

Mech 4611

Chapter 4611 Information Asymmetry

Ves finally waved his arm and switched off the live feeds that showed the aftermath of the battle.

There was no point in observing what was taking place in the Ramage Repulsor System any further. Neither side was willing to launch any further attacks and Ves had other people in his employ that could analyze the current condition of the damaged alien battleship.

He needed to get ready to hold a number of emergency meetings to get ready for an upcoming warship assault.

Before that happened, he wanted to make sure to hammer home a point in his daughter's mind.

"Aurelia?"

"Yes, papa?"

"What is your take on this battle?" Ves asked. "What stands out to you? You will earn bonus points if you voice opinions that I have yet to address."

His little girl frowned in thought. She was so cute when she was doing her best to impress her parents.

Aurelia became so eager to meet her father's expectations that even Mana halted her current studies!

The companion spirit's semi-independent personality not only provided Aurelia with another thinking track, but also allowed her to view a situation from a slightly different perspective compared to herself.

Even if Mana wasn't a real cat, she still resembled one close enough.

As Aurelia and Mana both spent a minute in thought, they finally came up with a few notable observations.

"What happened today is really sad for both sides." His older daughter mentioned. "Many of their people have died and they also lost a lot of assets. The people of Cenatus Prospecting should be the saddest of the two since they have lost their flagship and leader."

Ves slightly shook his head. "You are mentioning obvious facts. You might as well say that stars are hot."

Aurelia smirked. "I'm not finished yet, papa. What I am actually trying to say is that our fleet hasn't suffered any losses throughout this battle. Cenatus Prospecting and the Tower of Babel did exactly what we wanted them to do. They fought against each other and forgot about our involvement."

He became a bit more satisfied when she mentioned this angle.

"That's correct. We took advantage of a fundamental condition to force our two enemies to turn their weapons against each other. Are you smart enough to figure it out, sweetie?"

Her daughter scrunched her face. She looked troubled as she couldn't figure out how she could please her father.

She eventually gave up and stared at Ves with her adorable eyes. "Please tell me the answer."

Ves chuckled. "Very well. This is a rather advanced concept that you will only be able to understand when you grow older. The key words are information asymmetry. Do you know what that means? You should already know the meaning of information, but what does asymmetry mean?"

"I learned in my math classes that asymmetry is the opposite of symmetry. Two sides aren't equal. It is as if one of my ears is larger than the other."

"Yup. Now how does that tie into information?"

"I think... it means that one side has more information than the other." Aurelia concluded. "In our situation, our side knows the most. We knew about the existence and location of the Tower of Babel whereas Cenatus Prospecting remained clueless. Neither of our adversaries figured out that they were being baited by us until it was too late."

"Hehehe." Ves amusingly grinned. "The asymmetry still exists. If I am correct, the aliens haven't even figured out that they were fooled. I just lured the Tower of Babel out of the brown dwarf star. After that, I made it seem as if the Cenatus Prospecting fleet destroyed a connection to a powerful phase whale by blowing up the bait. The aliens predictably went mad and laid all of the blame at the feet of the humans directly in front of them. They might not even know about the existence and the proximity of our own fleet."

"That will help if you want to attack them." The little girl cleverly remarked.

Ves nodded. "Ah, I see you've caught that important detail. You are correct. Our goal is to rescue a human prisoner that is trapped on the damaged alien vessel. The battle that just concluded a moment ago hasn't changed that. This means that it is still important to maintain a significant information advantage over the other party. We don't want the surviving aliens to know we are coming and prepare for our upcoming attack in advance."

"Won't the survivors of Cenatus Prospecting tell the aliens what truly happened? Our other enemies know about us and must have figured out that we are responsible. It will be much harder for us to attack the Tower of Babel if the alien soldiers learn about us in advance."

Ves nodded. "You are technically correct, but... the aliens may not be receptive to a message from an enemy that managed to cripple the front half of their proud battleship. Besides, it might not even matter anymore if we cannot exploit the information asymmetry between us and the aliens. Do you know why?"

"Because... the aliens have lost too much."

"Correct, but what I really wanted to hear is that we have an overwhelming strength advantage over our opponent." He told her. "Strength makes everything easier. An unbeatable opponent suddenly becomes vulnerable if you have the strength to overpower your adversary. You don't have to resort to risky, convoluted schemes like the one we just pulled off. We can just knock on the doors of the aliens and smash them apart."

His daughter made another remark. "This is what you wanted from the start. You wanted to attack the Tower of Babel, but you did not have the required strength. You had to rely on another attack method to soften up the enemy."

Ves smirked again. "That is correct. That ties in to another trick that I am fond of using. You see, we managed to advance our interests without paying any real price. Instead, one of our enemies had inadvertently taken the initiative to pay the price in our stead. That is the delicate art of making others pay for your benefits. Many of the most powerful and successful organizations have excelled in this art. If our clan wants to join their ranks one day, it is essential for us to master the associated methods."

"Oohhh..."

"Remember, Aurelia. It is not really impressive to use our own army to defeat an enemy army. This is because we will always incur serious damage in battle. If this happens often enough, our forces will become so damaged that we cannot protect ourselves anymore. A true victory should look like this. Instead of dispatching mechs and mech pilots, we instead made clever use of trickery and our unique advantages to win a battle. This is the most ideal way to solve our problems. We should only contemplate a frontal battle when we have exhausted all other alternatives."

He didn't think this way at first, but after he continued to learn from the likes of General Verle, Minister Shederin and Director Calabast, he had wisened up. The stakes had become too high for him to be as gung-ho about resorting to violence as before.

The idea that he wanted to impress in his daughter's mind was that the Larkinson Clan had already lost if it needed to resort to a fight to fulfill its goals.

He left his oldest daughter with those thoughts. She needed to internalize these lessons before he was ready to teach her more.

A few hours later, Ves received an action plan that the leaders of the Golden Skull Alliance had formulated in the past few hours.

In truth, their staff already prepared the basic frameworks of several different plans. Once the damaged state of the Tower of Babel became clear, the planners were able to take the most appropriate plan and adjust its parameters to the current situation.

Ves expected that General Verle and the others would decide on two different courses of actions.

The Golden Skull Alliance could either launch a general assault on the Tower of Babel, or send in an infiltration team that could rescue Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik as quietly as possible while the aliens were distracted with repairing their vessel.

He became surprised when General Verle presented a different plan that combined the steps of several other plans.

"This..." Ves hesitated.

"We need to strike while the iron is hot." General Verle's projection responded. The man looked as if he was in a hurry. "It is safest for us to wait until we wait

for all of our starships to cycle their FTL drives, but there is no need for us to wait so many hours. Even if we bring all of our mechs back to the Ramage Repulsor System, they won't be able to play a meaningful role. All we will do is to expose them to the terrifying guns of a battleship that has retained at least half of her combat power."

This had become abundantly clear in the previous battle. The ranged mechs of the Cenatus Prospecting fleet constantly fired their weapons against the Tower of Babel, only for the formidable alien battleship to shrug off the damage.

The transphasic energy shields were simply too powerful. Even when the Unrelenting managed to break open the front half of the Tower of Babel, the combined firepower of thousands of distant mechs failed to inflict significantly more structural damage.

This was because the exposed hull of the hybrid alien battleship was simply too tough and massive! She was as durable as a space fortress and could absorb a lot of damage before she lost all of her functionality.

When Ves considered how many mechs would get shredded by the unreasonable firepower of the damaged battleship, he reluctantly agreed with the general.

"Okay. Say you're correct about this. Is the alternative necessarily better, though? The decision to transfer a single ace mech, our expert mechs, our Valkyrie mechs and our DIVA contingent on starships with redundant FTL drives is just as risky if not more. I can understand the need to rush them back to the Ramage Repulsor System without any delay, but they will be on their own once they have arrived."

"Speed is crucial for this operation." General Verle emphasized. "Numerous experts such as Chief Shipwright Vivian Tsai have warned us that the alien

crews are performing emergency repairs at an alarming pace. They have access to advanced tech that is massively speeding up the pace in which they are able to restore many ship systems that can still be saved. The sooner we strike, the less guns and energy shields we have to face. We can also prevent the Tower of Babel from restoring enough mobility to avoid a confrontation."

The man made a few good points. Ves found it difficult to refute the need for haste.

He still felt incredibly worried about the fate of the troops assigned to this blitz attack.

"Are you sure that this is enough?"

"Numbers are meaningless when challenging an opponent of this scale." Verle stated. "We need quality, not quantity. To be more precise, we only need the Mars, the Amaranto and the Promethea to neutralize the enemy battleship. The other expert mechs can draw away more fire and provide us with a greater buffer in case an accident takes place."

"Why bring along the mechs of the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers if that is the case?" Ves critically asked. "They will suffer enormous casualties before they can get close enough to launch their battle formation attacks."

Distance never really mattered that much in the mech battles of the past. Most enemy mech forces weren't able to inflict effective damage onto the Valkyrie mechs at extreme ranges.

Warships were different! They possessed an unparalleled ability to shred large quantities of small craft at range!

There weren't any convenient asteroid belts or planets in the vicinity of the Tower of Babel's current location that could cover the approach of the Valkyrie mechs.

"We do not intend to rely on the Valkyrie mechs to finish off the alien battleship, sir. As I have mentioned before, the Mars and our expert mechs should be able to contain and degrade the Tower of Babel's offensive systems and propulsion systems by themselves. The reason why we want to have the option to launch a death battle formation attack is to prevent the desperate aliens from killing Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik. By wiping out most of the surviving alien crew ahead of time, the chances are great that any survivors will be concerned with more acute problems. None of them should have any ideas about executing their only human prisoner."

That made a lot of sense. Ves did not want to go through all of this effort, only to return empty-handed.

Sure, it was already a massive accomplishment if the Golden Skull Alliance was able to capture a unique alien warship that incorporated a blend of advanced technologies from different races.

He had no doubt that the MTA was willing to award a handsome sum of MTA merits to gain possession of the Tower of Babel!

However, Ves was not short on MTA merits these days. What he truly needed at this stage was friends in high places.

Lord Pearian Yorul-Tavik was his best ticket to forge a solid friendship with an influential first-class clan!

Chapter 4612 Blitz Planning

Once the Golden Skull Alliance settled for launching a daring rapid assault on the alien battleship, the alliance partners quickly prepared for the journey back to the Ramage Repulsor System.

Most of the ships of the expeditionary fleet weren't able to turn around and transition into FTL travel in an instant. They only possessed a single FTL drive

which had to cool down and complete their mandatory cycling process before they were safe to activate again.

Only a part of the vessels possessed redundant FTL drives. Fortunately, fleet carriers generally came with 2 FTL drives in their standard configurations as their military roles required them to move quickly if necessary. The more time they wasted in realspace, the longer it took to reach their destinations!

Since the plan called for bringing in at least 3000 mechs, most of which consisted of the Valkyrie Redeemer Redeemer Mark II and its many variants, the Golden Skull Alliance needed to dispatch at least several fleet carriers, which included Wild Torch, the Feminine Grace, the Antonio Cross.

The planners of the upcoming blitz operation purposefully decided against sending out the larger and more heavily armored fleet carriers such as the Gorgoneion, the Hemmington Cross, the Indigo Tremor and the brand-new Vengeance of the Hegemony.

Instead, they intended to stuff the remaining Valkyrie mechs into the combat carriers that happened to be luxurious enough to be outfitted with a redundant FTL drive.

"Our greatest priority is speed." Chief Minister Abigail Evern told Ves over a comm call. "If we want our rapid strike force to reach the Tower of Babel as soon as possible, we cannot afford to bring a single slow ship along. The pace of the strike force will be constrained by its slowest element, so adding a single elephant is enough to slow down a pack of cheetahs."

Though she was mostly engaged with leading the clan as a whole these days, that didn't mean she lost her expertise in starships and naval combat. She could still help the Larkinson Clan a lot in naval affairs.

"I understand that, but is it worth it to rush towards the battlefield with a bunch of flimsy carriers? Aside from the Wild Torch, all of the other vessels on the

list weren't designed to endure a lot of attacks. Their hull plating is thin and they aren't equipped with a lot of shield generators."

"Whether we send in a slim and fragile vessel such as the Antonio Cross or a large and heavy behemoth like the Vengeance of the Hegemony makes no difference against our current opposition." The former commodore of the Penitent Sister responded with a rueful smile. "It only takes two salvos from a single primary kinetic cannon battery to destroy the Seeker of Wealth. If even a higher end battle-oriented fleet carrier cannot withstand six heavy kinetic rounds from the Tower of Babel, no second-class fleet carrier can do any better."

Ves sobered up when he recalled how easily the alien battleship destroyed fleet carrier after fleet carrier in the earlier battle. Cenatus Prospecting lost almost its entire complement of capital ships in so little time!

"Okay. I understand why we shouldn't bring our bigger ships. What makes you think our smaller and faster carriers will do any better?"

"The effective range of the Tower of Babel is not unlimited, especially now that she has incurred heavy damage." The chief minister smiled. "There are many practical constraints, sir. As long as our carriers remain far away enough, it becomes much harder to track and land accurate shots with the primary gun batteries of the Tower of Babel. We just need to deploy our mechs early and have them approach the alien battleship under their own power for the final leg of the journey."

Ves understood what she was talking about. When ships were thousands of kilometers away, it became exponentially more difficult to nail a target with a gun. Just a minute shift in angle or position was enough to make an attack miss by hundreds of meters!

The problem was much greater in the case of projectile weapons as it took precious time for their physical output to reach their intended targets. The small delay was enough for faster and more maneuverable units such as mechs and warships to evade any incoming attacks.

Landing a successful hit often came down to luck rather than skill.

"What about the Tower of Babel's secondary laser cannon batteries?" Ves critically asked. "Those primary gun batteries are obviously designed to achieve naval firepower superiority at short to medium ranges, so they're not as effective at longer ranges. In order to compensate for this shortcoming, the designers of this warship have cleverly paired her with smaller and nimbler laser cannons. These guns might not be able to destroy a fleet carrier in six shots, but they can still wear down our more fragile fleet carriers with highly accurate fire."

The effective range of those warship-grade laser cannons was incredible. Even if many of the laser cannons incurred varying degrees of damage and misalignments that made it a lot more difficult for them to maintain a concentrated beam at extreme ranges, Ves did not dare to gamble on this matter!

However, the planners already formulated a countermeasure.

"Those laser cannons are accurate, alright, but can they land their shots on ships that are traveling at relativistic speeds?" Chief Minister Abigail grinned. "If we maneuver around the star system and slingshot our strike force around the brown dwarf star, we can approach the Tower of Babel at relative speeds that make it a lot harder for the enemy battleship to destroy any of our ships. This is the only way we can protect our fleet carriers and combat carriers from getting downed in open space."

Relativity screwed up a lot of battles in space. When both sides traveled at wildly different speeds, it became a struggle to calculate where to aim a weapon so that its output struck a ship that would be at that specific coordinate in an indeterminate time in the future!

There were so many extreme variables at play that not even the best processors could ensure a single hit.

While Ves understood how his strike force could take advantage of this phenomenon to prevent themselves from getting demolished in an instant, there was one enormous downside to this maneuver.

"If we do this, any mechs that launch from those carriers will also travel at relativistic speeds. They will essentially launch an extremely fast flyby past the Tower of Babel. Their contact time will be measured in milliseconds!"

"That is what we are going for, sir. We do not intend to swing our ships and mechs past the alien battleship at blinding speeds. We only need to build up sufficient speed to preserve our carriers and give our Valkyrie mechs a chance to close in on the Tower of Babel without exposing them in open space for long. Have you noticed that each time a group of mechs launch a battle formation attack, their powerful energy attacks propagate forward at speeds relative to the mechs in question? If our Pentinent Sister and Glory Seeker mechs travel forward at significant fractions of the speed of light, it will be impossible for their targets to evade the incredibly fast death wave attacks!"

"That won't be as effective as you wish." Ves shook his head. "The death energy will just sweep through the hull of the Tower of Babel without giving it any time to exert its effects. This means that our mechs can't move too fast if they want to launch an effective death energy battle formation attack."

Abigail Evern's expression turned a little more serious. "We already suspected that and have taken this possibility into account. We will need to perform a lot of complex maneuvers in space in order to plan out the right speeds, trajectories and acceleration profiles given all of the constraints we are working with. We are still in the process of calculating our solutions, but we will have it done by the time our strike force returns to the Ramage Repulsor System.

Even though Ves was able to process a lot more calculations than before, even he didn't look forward to this cumbersome task!

"Well, at least we are in a position to plan all of these complicated maneuvers in advance." Ves remarked. "It is always better to be fully prepared when entering into battle. We probably won't be able to take the Tower of Babel by surprise this time, but the aliens should know little about our performance while we know more about their battleship."

There was still enough information asymmetry for the Golden Skull Alliance to exploit. Ves would have been a lot more reluctant to commence this assault if the aliens knew exactly what was coming!

They continued to discuss a few more details about the blitz operation.

One of the most crucial aspects of the plan was that if they wanted the Valkyrie mechs to do their jobs, the Mars along with support from ranged expert mechs needed to distract the Tower of Babel as much as possible.

"We speculate that the Tower of Babel's mobility systems are at least partially intact and in working condition." Abigail explained. "It will become a lot harder for us to complete our mission if the alien battleship will not remain in place. Our high-ranking mechs must do their best to cripple the mobility of the Tower of Babel and ideally knock out as many gun batteries as possible. This will

help our Valkyrie mechs get in range and successfully launch their battle formation attacks without getting destroyed or being left behind."

Ves looked troubled. "They will have a hard fight on their hands if that is the case. No matter what kind of opposition they will face, they must tackle the situation mostly by themselves."

"That is yet another reason why we need to move quickly. The longer we delay, the more the Tower of Babel has restored her combat effectiveness. We already know that the ship can repel or defeat an ace mech when she is in her prime. The addition of a powerful alien protector makes it even more difficult to inflict serious damage."

All of this required a lot of planning and forethought. Fortunately, Saint Neville Magrin had already breached the Tower of Babel before, so the Golden Skull Alliance only had to take advantage of this vulnerability to deal material damage to the partially crippled vessel.

Still, this was the best the Golden Skull Alliance could come up with on short notice.

When Ves became satisfied with what he heard, he ended the call and talked to numerous other leaders and advisors.

He had many different questions about the operation, and he wasn't fully reassured by the answers.

"We highly advise against sending the Spirit of Bentheim with our elite strike force." General Verle told Ves. "A factory ship might be useful to have around in the aftermath of a successful battle, but she is not that useful in the upcoming engagement. Her value is too great for us to expose her to needless danger. I highly suggest you keep your flagship in our main fleet so that we do not have to worry about protecting her over every other priority."

"Fine..."

As the plan rapidly came into shape, the expeditionary fleet finally arrived in the neighboring star system!

A huge amount of mechs, supplies and personnel needed to be shuffled in hurry in order to get everything in the right place. Thousands of mech technicians and other support personnel were already preparing to pack and move a lot of supplies at a record pace.

It would probably take at least an hour to complete this incredibly complicated logistical nightmare. There was too little time to make optimal use of every available space, but time was of the essence.

As soon as the expeditionary fleet transitioned back into realspace, the hastily planned organizational frenzy commenced!

"Move move move!"

"Get those mechs out as quickly as possible!"

"There is a shuttle congestion at the Antonio Cross!"

Chapter 4613 The Antonio Cross

Many people scrambled to transfer the right mechs and goods to the right carrier vessels.

Long queues of mechs, shuttles and transports formed in front of the hangar bays of ships such as the Wild Torch and the Antonio Cross.

The bots and personnel assigned to the relevant ships all had to work at punishing speeds in order to complete their tasks as quickly as possible.

Haste became so crucial that people even started to resort to tossing out unnecessary goods into open space.

The shuttles and transports could always pick them up later.

As all of these exchanges took place, Ves became embroiled in another argument as he was about to transfer to one of the ships of the strike force.

"Whaaaa! Don't go, papa!" Marvaine cried as he clung onto the leg of the Unending Regalia. "I don't want you gone!"

Meanwhile, Andraste burst into tears as she clung onto the other leg! "You're so mean, papa! You promised to take me with you! I don't want to be left behind! I want to see the aliens get killed up close!"

Ves looked down with an exasperated expression. It wasn't easy being a father, especially to a bunch of precocious children.

At least Aurelia was well-behaved enough to avoid joining her siblings. Her suited form stood neatly beside her mother. She showed no intention to join her father on a dangerous mission.

"What are you doing, Ves?" Gloriana spoke with an irked expression. "This is a military operation and your presence will not change anything. There is no need for you to accompany the strike force. You can easily preside over the battle and provide advice by remote. Why are you so eager to make the stupid decision and put your entire life on the edge of destruction? What if you have miscalculated the strength of the Tower of Babel? What if the battleship manages to land a lucky hit on the starship you are stationed on? Do you know how devastating it will be if our clan loses its patriarch and head designer? What about our children?! Are you so eager to make them grow up without their father?!"

She made a lot of good points. Though Ves did not agree with her assertion that he could not contribute to the battle in any way, he could see how the risks far outweighed the benefits.

Ves was cognizant enough that he was acting like an adrenaline junky again. He couldn't give in to his desire to get close to the action and gain lots of inspiration from witnessing the death and destruction that was about to ensue.

Despite knowing that the Tower of Babel was still strong enough to destroy a large fleet with her intact gun batteries, Ves did not flinch in the face of danger.

What nobody knew was that Ves recently acquired a backup option in case he died.

He had made sure to hide his cyborg cat incarnation deep inside the Spirit of Bentheim.

This meant that once his real body died, a part of him would still live on in his living divine artifact!

Of course, this was hardly an ideal option as Ves would lose much of the elements that defined him. If his mother was any indication, he would have to spend a lot of time rebuilding and regaining what he had lost!

Even so, it was better than nothing.

"It'll be fine, honey. Our fleet will maintain high relative speeds throughout the operation so that the damaged alien battleship won't be able to land any shots."

"You know as well as I do that you are relying on far too many assumptions!"

The two continued to argue a bit. As usual, Ves remained unmoved by Gloriana's arguments. His wife understood him well enough that further nagging wouldn't accomplish anything.

"FINE THEN!" Gloriana threw up her arms. "Go play with the big boys then! I will continue to stay behind and watch over our children that you are leaving behind."

He sighed. "Come on now, honey. I am not abandoning them. I am just going on a brief work trip."

He eventually managed to placate his family. He kissed his wife on the lips only for her to cross her arms and turn her head away.

He had better luck with his kids. He bent down his armored body and kissed Aurelia on the head.

"I hope you will continue your studies and absorb everything you need to know to catch up to your first-class peers. I won't be here for the following days, so try your best to watch over your younger sister and brother in my stead, okay?"

Aurelia nodded.

"I will, papa."

He kissed Andraste's head next.

"I wanna go with you and kill the aliens!" His red-haired daughter petulantly demanded!

Ves carefully raised her arm and patted his energetic daughter's back. "I know you are eager to participate in a fight, but you're too young to get involved in all of this grown up stuff. Only soldiers get to participate in our upcoming operation, and you are far from being one. Just wait until you have completed your studies at an academy before you make this request."

His words bummed her out, but Gloriana pulled back the overeager girl before she could make any further outrageous remarks.

"Marvaine." Ves spoke as he turned and planted a kiss on the head of his youngest child. "I will only be gone for a short time. Listen to your mother and make sure you keep up with your studies, alright? If you want to have fun, you can play with Mekanos, your sisters or any of your other toys. Don't worry too much."

"Okay, papa."

Once he bid farewell to his family, he called up Lucky and boarded his shuttle. "It will be just you and me again, old buddy." Ves whispered to his gem cat as they both settled in for a short journey.

"Meow." Lucky yawned in boredom.

The main reason why the cat agreed to come along was because the Tower of Babel consisted of a huge amount of valuable exotics!

It would probably take many years for the gem cat to devour the entire vessel!

Though Ves would never allow Lucky to gobble up the alien warship in her entirety, he didn't mind it if the cat took a few nibbles here and there. The ship possessed so much mass that hardly anyone would notice if a few parts went missing.

The shuttle soon arrived at its destination.

When Ves stepped out of the vehicle, he became enchanted by the sight of lots of activity.

The hangar bays of the Antonio Cross were much smaller and more cramped than the ones of the flagship of the Cross Clan.

This reflected the extreme divergence in their roles. The Hemmington Cross was originally designed to be a large and prestigious symbol of a clan that used to be a part of the Garlen Empire. She was only ever meant to operate in the center of large and well-defended fleets.

The Antonio Cross was the opposite in this regard. The mech capacity of this thin and relatively fragile fleet carrier only amounted to a paltry 240 mechs, but she was by far the fastest and most maneuverable capital ship in the expeditionary fleet.

She was well-suited for exploration missions and other expeditionary activities. Her formidable acceleration and her relatively abundant support

suites ensured that she could not only travel quickly, but also remain self-sufficient for months if not years.

Still, the Antonio Cross rarely had a good opportunity to make use of her advantages. As long as she remained shackled to the main fleet, she could never go too far and gallop across the stars.

The blitz operation changed much of that. Though she was still accompanied by a number of other fast carrier vessels, her excellent mobility caused her to play a much more crucial role than other starships.

"Welcome aboard the Antonio Cross." Master Benedict Cortez said as he approached the new arrivals. "We have already prepared sufficient quarters for you and your men, though I am afraid that our workshops are not available."

"It's okay, Master Benedict. I don't think I need to do any tinkering. Our mechs are already in good condition so they don't need extensive adjustments to participate in the upcoming operation."

"Your living mechs are starting to arrive."

Both Ves and Master Benedict turned and saw that a small procession of expert mechs entered the busy hangar bay.

Numerous Valkyrie mechs and shuttles had to move out of the way in order to provide enough room for the new mechs.

A lot of personnel in the vicinity interrupted their work as they became affected by the glows of so many living mechs.

As familiar machines such as the Dark Zephyr, the Amaranto and the Minerva settled into their assigned berths, groups of recently transferred Larkinson maintenance crews attended to them in order to make sure their frames were in order.

"Did you bring one of your mounted wargear loadouts for the Everchanger?" Master Benedict asked.

Ves shook his head. "Not this time. The Everchanger is assigned to lead the Penitent Sister battle formation, so he won't remain in the rear like our other ranged expert mechs. The firepower bestowed by the City Breaker isn't enough to punch through the defenses of the Tower of Babel. Instead, all of that additional bulk will only slow him down and make it easier for him to get blasted by the massive guns of the alien battleship."

The Master Mech Designer threw an odd look at his younger colleague. "Your mechs have gendered pronouns now?"

"Ah. That is a recent development." Ves chuckled. "My living mechs don't really care that much whether you address them as 'it' or something else. They accept their identity as machines, but they have also started to take after their users, many of whom are distinctly men or women."

Master Benedict gazed at the Larkinson expert mechs with a more critical eye.

"I can see why this has become the case, but not every mech pilot will be eager to call a living mech this way. It will be challenging for most people to determine the gender of every mech, especially since they are rarely designed with this distinction in mind. I highly advise you to adjust your mech designs so that people have an easier way to determine whether they are looking at a male or female mech."

That was good advice. Ves should have thought about it earlier.

"I will work on it, though I don't think it is worthwhile to make too many radical changes to a mech design. Well, I will think about it later." He shrugged.

"Where is the Mars? It's been a while since I last saw our most powerful collaboration work."

"We have transferred the Mars to one of the workshops of this ship. I am in the process of applying specific tweaks and modifications to better prepare the ace mech for a confrontation against our upcoming alien opponents. Fighting a battleship demands a different approach, and we also have to take that oddly powerful nunser god into account."

Ves immediately frowned. "I don't think that creature deserves to be called a god. Using this loaded word will also cause us to fear this opponent more than we should."

Benedict didn't look like he cared all that much. "We can call him a phase lord if you prefer to use more neutral terminology. Phase lord is one of the most commonly used alternatives to the life forms that have transcended their physical limitations by integrating phasewater into their bodies."

"That can work."

Ves liked this term a lot more. It conveyed the proper amount of information and power without going overboard. It also didn't carry any unnecessary associations related to faith and belief.

He supposed that he could be classified as a phase lord as well, but so far he was unable to replicate any of the impressive powers demonstrated by the powerful nunser that protected the Tower of Babel.

Perhaps that might change if he managed to get a piece of the alien phase lord.

Chapter 4614 Marginal Roles

Once the ships assigned to the rapid strike force loaded up everything they needed, the fleet carriers and combat carriers quickly entered into FTL travel once again.

Only little more than an hour had passed since they just exited from the higher dimensions!

Even the fastest scout vessels of the Golden Skull Alliance needed around 3 hours to cycle their small-scale FTL drives!

Though Ves and numerous other people felt slightly uncomfortable about skipping the opportunity to 'rest' their bodies in realspace, they were easily able to tough it out and keep going.

Of course, Ves wouldn't be as confident if he and everyone continuously traveled around for several years.

Certain people had been driven insane by this. 'FTL sickness' was a very real phenomenon, and was the biggest reason why most people preferred to rest in realspace for a period of time.

As Ves and many other Larkinson guests settled into their new berths, they did not remain idle.

The hastily organized blitz operation demanded a lot from the participants. The expert pilots incurred the greatest risks as they had to expose themselves to the fury of an enemy battleship while lacking the defenses to withstand a direct impact.

Ves initially thought that the expert pilots of the clan would show more reluctance to this dubious operation, but it turned out that he was worrying about them in vain.

"From what I have learned, we only need to maintain our distance, stay on the move and keep our mechs in front of the battleship as much as possible." Venerable Rosa Orfan said. "Besides, our melee expert mechs won't be able to play much of a role aside from applying pressure with borrowed mech rifles. We're not allowed to get close until we receive confirmation that the enemy ship has lost most of her guns."

"That's correct." Ves confirmed. "The only other instance where we are willing to send your expert mechs in is when we have completely disabled the ship

system that is responsible for generating a wide area warp interdiction field. We haven't completely figured out where it is located, whether it has any backups and how much strength it has retained. The existence of this feature is one of the key reasons behind the enormous losses suffered by Cenatus Prospecting."

Pretty much every Larkinson expert mech possessed warp travel capabilities. As long as they had enough time to get up to speed, the expert mechs could easily keep themselves out of the firing angles of the most threatening guns of the alien battleship.

However, if the Tower of Babel ever solidified the surrounding space, no machine aside from an ace mech was able to break through the blockade!

"So we have to wait until Reginald, Stark and Isobel have dealt enough damage?" Venerable Orfan frowned.

"In short, yes."

"The Amaranto and the Promethea don't have the firepower to penetrate the battleship's energy shields. I'm not too sure whether the Mars can do any better, but if it isn't able to summon a lot of burst power like the Unrelenting, I don't think it will have a good time."

Ves smirked. "That is one of the reasons why we are in a hurry. There is a giant vulnerability in the front of the alien battleship. Our ship experts have closely analyzed the state of the heavily damaged vessel and have tentatively confirmed that her energy shield coverage is much weaker at the front. We can see signs of this from the live feeds of the battleship by observing how the alien repair crews are hurrying to install additional energy shield generators at the undamaged sections in the middle of her hull. These emergency modifications are anything but simple. It takes a lot of wiring and other structural work in order to install the enormous shield generators and supply

enough energy to keep them going. We need to strike before the aliens complete this crucial reinforcement plan."

As far as the analysts could tell, the Tower of Babel possessed a lot of redundant energy shield generators. Though the ones installed at the front half of the hull were all trashed, it was easy enough to pull out a handful integrated in the rear and reposition them in a more forward position.

All of this meant that until the aliens completed these essential repairs, the Tower of Babel was in her most vulnerable state yet! Her front side still represented a massive hole in her defenses while her rear was covered by significantly less transphasic segmented energy shields than before!

However, that didn't mean that a large amount of regular mechs could take her down. The Mars had to play a leading role in this operation.

Ves answered a few more questions and made sure that his expert pilots understood what he expected from his champions.

"Never underestimate the Tower of Babel. She might not be the largest battleship fielded by the aliens, but she is absolutely special. The fact that she has incorporated tech from multiple different races shows that she is most definitely a product of an elite organization. There is no harm in maintaining your distance and stick to taking potshots at her hull. The more you stress her defenses, the better."

The melee expert pilots all looked upset, but what could they do? The only way they could put an actual dent in a functional first-class battleship was to pilot a first-class expert mech themselves!

Venerable Davia Stark raised her hand. "I have a question."

"Ask."

"Will my Instrument of Doom be able to penetrate the enemy ship's energy shields?"

"I've already made a few calculations based on both solid data and a few guesses." Ves replied in a professional tone. "The Instrument of Doom has no hope of punching through a single layer. Its raw power is great when employed against mechs, but it is equivalent to the power of the main gun of a small warship. That is not enough to threaten a battleship that is expressly designed to fight against other battleship-grade opponents."

"What if I have the blessing of the Phase King?" Venerable Stark asked.

This was the key question and would directly determine how easily the strike force could take down the Tower of Babel.

"I think..." Ves quickly recalled the numbers. "I think it will be possible for the Instrument of Doom at its full power to punch through one of the alien battleship's segmented energy shields. A single layer, in other words. This is normally good news, but orven-style energy shields are often deployed in multiple layers. It won't really help if you invest a lot of effort to overcome one layer only to get stopped by the next layer."

Venerable Stark frowned. "Is there any way to increase the power of my expert mech and cannon any further?"

"Not in the short term." Ves shook his head. "The only way I can comprehensively improve the power of your expert mech is to incorporate first-class materials and technology in your mech. That is prohibitively expensive to say the least, and might also get us in trouble if I go too far."

Everyone looked disappointed when they heard this. Though they could rely on the Mars to do the heavy lifting, none of them were the kind of warriors who were willing to be marginalized in a battle.

"I suppose I will need to coordinate with Patriarch Reginald Cross." Venerable Stark thoughtfully said. "If the Mars can break a layer, my Amaranto will have a better chance at overcoming the defenses of our main target."

"What about my Promethea?" Venerable Isobel Kotin looked a bit lost and out of place. "My expert mech lacks the penetration power of the Amaranto. My damage output is primarily effective when I am able to land my attacks onto the structure of a target. Energy shields are my nemesis. If not for my recently mastered explosion technique I doubt I am able to deal any significant damage to an energy shield."

Ves turned to the other ranged expert mech pilot. "I am confident that the Tower of Babel will present a vulnerability sooner or later. You just need to be patient enough. As long as you have gained a window of opportunity, you will be able to play a huge role in weakening the battleship. I need you to concentrate your damage output on the turrets and gun batteries as much as possible. One of the advantages of your specialty is that you only need to strike a warship module a single time to burn down a significant chunk of mass. If the enemy vessel is able to rapidly restore or reposition her existing energy shields as we suspect, then the window of opportunity will last for an exceedingly short time. The material damage that you can deal on the enemy vessel will therefore exceed that of the Mars."

The Promethea was essentially built for this job. Though it was possible to equip the Mars with advanced weapon modules that could produce a similar effect, it would detract from ace hybrid mech's absolute firepower.

After he settled down the two crucial ranged expert mech pilots, he turned to Venerable Imon Ingvar. "I will be counting on you as well. The Gray Lotus is one of the few weapons in our arsenal that can mostly bypass energy shields. As long as the Tower of Babel isn't protected by too many layers, your little pistol should be able to kill a fair amount of alien crew members."

Casella's brother blinked. "Uhm, about that sir, shouldn't a weapon as important as the Gray Lotus be wielded by a more important expert mech? Don't get me wrong. I like the gun and what it can do, but my Blade Chaser Mark II is a melee expert mech. I always feel it is better to pass it on to the Everchanger or a real ranged expert mech."

Ves could understand why Imon felt he didn't deserve to wield the weapon.

"I don't intend to assign this relic weapon to your expert mech forever." He told Imon. "However, it is in the right place right now. Our real ranged expert mechs can already count on their current armaments. It is better to pair the Gray Lotus with a melee expert mech like your Blade Chaser Mark II. You're a pretty decent shot among melee specialists and you have already trained with it for several months. It is the height of foolishness to reassign the gun to another expert mech on the eve of another operation."

"Can you at least make it bigger so that it can do more against a battleship?"

"That's impossible. I am lacking a key material. For now, it is best if the Gray Lotus retains its current size."

The expert pilots no longer had any questions. They all gained a decent idea on what they should do. While the operation itself was quite convoluted, there was no need for the pilots to understand the complicated maneuvers. They just needed to help the Mars take down the Tower of Babel.

"With everything that we are throwing at the alien battleship, will Lord Pearian be able to make it out of the upcoming battle alive?" Venerable Vincent Ricklin skeptically asked. "Because it sounds to me that we are throwing so much firepower at the ship that nothing is able to come out unscathed. If the Mars doesn't demolish anything outright, the Amaranto will drill a hole into it. If the Amaranto hasn't destroyed anything, the Promethea will burn it all down. If there is anything left intact, then when the Penitent Sisters and the Glory

Seekers unleash their deadly battle formation attacks, the entire hull will turn into a ghost ship!"

The other expert pilots also shared Vincent's doubts. The Tower of Babel was certainly strong, but the upcoming operation could easily inflict so much damage that nothing recognizable would be left by the time the attack was over!

"This is why everyone needs to obey the instructions of central command." Ves told them all. "We have a large number of analysts and other smart people at our disposal that will constantly be studying every important aspect about the enemy vessel. Their highest responsibility is to identify the location of the cell where Lord Pearian is held. We think he is stowed somewhere in their lower decks, so don't worry that a surface attack will accidentally kill him. You should primarily focus your firepower on destroying the enemy battleship's external weapon modules. The Tower of Babel will be completely at our mercy if we have neutralized the majority of her guns."

In short, there were multiple ways to complete their objective. Ves did not entirely want to put all of his hopes on the high-ranking mechs or the battle formation attacks to finish off the Tower of Babel by themselves.

It was much safer and more prudent to spread his bets and prepare a few contingency plans!

He even thought about stuffing Lucky into a DIVA stealth shuttle and having him infiltrate the alien battleship when she was distracted by all of the mechs.

Perhaps it was time for his cat to don his Misfortune Harness once again!

Chapter 4615 Upgrades To The Mars

Out of all of the combat assets employed for the blitz operation, no mech played a more crucial role than the Mars.

As the only ace mech of the Golden Skull Alliance, its strategic and material value exceeded that of all of the expert mechs put together!

In fact, the Mars was more valuable than several fleet carriers put together. Ves could even make an argument that all of the ships of the Golden Skull Alliance weren't as valuable as a single combination of an ace mech and a mech pilot!

This was because a functional ace mech could defeat entire pioneering fleets on their own, particularly if the latter did not enjoy the protection of an ace mech itself.

In the past, ace mechs at least required the support of a carrier vessel in order to transport it to the battlefield and back, but even that rule was no longer mandatory.

Although the Mars was not expressly designed to engage in interstellar travel, it could travel to another star system in an emergency.

The speed and efficiency was awfully low, though. The Pulsvar V-1 was mainly designed to function as a battlefield-oriented transphasic flight system. This meant that it was good at making a mech move rapidly in short to medium ranges but was not the best at longer cruises.

Warp drives were also around 10 times slower than FTL drives when it came to star hopping, so it might take an ace mech several months to reach a destination!

"We don't need the Mars to engage in superluminal travel." Master Benedict Cortez told Ves as both mech designers stood before the powerful ace mech in question. "It only has to remain fast enough to outspeed the tracking of the Tower of Babel's primary and secondary gun batteries and the rotation of her hull. It also helps if the Mars can outrun the pursuit of the alien phase lord that previously protected the alien battleship against the Unrelenting."

Ves looked up at the Mars. He could just see the elements of the Pulsvar V-1 sticking out of the back of the masterwork ace mech. It looked different than before. It received additional elements that bulked up its construction and likely boosted its performance parameters.

"What did you do to the flight system?" He asked.

Benedict pressed his lips. "Reginald has requested us to find a way to make his ace mech faster. Personally, I am of the opinion that the configuration of the Mars is already optimal, but its pilot does not agree, so I had little choice but to take additional time off my schedule to make the requested changes."

Perhaps an ordinary mech pilot might not be able to force a Master Mech Designer to implement changes to a mech, but an ace pilot was a different story, especially when he also happened to be the leader of the clan that owned everything!

"So the Pulsvar V-1 is stronger now, Master?" Ves guessed.

"Correct. I worked together with the Godwin Institution to develop a more powerful version of its original product. Together, we came up with a variant called the Pulsvar V-1HE. The HE stands for High Energy, as the additional structures added to the base version significantly increases the forward acceleration of the flight system in exchange for consuming substantially more energy. The Pulsvar V-1HE is a hungry beast, and the main reason why I agreed to its inclusion is because I managed to improve my Original Energy Bridge System to compensate for the increased energy consumption."

Ves nodded in understanding. In short, the Mars became a lot faster, but also became a lot more energy inefficient in the process. Improving the Original Energy Bridge System which essentially exploited the skull of a dead expert pilot to extract more energy from... somewhere... prevented the ace mech from running dry too soon!

"I assume that's not the only upgrade, right?" The younger mech designer remarked as he sensed another significant change in the flight system.

"Ah, you are sharp if you managed to deduce that little detail. The Godwin Institution also helped with designing a way to integrate more phasewater into the flight system. The Pulsvar V-1 originally came with 400 grams of phasewater, but the Pulsvar V-1HE now has 600 grams of phasewater. That doesn't mean that the Mars can move 50 percent faster than before, but any incremental speed boost is helpful."

Now that Ves had gained a much greater understanding of phasewater, he realized how impressive that sounded.

While it was easy to stuff more phasewater into a relatively small object like a mech, it became exponentially more difficult to keep it all stable!

Significant concentrations of phasewater had a tendency to mess up the surrounding space. Expensive measures needed to be taken in order to suppress their spatial fluctuations and prevent the mech in question from tearing itself apart.

If this factor didn't play a role, then Master Benedict and the Godwin Institution could have easily stuffed several kilograms of phasewater into the transphasic flight system.

In fact, they could still choose to do so, but they haven't because most of the 'phasewater quota' was already taken up by the Abasis Armor.

One of the reasons why the Mars performed so well in its duel against the Neo Amadeus was because 11 kilograms of phasewater stuffed into the Abasis Armor allowed the ace hybrid mech to withstand a lot of punishing blows!

There was no way that Master Benedict was willing to compromise the excellent defenses of the Mars in exchange for a bit more speed.

Survival mattered the most. The previous Cross Clan had gone from heaven to hell in a single go after Lord Hemmington Cross met an untimely demise.

A repeat of that outcome had to be avoided at all cost!

Once Master Benedict filled Ves in on the changes to the flight system, they moved closer to the mech itself and discussed the other tweaks made to the ace mech.

High-ranking expert mechs always remained in development. Perhaps Master Benedict didn't work on the Mars non-stop, but he should definitely get back to its design from time to time in order to optimize its design, apply incremental improvements and replace outdated parts with newer versions that just became available.

Ves learned a lot from this tour. Though he had taken part in the original design process, he no longer remained up to date on the state of the Mars. His wife received much more information than him because the Mars also incorporated her god body solution.

Though many of the changes were rather incremental in nature, Ves could see what they represented.

The Mars was alive in more ways than one. Not only had it turned into a spiritual incarnation of its ace pilot, its physical configuration was constantly evolving by design.

What was happening to the Mars was a mirror to what happened to a powerful human like himself.

Ves gained part of his strength through advancing through the ranks, but he also derived a lot of help from purpose-built augmentations such as his cranial implant.

Both kinds of improvements were essential to him. They complemented each other and allowed him to produce astonishing works that couldn't be made by baseline humans.

After gaining a decent understanding of all of the improvements of the Mars, he estimated that its overall performance had roughly risen by at least 12 percent!

Though the changes to its flight system had made it a lot faster, that was only valid when it was traveling in straight or gently curving lines.

All of the additional parts added to the Mars had increased its mass. In addition, once it was moving at high relative speeds, it became a lot harder for the machine to make radical changes in direction. This compromised its dogfighting capabilities.

Fortunately, the Mars was about to fight against a battleship. Raw speed was more important than greater agility.

Ves and Master Benedict hovered closer to the shoulders of the ace hybrid mech. The modular slots that allowed the shoulders to mount any compatible weapons systems were currently empty, but that was bound to change soon.

"What weapons will you mount on the shoulders this time?" Ves curiously asked. "Will you put in a pair of gauss cannons?"

Master Benedict smirked. "Not this time. We have already seen from the Unrelenting that gauss cannons generally do not achieve great results when fighting against the transphasic energy shields employed by the native aliens. It is better to mount a different weapon system onto the shoulders so that the Mars has access to additional solutions that cannot be matched by its fixed loadout."

That made Ves curious. "Are you going for a pair of flamethrowers? I recall that the Unrelenting's own wrist-mounted flamethrowers managed to blind the

alien phase lord to an extent. This can help with allowing the Mars to distance itself from this annoying opponent."

"We thought about that, but we rejected this option. We have a much better and more appropriate option in mind. After a lot of thought, we have decided to mount it with a pair of missile launchers."

Ves widened his eyes. "There is little point in equipping the Mars with modular missile launchers unless their payload is significantly more useful than a pair of regular weapons. Let me guess. Are you making use of special missiles this time?"

"That is correct. Good guess." Master Benedict smirked. "You see, we aren't the only humans who are struggling to defeat powerful alien warships that are protected by multiple layers of strong transphasic energy shields. Most pioneering fleets simply do not have the firepower to overcome such defenses. The demand for weapons that can effectively break or bypass all of these energy-based defenses have grown stronger, and the market has finally begun to give us answers. Let me show you what we have recently acquired."

The Master Mech Designer led Ves away from the Mars and towards one of the secure storerooms where a lot of powerful ordnance was being stored.

After entering a new compartment, Master Benedict stopped before a highly secure and robust crate that was marked with lots of warnings as well as the logos of several companies and brand names.

The Master Mech Designer had to input a secure code before he could open the crate.

A single dangerous missile rested inside.

As soon as Ves studied it, he immediately sensed a lot of danger!

His phasewater affinity allowed him to detect the substance, and right now it told him that the warhead contained a significant concentration of the material!

"How much phasewater is stuffed inside this missile?!"

"This is a Stormsurge Missile, an experimental missile product developed by Immace Energy Armaments, the same company that made the ARCEUS System." Master Benedict explained as he gently caressed the surface of the high-end ordnance. "It was solely developed to provide parties such as us an easy and relatively low-barrier means of overloading strong transphasic energy shields. It is already powerful on its own, but it will truly shine when it is empowered by resonance, hence it is mainly meant to be used by expert mechs and ace mechs."

"You didn't answer my question, Master."

"Oh. I apologize. I try my best not to think too much on what it cost to procure a batch of missiles. The warhead of a single Stormsurge Missile is laced with 363 grams of phasewater. However, due to a convention that I am sure you are familiar with, our clan had to pay 726 grams of phasewater in order to commission a missile from Immace Energy Armaments. We also had to pay 15,000 MTA credits on top of that to cover the cost of the high-grade exotics needed to amplify the destructive power of the missile and make sure its volatile elements are contained until the time is right."

Ves stared at Master Benedict with a shocked expression!

A single Stormsurge Missile was worth as much as a mech regiment if not more!

In fact, Ves could have built enough mechs to double the numbers of his elite Nullifier Battalion with this much money and resources!

"Damn... how many will the Mars equip on its upcoming mission?"

Benedict sighed. "Only two, one for each launcher. I would love to add in more, but the Mars cannot carry so much phasewater equipment. Immace Energy Armaments also haven't been able to supply us with anything. The product is still experimental in nature, so mass production is far away."

"I see. Well, it's better than nothing. I'm a lot more confident in our ability to breach the defenses of the Tower of Babel if we have access to this new trump card."

Chapter 4616 It's Free Real Estate

Although the new Stormsurge Missile was an extravagant expenditure to the Cross Clan, it could easily be worth its weight in phasewater when employed in the right situations!

This was why the Cross Clan did not have the high cost of phasewater and MTA credits. In any case, the clan had earned a lot of both as of late, so it could easily cover the high expenses.

The same could not be said for many other pioneering organizations. Even if a pioneer was lucky enough to obtain a single kilogram of phasewater, much of that would definitely be used to upgrade an expert mech with more enduring transphasic parts!

Using so much phasewater on a consumable product was out of the question to these parties!

However, if the Cross Clan was willing to invest in them, so could the Larkinson Clan.

Now that Ves thought about it, acquiring a batch of Stormsurge Missiles was truly an excellent way to make up for the painful lack of shield breaking capabilities.

Though none of the Larkinson expert mechs currently made use of missile launchers, the modules were so easy to work with that he could mount them

on pretty much any decent machine. The Everchanger was most readily able to accommodate them due to its stellar flexibility.

Still, Ves knew that the full potential of a Stormsurge Missile could only be attained when it was paired with an ace mech. The true resonance amplification at the ace mech level was much more substantial than at the expert mech level!

If the Mars was able to break an entire segmented energy shield with a single Stormsurge Missile, a typical expert mech might need several more to produce the same results!

Though Ves and the Larkinson Clan were willing to cover the cost of using them in a crucial life-and-death battle, it was unsustainable to employ them in every battle against an alien warship.

Ves much preferred to spend his time, money and resources on developing more cost-efficient weapon solutions such as the Instrument of Doom.

Even though that weapon also demanded a hefty amount of phasewater to fabricate, once it was finished it no longer demanded any further resources unless it sustained heavy damage!

This was why mech designers generally treated missile launchers as lazy weapons. They were relatively easy to design and easy to scale up their power, but they were also prohibitively more expensive to use in the long term.

Anyone who wanted to obtain more powerful missiles just had to stuff more expensive materials into their construction. Their users just had to be ready to open up their wallets and pay a hefty sum each time they were used.

As a mech designer, Ves vastly preferred to improve the rifles and cannons of the Larkinson Army so that his troops could defeat alien warships by relying on their own intrinsic power.

However, that was not a realistic option in the short term. It might be necessary to stock up on Stormsurge Missiles or similar products to tide over the clan in the next couple of years.

Ves already thought about asking Immace Energy Armaments if they could make a grenade version of their new product. The Dark Zephyr could make excellent use of them to force his way through energy shields and get close enough to prevent a warship's gun batteries from repelling the expert mech!

Time passed by. As Ves immersed himself by learning about the properties of the Stormsurge Missile, the rapid strike force did not take long before it reentered the star system that it had just left!

"We're back again!"

The Golden Skull Alliance hastily departed the star system not too long ago, but a huge number of changes had occurred since that time!

A destructive battle took place between another pioneering fleet and a hidden alien battleship.

The sensor systems of numerous ships such as the Antonio Cross easily registered the large and expansive debris field orbiting the brown dwarf star.

Once, much of that debris consisted of fully functional fleet carriers and combat carriers. The destruction of so many valuable human starships represented a painful loss to any pioneering organization.

It was not easy to compensate for such a great loss, particularly when the demand of starships still exceeded supply!

"To think that we managed to destroy almost an entire pioneering fleet through subterfuge and trickery." Master Benedict said as he stood next to Ves as they looked out of the observation windows of the Antonio Cross. "Not

even the fact that Cenatus Prospecting has an ace mech at its disposal has saved its fleet and its founder from meeting an unfortunate end."

The Master Mech Designer had a lot of mixed feelings about what happened. The events reminded him of his own past circumstances.

"Do you regret what we have done?" Ves asked.

"Not really." Master Benedict shook his head. "I am realistic enough about our situation to acknowledge that we have attained a good outcome. We have weakened both of our potential adversaries at little cost to ourselves. What more can we ask for? I am merely lamenting that we live in a reality where we cannot stick to open and above board measures to solve our problems. If we are not willing to resort to dishonorable acts, someone else will apply them to us. We are all forced to treat so many groups as hostiles in this dwarf galaxy."

"Well, they should have known what to expect by coming here. The Red Ocean is a galaxy of opportunities. Greed can make a lot of people irrational to the point where they are willing to stab their own parents in the back. Otrus Magrin received the punishment he deserved. It was either us or them. That became obvious as soon as his vulture fleet started to stalk our own fleet."

Ves sympathized with Master Benedict's regrets, but that did not mean he was about to stop. Now that he had a taste of the power of subterfuge, he intended to turn it into a core strength of the Larkinson Clan.

If the Larkinson Clan wasn't willing to become a predator, then it would eventually fall prey to similar threats!

"Our strike force will split up soon." Master Benedict changed the topic. "The following period will be dangerous for us. The Antonio Cross will have to rely on her own capabilities to evade the Tower of Babel's attacks."

"I know. I didn't opt to ride on this ship if I wasn't confident about her ability to stay alive. Hopefully, the Mars can do a good job at occupying the battleship's attention."

It didn't take much time before the Antonio Cross split away from the rest of the strike force.

The other ships such as the Wild Torch and the Feminine Grace had to follow a separate route that swung around the brown dwarf star.

Although it was not really possible to take advantage of a gravity assist on a stellar object that sat in the center of a star system, it was still useful to do this to prevent the alien battleship from getting a direct line of sight to the strike force.

Once the other fleet carriers and combat carriers swung into view of the Tower of Babel, they should be moving fast enough to make themselves difficult to hit!

Not only that, the ships would also be able to disgorge their Valkyrie mechs at the same speeds, allowing the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seeker units to approach the Tower of Babel without taking an eternity to cross through open space!

The Golden Skull Alliance had precisely calculated all of the maneuvers needed to pull everything off at the right timing. The Valkyrie mechs couldn't approach too early or too late. They also had to move fast enough to survive the journey but not any faster lest they risked becoming irrelevant.

Ves had pulled up the technical reports multiple times, but he quickly put them away after a short moment.

Even his formidable capacity to process complex calculations struggled to keep up with all of the calculations!

It was quite exciting to see the forces move according to design. The star system was quite simple and did not contain any anomalies or too many stellar objects, so the ships did not have to take too many variables into account when they moved closer to the brown dwarf star.

The only downside was that the trajectories of the human vessels were so obvious that the aliens aboard the Tower of Babel should definitely notice what was taking place by this time!

"Has the battleship made any moves?"

"We have detected plenty of additional activity. Our preliminary judgment is that the alien repair crews are scrambling to prepare the ship for battle on short notice. We can observe many sections that have been opened up or partially disassembled in order to facilitate deeper and more extensive emergency repairs. Numerous damaged gun batteries are in this state as well, and it will take a significant amount of time to put them back together again."

"In other words, we caught them with their pants down."

"That is an apt description of the current state of the aliens. What is better is that it will take at least a couple of days for them to pull their pants up to their waists again."

"We need to hurry and commence before that happens!"

The increased vulnerability of the Tower of Babel was another big reason why the Golden Skull Alliance wanted to move so quickly.

The aliens had gambled on the possibility that no further attacks were forthcoming in the short term, so their crews initiated more deeper repairs in order to make their vessel more space worthy in a week or so. It would have worked out if the aliens could actually complete their jobs, but Ves and the others spoiled that plan!

According to the plan, the Antonio Cross would get closer first so that she could deploy the Mars and all of the expert mechs first.

All of the expert mechs stationed aboard the slender and fast fleet carrier briefly gathered together before they were about to deploy.

They shared drinks, made shameless boasts and egged each other on. Though not everyone looked forward to this upcoming engagement, they tried to make the best of it as it was necessary for all of them to learn how to cope with warships.

"I'm tired of playing second fiddle everytime we fight against warships." Venerable Vincent complained to Ves during this pre-launch party. "Can't you upgrade our mechs so that we can fight them on our own terms for once? My C-Man isn't designed to cower in the rear! We need to fight at the front!"

Ves tried to give his pilots a reassuring smile. "I am already thinking about that. Our clan won't have anything ready in the short term, but I predict our situation will be a lot better in a year."

"What will be different, then?"

"Think about what we are about to face. By most standards, the Tower of Babel is a first-class battleship. This means that her hull is loaded with tech and materials that only first-classers can afford. The entire vessel is a moving treasure mine!"

Everyone became a lot more impressed once they recalled this fact!

Ves grinned at his pilots. "Normally, attacking a first-class warship head-on is out of the question, but this is different. Now that a vulture fleet has softened her up, the Tower of Babel is weaker than she has ever been. She can no longer exert the combat power that is commensurate to a ship of her value! This means that we don't have to put in as much effort to take her down. Once we do, I can promise you that our clan will quickly salvage enough strong and

powerful first-class materials from her hull to develop an entire suit of upgraded mech equipment for your expert mechs!"

Making use of better materials was the easiest and most straightforward way to boost the performance of mechs.

Ves thought that it would be even better if the Larkinson Clan was able to harvest many tons of high-quality materials without limit. This was a much cheaper alternative to spending millions of MTA credits to obtain small batches on the open market!

"It's practically free real estate as long as we eliminate her protectors!"

Chapter 4617 No Damage

What Ves had neglected to mention to his expert pilots was the situation was way more complicated than they thought.

The Mech Trade Association maintained a rather strict separation between second-class mechs and first-class mechs, especially in the Red Ocean where everything could easily get mixed.

Before pioneers gained their privileged status from the Big Two, they had to sign a set of agreements that subjected them to additional rules.

One of the more troublesome ones to Ves was that pioneers were not allowed to employ mechs that exceeded their class.

A third-class pioneer couldn't save a lot of money and invest in a squad of second-class mechs which they could use to bully their peers.

The same applied to second-class pioneers who were not allowed to invest in a first-class mech that was powerful enough to demolish an entire second-class mech regiment!

Of course, no one prohibited first-class pioneers from fielding inferior mechs against other first-class pioneers. They could do what they wanted as long as they didn't bully second-raters and third-raters.

Though rules like these already existed in the old galaxy, they were more informal and relaxed over there. The Mech Trade Association likely tightened the reins in the new frontier because the region was much smaller and more compressed.

Ves suspected that one of the more important intentions behind this rule was to prevent third-class and second-class expert pilots from getting killed with ease by ordinary mech pilots that piloted vastly superior mechs.

The mechers consistently put a lot of effort into protecting high-ranking mech pilots against unreasonable challenges as much as possible.

Skill was important, but once the differences in performance became too great, no amount of human power could bridge the enormous gap!

Of course, while the Big Two could enforce this rule against any human pioneers, they held no jurisdiction over the indigenous aliens.

It was solely the responsibility of the pioneers themselves if they entered into battle against a first-class alien warship!

Fortunately for Ves, the Big Two was thoughtful enough to carve out small exceptions.

Second-class pioneers such as Ves were allowed to field second-class mech that incorporated a relatively small proportion of first-class tech and materials. The latter was only limited to 10 percent of the total mass of the mech in question.

Ves could do a lot with this allowance. It probably wasn't realistic to clad a second-class mech with expensive first-class armor plating, but it should be easy enough to equip it with a serviceable first-class weapon.

Additionally, every pioneer was only allowed to equip up to 1 percent of their total mechs with overpowered equipment.

This was enough. The additional power of a small amount of first-class weapons was what the Larkinson Army needed the most at this junction. As long as his troops gained the ability to overpower strong energy shields, they would be able to destroy a powerful warship the conventional way!

"All we need is to take down the Tower of Babel."

Right now, the strike force was about to initiate an action that many people would call mad.

Even a damaged warship still had a lot of teeth!

"Are you ready, Reginald?"

"I was ready hours ago, Benedict." The ace pilot replied in an impatient tone.

"Is it finally time for me to launch?"

"Let us check the connection to the external energy pack. Alright. The module is firmly attached to the rear of the Mars. Remember the plan. Once you deploy into space, don't hesitate to accelerate and enter into warp travel and initiate combat at full power. I suggest you use up the spare energy reserves as fast as possible so that you can detach the pack when you are done. You will need all of the mobility that you can get once you get close."

"You don't need to remind me. I'm not that stupid."

Master Benedict knew that. Reginald's real problem was not that he was lacking in intelligence, but that he allowed his desires to override his good judgment far too many times!

Once Reginald received the necessary reminders, he finally received permission to launch into space.

The powerful dark red-coated ace mech entered into open space as if it was a champion about to perform in an arena!

The ace mech made for a substantially more heroic sight than the Unrelenting. Its circle-patterned armor plating, its segmented shoulder plating, its human-masked face and the vertical crest on its head all made the machine look like an ancient warrior that had undergone an extreme round of modernization.

If that wasn't enough, the ace mech also projected a cape that fluttered behind its back as if wind was blowing through space!

Ves rolled his eyes. "Move already!"

Once Reginald satisfied his vanity by posing his ace mech in front of his men, the Mars finally blasted forward and proceeded to warp towards the Tower of Babel.

There was still a lot of distance between the Antonio Cross and the alien battleship.

The reason why the plan called for deploying the Mars early was because they needed the ace mech to test and verify the combat effectiveness of the Tower of Babel.

The ace mech probably didn't possess the firepower to overcome the defenses of the alien vessel. Perhaps its new Stormsurge Missiles might help, but it was better to save them until additional help arrived.

What Ves and the others were confident in was that the Mars was likely capable of holding on for a long time.

The ace mech's energy reserves were abundant despite its relatively high consumption and its Saint Kingdom along with its Abasis Armor provided a generous buffer against mistakes.

The only wildcard as far as the Golden Skull Alliance was concerned was the alien phase lord that repelled the Unrelenting a few days ago, but the analysts speculated that this potent combatant was not good at ranged combat.

It took quite a bit of time for the Mars to get close enough to start pestering the Tower of Babel. The Pulsvar V-1HE flight system was putting its enhancements to good use by helping the ace mech reach its destination faster.

As the Mars used up the additional energy provided by its detachable energy pack, the distant alien battleship had yet to take any offensive actions.

That would change soon enough. Both sides were waiting until they got close enough to launch attacks that had a reasonable chance of actually hitting their intended targets!

Ves joined Master Benedict in the command center of the Antonio Cross and sat behind a spare workstation.

He pulled up the telemetry of the Mars and saw that it was running cooler than it should considering how much energy it was expending.

He hadn't heard anything about upgrades to the ace mech's heat management system, so he chalked up this anomaly to Patriarch Reginald's willpower baptism.

The Mars already bathed in his glory long enough to apply a fair amount of unreasonable and unexplainable upgrades to the machine.

Ves had learned early on to accept these changes without kicking a fuss. Trying to find explanations how mechs performed a lot better was a gigantic waste of time.

He was much more interested in the condition of the alien battleship at this moment. Once he pulled up the data on the damaged vessel, he could see that a number of powerful gun turrets had already swung in the direction of the incoming threat.

"Has her hull moved in any way?"

"Not yet, sir. We expect the aliens to alter her orientation so that most of her gun batteries can angle their muzzles towards the Mars."

"Will they?" Ves looked curious. "If the aliens do this, then they will be exposing the main thrusters to the Mars."

"It is only a vulnerability if our ace mech can overcome the energy shields protecting the rear half of the vessel."

In other words, if the Tower of Babel turned around so that she presented her rear to the greatest threat, then that was an indication that her front still presented an enormous gap in her defenses!

It did not take long before everyone had an answer.

"The enemy battleship is turning!"

This was good news!

What Ves and everyone else was afraid of was that the Tower of Babel had restored enough of her defenses to make her almost impervious to damage in every direction.

If any imbalance had occurred, then that suggested that a hole in the defenses truly existed!

This was the greatest benefit that Saint Neville Magrin and the Unrelenting had provided to the Golden Skull Alliance.

Of course, Neville not only lost most of his starships and personnel, but also the father he looked up to and idolized the most, but what did that have to do with Ves?

He was glad that Cenatus Prospecting had put in enough effort to prevent the Golden Skull Alliance from returning to this star system in vain.

Once a bit of time had passed, the Mars finally came close enough where it could begin to open fire on the enemy vessel.

The same could not be said for the Tower of Babel. Most of her intact gun batteries were so large, slow and unwieldy that they were unlikely to strike a small and fast-moving target like an ace mech that was still in warp travel.

Reginald was at least cognizant enough to begin to vary and angle the direction of the Mars. He studied his target carefully before he decided to pull the trigger.

"I am opening fire!"

The ARCEUS System's integrated energy weapon modules launched the opening strike of this battle!

Although it was considerably more difficult to land a shot with positron beams as opposed to laser beams, that rule didn't apply under the current circumstances because the Tower of Babel remained mostly stationary!

As such, 9 potent resonance-empowered positron beams rapidly crossed the distance and struck the 'rear' of the enemy battleship in a relatively tight grouping!

None of the beams fired at an extreme range missed the mark, though Reginald hadn't been able to ensure that they concentrated their power onto the same segmented energy shield.

Much to Reginald's disappointment, the opening strike of the Mars failed to bypass or break a single transphasic energy shield.

"The alien shielding technology is too annoying!" Patriarch Reginald growled in frustration.

That did not stop the Mars from launching repeated attacks. The ace mech had enough energy to spare, so it might as well begin with wearing down the Tower of Babel's first line of defense.

As the Mars continued to propel forward, it began to circle around as if it wanted to strike the most vulnerable side of the alien battleship.

The aliens weren't about to let that happen and continued to change the orientation of the hull so that the ship always presented her strongest side to the enemy.

The battleship did not let herself get beat up for nothing. After a moderate delay, she finally opened fire with all of her formidable guns that she could bring to bear!

The Mars rapidly evaded to the side moments before a large net of enormous kinetic projectiles and hot laser beams could strike its position!

Though the aliens had been rather clever about weaving a net of attacks to reduce the effectiveness of evasive maneuvers, the distance was still far too great to make the net 'tight' enough.

"How are you holding up, Reginald?!"

"Hahahaha!" The ace pilot laughed as he started to enjoy this fight. "The guns of this battleship have no chance at all of striking my ace mech at this range!"

"If that is the case, then try to maintain your distance and keep peppering the Tower of Babel with long-range attacks. Please wait until our expert mechs have entered into combat range before doing anything else."

"I can do that, though I make no promises." Reginald said.

The first phase of the battle had begun! Both the Mars and the Tower of Babel continued to attack each other without attaining any meaningful results.

The Mars under the excellent control of Patriarch Reginald relied on evasion while the alien battleship relied on her excellent defenses to avoid damage.

While it made for a visually stunning sight, it had little meaning so long as neither side made any progress.

That probably wouldn't last. Once the Mars was done with testing the capabilities of the Tower of Babel, the next phase would definitely produce more intense results!

Ves observed the damaged alien battleship closely. "Come on. Show me your secrets so that we can take down faster."

Chapter 4618 Angry Aliens

The two units exchanging fire with each other couldn't be any more different from each other.

On one side, the Golden Skull Alliance deployed the Mars, its famed and battle-tested masterwork ace mech.

What impressed the native aliens the most about ace mechs was that they packed a huge amount of power in a machine that hardly outmassed a starfighter!

Though the aliens were not entirely unfamiliar with the concept of extraordinary warriors, their 'gods' mostly relied on their intrinsic phasewater-infused bodies to imitate the powers of the phase whale race.

While there were certainly phase lords who managed to grow incredibly strong through this route, the difficulty of reaching it was unimaginable!

Ace pilots may be far weaker by themselves, but once they paired up with a compatible ace mech, the resulting combination produced an amazing degree of synergy!

Right now, this became abundantly clear as the Mars amply proved that it could hold its own against the Tower of Babel!

No matter how many of her intact and operational gun batteries the alien battleship brought to bear against the ace mech, none of them had yet to land a solid strike!

The Mars wasn't making it easy for the alien AIs or gunners to land their shots. Patriarch Reginald possessed a keen intuition for danger and could often predict when his position was about to become extremely dangerous.

By the time the large but ponderous warship cannons unleashed their firepower, the annoyingly small ace mech had already completed its evasive maneuvers!

The command center of the Antonio Cross turned into a hive of activity and many different Crossers kept track of what was taking place.

Some of the men kept a close watch on the Tower of Babel while others supported Patriarch Reginald by providing highly relevant data and suggestions.

As the various elements of the rapid strike force continued to obey their maneuvering instructions, Ves started to worry about whether the aliens would continue to bother with attacking an elusive target.

One of the key components of this daring plan was to force the enemy battleship to train most of her firepower onto the Mars.

While Ves didn't want to see the most important mech of the Golden Skull Alliance get struck by heavy kinetic round that was powerful enough to annihilate a city district, he didn't want the aliens to get too discouraged either!

He turned to Master Benedict. "Once our expert mechs enter into battle, the Mars needs to do more to retain the attention of the enemy battleship."

The Master Mech Designer was no novice when it came to mech combat. He designed mechs for many more years. That automatically meant that he understood the flow of battle much deeper as well.

"We are aware of this concern." The accomplished mech designer responded with a calm and collected voice. "Reginald will bring his Mars closer soon. The aliens will not be able to ignore the threat of our ace mech, especially when our best machine begins to concentrate its ranged output onto the segmented energy shields that have previously absorbed damage."

That was a good way to make the aliens feel threatened. One of the reasons why the Tower of Babel could withstand the attacks of the Mars so easily was because it could dynamically move its segmented energy shields around.

"Will the Mars get close enough to circle around to the damaged front half of the battleship?"

"That is up to Reginald's discretion. It depends on whether the enemy 'phase lord' will pursue the Mars. We believe that the phase lord that has shown up in the previous battle cannot effectively attack and range. The only way for this alien powerhouse to fight against the Mars is to get closer, but if he moves too far away from the Tower of Babel, he will make his ship vulnerable against close assaults by other units."

So far, the phase lord that presumably belonged to the nunser race had yet to make an appearance, but that would change sooner or later.

The existence of this powerful combatant imposed a lot of restrictions on the Golden Skull Alliance. Perhaps the phase lord might not be able to beat ace mechs in direct combat, but the same could not be said for expert mechs!

This was why Ves wasn't eager to send his melee expert mechs such as the Riot and the C-Man forward for the time being.

"Sir, the Mars is moving closer!"

Letting the Mars move closer changed the dynamic of the ongoing firefight.

The Mars was better able to angle around the hull of the alien battleship.

At the same time, the Tower of Babel's primary armaments needed to adjust their firing angles faster. While her secondary laser cannon batteries could still keep up, her much larger and slower primary kinetic cannon batteries struggled a lot more at this point.

This problem would only become greater if the Mars got any closer, but that would likely draw out the enemy phase lord as well.

"Hahaha! You still can't hit me!" Reginald exulted in the enemy's continued lack of ability to inflict effective damage against his ace mech. "Ah, are you trying to shut down my warp bubble? Fat chance!"

Ves called up a new data screen that showed that the Tower of Babel had activated her warp interdiction field.

A wide area of space around the battleship became more solid, making it harder for warp drives and similar equipment to form warp bubbles that were necessary to make objects move faster.

"The strength of the warp interdiction field has weakened by about two-thirds, and its energy levels are constantly fluctuating." Master Benedict remarked as he studied the same data. "That is good news. We expected the enemy

battleship to retain most of this capability, but the damage to the intact rear half of the hull is more extensive than we thought."

The warp interdiction field was probably strong enough to block the warping capabilities of most mechs and starships, but ace mechs were different!

Patriarch Reginald's sheer willpower was enough to smack this field and prevent it from affecting his machine!

This was what made high-ranking mech pilots so special and valuable. No matter what kind of exotic or destructive measures an enemy could come up with, extraordinary mech pilots could always fend off the negative effects.

The universal nature of their resistance against negative effects allowed them to fight against many many different alien civilizations without needing to make too many adjustments!

The ARCEUS System continued to pound the segmented energy shields of the Tower of Babel without showing any significant signs of stress.

Ves was surprised by how well the integrated energy weapons held up during intensive use. The amount of energy and heat running through their compact structures was astounding and could easily melt the metals used to build ordinary mechs.

However, the Mars continued to exhibit robust performance, though he could clearly tell that the effective damage output from the energy weapons was not as great as before.

Ves knew why that was the case. Patriarch Reginald's willpower baptism had fully overridden the effects bestowed by one of Lucky's precious gems.

"What a waste." he whispered under his breath.

He recalled that the Rage of Ayef gem amplified the damage of all energy weapons by 50 percent. This was one of the best offensive performance boosts that Ves had ever gotten his hands on up until this point.

Not even the Amaranto obtained a benefit of this magnitude from its own gem! Bastet's Affection only amplified the damage of the expert rifleman mech by 20 percent.

If Ves could do it all over again, he would refrain from integrating a powerful and nearly irreplaceable gem into the Mars. He should have resorted to a less useful one instead!

"At least Reginald is partially able to reproduce its effects."

The damage output of the Mars hadn't dropped to a massive extent. The ARCEUS System was just a bit weaker than normal because Reginald also invested a lot of effort into fortifying his expert mech's robustness and staying power.

The battle continued to progress like this until the expert mechs deploying from the Antonio Cross were finally ready to take part in the fight!

This was a dangerous moment for the rapid strike force. The Mars might be able to shrug off the battleship's attacks as if they were nothing, but the same couldn't be said for everything else!

The expert mechs therefore lingered at an extreme distance from the enemy battleship. Ordinary ranged mechs wouldn't even be able to fight effectively at this range because their weapons would miss most of their shots.

However, mechs such as the Amaranto and the Promethea were much more precise due to their higher quality designs. When paired with skilled expert pilots, they should reluctantly be able to land their shots on a large and relatively stationary battleship!

The biggest risk was getting hit by the Tower of Babel's formidable armaments, but the expert mechs should be able to evade most attacks at this distance.

Ves immediately shifted his attention to the most powerful ranged mech at his disposal.

The Amarantho did not prepare to open fire by herself. Instead, the expert marksman mech approached the Amphis Mark II and took shelter behind its formidable bulk and tower shield.

"I miss the Shield of Samar." Ves sighed.

The former masterwork expert space knight was designed to seamlessly combine with the Amaranto to form a cohesive combination unit.

That wasn't possible with the Amphis, so the Cross Clan's defensive expert mech could only provide partial cover to the Amaranto.

It would have to do.

The powerful Amaranto piloted by a mid-tier expert pilot started to glow. Her impressive Instrument of Doom began to accumulate more power even as the Phase King began to bless the oversized mech cannon.

More and more power began to well around the Amaranto. A lot of nearby expert pilots detected a growing threat from the expert mech.

Even when she wasn't aiming her weapon's massive muzzle at any friendlies, the Instrument of Doom still made for an intimidating sight!

Despite the dramatic light show and spike in energy emissions, the distant Tower of Babel seemed to take no notice of what was taking place.

This was not a surprise as a casual attack from the Mars far exceeded the power level of the Amaranto with her new weapon!

"Fire!"

A blindingly bright disruptor beam that was at least wide as half a mech rapidly soared from one end to the other end of the battlefield!

The sensors of the Antonio Cross had preemptively hardened themselves in anticipation of this outburst of power.

As the lengthy beam finally struck the Tower of Babel from the side, one of her segmented energy shields incurred a significant amount of damage!

"The energy level of that specific segmented energy shield has dropped by around 22 percent!"

That wasn't all. Much to the surprise of many people, the potent blessing of the Phase King actually enabled a part of disruptor beam to phase through the first layer of energy shields and strike the second layer!

Even if the damage to the second layer was negligible, it showed that the penetration power of the Amaranto and the Instrument of Doom exceeded that of the Mars!

"..."

"We are detecting a response from the enemy battleship! Three of her secondary laser cannon batteries are aiming in the direction of our ship."

"I think we have made the aliens angry!"

"Commence evasive maneuvers! Don't hold anything back!"

It didn't take long before a salvo of powerful laser beams filled up the space around the Antonio Cross!

The fast and nimble fleet carrier had already changed her orientation so that she presented only a minimal silhouette to the Tower of Babel. That along with irregular movements helped the capital ship avoid incurring any damage.

However, the warship's laser cannons did not need to wait too long until they were ready to fire again. The Antonio Cross was still in as much trouble as before!

Chapter 4619 First-Class Damage Sponge

The aliens crewing the enemy battleship were previously content to ignore the other human mechs and starships in the star system.

They recognized that an ace mech was by far the greatest threat a human pioneer could deploy on the battlefield. As long as they could take down the Mars, the rest of the human mech force posed no threat!

However, a part of that calculus changed once the other human units proved that they could pose a more substantial threat to the alien vessel.

This was why the aliens showed a greater willingness to redirect a part of their formidable firepower towards the Antonio Cross and her compliment of expert pilots!

"Incoming!"

This time, one of the powerful laser beams managed to get lucky enough to inflict a glancing blow on the Cross Clan's fleet carrier! One of her energy shield's managed to block most of the blow, but it did not come without a cost.

"One of our shield generators has been overloaded! Our engineers report that it will take at least 44 minutes to replace the blown parts and bring her back to operation!"

"Turn our ship around and don't expose the same section towards the enemy battleship again!"

The Antonio Cross experienced a few close shaves, but the Tower of Babel quickly gave up on striking the fleet carrier. The latter proved to be a lot more difficult to hit than other fleet carriers on account of her slender and relatively mobile profile!

Perhaps the aliens didn't mind if they could strike down a human fleet carrier with ease, but that wasn't the case at this moment.

Taking down a human fleet carrier only provided marginal help to the aliens as it did not directly impact the combat effectiveness of mechs already in the field.

At most, taking down the Antonio Cross would damage the morale of the mech pilots and prevent the mechs in the field from replenishing their spent supplies.

No one intended for this battle to drag on to this extent. Despite the amount of mechs that the Golden Skull Alliance had brought to bear, Ves and the others did not think that they would be able to win a battle of attrition.

Even with only half of her hull left intact, the Tower of Babel was a typical battleship that could fight for several days if her crew managed everything well!

"We are not wearing the Tower of Babel down fast enough." Ves frowned.

"The Mars needs to circle around and attack the front half of the vessel."

"The enemy battleship is making that harder by continually turning her rear side to our ace mech."

"Then I guess we will have to rely on our expert mechs to put pressure on the enemy vessel's weak point."

The alien commander wasn't stupid. The front sections of the damaged battleship represented a massive weak point. A mech as powerful as the Mars could easily finish what the Unrelenting started in a prior battle!

This was why the alien crew did their best to utilize the strained maneuvering thrusters of the Tower of Babel to keep up with Patriarch Reginald's attempts to outflank the damaged vessel.

Reginald became increasingly more annoyed at this. The distance between the Mars and the Tower of Babel was far enough that the ace mech had to traverse a lot of distance in order to change its angle towards the enemy vessel.

"I need to get closer!"

"Please wait before you approach any further! We do not know how effectively you can occupy the attention of the enemy battleship if you get entangled by the alien phase lord. Please follow the plan and make sure that the enemy battleship exposes her weak side to our expert mechs."

Patriarch Reginald struggled for a moment. The plan demanded that he coordinate his actions with other mechs in order to maximize their chances of defeating the battleship, but that clashed with his personal desire to challenge the enemy phase lord!

Although he could earn plenty of glory by contributing to the downfall of an alien warship, he would earn a lot more renown if he was able to defeat one of the famed 'gods' of the indigenous aliens in single combat!

"I will maintain the current distance... for now." Reginald eventually squeezed between his teeth. "You better produce enough results. If we aren't making any progress, then I am going in so that I can do the job myself."

The Cross Clan was used to this, but Ves did not look particularly good at the moment.

Fortunately, the plan accounted for Reginald's willfulness. He was at least predictable in that aspect.

As the Mars continued to circle around the battlefield, the alien battleship eventually exposed her ruined front side to the group of expert mechs.

"Finally! We get to damage something more solid this time!"

The ranged attacks launched by the expert mechs were no longer blocked by energy shields this time!

Instead, the energy beams all struck the ruined and abandoned hull sections that comprised the front half of the vessel.

Many chunks of hull structure melted or got vaporized when struck by the resonance-empowered energy beams of mechs such as the Minerva.

The expert command mech looked a lot lonelier than usual this time. She worked best when she exerted her power over large formations of regular mechs, but it was deemed too risky to do so this time.

The expert mechs may be capable of evading most of the long-ranged fire of the enemy battleship, but the regular mechs might not be able to match this capability.

As such, the Minerva continued to fire her Irvan luminar crystal rifle while applying her Single Empowered resonating ability onto the Blade Chaser Mark II.

Piloted by Commander Casella Ingvar's brother, the Blade Chaser Mark II once again fought in a manner that went against his own nature by carefully firing the Gray Lotus pistol at the distant battleship.

Venerable Imon Ingvar and the Blade Chaser Mark II had to put a lot more effort into landing their shots. Neither of them excelled in long-ranged combat so they had to concentrate extra hard to allow the Gray Lotus' ominous energy beams to strike the enemy vessel's hull.

"You're doing it wrong again, brother. You need to steady your mech further."

Fortunately, Imon received the support of her sister this time. As her command-oriented power continued to meld with Imon's true resonance, the two were able to combine their forces and bring out the best of both!

However, as their shots continually struck the damaged forward hull of the distant battleship, Imon did not sense any of the satisfaction that he landing any effective hits.

Helena hadn't harvested any souls with the death energy that she generously donated to the Gray Lotus up to this point!

"The front half of the enemy battleship isn't manned at all!" Imon Ingvar reported his observations. "I've been firing my gun at many different angles and positions, but none of them have done anything to pass through a bunch of empty compartments."

The other expert pilots reported their own findings.

"Our attacks are merely degrading the structural elements that the aliens have already condemned." Commander Casella Ingvar succinctly reported. "The hull sections that we are able to strike at this angle are unpowered and isolated from the intact sections of the enemy battleship. The aliens have essentially turned the derelict portions of the hull into a giant damage sponge! A first-class damage sponge!"

A lot of faces turned ugly after they made this realization. The aliens had thought ahead and did not do their utmost to cut down the front half that had been ruined by the Unrelenting's massive charge a few days ago. Instead, the clever bastards had kept all of the deadweight attached in the event they needed all of this mass to function as an enormous buffer.

Ves glanced towards the Amaranto. The expert rifleman mech fully charged her Instrument of Doom before opening fire with a blindingly bright positron beam!

Out of the three beam types the Instrument of Doom could select, the positron beam inflicted the greatest damage onto material objects. The annihilation of

particles along with the immense heat released from the reactions never failed to destroy a lot of structural elements!

Yet when the gigantic penetrating positron beams of the most offense-oriented expert mech on the battlefield struck the hull sections, they produced lackluster results.

The damage was not light. Despite the excellent material quality of the battleship, much of her powerful physical defenses were concentrated on her outer layers. Her energy shields along with the thick Arma-Lite DTT-F4 outer hull plating were able to resist a lot of damage.

The former was no longer present while the latter was full of holes and cracks. The interior of the Tower of Babel was a lot softer in comparison.

It should have been easy enough for expert mechs such as the Amaranto to squeeze their ranged attacks through the more vulnerable sections of the battleship's hull.

However, that meant that every attack had to chew through hundreds of meters of bulkheads, abandoned ship parts and other miscellaneous junk!

The results looked dramatic. The front half of the battleship looked like a fortress that was being broken down piece by piece.

The Amaranto was able to produce the greatest amount of damage with every strike, but her Instrument of Doom possessed an agonizingly slow firing rate.

Venerable Stark also no longer called upon the Phase King's blessing. Additional penetration power did not actually increase the amount of damage inflicted onto the ship. It only spread out the Instrument of Doom's damage output over a wider area.

The other expert mechs couldn't inflict as much damage despite wielding faster-firing rifles. The damage output of these weapons was much lower,

particularly if they happened to be spare equipment that weren't particularly attuned to any specific machine.

Melee expert mechs such as the First Sword, the Riot and the C-Man looked exceptionally sad as they listlessly fired their loaned luminar crystal rifles at the exposed hull of the enemy battleship.

The mechs and their pilots were at least good enough to hit the ship most of the time, but they weren't always able to land repeated shots in the same areas, which made it harder for them to concentrate their fire and penetrate any deeper.

The only way for them to unleash their formidable close combat potential was to get close, but that was deemed too risky for the time being!

The only other ranged expert mech that was doing well aside from the Amaranto was the Promethea.

Compared to the bombastic up-front power exhibited by the Amaranto and her latest weapon, the Promethea did not attract that much attention at first.

Every positron beam fired by her Ignitron luminar crystal rifle did not particularly damage a huge amount of hull structure. The damage upon impact was quite mediocre to be honest, and the Ignitron did not even possess any notable penetration properties.

However, each and every monotonous strike from the Promethea left behind a strange purple flame.

The oddly persistent fires mostly represented an extension of Venerable Isobel Kotin's true resonance and willpower, so they did not exactly behave like normal flames.

The strangest part about these purple flames was that they pretty much burned every piece of solid matter they came across. It did not matter how

tough or fire-resistant the alloys were, as long as the flames caught on, it undoubtedly burned and produced heat!

At first, the amount of flames was negligible, but as the minutes passed by, they started to become a little more serious.

Before everyone knew it, dozens of exposed compartments and hull sections had become engulfed in a firestorm!

Ves became ecstatic at the sight!

"Can you spread your flames any further, Isobel?!"

"I... can't, sir. I am already doing the best I can, but I am stretching my limits at this moment. I won't be able to keep this up much longer either."

"It's already enough as long as you can hold on for a couple more minutes." Ves replied.

He wasn't satisfied with this answer. The Promethea was the only expert mech that was making this attempt worthwhile, but that would all stop once Venerable Isobel exhausted her willpower.

Chapter 4620 Low Intimacy

The Amaranto and the Promethea were both expert rifleman mechs, but fought in completely different ways.

The former was the classic marksman mech that sat back far in the rear and took down high-priority opponents by targeting their weak points.

Normally, that worked out great because every mech or starship possessed a weak point. Whether that was a hole in the outer surface, a joint with much less armor cover or the rear of a starship where the thrusters were dangerously exposed, there was often a way for the Amaranto to turn a battle around by crippling a powerful opponent with one, dazzling precision strike!

The expert rifleman mech was not omnipotent, though. If that was the case, then the Golden Skull Alliance would have defeated its previous opponents with much greater ease.

The greatest hindrances that impeded the Amaranto were energy-based defenses and lots of junk in the way.

Right now, Venerable Stark found herself in a less than enviable position as much of the potent firepower of the Instrument of Doom kept destroying abandoned hull structures as opposed to more useful ship elements.

Venerable Isobel Kotin and the Promethea actually faced the same problem, but there was a crucial difference.

Ves had expressly conceived the Promethea as a ranged expert mech that could take down an entire warship by herself!

Though Ves hadn't actually expected the Promethea to confront an armed capital ship of this caliber so soon, that did not detract from the fact that she was in her element at this time!

More hull structure did not necessarily represent more hindrances that prevented Venerable Isobel from completing her objectives.

Instead, when affected by her fire-oriented true resonance, the enormous structure began to get engulfed by increasingly more expansive flames.

The Promethea's damage output produced a much more impressive visual spectacle than that of other high-end mechs!

This was especially the case when the expert mech had a sufficiently large enough canvas for Venerable Isobel to express her power!

"The ship... is actually on fire!"

"This is impossible! How can a single expert mech produce so much damage? The hull is constantly heating up and melting as we speak! Solid alloys that

have incredibly melting points are turning into molten slag with each passing second."

Not only were the flames spread by the Promethea softening up the hull on a large scale, but they also made it easier for the other expert mechs to inflict greater damage to the formerly solid structure.

When Ves looked at the data related to the effects produced by the flames, he saw that they were not that exaggerated.

Venerable Isobel Kotin still possessed limits and her flames found it particularly difficult to 'burn' through more solid first-class materials.

Oh, they were burning alright, but the speed in which they did so was incredibly slow!

However, that did not matter that much as the inner hull incorporated lots of softer metals and materials that burned a lot easier!

The result of all of this was that the purple flames began to reach deeper and deeper towards the middle of the alien battleship.

This was an alarming outcome and one that most definitely spooked the alien crew!

"The alien battleship is redirecting some of her gun batteries. They are about to fire on the Promethea!"

"Careful, Isobel!"

Ves didn't need to worry. Venerable Isobel had took into account that her Promethea would become a priority target after she single-handedly began to torch the Tower of Babel.

The expert mech was far enough from the alien battleship to exacerbate any minor mistakes in aim.

It did not escape the attention of the Golden Skullers that the Tower of Babel's formidable warship-grade cannons exhibited much poorer accuracy than before.

Even if the Antonio Cross and her complement of expert mechs stayed much further away than the doomed starships of Cenatus Prospecting, it was rather strange that the warship had not produced any better results than a few rare glancing blows.

"The laser cannons have become misaligned." Master Benedict made an educated guess. "When the Unrelenting charged straight into the forward half of the enemy battleship, the ace mech applied a massive amount of force during its charge. This not only resulted in a great amount of direct damage, but also warped and deformed large sections of the hull, including the rear half that mostly appears to be intact."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "Shouldn't warships be more resistant to the negative effects of hull warping? They are dedicated combat units, after all. They are designed to withstand enormous blows and keep going."

"Ordinarily, you are correct, but this is a special case. The full charge of the Unrelenting under the influence of Unity of Man and Machine was a sight to behold. The ace mech managed to charge deeper into the throat of the battleship than anyone could have imagined. It is exactly because Saint Neville Magrin managed to deliver a strike so deep into the center of the hull that the rear half got affected. Aside from that, the aliens aren't doing their abused battleship any favors by making any movements. There is so much dead weight attached to the vessel that it will only make the hull warp even more."

In short, all of the gun batteries had become askew and urgently needed to be straightened out again. This was anything but simple unless the entire vessel

was made out of smart metal. A full recalibration of all of the armaments could easily take months!

All of this was good news to the Golden Skull Alliance. Ves worried less about the alien vessel producing any significant casualties.

"The Promethea could still do more, though."

While the expert ranged mech was inflicting a lot of damage, not all of it mattered. There were simply too many alloys to burn through.

"Is there a way to stoke the fire?" Ves wondered.

He briefly glanced at the list of assets on the battlefield before he developed an idea on how he could strengthen the Promethea.

He opened a new communication channel to one of his masterwork expert mechs. "Casella!"

"Yes, patriarch?"

"Isobel and her Promethea could use an additional boost. Can you empower them with your Minerva?"

"We've tried in the past, but it is not easy." Casella replied. "Expert pilots and expert mechs generally do not wish to develop a dependence on outside help. My brother is different because we are close siblings, but I do not share the same intimate bond with Isobel."

The Ingvar siblings might not be Geminis, but they could probably join their notorious family if Casella embraced their unorthodox lifestyle.

"Try again this time! Maybe the situation wasn't right previously. Isobel is struggling a lot at the moment so she should be much more receptive towards your assistance this time!"

This was just a guess from Ves, but it was worth a try.

The Minerva briefly interrupted her attempts to poke more holes into the battleship and approached the Promethea.

The two female expert pilots talked privately to each other before the Sentinel Commander cautiously extended her power to Venerable Isobel.

For a moment, the Promethea became more turbulent. The expert mech instinctively interpreted the extension of Commander Casella's true resonance as an invasion of her territory.

The two expert mechs weren't harmonizing!

It wasn't for lack of trying. Venerable Isobel Kotin and Commander Casella Ingvar both agreed with this measure, and their living expert mechs were more than willing to cooperate.

Yet why weren't they making any progress?

As Ves observed the two mechs with a critical eye, he saw that intent was far from sufficient to allow Casella to lend her power to another expert pilot.

"Expert pilots are too exclusionary to external influences. That is both an advantage and a disadvantage. In this case, the trust and intimacy between the two female expert pilots aren't strong enough to overcome their inherent resistance."

It reminded Ves of certain games where two different characters needed to level up their friendship in order to get a substantial buff to their battle strength.

It might sound like a silly concept, but it actually existed in reality. The Gemini Family was a giant poster child of the power of intimacy!

Clearly, the ties between random Larkinson expert pilots did not meet the high threshold. The fact that the two mech pilots belonged to the same clan and fought for the same people was not sufficient.

"Forget about it." He transmitted to the two. "It was worth a try, but we can't waste too much time and effort on this when we are in the middle of a battle. Focus on doing what you can on your own. The battleship is showing signs of greater activity."

There was no way the aliens were willing to go on as usual as a part of their proud warship was on fire!

In ancient times, fire was one of the greatest threats of ocean-faring vessels.

That hadn't changed now that ships roamed the stars. It just became a lot harder for them to catch fire due to the lack of highly flammable materials and other circumstances.

However, if a starship did manage to catch fire for some reason, then that was most certainly a reason to panic!

"We're detecting powerful spatial fluctuations!" A sensor officer reported.

"What is the ship doing now?!"

"The readings... the readings match the patterns produced by the enemy phase lord!"

The god in charge of the alien battleship had finally decided to make an appearance!

If the powerful vessel had no more readily available means left to repel the enemies at hand, then the phase lord had to make an appearance before the flames reached the intact portions of the ship.

Ves zoomed in on the live feed that showed the phase lord emerging from a hatch on the side of the alien vessel.

Nunsers were generally larger and more massive than humans, but the phase lord looked even greater than that, especially when he was wearing a thick suit of armor.

Not everyone was aware that phase lords were actually much bigger than they appeared. As long as a significant proportion of their blood was replaced by phasewater, their physical bodies actually became a lot bigger!

They just looked the same because a lot of weird spatial manipulation took place that shrunk the insides of their bodies.

Ves wasn't able to guess the true size and mass of the alien phase lord. He could only vaguely guess that the phase lord was substantially more powerful than himself and his cyborg cat.

This was a true powerhouse.

Whereas Ves had to resort to cheap tricks, the nunser phase lord likely had to get to this point through hard work and taking risks!

"Who is the phase lord going to fight?"

That was the important question. Would the alien 'god' choose to entangle the Mars and prevent it from exerting any further pressure on the battleship's defenses?

"The alien phase lord is moving away from the Mars! He... he is heading in our direction! He has already formed a warp bubble and will reach our position in a few minutes!"

Ves and a lot of crew members aboard the Antonio Cross started to get a lot more concerned!

They couldn't imagine how much destruction the phase lord could wreak if he got close to their vulnerable fleet carrier!

"Should we request Patriarch Reginald to intercept the enemy phase lord?"

"NO! The Mars must continue to keep the Tower of Babel occupied. Trust in our expert mechs! We have more than a dozen of them at our disposal.

A powerful champion was on the way. No one truly knew how well the expert mechs deployed from the Antonio Cross would fare against an unusual alien menace.

What complicated the situation was that no one had a clear idea on how to gauge the strength and combat effectiveness of alien 'gods'. Direct comparisons were extremely difficult to make due to a lack of data. The only way to know for certain whether the expert mechs could hold their own was to see them in action!

"At least our melee expert pilots are useful now." Ves remarked.