia override his justified sense of

animosity towards our state? I am not sure that he understands the Friday Coalition well enough to understand that we are more of a collection of six squabbling siblings than a single united family."

"If he does not understand, then it is your job to make him understand. Besides, I am sure that he has enough advisors on his side to enlighten him on the deplorable relations within our state."

"What is the point of all of this, Miss Monater?" He asked. "It sounds to me that you are trying to get me to achieve a different goal than what is part of my original mission briefing."

The woman smiled. "You are correct in that, but let's not get into a hurry. There is another dimension to this complicated situation that you will need to learn."

"And what is that?"

"The patriarch's children."

Chapter 4140 Organic Basketball

Aurelia Wodin-Larkinson was the happiest and luckiest little girl on Davute.

It wasn't only her that felt this way. Her parents regularly reinforced this picture to her as they hugged her and kissed her every day.

Her other playmates conveyed this thought as well. When they saw how well Ves and Gloriana treated their little daughter, they grew jealous and wondered why they didn't have the fortune of being born into the 'royal family' of the Larkinson Clan!

There was not much Aurelia could do about that. She even had to push a few little boys and girls away from her because they grew too jealous of her fortune.

How was it her fault that she had such a fantastic mom and dad?!

Fortunately for Aurelia, Gloriana paid great care in choosing her friends and playmates. Many of them were children of high-status people who had little reason to grow jealous at the unofficial 'princess' of the Larkinson Clan.

Among the many little friends she made, she only considered one of them to be her closest life-and-death companion.

"Clixie!"

"Miaow~"

The little girl giggled as the calico cat padded up to her and pressed her furry head forward.

A strong bond of love and warmth had already formed between them a long time ago. Aurelia never questioned how this could come into being. To her, developing such a strong bond was as natural as breathing.

The spiritual bond not only allowed Aurelia to share a portion of her thoughts and emotions to her cat friend, but also enabled her to be aware of Clixie's location at all times.

The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat was never too far away from her, though. Clixie took on her protective duties seriously and rarely wandered off, unlike Lucky.

"Hihihihii!"

Aurelia giggled as she became drowned by fur. Now that Gloriana had essentially discarded Clixie, the cat became determined to never encourage the daughter to do the same!

Fortunately, the strong bond between them gave Clixie a lot of assurances that Aurelia would not follow in her mother's footsteps. Their mutual love and trust was both genuine and strong.

"Chase, Clixie, Chase!"

One of their favorite games was letting Clixie chase after stuff. Instead of throwing out a toy ball or other convenient object, Aurelia ejected an even better target.

Mana!

As soon as the small but fluffy white translucent kitten emerged from Aurelia's head, the companion spirit immediately flew away!

After experiencing a substantial amount of growth, Mana was no longer as small and weak as before. She no longer needed to sleep most of the time and possessed more than enough energy to manifest outside for longer periods of time.

Mew mew mew!

"Miaow miaow!"

Mana's flight speed wasn't all that impressive compared to the older and more mature spiritual cats, but she was still fast enough to give Clixie a substantial workout.

Aurelia giggled and clapped as her other self led Clixie on an exciting chase!

Since they were sitting in the expansive backyard of the Royal Mansion, there were plenty of benches, bushes, trees and other interesting obstacles to give the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat a substantial workout.

Clixie displayed a remarkable degree of agility and reaction speed as she skillfully navigated the familiar terrain.

However, she couldn't quite catch up to the vigorous spiritual kitten who was able to use her intangible nature to her advantage by phasing right through anything in her way.

Mew mew mew~!

Mana even had time to look back and tease her pursuer!

"MIAOW!"

Clixie's patience only extended up to a point. Now that Mana had the temerity to mock her, the older cat began to take out the big guns!

Clixie's body abruptly shone in gold before she made a powerful leap that rapidly closed the distance between the two. Mana became so shocked that she attempted to juke to the side.

It was a pity that it was too late!

MEW!

Clixie finally managed to trap Mana in her paws!

As the Rubarthan Sentinel Cat landed back on the ground, she lowered her body and began to give Mana a completely unnecessary bath.

Mew! Mew! Mew!

"Clixie, stop it! Your tongue feels so funny!"

"Miaow miaow~"

The relationship between Aurelia and her cat was quite odd. Though Clixie saw Aurelia as a friend as well as a protection target, the furry animal completely treated Mana as her own kitten!

It didn't matter that they were two substantially different life forms. To Clixie, a cat was a cat. Her developing spiritual power easily enabled her to touch and interact with spiritual entities.

As Aurelia continued to play and cuddle with Clixie, she suddenly stopped and turned her head.

She could already sense the approach of her parents from afar!

Just as with Clixie, Aurelia had already formed spiritual bonds with her mom and dad as well.

"Mama! Papa!"

Lucky floated in first. The gem cat flew to Aurelia's side and gently brushed his side against her leg before closing in on Clixie and Mana.

"Meow meow."

"Miaow."

Mew! Mew!

As the cats all kept each other company, Ves and Gloriana strode into the idyllic yard with an extra passenger in their midst.

Gloriana held a baby in her arms. Her second daughter was already a few months old at this time and already bore a small tuft of red hair on her delicate head.

"Waaaaa!"

As soon as they came closer, the youngest daughter happily reached out to her big sister!

Despite her extremely young age, the tiny baby was already able to recognize Aurelia from a distance. The new but deepening spiritual bond between the two helped a lot with that. Both daughters of Ves and Gloriana had already developed a high degree of trust and dependency on these bonds.

As Gloriana settled down on a chair, Aurelia walked up and climbed on her mother's lap.

"Andraste."

"Mwaaa?"

"Andraste!"

"Aaaa!"

Their mother happily watched on as Aurelia planted a gentle kiss on Andraste's forehead before she attempted to embrace her younger sister.

Upon their second child's birth, Ves and Gloriana had agreed to call her Andraste.

They considered many different names before this point. Since their second-born daughter received a package that was geared towards growing designer babies into future mech pilots, soldiers or athletes, Ves initially set his mind on calling his newest baby Victoria.

Though the name was fairly common and frequently used throughout human space, Ves did not feel too bothered by that. There may be a huge number of people who carried the same name, but he was confident that Victoria Larkinson would eventually be able to make enough accomplishments to make herself stand out from her namesakes!

Unfortunately, Gloriana completely resisted his initial suggestion back when she was still pregnant.

"No! Absolutely not! Our strong and legendary daughter deserves to carry a more imposing name!"

"What's wrong with Victoria? This is a great name for a future winner!"

Gloriana looked at Ves as if he was stupid. "Our new baby deserves a more sophisticated name than that. I will not have her bear a name that only an uncreative parent could think of. It's too lazy!"

"Then what do you suggest, honey?" Ves asked with a frown.

"How about Artemisia?"

"No. That name is a bit too complicated. It's uncommon, I will grant you that, but I can't imagine giving our daughter such an unwieldy name."

"If you aren't satisfied with Artemesia, then what of Morrigan?"

"That's a villain's name, Gloriana. Do you want our daughter to grow up into a mass murderer who would not hesitate to sacrifice the lives of millions of innocent civilians in order to fuel her own lust for power? Because that is exactly what you get if you stick her with such a loaded name."

Gloriana looked even more stupefied at her husband. "That is the most idiotic reason to reject a name that I have ever heard! Morrigan is not an evil name! It is a dignified name that suitable for a future queen on the battlefield!"

"Let us consider other alternatives."

They entertained a lot of options before they eventually settled on Gloriana's latest suggestion.

"No more indecisiveness! We will settle for Andraste or we will settle for my initial choice!"

Though Ves was not entirely comfortable with the mythological allusions of this particular name, he was quite charmed by this suggestion.

Andraste was a relatively sophisticated name while also being fairly short and succinct. What was even better was that it was highly uncommon in human society, which made it easier for their second daughter to make a name for herself.

Of course, these considerations were so far in the future. For now, Andraste Wodin-Larkinson was just a cute red-headed baby that already showed a hint of accelerated physical development.

As a designer baby that had been derived from Withshaw & Seneca's Formula K-356666-EKT, Andraste was born as a remarkably healthy baby from the start.

Her body cells and her bones were not only supple and pliable, but also happened to be tougher and easier to regenerate.

As the initial months passed by, Andraste drank more nutrient solution and grew a little faster than Aurelia when she was younger.

Of course, Andraste's growth deviated quite significantly from the trajectory calculated by the biotech experts working for Withshaw & Seneca.

This was due to the 'upgrades' that numerous entities bestowed upon Andraste back when she was an unborn baby.

Ves had enhanced her tiny spirituality in advance and implanted her spirit with a companion spirit seed.

The Superior Mother had descended and transformed her 'granddaughter' so that Andraste was able to absorb spiritual energy to fuel her body's growth in various aspects.

Gaia had also made an appearance in order to shower the lucky baby with an extra life blessing.

It took quite a bit of effort for Ves to get Gaia to help. The unfathomably powerful design spirit did not exactly agree to be at the Larkinson Clan's beck and call.

Ves actually had to make a concession to his own design spirit before Gaia deigned to provide her blessing!

It was worth it though as Gaia's beneficial influence not only optimized Andraste's growth, but also bolstered the baby's physical health beyond what the geneticists and other medical experts of Witshaw & Yeneca could accomplish.

All of this ensured that Andraste became one of the healthiest and most resilient baby girls of her age!

Ves could even drop Andraste to the ground and attempt to bounce her body like an organic basketball without causing too much harm to his baby's body! That was how absurd her physical state had grown!

Of course, he would never do such a thing to his precious daughter. He had only ever carried her with the gentlest embrace that he could manage.

"Whaaaaa!"

As little Andraste thoroughly enjoyed the pampering from her older sister and her mother, Ves felt an intense feeling of satisfaction.

The only concern he held for his daughter was whether she would be able to develop the right genetic aptitude to be able to interface with a mech.

She was literally born for this purpose. If it turned out that she was as talentless in this aspect as Ves, then that would be such a crushing disappointment that it would be difficult to console her after learning the truth!

Could he do something about this? Was there a way for him to develop a method to ensure his daughter would be able to choose this option if she really wanted to pilot mechs in the future?

As much as he had broken many rules and defied many impossibilities in the past, he had no confidence in his ability to overcome this particular issue.

That was because genetic aptitude was not a spiritual phenomenon, but a purely biological phenomenon. The brains of humans simply had to be wired in a very specific way that did not occur too often.

Though Andraste had better chances of developing a good genetic aptitude than normal due to her Larkinson bloodline and her designer baby genes, objectively the chances were greater that she would end up as a norm like the vast majority of people.

Ves didn't want to rely on hope to see whether Andraste would be able to become a mech pilot or not. He had to find another solution, one that could guarantee his desired outcome!

"Where can I find this solution, though?"

That was a good question.