

Mech Touch 6251

Chapter 6251 A Man's Perspective

General Ark Larkinson did not expect to receive a harsh rebuke from Venerable Rosa Orfan.

To be fair, he deserved to hear it. He genuinely made a few missteps when he took the initiative to plan this operation and begin to set it in motion.

Was he being selfish?

Perhaps. Every human was selfish to a degree, and high-ranking mech pilots were usually more self-centered for obvious reasons.

That was not a problem in most circumstances, but it became a distinct issue when they started to assume leadership responsibilities.

There was an inherent conflict between selfishness and command authority.

When a leader had been entrusted with authority over a military unit, that leader assumed multiple different responsibilities.

He needed to be a good custodian of that unit and make sure to keep it in the best possible condition. The leader needed to take adequate care of his troops and ensure that their lives did not go to waste. The soldiers all signed up in order to do their duty but also to advance their own careers. It was the responsibility of the leader to facilitate those goals if possible.

He also needed to obey the directives of his superiors and lead the unit in successful actions. A unit should not be coddled, especially in times of war where their strength was needed more than ever. A force that was not prepared to fight the difficult battles that they were equipped to handle was not a useful combat asset!

A completely selfless leader should not have too many issues with upholding both responsibilities. The most typical scenario that would present problems to such a leader was when times became tough and casualties started to mount in an escalating war.

A qualified leader needed to make tough choices about spending the lives of his subordinates in order to fulfill important military objectives. Those that cared too much about the lives of his troops were not suited for their positions, and should be transferred away in order to make room for a tougher commander that was willing to make the hard but necessary choices. Even then, the replacement was still expected to do whatever it took to preserve the lives of his men and prevent any excess losses.

This dynamic became a lot more complicated when the leader was selfish.

What if the officer in charge possessed strong ambitions? What if he valued his career progress over preserving the lives of his men? What if he was actively willing to throw his troops into a meat grinder in order to climb up the hierarchy at a faster rate?

The situation especially became complicated when the commanding officer also happened to be an expert pilot!

Every expert pilot wanted to become stronger. Their willpower was largely centered around the need to become powerful enough to realize their impossible ambitions. They would have never broken through in the first place if they did not desire power hard enough.

One of the reasons why it was difficult for command-oriented expert pilots to break past their stubborn bottlenecks was because they needed to resolve additional dilemmas like this. They all needed to find a balance between their responsibilities and their selfish desires for power and glory.

When General Ark looked back at his own decision-making as of late, he could not honestly judge whether he went too far. Sure, he made decisions that he otherwise wouldn't have made if he was not an expert pilot, but it was exactly because he was fairly strong that he was eager to undertake greater risks.

As Ark continued to puzzle over whether he had made any missteps as of late, he decided to share his thoughts with another individual.

There were not many people he could reach out to. Under normal circumstances, he would have called his father Benjamin or his nephew Ves for a personal talk.

If he wanted to hear out more objective voices, he could reach out to Venerable Jannzi or Commander Casella Ingvar.

Unfortunately, the stealth ship maintained a complete communications blackout.

There were not a lot of mature and thoughtful peers on the stealth vessel.

This was why General Ark eventually approached Venerable Vincent Ricklin.

"What's up, general?"

"I could use your counsel."

"Counsel? Me? Are you serious?" Vincent questioned as he paused in eating his meal.

"I need to hear another perspective on a matter that Venerable Orfan has recently brought up with me. Let me explain."

As the older expert pilot laid out Rosa Orfan's critique, Vincent's expression gradually changed from puzzlement to understanding.

"I can see why she is upset." The muscular expert pilot commented. "You really messed her up by dragging her into your high-risk operation while she is still stuck with a severely outdated expert mech. I would be just as angry if I was in her shoes. I'm not as upset because my C-Man is newer and stronger than her old Riot. That doesn't mean I am particularly pleased. I can understand your reasoning for forcing us to take part in this op, but it would have been great if you presented it to us first."

"We are at war, Vincent. I have no obligation to seek your permission. As long as the regional headquarters of the Red Association approves of my plan, then that should be enough. I also had to maintain the secrecy of this operation. The more I talk about it in advance, the greater the likelihood that the native aliens will find out and prepare an ambush. We cannot handle information as loosely as before. It is important for us to exercise tight information control and keep most people in the dark as long as possible."

"Talk like that just reinforces Rosa's accusation that you don't care at all about the rest of us." Vincent frowned. "Look, I get it. We are all expert pilots. We don't need any coddling. That doesn't

mean we want to be treated like crap. She is right that a more caring leader like Commander Casella would definitely make a greater effort to bring us on board sooner."

"Even you think this way?"

"Yes, but I don't think that Casella is necessarily better than you, Ark. Before I joined the Larkinson Clan, I worked for a mix of different leaders, each of whom were crappy in different ways. Compared to them, you are not that bad. You can be counted upon to make the tough but necessary choices, I suppose. We are not here to have a picnic. We are here to fight. It is a luxury if everything goes in our favor."

General Ark did not expect Vincent to speak such sage words. The younger expert pilot did not behave as immature as his public image suggested.

"So you prefer to be led by me or Commander Casella?"

"I don't regret my decision to transfer into the Warborn." Vincent shrugged. "I still trust you. I trust Casella as well. The two of you have different leadership styles. I think I would feel more comfortable if I was placed under the Sentinel Commander, but I also think my chances of breaking through won't be as high. She cares about her men, which is good if keeping us all alive is the only priority. However, it is because she cares about us that she is reluctant to send any of us out on risky missions where we could fall at any time. Without all of that tempering, we won't be able to progress as quickly as we want. She is always present and ready to catch us as we fall, but there are pilots who don't necessarily need or want a mother hovering protectively over their heads."

In other words, if Commander Casella could be described as a somewhat overprotective mother, General Ark could be likened to a neglectful father!

The trueblood Larkinson looked bemused. "I see. That is a refreshing opinion for me to hear. Thank you for helping me clear my confusion. Rosa Orfan may be correct that I do not 'care' about my subordinates in the way she prefers, but that does not mean my command approach is necessarily wrong. As mech pilots, we signed up for a life of duty and hardship. None of us are destined to live peaceful lives. I may be accused of pushing my men hard, but they are all elite mech pilots, or else they wouldn't have been able to enter the 77th Warborn. I cannot promise everyone that they will remain safe, but I can at least give them plenty of chances to earn glory on the battlefield."

The pilot of the C-Man chuckled. It was as if Ark made an unintentional joke.

"You sound like Patriarch Reginald at times. Bits and pieces of him must have rubbed off on you. How much do you care about glory, actually?"

That was a good question. General Ark frowned as he tried to tackle this question in a serious way.

He soon found that it was hard for him to supply a clear answer.

"I... have always cared about glory, I suppose. There was never a time when I was not in a prominent position. I was a prodigy during my academy days. I entered into service at the right time when the next Bright-Vesia War had just unleashed. I managed to make the Larkinson Family proud by breaking through as an expert pilot. I received promotions and began to lead larger and more powerful mech units. After that... I stalled and meandered around for a long time."

"You stopped earning glory when the war had ended."

"Quite so. It was... not frustrating, but disappointing. As much as I do not like to admit it, I thrive in conflict. This is the time where my services are the most needed and appreciated. I am always in a better mood when people look up on me and depend on me to deliver them victories. I suppose it is not a coincidence that my ability as a command specialist is so centered around myself. I seek to rise above the occasion because it earns me glory. This is good for me because more people will respect me and worship me as their savior and protector, which in turn feeds back into my strength."

General Ark did not see anything wrong with this. He did his best to step up and become the brightest presence on the battlefield so that he was better able to fulfill his objectives.

He did not think he was neglecting the others who were left in the shadows. He cared for them in his own way, which was to give them enough opportunities to stand out and break through in battle.

If doing so meant that he had to expose his troops to greater peril, then that was a necessary sacrifice.

Ark felt a lot more comfortable in his skin after making this realization. He was no Commander Casella, nor did he have any wish to resemble her. Neither of them were necessarily right or wrong. They were just different.

"You're a man." Venerable Vincent said. "There is no need for you to apologize for that. Embrace your manhood and dominate the battlefield in the best traditions of our gender. I don't know about

the others, but you can count on me to follow you and cover your back, at least while I am still a part of your Warborn. I am with you on this. We can't remain passive all of the time. We need to attack not just because it is a better way to contribute to the war effort, but also because I don't think I will have any chance of breaking through if I act like a turtle all of the time."

Vincent simply did not care about the risks of the upcoming operation in the same way as Orfan. That ultimately set the two apart and caused them to have wildly diverging opinions about whether General Ark was right or wrong.

Whether Vincent was right to feel confident about this risky operation remained to be seen.

Ark just hoped that Vincent did not come to regret his bold stance.

Chapter 6252 The Less Competent Ingvar

Speaking to both Venerable Rosa Orfan and Venerable Vincent Ricklin had done General Ark Larkinson a lot of good.

Ark received more honest criticism and helpful feedback than he had in months, if not years.

It helped him put his command approach into perspective and make him more aware of where he stood as a leader of men as well as an expert pilot.

As he continued to think about his strengths and his interactions with other mech pilots, he continued on his tour and spoke with the remaining expert pilots.

As the brother of a woman as outstanding as Commander Casella Ingvar, Venerable Imon Ingvar was better placed than most people to comment on this subject.

"Casella is overcompensating." The male Ingvar spoke. "Before we got picked up by Ves Larkinson, we had been reduced to a pair of losers. Both of us used to be members of House Ingvar. My sister studied to become a mech officer, and did well enough when our House was doing great. When it suddenly collapsed due to betrayal and intrigue that I am not eager to rehash, all of her subordinates quickly turned around and no longer obeyed her. That setback affected her deeply."

As a mech commander himself, Ark understood how deeply such an occurrence could be damaging to one's confidence as a leader.

"It sounds as if Casella is not to blame for this outcome." The older expert pilot quietly said. "The mech pilots owed their loyalty to House Ingvar. From the moment it had fallen, their employment contracts should have turned null and void. They are free to leave and work for another organization, which they evidently did. It doesn't matter if you can continue to cover their pay by relying on your own bank accounts. Only the most loyal and dedicated servants are willing to follow fallen nobles. Everyone else doesn't like to bet their lives and future on a couple of young nobles who have lost the backing that they relied upon all their lives."

Imon crossed his arms. "My thoughts are similar to yours, but Casella doesn't accept this viewpoint. She still blames herself to this day, you know. She believes that if she had put a greater effort into building a genuine sense of camaraderie and respect with her subordinates, they would have stuck to her despite the lack of advantages of following her after the fall of our House. If you know that, then you should understand Casella's active command style much better. The reason why she is so well-liked by everyone is not entirely because she cares about her subordinates. It is because she is terrified that they will abandon her and desert her when we are in another crisis. Such an event... is enough to break her willpower."

"..."

General Ark could understand why a commander like Casella would buckle under such trauma, but he would never take it like this. Humans were flawed. They were cowards by nature.

It was only due to training, duty, greed, esprit de corps and even camaraderie that soldiers were able to suppress their natural fears and enter into battle with brave expressions.

That did not mean that their fears had disappeared entirely. As long as events caused their fear to surpass their bravery, their confidence would waver to the point where they wanted to retreat and run away regardless of any greater considerations.

Ark had never witnessed a rout in his later years, but he had seen it numerous times in the early days of his career.

The Bright Republic's Mech Corps won as many battles as it lost against the Vesia Kingdom's Mech Legion.

The two sides knew each other so well that neither side was able to attain any absolute advantages over the other. It was normal to win and lose.

In the few cases where Ark fought in a battle where the Mech Corps fell into a heavy disadvantage, he experienced the spread of panic and the sense of gloom that affected all of the troops on the battlefield.

Fortunately, the Mech Corps was not a military organization that refused to acknowledge the possibility of defeat. It tried to form clear lines of retreat and ensure that the withdrawing troops would eventually be able to live to fight another day.

That was part of the reason why Ark did not think it was a big deal if soldiers became so gripped by their fears that they stopped following his instructions. His troops at least fell back to a location where he could eventually reunite with them and bring them under his command once again.

Casella never enjoyed that particular luxury in the past.

"Who do you think is a better commander?"

Imon shrugged. "I can't say. I mean, you have your strong points, and so does my sister. I suppose it depends on what you care about the most. Is the purpose of leading troops to limit their casualties as much as possible, or to complete as many missions as you can? From what I have observed, Casella is probably more inclined to call for a retreat if the price of winning is too high. In comparison, you are not afraid of taking greater risks, or else you wouldn't have decided to attack Duqaste XI without any form of backup. Which is better depends on what you care about the most."

Ark frowned. He did care about the lives of his subordinates. Perhaps he did not treat them as individual treasures like Casella, but it was a lie that he was perfectly willing to let them all die.

In his opinion, he was just being more realistic about the life and death of soldiers. People died in droves in every war. He had befriended numerous comrades in the past, but many of them eventually fell in battle against the Vesians.

This happened with such regularity that he no longer developed a lot of intimacy with the next comrades that fought by his side.

It also didn't help that he began to climb up the hierarchy. The higher his officer rank, the lower the amount of people he could interact as equals.

Eventually, his rank became so high that the only people he dealt with on a daily basis were those underneath him. How could he befriend them so easily when he needed to be harsh and send them to their possible deaths if necessary?

"Being a leader is hard." Ark commented. "I am sure that your sister has experienced many moments of stress due to the burden of leadership. I envy simple pilots such as you, Imon. You are not expected to do anything but fight well when your services are needed."

"Hehehe." Imon Ingvar chuckled and straightened his posture. "Is that what you think? I have a completely different opinion on that. Do you know that whenever someone in our clan says the name Ingvar, their mind immediately jumps to my sister? They always respect and look up to 'Casella Ingvar'. It is rare that any Larkinson looks up to me first. I mean why should they? Compared to my talented, capable and compassionate sister, I am just the simpleton who doesn't possess any ability to command a mech legion, let alone a mech squad. The reason why I am expected to do nothing but pilot my Blade Chaser Mark II well is because people don't trust me to do anything more than that. They are afraid that I will fail if I take on any more burdens."

"I do not think that is an accurate characterization of yourself." General Ark frowned. "Do not belittle yourself, Imon. People have different talents and inclinations. It is perfectly acceptable for high-ranking mech pilots to stay away from any leadership responsibilities. As long as you do your primary job well, no one will care about your shortcomings. Your sister may have indeed become the more famous among the two of you, but take it from a Larkinson who grew up in a long line of expert pilots and war heroes. You can forge your legend as long as you are successful enough. If you become an ace pilot before your sister, then you will not be regarded as the more incompetent Ingvar anymore."

Imon nodded in agreement. "Becoming stronger is definitely one of my main goals. I don't necessarily want to prove that Casella is weaker or anything. She is still my sister, and I care for her a lot. I just don't think I can help her all that much at my current level of strength. It is only when I have advanced to an ace pilot that I can truly watch her back and serve as her most powerful asset by her side. This is why I don't object too much about this crazy operation that you have sprung on us. It is not a pleasant surprise, but it is probably one of the best opportunities for me to challenge my limits and see if I can get any closer to breaking through."

"How close are you, Imon?"

"Not that close, to be honest. I still need to work on... stuff. I have a feeling that I not only need to figure out what sort of relationship I want to have with my sister, but also get her to accept my chosen role."

"And what role do you envision for yourself?" Ark asked.

"We belong together. She is a great commander, but she is not that good of a fighter compared to other expert pilots. I am the opposite. I don't know the first thing about leading troops, but you are right when you said that I know how to fight well. I want to become her protector and her greatest champion. She can make all of the tough choices and support me from behind while I take care of all of the toughest enemies that she will face in the future. This is a perfect combination as far as I am concerned. We are a match made in heaven."

It could be argued that Imon would probably pair well with most other mech commanders.

Who wouldn't like a strong expert pilot and expert mech at his disposal?

General Ark looked at Imon with greater respect. "Your dedication to your sister is admirable. It is rare for me to see a stronger bond between relatives. Is this why you are eager to test yourself in the upcoming operation?"

Imon grinned as his willpower exuded greater eagerness and battlelust. "Yes. Compared to participating in typical battles, I can get much more out of it if we are badly outnumbered and have to fight for every scrap of progress. There are no fallback options or escape routes for me. I will literally have to fight for my life in order to survive... and maybe become a greater version of myself while I am at it. I am both excited and apprehensive at the upcoming action. I am aware that there is a chance that I won't be able to return to my sister."

"Does that terrify you, Imon?"

"No, general. I am... impatient. I do not want to spend the next years and decades of my life as the same high-tier expert pilot. I hate my bottleneck. I am willing to do almost anything to obliterate it. I will either return to Casella as an ace pilot, or inside a coffin. I don't know which of the two outcomes will eventually happen, but I would rather make it happen sooner or later, because I don't want to stay in a limbo where I am too weak to matter."

Imon wanted a resolution. His self-esteem and his desire to be of use to his sister did not allow him to remain stuck as an expert pilot.

In an era where only ace pilots and stronger combatants could make a significant difference in the massive battles being fought today, Imon Ingvar no longer wanted to be known as the useless and less competent sibling!

"I wish you all the luck you need, Imon." Ark said in an understanding tone. "You will have your chance in the next battle. It may even be more than you can handle, but that is exactly the sort of situation where you can prove that you are better than what many think of you. I am rooting for you. Of course, I am also rooting for myself, but that goes without saying. Let's turn this into a race and see who gets to break through first."

Imon grinned and bumped his fist against Ark's own outstretched fist. "Deal."

Chapter 6253 Stealth Tension

The RA stealth carrier quietly reached the edge of Duqaste XI's perimeter.

In order to reduce the probability of detection as much as possible, the ship disabled non-essential systems. From the lighting to the antigrav systems, nothing was allowed to give away any hint of the vessel's presence.

The temperature turned cold. The lack of gravity made navigating through the ship a lot more cumbersome. Everyone had to wear vacuum-sealed suits that also kept them warm, fed and clean.

The carrier's stealth capabilities were impressive, but that was no reason for the mechers to grow complacent. They followed all of the rules and guidelines and acted as cautiously as possible.

The crew members no longer bothered to communicate through sound or through wireless signals. They mostly exercised their own responsibilities according to a predetermined plan. At most, they resorted to economic hand signals and subtle exchanges by physically connecting their slim armored suits to each other.

All of these efforts helped to reduce the load on the active stealth systems and minimized the occurrence of slight blips that could potentially alert the monitoring systems of the enemy starships in the vicinity.

The humans had already employed stealth vessels and stealth mechs against the native aliens many times in the past.

While the results were mostly gratifying, the downside was that most of the major alien races had become a lot more guarded against stealth attacks!

It had become standard procedure for any alien fleet or base to deploy a combination of escort ships and phasefighter squadrons out on patrol.

Since the aliens usually saw no need to hide their tracks, their vessels openly employed active sensor and scanning systems at medium intensity in order to track stealth vessels trying to sneak past their perimeter.

The effectiveness of these measures varied depending on the tech, quantity of patrols and environmental factors.

The native aliens didn't care too much about catching enemy infiltrators on approach. Their primary concern was to deter stealth attacks by showing that they are alert and ready to respond the instant they detected a hidden threat.

Right now, the RA stealth carrier had slowed down. The captain of the ship grew pensive as the quantity of alien patrols around Duqaste XI made it unlikely that his vessel would be able to maintain secrecy all the way.

General Ark Larkinson was the only mech pilot who had not yet boarded his mech. He needed to be on the bridge in order to remain up to date on the developing situation and issue instructions if necessary.

Seeing that the stealth vessel had slowed to a relative stop outside of the perimeter of the target planet, Ark slowly floated forward until he came close enough to place his armored hand on the captain's shoulder plate.

[Is it safe to advance?]

[Not at the moment.] The captain replied through a very subtle signal transmitted through physical contact. [The density of patrols is putting out too many detection signals in the surrounding space. According to our calculations, the risk of detection is 0.5 percent per minute. That does not sound too much to you, but keep in mind that we will be lingering in this area for a longer duration than that. The risk of detection also rises the closer we move to the mission site.]

General Ark frowned. It would be bad if they got stalled at this distance. If the stealth carrier proceeded no further, then her safety would be assured, but it would also make life harder for him and his fellow pilots.

The Mars and the expert mechs assigned to this mission were usually loud and obvious. There was no way to hide their obvious heat signatures and other emissions once they became active.

The only way to keep them hidden for a short while longer was to gently eject them from the hangar bay of the stealth vessel. By refraining from activating the cold and silent mechs, they might be able to coast along for a dozen seconds or a little longer without getting detected right away.

This was not enough for the high-ranking mechs to get much closer to their objectives, but it was enough to reduce the probability of exposing the exact location of the stealth carrier.

Even so, Ark was not satisfied with this situation. He knew that the native aliens would wake up and begin to mobilize all of their available combat assets as soon as they sounded the alarm.

Precious minutes would pass by as the Mars and the expert mechs crossed the distance and entered into low orbit of Duqaste XI. That was enough time for the native aliens to make a lot of progress to form a blockade and get ready to encircle the human intruders as best as possible.

[This ship needs to get closer.] Ark conveyed. [What are our options?]

[We can choose from three possible courses of action, general. The most passive and safest option for the ship is to maintain our current distance and launch your mechs into space. Another low-risk option is to wait for the Ghirard Fleet to dispatch more of its warships to Duqaste VII. The most dangerous option is to deploy one of your mechs to generate a distraction that will allow my ship a greater chance to sneak closer without setting off any enemy alarms.]

None of the three options sounded ideal to Ark. He already ruled out the first option. That meant he could either choose between waiting for a change in circumstances or create a distraction that could go very right but also very wrong.

The last option was the most proactive one that promised to deliver quick results, but Ark felt hesitant to take such a dangerous gamble.

The plan called for splitting up the already limited mechs. There would be at least one less machine to raid the surface of Duqaste XI and fight their way out of an encirclement.

While an argument could be made that creating a diversion may draw more alien assets away from the planet, thereby making it more vulnerable, that meant the isolated mech would attract even more danger!

Ark much preferred to stick to the original plan as much as possible. That meant keeping all of the mechs together.

[We wait.] He decided. [The troops guarding Duqaste VII are still in the process of subtly trying to draw the attention of the invading aliens. They are not done yet with luring the enemy forces over. Give them more time to work. We will proceed as soon as the defenses here have lessened to the point where the risk of detection is low enough.]

[We may remain stuck here for days or longer, general. An opening may not appear until the Ghirard Fleet is ready to launch a full assault.]

[Then so be it. I will not subject ourselves to excessive risks in an already dangerous operation.]

Ark stayed around a little longer in order to convey additional instructions and demands. He then proceeded to leave the bridge and move over to his Lionheart.

There was no reason to stay inside the bridge any longer. Ark would rather remain on standby in his Lionheart and make sure the rest knew that they needed to do the same.

Hours passed by as Ark remained inside the cockpit of his excellent mech. His Lionheart became so quiet and lifeless when it had been put in a dormant state.

Unlike the more classical living mechs such as the very boisterous Riot, the Lionheart was a so-called post-living mech according to Ves, who was the only authority on this subject.

This phrase essentially meant that the Lionheart had the roots and many of the trappings of living mechs, but diverged in important ways.

Ark had requested to turn the Lionheart into a second skin mech for specific reasons. He did so despite the amazing popularity and appreciation for living mechs that could think and potentially fight for themselves.

It was not that Ark hated the idea of living mechs or anything. He could see how well it complemented pilots such as Tusa, Jannzi, Joshua and many others.

Ark simply did not feel the need to change his modus operandi.

He was raised as a champion and a hero ever since he first demonstrated his talent. He had learned to pilot ordinary mechs and steadily worked his way up by piloting one lifeless mech after another.

He had achieved a great amount of success with mechs like that and built up a lot of muscle memory and other routines as a result.

Ark would have to change too many aspects of his piloting style if he switched over to piloting living mechs. He would have to unlearn many important lessons and painstakingly build up a lot of new habits.

He also had to split his time and concentration on building up an amicable relationship with his 'battle partner'.

The expert pilot did not look forward to making so many changes to his established formula.

He had seen how Patriarch Reginald was able to make his Mars work so well despite having killed off the machine's independent personality.

Ark did not regret his decision to pilot a mech similar to that of the Mars.

The Lionheart was powerful beyond doubt. Its lack of independent personality did not make Ark feel as if he was missing out on anything important. The fact that it fit him like a glove allowed him to assume considerably greater control over the machine than he had ever attained with any other mech.

It was not easy to pilot the Lionheart for that reason. Ark had to invest more attention and focus on controlling all of its functions, but the benefit of doing so was that he could make it move and behave exactly according to his intentions.

As a command-oriented expert pilot, Ark was not afraid of higher control requirements. It also helped that unlike Commander Casella, he did not need to spend a large part of his attention and

focus on micromanaging so many different subordinates. He was able to invest most his resources into piloting the Lionheart and turning it into the most powerful and well-controlled machine on the battlefield.

Only Patriarch Reginald was able to get more out of his own second skin mech than Ark, and that was solely because the ace pilot had transcended further!

In any case, Ark knew that he would have to squeeze the most out of his excellent control over his expert command mech than he had done in the past.

The difficult conditions of this operation demanded no less. The circumstances were brutally unforgiving towards mistakes, and Ark was not able to utilize the Lightbringer resonating ability anywhere close to full power due to lack of support from his subordinates.

Ark resigned himself to the fact that he able to become the brightest presence on the battlefield during this dangerous operation.

The Mars would definitely take the crown this time. The Mars was especially notorious for outputting a lot of light and other emissions due to its heavy energy expenditure.

The ace hybrid mech was an energy hog, making it all the more challenging for the Lionheart to outshine the older post-living mech.

Although these circumstances were anything but ideal for General Ark, this was exactly why he needed to tackle this challenge. He needed to participate in at least one difficult fight where he was unable to rely on the amplification of tens of thousands of subordinates who empowered him with their hopes and beliefs.

Ark wanted to prove that he could still be strong enough on his own. He was willing to bet his life on this assumption.

As the minutes continued to pass by in silence, a very loud and screeching alarm suddenly shook Ark and the other waiting mech pilots out of their reclining postures.

"What is happening?!"

"General!" The captain communicated through a newly opened communication channel. "The Ghirard Fleet somehow found our presence somehow. Multiple enemy patrols are inbound. Many alien warships and carrier vessels are beginning to enter into a heightened state of alertness. More enemy assets will soon converge on us, making it exponentially more difficult for our stealth carrier to sneak away unnoticed."

"WHAT?! How could they have detected us when we are so far away from their detection range?!"

"We do not know, but you need to make a decision quickly. Do you wish to proceed with this operation and launch out of our hangar bay, or do you want us to turn around and attempt a silent retreat?"

General Ark immediately fell into a time-sensitive dilemma.

Chapter 6254 Mounting Danger

A serious accident occurred before the operation got off to a proper start.

For whatever reason, the RA stealth cruiser got detected in advance!

This wasn't supposed to happen!

The Ghirard Fleet was predominantly made up of nunsers warships. The other vessels originated from various vassal races that possessed inferior tech and capabilities.

Nunsers tended to be fairly unexceptional when it came to their technological prowess. Their scientists and engineers were not dimwits, but they weren't geniuses either. The puelmers easily beat them in this regard.

Since the rise of the Red Cabal, the major alien races had engaged in increased technology sharing and cooperative development. It was not impossible for the nunsers to obtain superior detection tech, but even if that was the case, the differences would have been noticeable.

As far as the mechers could tell, the mechs and escort ships patrolling the perimeter of Duqaste XI were only equipped with regular detection systems. None of the hardware was powerful or advanced enough to be able to detect the RA stealth carrier at this distance!

The story might be different if the stealth vessel attempted to get closer to the target planet, but the ship had not attempted to do so as far as Ark knew.

"I need more clarification." General Ark spoke over the communication channel even as his Lionheart started to become active. "Can you deduce the reason why our position has become exposed? Did the native aliens manage to learn about our operation by spying on the humans stationed in and around Duqaste VII? Has your stealth system malfunctioned somehow? Did the native aliens secretly make use of much more advanced detection systems that they had deliberately kept in reserve to catch us by surprise?"

"It is difficult for us to obtain any definite answers, general. Our preliminary judgment, which is backed by the statistical predictions made by our ship's AI logic engine, is that we have been detected by a hidden third party. The native aliens may have deployed additional measures to guard their staging against human infiltration. This is largely speculation, but the most probably third party is an archeship that is under active stealth. The arche are not only the masters of stealth technology in this dwarf galaxy, they are also adept at detecting it. Their ability to do so matches or surpasses the efforts of the puelmers."

The mention of the arche race immediately caused General Ark to grow a lot more concerned about the safety of the stealth vessel.

Hardly any humans encountered the arche during the Red War, but that was mostly because their elusive archeships were so difficult to detect when they tried to stay hidden!

If there was truly an archeship hiding in the vicinity somewhere, then the RA stealth carrier was at a massive disadvantage. The arche possessed all of the initiative if they managed to remain hidden while being able to expose the hidden human vessel at the same time.

If the archeship wanted to, she could even launch a surprise attack onto the RA stealth vessel at any time!

This could potentially lead to devastating results as the human ship's defenses were much poorer compared to other warships built by the Red Association. The need to accommodate an active stealth system compromised the physical defenses of the very same ship.

The only form of defense the RA carrier could count upon was her azure energy shields, but they were not as strong as those on other ships.

Even if the archeship failed to overcome the energy defenses of the human vessel, the attacks would definitely expose the latter's position and give the alien a clear enemy to pursue and attack!

"If this is the case, we cannot proceed with the operation without getting rid of this archeship somehow." General Ark determined. "We need to flush her out and eliminate her regardless of whether we proceed with or call off the operation."

It was at this time that a loud voice interjected into the conversation.

"Let me out." Patriarch Reginald Cross demanded. "I will hunt down this archeship for you. If she is close enough, I'll find her one way or another."

General Ark fell into a moment of hesitation. The presence of a hidden archeship was just a theory. If they were wrong about this, then the Mars would be wasting a lot of time flying around while calling even more attention to the stealth vessel that they needed to protect at all cost.

He also had to decide whether to go through with the operation despite getting detected in advance or whether to pull back and focus on disengagement above all other priorities.

Ark quickly examined the local plot that displayed the amount of enemy assets around Duqaste XI and their last known locations.

The amount of ships had lessened by a bit in the past few hours. The human defenders over at Duqaste VII had succeeded in drawing more alien aggressors over.

However, there were still enough defending ships left that General Ark did not feel too good about his chances.

He opened a new communication channel that included all of the expert pilots taking part in the operation.

"We have fallen into a suboptimal situation. We are unable to approach Duqaste XI undetected. No matter whether we attack or flee, we cannot avoid confrontation against the Ghirard Fleet. If we flee, the native aliens will not attack us with all of their numbers as they still need to leave enough defenders behind to protect their depots on the planet. If we attack, we have a chance of completing our mission and earn a large amount of war merits in the proceeds, but at the cost of facing a much more prepared group of enemy defenders."

"What is your point, Ark?" Venerable Rosa Orfan impatiently asked.

"We have a chance to complete our mission, but under significantly less favorable circumstances than before." Ark stated. "Seeing as we are in for a fight either way, I am in favor of going all-in and inflicting at least some damage to the large amount of supplies and goods that the native aliens have stockpiled on Duqaste XI. I will not lie. The danger is greater. If you are still confident in your own strength and the strength of your expert mech, then voice your support. If not, then say so. I will decide on whether to proceed with the mission after you have voiced your decision."

"Well that's easy for me." The female expert pilot said. "I already have my doubts about this operation under expected circumstances. Now that the native aliens turn out to be more prepared and alert for us than expected, we'd be idiots if we follow a plan that is already out of date. I say we retreat as soon as possible."

That was a predictable response. Venerable Orfan had not hidden her reluctance to participate in a high-risk mission when her expert mech was the weakest and most outdated out of the participating machines.

"It would have been great if we could have caught the enemy by surprise, but I don't fear them if they see us coming in advance. Let's fight!" Venerable Vincent said as he already started to pump himself up for a massive brawl.

"I don't trust my own judgment on this kind of stuff. I leave that to my sister." The only expert pilot with a powerful sister said. "General Ark can decide on my behalf. I defer to his judgment."

"Imbecile." Orfan quietly muttered over the channel.

"I am not stupid! I am just more aware of my limitations!"

"I say we proceed." Venerable Kolak Glendale stated. "I have not participated in too many notable operations. I broke through later than many of you. I can feel this is a chance for me to prove that I can be a hero as well. My axe hungers for alien blood, preferably the phase lord kind."

"Crossers?" General Ark asked.

Venerable Lothario Cross issued a simple opinion. "I follow where my patriarch goes. If our leader wants to fight, then we will accompany him and assist him as best as possible."

"I would like to accompany our patriarch as well, but my expert space knight is not suited for long traversals." Venerable Selkie Cross spoke in a more cautious tone. "Leave me behind to guard the carrier."

It was unfortunate, but Selkie had a good point. Her defensive mech did not score well on mobility. While her expert mech was still a lot faster than ordinary defensive mechs, she would not be able to keep up with the high-speed maneuvers that the other high-ranking mechs were about to perform. Her Honeycomb Defender would just drag down the others.

Seeing that there was not much opposition to proceed with the mission, General Ark felt more assured about his chosen course of action.

"Very well. You heard it. The operation is still on. Selkie, stay in the hangar bay and do not come out unless this ship is exposed and under attack. Your only purpose is to guard the stealth carrier against targeted attacks. We are counting on you to keep our only safe means of escape intact and in working condition."

"Roger."

"Reginald, please hunt down the enemy stealth ship first. Do not spend too much time sniffing her out. She might not really exist. We still need you to occupy the attention of the enemy phase lord."

"Yeah, yeah, I got it, Ark. Moving out!"

Patriarch Reginald did not wait for anything else as his Mars tumbled out of the hangar bay of the stealth carrier while still keeping its systems in a semi-active state.

The ace pilot even suppressed his Saint Kingdom and kept it as dormant as possible in order to avoid giving away the position of the stealth ship.

However, Reginald's patience only lasted for so long. Just five seconds after the Mars entered into open space, her power reactor and her Original Energy Bridge System began to generate a lot more power!

The powerful Magma Vein System developed by Master Benedict Cortez began to channel even more energy throughout the ace mech, allowing the powerful machine to power up to its peak condition in record time!

A huge amount of heat started to radiate from the ace mech as the adaptive AI controllers prioritized speed of activation over energy efficiency and heat management.

The results were astonishing. The Mars exploded with power as Patriarch Reginald unfolded his Saint Kingdom and began to circle around in an effort to find any trace of a hidden enemy stealth vessel!

In the meantime, the other expert mechs took advantage of the powerful emissions of the Mars to quietly tumble out of the stealth carrier's hangar bay.

"Have you found the enemy ship yet, Reginald?!"

"Give me a second. I am getting close. I can feel her lurking somewhere. She might assume that she has hidden herself well, but My Saint Kingdom has caught faint traces of that sneaky bastard...
THERE!"

The Mars suddenly made an abrupt turn and began to unleash all 9 integrated energy cannons that comprised ARCEUS System.

The resonance-empowered positron beams almost instantly crossed a short distance before they eventually converged on the hull of an alien ship that had previously remained unnoticed by everyone.

"She's an archship! The mechers were right!"

The archship that was entirely crewed by the turtle-like race was on the smaller end. It appeared that she was just a scout ship that had been assigned to accompany the Ghirard Fleet from the shadows.

Though her stealth and detection capabilities were formidable, the archship's offensive and defense capabilities left much to be desired.

The opening strike of the Mars not only punched through the underprepared alien vessel's half-hearted defenses, but also burned deep into the hull of the relatively hull!

Patriarch Reginald clearly looked down on the archship, as his Mars only proceeded to unleash several more salvos of the powerful armaments of the ARCEUS Systems until the archship finally collapsed and fell apart into multiple pieces of half-melted debris.

Now that Reginald took care of the cause of the accident, he grinned as his Mars changed course and flew straight towards Duqaste XI.

He was finally able to initiate the duel that he had been looking forward to all this time!

"GHIRARD! GET YOUR GIGANTIC ALIEN BUTT OUT HERE AND FACE ME IN COMBAT!"

The Mars moved so quickly that the other expert mechs struggled to catch up to the ace mech!

Chapter 6255 The Upgraded Engine

With the exception of the Honeycomb Defender, the high-ranking mechs of the 77 Warborn Mech Division had finally entered into an attack run on the planet of Duqaste XI!

Unfortunately, the just-destroyed archship had given the defending Ghirard Fleet enough forewarning to summon the nunser starship personnel to their action stations and launch thousands of phasefighters from their makeshift carriers.

An entire mech division would struggle to defeat such a formidable fleet. Seven high-ranking mechs had no chance of doing so, especially if the alien fleet was guarded by a formidable phase lord.

So far, the Tireless Engine had yet to show himself, but it shouldn't take long before the nunser warlord made an appearance.

The enemy leader had no choice in the matter. The Mars advanced towards the Ghirard Fleet at such a rapid pace that it would soon enter into optimal fighting range!

The native aliens possessed a good enough understanding of ace mechs to know they should never allow these powerful machines to fight without keeping them in check.

That did not mean that the enemy warships were afraid to go on the attack. The first gun batteries already started to open fire at the approaching ace mech.

Dozens of chaotic and uncoordinated energy beams, kinetic projectiles and missiles attempted to strike the Mars.

None of them managed to inflict any effective damage.

The Mars deftly maneuvered around in space and managed to throw off the aim of a lot of alien gunners and automated targeting systems. The machine also channeled so much power into its flight system that Reginald was always able to move it in time to evade an attack that could have struck his mech directly according to his sharp intuition.

The missiles were a little more annoying to deal with as their homing capabilities had no trouble locking on to the ace mech that was radiating a huge amount of heat and other emissions.

The Mars fired the integrated energy weapons of the ARCEUS System at a rapid rate. Though Reginald usually preferred to pump as much juice in the weapons to inflict the greatest possible damage, he knew how to reduce their power output in order to speed up their cycling time and allow for more frequent shots.

The thin laser beams accurately struck each and every warhead with plenty of power to detonate them in advance. Multiple powerful explosions filled the surrounding space, throwing up a lot more interference, but not enough to cause the two sides to lose track of each other.

As the Mars continued to advance in the face of enemy fire without incurring any damage, the enemy leader had no choice to appear this time.

It was abundantly clear that the Mars could easily destroy the entire enemy fleet without the protection of a phase lord!

The only other way to preserve the alien vessels was if they split up and fled in separate directions, but that was obviously not an acceptable option.

"We are detecting a huge amount of spatial activity!"

The Tireless Engine emerged out of the flagship of the Ghirard Fleet and began to unfold his alien true body.

The quadruped alien grew in size until his height surpassed 1.2 kilometers!

That already made him larger than all but the most exaggerated juggernauts built by red humanity!

Ghirard's length and bulk was even more impressive. The massive nuser phase lord clearly looked a lot bulkier and more muscled than the bodies of typical nusers. There were clear signs of biological modification and mutation. This was not a warlord that shied away from more extreme augmentation methods to increase his combat power!

As the Tireless Engine reached his full size, a massive suit of armor that resembled the metal shell of a capital ship appeared out of nowhere and soon began to wrap around the phase lord's body in a preprogrammed routine.

"Where did that giant suit come from?!"

"The Tireless Engine possesses his own pocket space. Be careful about that. He may be hiding more than just his full battle dress."

Ghirard may just be a lesser phase lord, but he was close to reaching the limits of his current stage. His spatial barrier felt strong and solid while his formidable equipment looked especially strong and high in quality.

Additional segmented azure energy shields began to wrap around the massive alien warlord. The phase lord was covered by so many powerful energy defenses that Patriarch Reginald began to feel a lot more pressured at the thought of trying to overcome all of those tough and sturdy layers.

By the time that the Tireless Engine reached his full size and adorned his proud transphasic raiment, his presence on the battlefield had risen to an enormous height!

His open presence boosted the morale of many nunsers serving in his fleet, causing them to gain a lot more confidence in their fight against the human invaders.

In the meantime, General Ark and the other expert pilots grew dismayed at what they saw.

"This phase lord looks different from the recordings. His giant suit of armor looks a lot more modern. He's... become more powerful than anticipated."

The sensors of all of the mechs tried to gather as much data as possible. They detected a lot of clues that made the expert pilots feel more and more alarmed.

"Damn! The phase lord's raiment is made with the help of stolen human technologies! Not only does it make use of our azure energy shields, but its armor system is also much tougher as well!"

"The big metal suit is new." General Ark "It incorporates more advanced phasewater technology as well as hyper technology. The configuration is also different. It has less ranged weapon hardpoints, but its thrusters are bigger and more numerous. I fear that it has become a much deadlier brawler than before. Do not allow the Tireless Engine to get close to you. Do whatever you can to shake him off if he has chosen to pursue you. Wait for the Mars to block his path."

The plan to attack Duqaste XI suddenly became a lot shakier due to this variable. The presence exuded by the Tireless Engine was incredible. The nuns phase lord did not seem annoyed or afraid by the incursion of human high-ranking mechs in the slightest!

As the various systems of his transphasic hyper raiment continued to power up, the phase lord greeted his human 'guests' with an electronic broadcast on many different channels at the same time.

"HUMAN FAILED GODS. YOU ENCROACH UPON MY FLEET AND TERRITORY. YOU SHOULD HAVE CONTINUED TO HIDE BEHIND YOUR ORBITAL DEFENSES AROUND THE SEVENTH PLANET FROM THE NEARBY STAR."

The Tireless Engine's raiment helpfully translated his alien speech into human language, so none of the pilots had to be subjected to incomprehensible alien noises.

In situations like these, only Reginald should respond. Phase lords tended to respect norms and expert pilots much less than ace pilots.

From the perspective of these powerful aliens, it was a waste of time to engage mortals and weaklings in a dialogue. Only humans that had attained the strength of an ace pilot at minimum was worth their attention as they were also the only enemies that could stop them in their tracks!

"Your suit of armor looks new. Where did you get it from?"

"THE RED CABAL HAS ENTRUSTED ME WITH THE TASK OF STOMPING 'ACE PILOTS' SUCH AS YOURSELF. DO NOT THINK THAT GODS SUCH AS MYSELF WILL ALWAYS REMAIN PREY TO YOU. JUST AS YOU RELY ON YOUR TECHNOLOGICAL PROWESS TO AMPLIFY YOUR POWER, SO CAN WE. MY SAINT CRUSHER IS ONE OF THE MANY TECHNOLOGICAL GIFTS DEVELOPED BY OUR RACES THAT DOES NOT SEEK TO GIVE US AN EQUAL CHANCE OF WINNING AGAINST YOU, BUT ANNIHILATE YOU UTTERLY. BY THE TIME OUR DUEL COMES TO AN END, YOUR BROKEN BODY SHALL BE CRUSHED BY MY HOOVES!"

Well, General Ark at least found the alien translation program to be praiseworthy. It sounded a lot better and less mangled by alien idioms than the alien speeches he heard in the past.

Despite learning that the Red Cabal had very clearly developed and deployed more specific countermeasures against powerful ace pilots and ace mechs, Patriarch Reginald did not appear to be intimidated at all. His confidence was so great that he still did not see any reason to think he would lose against an opponent that had recently upgraded his gear.

Sure, Reginald at least possessed enough sense to realize that he had a greater chance of losing if he was careless in any way, but he did not intend to make any mistakes in this fight.

The Mars actually slowed down as it flew closer to the armored phase lord.

The size and mass between the two diverged enormously. The Mars looked so much smaller than the massive Tireless Engine that it resembled a fight between a mouse and a bear.

Yet, the amazing energy output of the Mars and its even more impressive Saint Kingdom made it so that no one thought that the ace mech was at a significant disadvantage in this fight!

The prospect of battling against a more formidable and well-equipped foe made Reginald more excited, causing his willpower to spike to a greater height before the duel had even begun!

The Mars extended its trusty transphasic axe, which Master Benedict Cortez had recently upgraded with hyper technology.

The changes made by the Master Mech Designer has caused the transphasic axe to gain a lot more mass and heft. This allowed the Mars to swing the weapon with much greater physical force and impact than before.

"If you think that ace pilots like myself are easy to defeat now that you have got a new suit of armor, then think again. We are the second-most powerful protectors of humanity! We have much more experience with fighting with powerful technologies than a lumbering phase lord such as yourself. You call yourself Tireless Engine, right? I will make sure to break you before you ever get to outlast me. Your proud defenses stand no chance against my unending attacks."

The enemy phase lord responded by using his armored upper limbs to retrieve a pole from the side of his raiment before unfolding it into a powerful spear.

The imposing, kilometers-long spear looked incredibly massive and deadly!

Just a simple swing from the giant phase lord was probably enough for the Lionheart to get crushed by the sheer physical force of getting slammed by the side of this giant-sized polearm!

What was worse to the humans was that the weapon was not a simple stick with a pointy end. The Red Cabal had incorporated both phasewater and hyper materials into it, causing it to not only gain amazing penetration properties, but also increase its sensitivity to the water element.

Each time the massive phase lord swung his transphasic hyper spear, spatial ripples passed in the weapon's wake.

If the phase lord started to channel his spatial abilities through a weapon that was clearly designed for this purpose, then the Tireless Engine would definitely be able to pose a great threat against his current challenger!

The Mars was an excellent offensive mech and always fared best when it was on the attack.

Its defenses were less than stellar. Aside from its Saint Kingdom, its defensive properties were not that great.

There was a real chance that the Mars could fall into a disadvantage if it suffered a solid blow from this scary spear!

As for the expert mechs such as the Lionheart and the C-Man, they stood no chance at all! A direct impalement was probably enough to crush their mech frames to pieces!

"YOU ARE NOT LACKING IN CONFIDENCE, REGINALD OF THE CROSS CLAN. YES, I KNOW OF YOU. I HAVE BEEN STUDYING YOU IN PREPARATION TO FIGHT AGAINST YOU EVER SINCE MY HERD LEARNED THAT YOUR WARBORN IS DEFENDING THIS STAR SYSTEM. I SHALL NOT PROVE MYSELF AS INCOMPETENT AS THE TRAMPLER OF STARS. TODAY, I SHALL PROVE THAT THE GODS OF OUR RACE ARE FULLY CAPABLE OF CRUSHING HUMAN SAINTS LIKE YOURSELF!"

Chapter 6256 The Reborn ARCEUS System

The titanic Tireless Engine and the furious Mars began to clash against each other right away!

A whole section of the battlefield immediately turned into a no-go zone as deadly resonance-empowered positron beams and lethal spatial shards began to fill up the immediate space.

The two combatants easily expended energies that surpassed the full output of mighty battleships.

Of the two, the Tireless Engine easily used up greater amounts of energy. His massive 1.2 kilometer high true body moved surprisingly quickly for a physical organism of his size. His upper limbs swung the giant spear with great speed and force, and his lower limbs was able to push his body in different directions by generating strong but short-lasting spatial footholds.

The huge amount of phasewater circulating inside his titanic body also went to work. Dozens of phasewater organs of many different functions continually worked to strengthen the Tireless Engine's body, spatial barrier, sensory perception and more.

"MY POWER IS EVERLASTING. MY ENGINE CAN NEVER BE EXHAUSTED."

The nunser warlord was an old veteran of many alien conflicts in the past. He had already been fighting for glory and resources many years before the arrival of humans in the Red Ocean. He had accrued a lot of experience and honed his combat instincts before Patriarch Reginald's great-great-great-great-grandparents were alive!

One of the more annoying and difficult-to-avoid aspects of the Tireless Engine's combat approach was the destabilization of space around his massive body.

Although phase lords did not have anything that could come close to matching the performance of a Saint Kingdom, the Tireless Engine's frequent destabilization and outright shattering of the nearby fabric of space made it a lot harder to navigate around his titanic body!

"I HAVE NEVER BEEN DEFEATED BY ENEMIES WHO ARE SMALLER THAN MYSELF. FROM THE MOMENT YOU HAVE ENTERED MY SPACE, YOU ARE ALREADY TRAPPED WITHIN MY DIVINE CONTROL."

"Shut up, you overgrown bovine alien!" The pilot of the Mars roared back. "I am not one of the weakling aliens you are familiar with. I am a halfgod! I am a saint! My willpower shall vanquish over all of your spatial tricks!"

"WE SHALL SEE."

Space began to curve and even curl around in unpredictable ways. This became most evident when the ARCEUS System of the Mars launched full-powered positron beams at the Tireless Engine's multi-layered energy defenses at the fastest possible rate.

While Patriarch Reginald intended to concentrate his fire so that he could efficiently wear down the segmented azure energy shields protecting his opponent, many of his shots unexpectedly went off-course!

The curved beams either struck other segmented energy shields that were easily able to withstand the damage or flew so off-course that they ended up missing the giant phase lord!

The more the Mars launched its energy beams at its target, the more this weird curving effect took place!

"YOUR TINY LITTLE ENERGY WEAPONS ARE PITIFUL. YOU WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO EXHAUST MY DEFENSES AT THIS RATE."

Patriarch Reginald frowned. He had seen this phenomenon before. The Amaranto of the Larkinson Clan was able to perform the same feat, but the difference was that the expert marksman mech utilized it as a means to enhance her own damage dealing capabilities.

In this case, Reginald did not intend to bend his energy beams at all! It was his opponent that was redirecting his ace mech's ranged attacks!

Of course, the ace pilot did not let the phase lord spoil all of his attacks with impunity. Reginald took this as a challenge and tried his best to counteract the effect.

The Mars utilized its superior mobility and much more compact size to circle around the Tireless Engine.

The firing rate of its ARCEUS System had slowed. Reginald no longer blindly pursued the highest degree of sustained damage, but instead tried to focus more on empowering his attacks even further.

He took the time to condense more resonance into the ARCEUS System, thereby trying to impart more of his willpower in the concentrated positron particles that they were about to unleash.

The Mars glowed with power and intensity. Its Saint Kingdom visibly shrunk as Reginald tried to concentrate his power as opposed to dispersing it into the surrounding space.

As the integrated energy weapons of Reginald's trusted ARCEUS System began to glow with power of their own, the ace pilot finally pulled the trigger!

"MY WILL CANNOT BE BENT!"

The beams were so much brighter and more powerful this time!

The ARCEUS System was already powerful enough on its own. Though not all of the integrated energy weapons were large in size, they incorporated state-of-the-art technologies and excellent materials that Master Benedict Cortez and partner developers had repeatedly upgraded and optimized over the years.

Due to the former Skull Architect's attentiveness and iterative upgrade process, the current version of the famed ARCEUS System of the Mars might look not much different from what it used to be at the start, but it had actually become at least ten times more powerful during this interval!

Master Benedict managed to increase the toughness of the ARCEUS System by a huge margin by replacing rare second-class materials with more extravagant first-class materials.

More refined and sophisticated applications of technology not only allowed the ARCEUS System to get more use out of these luxurious exotics, but also allowed for the effective utilization of high-grade fire hyper materials!

Shortly after the start of the Hyper Generation, the master mech designer of the Cross Clan had worked hard to quickly implement the most powerful form of hyper technology that he was able to implement into his proudest and strongest work.

The entire Mars had been remodeled around the use of fire hyper materials. Pairing the Mars with the fire element was the most natural fit as the machine regularly ran extremely hot.

While the ace hybrid mech never solely relied on its formidable energy weapons to defeat its more powerful adversaries, the ARCEUS System still played an indispensable role in wearing down their defenses.

All of these considerable technological and material improvements made the ARCEUS System a lot more powerful without causing the weapon systems and related supporting systems to grow any larger or more cumbersome.

Perhaps the only downside to all of these upgrades was that it became a lot more difficult and expensive to repair the ARCEUS System if it ever incurred any serious damage!

Fortunately, Patriarch Reginald was usually able to avoid this outcome by beating up his enemies before they could breach through the upgraded defenses of the Mars.

In the mind of the aggressive ace pilot, attack was always the best form of defense!

As long as he attacked relentlessly enough, his opponents wouldn't be able to spare enough time and effort from defending to launch any counterblows!

At this time, the concentrated infusion of willpower into the transphasic hyper positron beams clearly produced better results than before!

The phasewater organs responsible for warping and distorting the space around the phase lord clearly found it much harder to force the incoming resonance-empowered energy beams to obey their spatial designs!

Nine beams of fire and fury rammed their way through all of the distorted space and hardly ever went off-course in the process!

Reginald's willpower was so strong that the positron beams all eventually struck the segmented azure energy shield that the ace pilot targeted in the first place!

The segmented energy shield failed to withstand the amplified energies and fizzled out in an instant.

The power of the ARCEUS System's attack salvo was so great that the next segmented energy shield from the second defensive layer also sustained severe damage!

While the results had been gratifying for Patriarch Reginald, he only managed to strip one of hundreds of segmented azure energy shields that enveloped the Tireless Engine!

What was worse was that the state of all of those energy shields were unrelated to the Tireless Engine's spatial barrier, which was generated by a phasewater organ as opposed to his Saint Crusher raiment.

The Tireless Engine didn't even take this result all that seriously.

"SO MUCH ENERGY AND EFFORT, AND FOR WHAT, REMOVING JUST A SINGLE ENERGY SCALE? YOU SHALL TIRE YOURSELF OUT BEFORE YOU CAN EVER MANAGE TO DAMAGE MY FLESH, WHICH AS YOU CAN SEE, IS MORE VAST THAN YOUR PUNY ENERGY WEAPONS CAN EVER BURN!"

"You underestimate my power!" Patriarch Reginald roared as the ARCEUS System of his Mars continued to absorb as much willpower and resonance as they could hold before unleashing the combined powers at the enemy phase lord!

The firing rate of the ARCEUS System had slowed down enormously, but every attack was guaranteed to strip a segmented azure energy shield!

The clash between fire-ascpected attacks and water-ascpected defenses ended up in a resounding defeat for the latter in every collision.

This was because the hyper technology that the segmented azure energy shields were based upon was merely derived from mortal technologies!

The ostentatiously named Saint Crusher may look as large and impressive as a battleship, but it possessed no particularly strong synergy with its wearer. The Tireless Engine was a transcendent body cultivator whose augmentations were largely based on his own biology.

There was no direct interface or deep connection between body and suit that allowed the two to combine their strengths on a deeper level!

The best way to describe their relationship was that they were two different combat machines that just happened to occupy the same space. Their cooperation was shallow and not profound enough to produce deep synergies.

This was one of the obvious weaknesses of the Tireless Engine, and one that Reginald definitely intended to exploit!

"That massive tin can of yours may look big and impressive, but it is nothing but a heavy shell that can be drained sooner or later. Once I've stripped your giant metal suit from your filthy alien body, let's see whether you are still in the mood to boast about your staying power!"

While Reginald certainly sounded confident, he knew that he was committed to a lengthy and tedious endurance contest.

However, the situation was not as bad as it looked for him. Reginald had shown a little more patience than usual this time by maintaining a respectful distance from a phase lord that clearly excelled in close-quarters combat.

Though the warship-grade gun batteries mounted on the surface of the Saint Crusher regularly launched transphasic hyper energy beams at the Mars, the gun turrets were so slow and easy to predict that the ace mech effortlessly evaded the attacks.

The Tireless Engine was only able to constrain the range of movement of the Mars at best with these attacks.

In fact, Reginald was confident he could tank these blows if needed. He just focused on evasion as that was much less draining on his extremely abundant energy reserves than trying to block the massive energy beams by relying on his defenses.

The ace pilot knew that this could go on seemingly forever if he continued to maintain this distance.

This was why he decisively moved closer even though his Mars would have to contend against the phase lord's massive spear and other possible threats at this short distance!

"My will and technology shall crush your vaunted defenses!"

The Mars always fought better at closer ranges. It was only by approaching its enemies that its powerful domain field was able to affect the state of its foes.

Already, Reginald's domineering willpower pressed upon the segmented azure energy shields. Dozens of them began to shake and distort as Reginald forcibly tried to alter reality so that their defensive properties became weaker than they should!

This was not only the debilitating effect that compromised the Tireless Engine's multi-layered energy defenses.

As part of Master Benedict's comprehensive effort to drag the Mars into the Hyper Generation, the Master Mech Designer had painstakingly cleared enough capacity to fit a very powerful and high-quality space suppression module!

Both allies and enemies watched the Mars closely to determine how effectively the ace mech could compromise the Tireless Engine's defenses with the help of its powerful space suppressor.

The performance of this recently developed module could literally decide the outcome of this operation!

Chapter 6257 Size Really Matters

Ever since the Hyper Generation introduced space suppression technology, red humanity finally gained an effective counter against the ubiquitous transphasic energy shields so loved by the native aliens.

The original residents of the Red Ocean had occupied the dwarf galaxy for so long that they had accumulated huge reserves of phasewater.

They had so much more time to harvest phasewater and invest it in the construction of lots of warships and other combat craft.

This was one of the biggest reasons why linefighters suffered so many losses at the frontlines.

The Red Two and the first-rate superstates were in better shape. Their vast wealth and power easily allowed them to gather enough phasewater to equip their premier combat units with transphasic weapons and defenses.

Other groups, especially the more grassroots ones, did not enjoy this particular luxury!

Since most human forces were not able to enjoy the benefits of phasewater technology, they needed to even the odds a different way.

Space suppression technology offered them the equalizer that they had long demanded.

While it was true that space suppressors worked a lot more effectively if they integrated a bit of phasewater themselves, the revolutionary tech developed by the mechers in cooperation with the Spacelock also remained effective without the use of this expensive exotic material!

The tech massively increased the combat effectiveness of many human forces and single-handedly revived the popularity of melee mechs.

The effectiveness of space suppression modules was already notable enough when utilized by standard mechs, but they really started to shine when employed by high-ranking mechs!

The custom-developed space suppressor utilized by the Mars was unlike the ones equipped by ordinary mechs. Not only did its tech and materials reach first-class standards, but it also integrated a luxurious quantity of phasewater!

The power of pure technology was just one half of the equation that made this custom space suppressor so strong.

The power of true resonance amplified the performance of this module to an even greater height!

Sustained willpower baptism had steadily boosted its passive performance parameters beyond what human science could produce.

When Reginald truly started to resonate with it, the strength of the space suppression field generated by this extraordinary module multiplied by at least several times!

This was a dramatic result that only high-ranking mech pilots could produce!

No alien phase whale or phase lord could produce anything comparable, because their strength did not lie in their willpower!

This was the difference between quantity and quality.

The Tireless Engine may hold an immense advantage in quantity, but Reginald fearlessly challenged the enormous phase lord because he believed he could win this bout by relying on his superior quality!

So far, he had not been proven wrong.

As soon as Patriarch Reginald activated its powerful space suppressor and actively resonated with it, the Mars produced a highly concentrated space suppression field that forcibly eliminated most if not all spatial distortion effects around the Mars.

Not only that, but the nearby segmented azure energy shields lost even more strength!

"Your protection is huge, but brittle! What is the point of growing so big if your defenses are being stretched so thin? Hah! Your energy shields are fragile in front of my ace mech!

All of the phasewater empowerment put into the Saint Crusher's shield generators disappeared under the effect of the space suppressor, causing the segmented energy shields to look and feel especially feeble!

When the Mars unleashed another salvo of positron beams, they split up and struck six different weakened segmented energy shields.

All six of them collapsed with unnatural ease!

Patriarch Reginald grinned when he saw this result. "Hahaha! I knew it! You're not as tough as I thought! I won't need an entire day before I can sink my axe into your flesh!"

The Mars gained even more momentum after Reginald confirmed he was able to chew through the phase lord's energy defenses with greater ease!

Though the Tireless Engine repeatedly tried to damage or beat back the Mars by swinging its spear with dazzling speed, the Mars always proved itself to be faster and more alert to sudden attacks!

The mobility of the Mars was already fairly good, but it had received successive upgrades that made it faster, more responsive and more able to make sharper turns and course corrections.

Although the Mars was not able to match the mobility of a true light mech such as the Dark Zephyr Mark III, it was no slouch in this area.

Even so, mobility was not everything. The Mars constantly played with fire by constantly trying to weaken the nearby segmented azure energy shields with its powerful Saint Kingdom and space suppressor.

In order for Patriarch Reginald to debilitate his adversary's defenses as best as possible, he had no choice but to bring his Mars into the phase lord's striking range.

The titanic Ghirard skillfully whipped, spun and swung his long and massive spear around and constantly threatened to smash the Mars with such overwhelming force and leverage that a direct strike could easily launch the smaller machine away!

Yet for all of the speed and skill that the Tireless Engine put into his spear techniques, the Mars was able to evade the attacks with ease.

This was because for all of his strength and size, the phase lord did not actually possess any extraordinary skill!

His skill and combat intuition was honed beyond the ordinary limits of what his race and physique might suggest, but they were ultimately not the focus for his transcendent evolution.

The excessive emphasis on phasewater and biology were purely quantitative means of improvement. This left phase lords as well as phase whales with very little resources to spend on more qualitative improvements that enabled them to make better use of their capabilities.

From the perspective of Patriarch Reginald, the Tireless Engine's spear techniques were utterly useless because they weren't fast or accurate enough to hit his mobile ace mech!

His Mars was like a fly buzzing around a lumbering human that continually tried and failed to swat the insect.

Nothing the phase lord tried succeeded, at least at first. The frustrated nunser warlord began to channel more power into his phasewater organs.

This not only caused his body to move faster at the cost of eating up a prodigious amount of stored energy reserves, but also strengthened the spatial distortion effects around his body.

Unfortunately, the effect of the former did not give the Tireless Engine enough of a speed advantage to hit the Mars.

The effect of the latter was too dispersed. While it certainly made the surrounding space deadlier to both allies and enemies, an ace mech like the Mars was easily able to power through all of the debilitating field by relying on the protection of its Saint Kingdom and space suppressor!

The Tireless Engine visibly grew frustrated. His gigantic alien head may be covered by a stylistic-looking helmet, but his spear attacks grew increasingly more jerkier and irregular.

Of course, the alien did not grow less dangerous by losing his cool. He instead utilized his frustrations to make his movements more unpredictable, making it a lot harder for Patriarch Reginald to predict where the next attack would land.

Even so, the ace mech still managed to dance around the extremely powerful and threatening polearm strikes without seeming to be in any greater danger.

"YOU ANNOYING INSECT! EVEN VORIBUGS ARE NOT AS FRUSTRATING TO ERADICATE AS A SMALL HUMAN WRAPPED IN A SMALL MACHINE AS YOU. STAY STILL SO THAT I MAY CRUSH YOUR SHIELDS AND PULVERIZE YOUR METAL TOOLS!"

"Hahaha! Keep trying, you overgrown alien dolt. You will never hit me with that silly spear. I have fought other ace pilots whose skill with their weapons and combat intuition are so much greater than yours. Size doesn't matter. The only thing going for you is your stupidly thick defenses, but even that won't help you for long."

Ever since the Mars got closer, its ARCEUS System inflicted much more effective damage than before. It was able to eliminate at least six whole segmented azure energy shields after they got weakened.

While the Tireless Engine still had a lot more segmented energy shields to rely upon for protection, the rate in which the Mars got rid of them had increased so much that the dynamic of the duel heavily tilted in the favor of the Mars!

This was an amazing result so far. Although Reginald still did not see any opportunity to take out the leader of the Ghirard Fleet in an instant, he was more than capable of containing his enemy and preventing the massive alien from turning around and reinforcing the rest of his fleet.

The phase lord did not miss the fact that the expert mechs that had accompanied the Mars went on to raid the precious warehouses built on the surface of the Duqaste XI!

Days and weeks worth of valuable supplies went up in smoke. Each destroyed cache represented another delay or setback in the attempt to conquer the Duqaste System.

If the damage escalated to the point where an assault effectively had to be called off, then the Tireless Engine would not only lose a lot of prestige among his fellow 'gods', but also receive a penalty from the Red Cabal!

"YOU ARE NOT ENTIRELY WRONG, HUMAN. SIZE DOES NOT ALWAYS MATTER. MY FORM HAS ALWAYS ALLOWED ME TO TOWER OVER WEAKER PHASE LORDS AND WARSHIPS OF MANY SIZES. YET AGAINST A METAL INSECT LIKE YOU... A DIFFERENT APPROACH IS NEEDED."

The nunser phase lord could not afford to suffer these setbacks. Many of his peers and rivals would exceed him. The phase whales will not see any reason to award him with a precious phasewater production system, thereby cutting off his best opportunity to evolve into a greater phase lord!

The Tireless Engine understood that as long as he continued to fight like this, he would eventually get ground down by the agile ace mech.

The phase lord made a surprising admission.

"YOU ARE NOT ENTIRELY WRONG, HUMAN. SIZE DOES NOT ALWAYS MATTER. MY FORM HAS ALWAYS ALLOWED ME TO TOWER OVER WEAKER PHASE LORDS AND WARSHIPS OF MANY SIZES. YET AGAINST A METAL INSECT LIKE YOU... A DIFFERENT APPROACH IS NEEDED."

The Saint Crusher was an abject failure. Either that, or it had met the wrong kind of ace pilot and ace mech.

Since that was the case, the Tireless Engine made a daring choice that not many phase lords in his position would make.

His enormous metal raiment, which still maintained a lot of intact segmented azure energy shields, suddenly began to bulge and split apart at the seams!

Patriarch Reginald got caught off-guard by this sudden change and hastily pulled his Mars back in order to move away from any surprise attacks.

It was not an attack.

The Tireless Engine had decided to purge his Saint Crusher from his giant biological form!

Huge pieces of armor, functional systems and weapon modules got loose as they split away from the giant phase lord's body.

The purged metal pieces soon disappeared in an instant. Ghirard had obviously stowed his gigantic equipment back into his own private pocket space.

Now that the phase lord had unburdened himself from his strong but ultimately constricting raiment, the alien warlord then proceeded to shrink his form!

More and more pieces of his true body began to fold into different dimensions, thereby reducing the Tireless Engine's mass and volume at a rapid rate.

It was not until the phase lord shrunk his height to just 170 meters that his change in form had stopped.

"BEFORE I HAD GROWN TO THE STATURE THAT YOU JUST FOUGHT AGAINST, I WAS A MUCH WEAKER GOD. I HAVE SPENT MANY MORE YEARS IN STRUGGLE AT A SIZE CLOSER TO THIS! NOW THAT I HAVE RETURNED TO IT ONCE MORE, YOU SHALL FIND IT MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO EVADE MY ATTACKS."

The shrunken but still dangerous-looking phase lord retrieved a much smaller but still solid transphasic hyper spear from his pocket space.

Patriarch Reginald actually grew jealous at the Tireless Engine. Why did the phase lord get to have a handy pocket space when his Mars did not have access to the same?

In any case, Reginald still did not take his adversary all that seriously.

"Heh. Talk is cheap. All I see is that you have given up your greatest advantage as a phase lord. You should keep your tin can much longer. At least you could have prolonged your eventual defeat!"

The duel resumed, but this time the two combatants were not as exaggeratingly far apart in size!

Chapter 6258 Multi-Racial Collaboration

The duel between Patriarch Reginald Cross and Ghirard entered into a completely different phase after the latter had voluntarily discarded the advantages afforded by his massive size and his Saint Crusher Raiment.

The phase lord had definitely struggled to make this decision. The native aliens had always revered larger gods over the smaller ones. There was literally no way that the nunsers or any other alien race would worship a phase lord the size of a small juggernaut over one that was just as large as one of their capital homeships!

Size mattered in alien society. Bigger was already better. This principle had become so ingrained in the minds of many aliens that it had remained constant throughout many different eras in the Red Ocean.

That was why the arrival of humans in their dwarf galaxy inflicted so much shock and trauma onto the local residents.

For the first time in recorded history, the native aliens all encountered an extragalactic 'alien' threat that completely broke the established principles and rules that the natives held dear for so long!

The emergence of 'expert mechs', 'ace mechs' and the especially logic-defying 'god mechs' completely threw the rule that bigger was better into the dirt and crushed it beneath the heel of their metal feet.

Due to how tightly the native aliens clung to the old rules and conventions that had always worked for the locals, they found it very difficult to adjust to a new reality where size didn't matter as much anymore.

At first, the native aliens resisted the challenge to their existing power structure. The phase whales were especially stubborn about refusing to acknowledge the new reality.

It was not until Operation Night Jazz had cruelly shown both humans and aliens that god mechs could slaughter the oldest and most powerful ancient phase whales with contemptuous ease that the native alien community was finally forced to accept the new reality!

However, it was one thing for phase lords and phase whales to admit that the humans had found a way to make their tiny combat machines a lot stronger than their size permitted.

It was another thing for the native aliens to follow the strategy of the humans and actively seek to shrink their sizes in an attempt to pursue a different means to grow stronger!

This was why the Tireless Engine's actions completely confounded his fellow nunsers subordinates.

Practically all of the members of the Ghirard Fleet that had enough spare attention to track their god's performance all grew dismayed when the Tireless Engine actually shrank in size!

From a height of 1.2 kilometers to a height of just 170 meters was such a dramatic regression in size that it looked as if the powerful god had actually lost most of his strength all of a sudden!

The impact on the morale of the alien soldiers was so extensive that the warships and small craft visibly performed worse than before.

The ignorant nunsers all thought that the Mars had inflicted a grievous blow against the Tireless Engine!

Although the enemy phase lord was very much aware that his radical gambit would make his subjects lose faith in him, none of that mattered when he was locked in combat with one of the difficult ace mechs of the human invaders!

The Tireless Engine already had an expectation that it would be difficult for him to defeat one of these vaunted saints, but the reality was much worse than he expected!

This was why the alien had chosen practicality over dogma and decisively shed the advantages that did not give him any edge against this particular opponent.

Though Ghirard had definitely made a dangerous gamble, as soon as he started to duel against the Mars in his much more compact form, he finally managed to regain a bit of initiative!

"I MAY HAVE BECOME SMALLER, BUT MUCH OF MY POWER STILL REMAINS. I HAVE BECOME FASTER THAN EVER BEFORE!"

The Tireless Engine no longer fought like a lumbering giant anymore. Instead, he was able to match or even exceed the speed of the Mars this time!

The phase lord was able to form a powerful localized warp bubble around his compact body that massively increased his movement and maneuvering speeds.

It was only when the Tireless Engine flew closer to the Mars that the latter's enhanced space suppression field neutralized the warp bubble, but it didn't matter as the two combatants had already entered into striking range!

The integrated energy weapons of the ARCEUS System constantly pelted the phase lord with transphasic fire hyper positron beams, but they failed to inflict any effective damage due to colliding against the large enemy's spatial barrier.

Though the space suppression field also weakened the efficacy of the spatial barrier, the reduction in performance was not as exaggerated.

The spatial barrier of a phase lord was formed by his entire physique as well as any supporting phasewater organs!

That made it a lot harder to suppress as the source of the spatial barrier did not come from a separate technological system, but rather from interconnected organs bound by phasewater.

Patriarch Reginald scowled at this result, but that only drove him to employ additional weapons to wear down his adversary's defenses!

"Taste my shotgun!"

One of the limbs of the Mars snapped in the direction of the approaching phase lord and opened fire!

Dozens of transphasic hyper flechettes cut through space and collided against the Tireless Engine's spatial barrier.

Strangely enough, the spatial barrier visibly destabilized as the flechettes dug into this energy defense and actually stuck around!

As the spatial barrier continued to suffer under this additional debilitating effect, the Mars relied on its Saint Kingdom to resist the incoming spear strike while channeling all of its momentum into delivering a heavy axe strike!

"HEAVY CHOP!"

The simple name for this move belied the incredible power behind this resonance-empowered axe blow!

The hypers responsible for increasing the mass and force of the transphasic axe caused the blade to strike the spatial barrier with such might that ripples of energy and spatial distortions spread from the impact site!

Due to all of the weakening effects, the singularly powerful blow inflicted way more damage than it should, causing the Tireless Engine to lose a lot of defensive buffer!

However, Patriarch Reginald did not manage to inflict this damaging blow without paying a price.

By putting all of his attention on defense, he was not able to block the incoming spear stab.

Although the weapon was a lot smaller and lighter than the massive pole that the Tireless Engine wielded just a moment ago, his more compact weapon still demonstrated excellent penetration properties!

Patriarch Reginald's Saint Kingdom did not help to debilitate the passage of the transphasic spear as much as the ace pilot expected.

This was not supposed to happen.

The Saint Kingdom of a ace mech was the direct evolution of the resonance shield of an expert mech.

The former was a lot more versatile, but it still possessed the protective functions of the former, but at a much greater power level.

Yet surprisingly enough, the transphasic spear continued to cut through the Saint Kingdom without experiencing any major hindrance!

Even as Patriarch Reginald focused most of his attention on his power attack, he still had enough focus left to command his Mars to hastily raise the arm holding its upgraded shotgun.

The ranged weapon received an awful cut to its barrel!

Though the powerful alloys that made up the weapon barrel finally managed to slow down the incoming spear just enough for the Mars to push away and prevent the spear from punching into the ace mech's armor, the shotgun was no longer safe to fire anymore!

Reginald became so befuddled by how the enemy's spear pierced through his Saint Kingdom as if it didn't exist that he decided to pull back his Mars a second time.

Another lull ensued in the duel as the two powerful champions took stock of what just happened.

The Tireless Engine felt the heavily damaged state of his spatial barrier. The transphasic axe had dealt a massive blow. The phase lord could not afford to get hit like this at close range when the space suppression field and other effects were at their strongest.

The good news was that the phase lord managed to take the arrogant ace pilot by surprise and disabled his powerful shotgun.

The nuser warlord smirked. This time, the lack of raiment did not hide his alien expression.

Reginald in the meantime had grown a lot warier and more concerned about the weapon wielded by his adversary.

He still couldn't figure out why his Saint Kingdom failed so badly at this junction. He could only attribute this result to the special properties of the smaller spear!

"DO YOU KNOW WHY I HAVE REDUCED MYSELF TO THIS SMALL AND PATHETIC STATURE? IT IS SO THAT I CAN WIELD THIS GIFT. IT IS... A PROTOTYPE IN YOUR

HUMAN PARLANCE. IT IS A FLAWED BUT WORKING VERSION OF A WEAPON DESIGNED TO DEAL THE DEATHBLOW AGAINST FALSE GODS SUCH AS YOURSELF."

"That weapon... what is it?" The ace pilot couldn't help but ask.

The phase lord, who had just regained a lot of confidence, saw no need to hide the details of this weapon.

"DO YOU KNOW WHY I HAVE REDUCED MYSELF TO THIS SMALL AND PATHETIC STATURE? IT IS SO THAT I CAN WIELD THIS GIFT. IT IS... A PROTOTYPE IN YOUR HUMAN PARLANCE. IT IS A FLAWED BUT WORKING VERSION OF A WEAPON DESIGNED TO DEAL THE DEATHBLOW AGAINST FALSE GODS SUCH AS YOURSELF."

"How does it work?"

"I DO NOT KNOW. I AM NOT STUPID ENOUGH SHARE THE SECRETS OF THIS WEAPON TO YOU EVEN IF I UNDERSTAND THE THEORY. I DO FIND IT IRONIC THAT THIS SPEAR HAS COME ABOUT THROUGH THE COMBINED EFFORTS OF THE CRAFTY PUELMERS AND THE 'TERMINAL CELL' OF YOUR COSMOPOLITANS. BOTH HUMAN AND ALIEN INGENUITY HAS BEEN PUT INTO THE DEVELOPMENT AND CREATION OF THIS ARMAMENT. IT IS ONLY FITTING THAT IT IS CALLED THE SAINT PIERCER."

Though the Tireless Engine refused to provide a proper explanation for his amazingly effective spear, Patriarch Reginald had already figured out a few clues by himself.

The mention of the puelmers and the cosmopolitans collaborating on the development of this revolutionary new weapon type suggested that it was a purely technological product rather than anything mystical.

The phasewater content of the Saint Piercer was not higher than that of the much more massive one that the phase lord wielded earlier.

The similarities between the name of the Saint Piercer and the Saint Crusher suggested that they originated from the same source. It even suggested that they were supposed to be a part of the same set of combat equipment.

If that was the case, why did their sizes diverge so enormously?

The obvious answer to this was that the puellers and the cosmopolitans may have originally planned to produce a larger version of the Saint Piercer that a 1.2 kilometer high nuser phase lord was able to wield, but they suffered a shortage in the critical materials needed to make the Saint Piercer work!

The ultimate answer then was that the Saint Piercer was special due to the exceptional new blend of materials put into its construction. The enemy aliens and the treacherous humans had combined their expertises to develop a powerful new alloy formula that combined both exotics and hypers to produce the first true counter to an ace pilot's Saint Kingdom!

If not the fact that the native aliens likely hadn't gathered enough raw materials to create larger anti-Saint weapons that could easily be wielded by larger and more powerful phase lords, Patriarch Reginald may have gotten in trouble a lot earlier if his ace mech got pierced by the giant-sized version of the Saint Piercer!

At this time, Reginald actually started to think about maintaining his distance so that he could steadily grind down the Tireless Engine's spatial barrier with his ARCEUS System.

Unfortunately, that tactic didn't work anymore. The shrunken phase lord was able to generate more powerful warp bubbles that allowed him to move faster than the Mars. There was no way for the ace mech to maintain its distance if the Tireless Engine was determined to get close!

Reginald made a decision. His Mars slowly stowed its transphasic hyper axe onto its back and slowly began to unsheathe the exaggaratingly long Whale-Cutting Saber from its back.

"You do not deserve to wield that spear. You can either make this easy or difficult, but one way or another, I shall pry your precious Saint Piercer from your severed fingers!"

Chapter 6259 The Initial Approach

The duel between Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Tireless Engine shook the surrounding space and occasionally produced collateral damage that made everyone else avoid their clash as much as possible.

The duel had become separate from the larger battle taking place in and around Duqeste XI.

Venerable Rosa Orfan sighed as she restlessly sat inside her cockpit.

This operation was anything but ideal in her opinion. It was hastily planned and contained far too few redundancies. The safety margin was razor thin and had become stretched even further due to the early detection of the RA stealth vessel.

Venerable Orfan knew what General Ark Larkinson had in mind. Both of them were high-ranking expert pilots that had already reached their bottlenecks and could not make any further progress. Both of them experienced the same persistent desire to find a breakthrough opportunity and smash apart their stubborn bottlenecks.

Yet just because they were eager to advance to the rank of ace pilot did not mean they were willing to do everything and throw aside much of their caution.

General Ark obviously felt more comfortable with organizing a daring raid on Duqaste XI due to two separate factors.

First, Patriarch Reginald Cross would be accompanying the expert pilots. The powerful Crosser ace pilot had already proven his chops as an excellent duelist and a veritable engine of destruction.

Reginald's presence not only ensured that the enemy phase lord would not be able to bully the expert mechs while they executed their missions, but could also serve as a potential failsafe for any teammate that was on the verge of getting killed.

Of course, the latter was not a solid guarantee. Anything could happen in a messy battle. If the Tireless Engine fought so well that Patriarch Reginald was unable to maintain situational awareness of what took place further away, then the expert pilots would all be forced to fend for themselves!

In other words, the safety blanket that General Ark was counting on to preserve the lives of himself and his fellow expert pilots was paper thin. It could easily be torn so long as the aliens were a little bit stronger or luckier.

This operation was by far her most dangerous action in years. The only battles that could rival the danger factor of this mission were the ones that took place before she transcended her mortality.

Combined with the fact that getting discovered early meant that the Lionheart, the Riot and all of the other expert mechs had to approach Duqaste XI in the open for all of the aliens to see, the native aliens had a much greater chance of taking down an expert mech and killing the pilot nestled in the cockpit!

All of these factors exerted a huge amount of pressure onto Venerable Orfan's shoulders. The lack of support from the rest of the 77th Warborn amplified her concerns and made her feel even more isolated and left to fend for herself.

This operation was by far her most dangerous action in years. The only battles that could rival the danger factor of this mission were the ones that took place before she transcended her mortality.

Those grueling battles against enemies that outnumbered her own forces had been difficult to survive, let alone win. A lot of fights only ended in the favor of the early Larkinson Clan due to a combination of luck and because the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan often managed to pull out a trump card.

This time, Ves Larkinson was nowhere to be found. Perhaps he might have a way of monitoring this battle from remote, but he had absolutely no way of intervening more directly.

That decreased Venerable Orfan's confidence and made her feel that she could not afford to make a single major error.

If she screwed up big time, no one would be able to bail her out! The other expert pilots would likely have their hands full in trying to fight while heavily outnumbered.

She could only rely on herself, her expert mech and perhaps a few design spirits to overcome a difficult situation.

"WE CAN DO IT, ROSA." The electronic voice of male sounded in the cockpit. "WE MAY NOT BE READY FOR THIS, BUT WE CAN STILL SURVIVE THIS BATTLE."

"Riot..." The slightly aging woman looked strained. "The timing is all wrong. If Ark waited for half a year before putting us all up for this risky operation, then I would have no objections at all. I still cannot stomach his callousness for deciding that now was the right time to commit to a life-threatening challenge. It is all well and good if he decides to throw himself right in the middle of an enemy staging point by himself, but no, he has to drag all of the other expert pilots of his Warborn as well."

"THAT IS HIS PREROGATIVE AS OUR COMMANDER. YOU ORIGINALLY AGREED TO TRANSFER TO HIS MECH DIVISION, REMEMBER? YOU SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT YOU MAY ACTUALLY BE SIGNING UP FOR MUCH SOONER."

"I didn't know that Ark was such a selfish bastard at the time! Okay, I admit it! I fell for all of the old propaganda published by the Bright Republic. I used to think he was a perfect hero and leader that would protect any soldier under his care. Perhaps he still has a few good intentions somewhere, but his desire to break through is overriding his good sense as a responsible leader."

"YOU ARE JUST MAKING EXCUSES FOR A LEADER THAT DOES NOT DESERVE ANY LENIENCY. I CAN GUARANTEE YOU THAT HE DID NOT SPARE ANY THOUGHT ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL SITUATION WHEN HE DEvised THIS OPERATION. HE ONLY THOUGHT ABOUT HIS OWN CONDITIONS. LOOK AT HIS LIONHEART. WHAT DO YOU SENSE FROM HIS MACHINE?"

Venerable Orfan utilized the optical sensors of her expert mech to take a deep look at the Lionheart flying at the head of their loose formation.

The bright white and resplendent expert mech looked extremely majestic even if it was glowing a lot less brighter than usual. The quasi-first-class expert mech still managed to look majestic due to its amazingly sculpted white lion head and projected blue cape that flapped as if there was wind in space.

The Lionheart easily stood out from the other expert mechs in their team, which also included the two Crosser mechs that took part in this operation as well.

The Lionheart was so much newer and better. It was a sixth generation living mech, while the Riot was still stuck as an ancient third generation living mech.

The design budget of the Lionheart was at least hundreds times greater than the current iteration of the Riot.

The former had been designed and built when the Larkinson Clan was already starting to enter into first-class society.

The Riot on the other hand was designed and built back when the Larkinson Clan had entered into second-class society not too long ago!

Though the Riot's much-appreciated Mark II upgrade may have granted him transphasic weapons and armaments, there were still many internal components that remained virtually unchanged since the day he had been built and brought to life!

All of this meant that even if both expert mechs were both transphasic, the Lionheart was able to withstand a lot more damage to its armor and internal structure than the outdated Riot Mark II!

It was difficult for Venerable Orfan to admit that her expert mech was no longer able to keep up with the current state of warfare. The enemies of the Larkinson Clan had shifted to a much stronger and formidable set of opponents.

As the team of expert mechs began to get closer to the lifeless rock that was devoid of any atmosphere, the many alien warships and tens of thousands of phasefighters had already formed up to meet the incoming human intruders!

Although all of these ships and small craft were crewed by mortal nunsers, Venerable Orfan still couldn't help but feel intimidated by the prospect of trying to bypass all of their destructive hardware.

"Be careful, but do not overestimate our foes." General Ark spoke over the communication channel. "We can get through this. Our mechs are all fast and agile enough to evade most attacks. Spread out further and give each of us enough room to maneuver. Make sure to cover for each other if one of our expert mechs suffers a mishap. Once we pass by their orbital assets, we have a clear shot at their supply and munition stockpiles."

Ark made it sound so simple. While it was true that the enemy phasefighters and warships had a low chance of actually hitting any expert mechs at these distances, the problem was that the opposing nunsers had a huge amount of guns at their disposal!

If a single cannon only had a 0.001 percent chance of hitting the Riot with a single shot, then there was a large chance that Orfan would have nothing to worry about.

If the aliens brought at least 100,000 guns to bear on her expert mech, then that was a completely different story!

Although the chance of getting hit by a single massive salvo was not 100 percent, the probability that her expert mech's defenses would get tested was still a lot higher than before!

Much of the outcome of this grueling approach would be decided by the strategic decisions of the nunsers commanders.

Would they opt to focus their fire on just one or two expert mechs, or would they spread their firepower around in order to test all of the machines or hope they would get lucky?

If the former was the case, then Venerable Orfan quickly realized that her Riot would likely get into a lot of trouble!

The Riot was hardly the most mobile mech out of the team, and most of her tech was a lot older as well.

As the distant enemy warships began to open fire with their primary and secondary armament, Venerable Orfan no longer focused so much on her concerns and shifted into a more combat-oriented state of mind.

The initial salvo of warship-grade energy beams tried to strike all 6 expert mechs equally.

The nunsers had clearly coordinated their fire as they not only spread their firepower in equally sized portions, but also tried their best to fire their weapons in grid patterns, making it a lot trickier to evade the devastating attacks!

Nonetheless, the range was so great and the warship armaments were so clunky that it did not take too much effort for the expert pilots to deftly maneuver their machines out of the danger zones in time.

The intuition of almost every pilot participating in this operation was top-notch!

Every participating Larkinson expert pilot was a seasoned veteran who had thrown themselves into the jaws of enemy warships many times in the past.

The only exception was Venerable Lothario Cross. The Crosser had broken through later than everyone else, so he was still a low-tier expert pilot.

More importantly, he did not have the luxury of accelerating the growth of his resonance strength by gaining access to general purpose cultivation elixirs.

His attempts to evade all of the powerful warship attacks was remarkably worse than that of the other expert mechs!

The nunsers apparently made the same observations, because Venerable Orfan could already feel that many enemies had shifted their attention away from her Riot.

While she privately felt relieved about it, she understood that her reprieve came at the expense of another comrade.

"Lothario!" General Ark barked over the communication channel. "Your expert mech is about to get focused upon by the main elements of the Ghirard Fleet. Don't think about anything except survival! Do not hesitate to divert your course and back off from Duqaste XI if you think you cannot keep your machine safe at closer distances. You can still support us from a distance."

"Roger that." Lothario responded. "I can still proceed forward. My 80th Element is fast enough. However, the smart metal that makes up my expert mech is not able to resist warship-grade attacks as easily as more solid expert mechs. I will try to prioritize my machine's survival as best possible."

Just before the warships unleashed their second salvo at the only expert mech made out of nanomachines, the 80th Element already veered off and even began to deploy a few decoys made of very thin layers of smart metal in order to confound the alien gunners and targeting systems!

Chapter 6260 Converge of Opposing Sides

The alien commander in charge of the Ghirard Fleet clearly possessed a good understanding of human expert mechs and the 77th Warborn Mech Division in particular.

There were many arrogant alien leaders that never really made a serious attempt to understand their human foes in depth.

Those leaders were most prone to suffering catastrophic defeats where far too many of their expensive warships got torn apart by mechs.

The longer the Red War persisted, the greater the likelihood of encountering alien commanders that showed serious respect towards their human adversaries.

The threat from another galaxy may have spread untold death and destruction across the Red Ocean, but the arriving humans had also introduced a lot of new technologies, ideologies, military doctrines and so much more.

The native aliens that weren't arrogant enough to assume that the customs of their race were superior to everything else all benefited a lot whenever they learned from the powerful humans.

The longer the war dragged on, the more the native aliens would begin to resemble their hated human foes!

The same applied in the other direction as well. Red humanity had already begun to integrate in the Red Ocean by mastering phasewater technology and attempting to produce human phase lords.

These concurrent trends basically described the inevitability of convergence of two completely hostile groups.

No matter whether they were enemies or allies, continued exposure to each other's culture, technology, armies and so on resulted in greater mutual understanding, if only so that they could figure out how to defeat their adversaries more effectively.

As the warships began to train their massive guns towards the only Crosser expert mech to take part in this lengthy approach, Venerable Lothario Cross did as instructed and immediately prioritized his survival above all other concerns!

The 80th Element flew away from the loose formation and started to make a lot of lateral movements.

Perhaps Venerable Lotharia had already made that conclusion, because just before the barrage of attacks arrived, the expert pilot steered his machine in a direction that allowed it to avoid several primary gun battery strikes at the cost of getting hit by two different secondary gun battery attacks!

Hundreds of energy beams, kinetic projectiles and more exotic attacks proceeded to flood the space around the smart metal mech!

This time, the Crosser expert mech was unable to avoid getting hit.

Perhaps Venerable Lotharia had already made that conclusion, because just before the barrage of attacks arrived, the expert pilot steered his machine in a direction that allowed it to avoid several primary gun battery strikes at the cost of getting hit by two different secondary gun battery attacks!

The 80th Element's resonance shield managed to resist the attacks with great difficulty.

The difference in power was considerable even though the mech ended up getting hit by a pair of secondary gun batteries. Smaller caliber or not, the second-largest gun turrets mounted on a large alien warship were still larger than any weapon that a mech could reasonably wield. They were also powered or supplied by a huge vessel that could devote a lot of capacity to keeping the weapons supplied with enormous amounts of energy and munitions.

Yet despite the enormous disparity in size and power, the 80th Element actually managed to withstand the incoming blows quite well!

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The expert mech's resonance shield was one of the remarkable 'technologies' that the native aliens were still unable to replicate.

Based on willpower more than sophisticated engineering, the resonance shield's working principles were based on defying the laws of reality rather than exploiting them to the fullest.

In other words, the resonance shield easily resisted the pair of energy beams fired by secondary gun batteries because they weakened the principles that made the attacks so powerful.

In the end, the 80th Element managed to get away unscathed from a physical perspective.

The result did not come without a cost, as Venerable Lothario Cross's willpower had already become more strained from the exertion.

"I can't resist too many of these attacks!" Lothario informed the others. "My resonance strength is not as high as that of the rest of you. I think I can only keep this up for one or two minutes before I have to retreat in order to give me enough rest to recover my resonance shield."

"Two minutes is enough, Lothario." General Ark responded. "The more firepower you attract, the less the nunsers warships are working to wear down the defenses of our own expert mechs. Keep doing what you need to do to survive. You may withdraw at your discretion once you judge you are close to reaching your limits."

"I will try to last as long as possible, sir."

Venerable Lothario was a younger member of the Cross Clan who had grown up hearing about all of the famous battles that led to the rise of the Golden Skull Alliance.

He had spent his years in the academy hearing about all of the feats accomplished by the heroes of the Larkinson Clan and the Cross Clan.

Lothario was anything but a coward, or else he wouldn't have been able to break through in the first place. Both his duty and his personal desires drove him to contribute as much as possible despite the danger of getting targeted by several dozen warships.

Perhaps the only consolation was that his expert mech was not being targeted by the tens of thousands of phasefighters that the Ghirard Fleet deployed in space.

The effective ranges of the transphasic energy weapons mounted on the fightercraft were not particularly high. Perhaps they might score a lucky hit on a mech at such a long distance, but the more probable outcome was that they would waste their energy in vain.

No. The phasefighters were already moving to intercept and interfere with the other expert mechs that continued on their approach to Duqaste XI.

While the 80th Element continued to attract a lot of firepower, the remaining expert mechs soon had to contend against the swarms of nunsers phasefighter that were probably willing to do anything to hinder the human champions.

"The nunsers race is characterized by high cohesion as well as a high degree of collectivism." General Ark Larkinson said. "Out of the major alien races, the nunsers are the most willing to

engage in self-sacrificing behavior. In past battles, the nunsers have already demonstrated a proclivity for engaging in suicidal ramming attacks, especially against expert mechs. I think that all of our mechs will become targeted by this method attack soon. No matter whether your machine is a melee mech or not, be careful about approaching phasefighters and do not let yourself get pinned down in any way."

"I hear that the native aliens have begun to deploy more solutions against expert mechs." Venerable Vincent said. "I think that a force as well-equipped as the Ghirard Fleet should have multiple tricks up their sleeve."

Ark agreed with that assessment. "You are likely right, though intelligence has been unable to gather any details about these new solutions. Most of the solutions that the different major alien races have employed so far have focused on inhibiting our mobility. Think about nets, gravitic traps and so on. Our enemies know that our mobility is the main reason why we are able to wreak havoc on their forces. As long as they can pin us down, they can bombard our expert mechs with their heavy guns, so do not let yourself get caught. Try to watch out for your fellow comrades and do your best to save any that have gotten caught."

Everyone silently nodded. Multiple expert pilots already suspected that these measures would soon be needed.

A short time passed by. It was not until the expert mechs began to get targeted by lots of phasefighters in earnest that the battle had entered a new phase.

A massive amount of smaller energy beams began to strike at the incoming expert mechs!

Of course, most of the shots missed their mark, but it was inevitable that at least a few of them hit their targets.

The expert pilots all maintained their cool despite the huge amount of guns arrayed against them. This was because the attacks launched by the phasefighters were not that powerful.

Not only were the calibers of the energy cannons mounted on the phasefighters a lot smaller, but their phasewater concentrations were also a lot lower. The resonance shields of the 5 Larkinson expert mechs easily withstood the damage as they were all derived from the willpower of 5 high-tier expert mechs.

Even so, none of the expert pilots dared to underestimate the phasefighters. The enemy craft might not be able to attain any immediate results, but as long as they kept enough hits, they could easily grind down the resonance shields over time!

This was why the expert pilots still did their best to move in unpredictable trajectories and evade as many attacks as possible. Their efforts at the start of contact may directly determine whether they could get away from Duqaste XI with their mechs intact!

"Have we identified what kind of starfighter models we are up against?!" Venerable Orfan asked as her Riot still had difficulty determining the exact capabilities of the small craft in front.

"Partially." General Ark answered. "The Ghirard Fleet has deployed many familiar starfighter models, but most of the known fighter craft are on the low end. The nunsers have deployed numerous new fighter models this time that appear to be more powerful and better equipped. We lack the analytical support of our fleet, so my Lionheart's processors and analysis engines are working overtime to decipher their capabilities. The results are limited so far as the new fighters have yet to unveil their full capabilities."

Rosa Orfan scowled when she heard that. This was yet another disadvantage of launching a raid without involving most of their fleet. In a risky operation like this, intelligence became extremely crucial. The more they knew about their enemies, the lower the chance of getting caught off-guard.

Right now, Venerable Orfan did not like the look of some of the larger and heavier fighter craft. They did not look like pure combat machines, but instead appeared to be designed for specialized support functions.

The fact that they made her feel uneasy gave her the suggestion that they were designed to deal with expert mechs like her Riot!

She would soon have a chance to see whether her hunch was on the mark as dozens of specialized fighter craft in green had separated from the greater swarm and proceeded to approach the C-Man, which arguably appeared to be the least versatile mech of the bunch.

"Be careful, Vincent!"

"Hah! I don't know what the fighters are up to, but I will smash them with my fists in no time!"

Despite his boastful words, Venerable Vincent did not charge head-long towards the strange green-coated fighter craft.

Once the nuser craft came close enough and surrounded their target from multiple angles, they simultaneously launched expanding nets made out of transphasic alloy cords at the C-Man!

"What?!"

Most nets missed the C-Man, but three nets successfully managed to entangle the C-Man!

The nets did not envelop the mech all that tightly as the resonance shield prevented them from touching the mech frame, but they still clung tightly nonetheless.

This soon became a serious concern as the C-Man struggled to get rid of the nets.

"Damnit! I can't punch these nets apart! I need to retrieve one of my spare knives."

While the C-Man attempted to do so, the fighter craft began to fire a second salvo of nets.

This time, many more of them managed to entangle the C-Man.

What was different this time was that the green fighter craft were still connected to their nets via very sturdy but flexible lines!

The green phasefighters that managed to bind the C-Man on their leashes proceeded to fly in different directions until their lines grew taut!

The C-Man abruptly lost the ability to move where it wished. It had become almost completely trapped in place as the green phasefighters did their utmost to turn the C-Man into a sitting duck, if only briefly!

"Eliminate those net fighters!"

The Lionheart already began to utilize its integrated luminar crystal cannon to shoot down the green phasefighters one by one, but the other expert mechs either had to close in on the enemy fighters or use their backup pistols to damage the enemy craft at range.

It took far too long for the other expert mechs to get rid of the net-launching fighters. This gave the enemy plenty of time to launch a concentrated salvo of attacks towards the trapped C-Man!

"I'm in trouble!"