

Mech Touch 6311

Chapter 6311 Dostoevsky Ancient Clan

When Ves presented Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson with the options to serve on different fronts, he expressed the intention of going where he was most needed.

That essentially translated into the most intense, grueling and deadly battlefronts of the Red War.

The young ace pilot sounded so confident and self-assured at the time that the current Tusa felt like smacking his previous self.

Why did he have to seek a challenge so soon?!

What was wrong with acclimatizing to his impressively upgraded living mech and building up a new combat system based on the use of Erlemin in one of the many less intensive battlefields?

The closer his courier vessel brought him to his new posting, the more Saint Tusa grew apprehensive about what he would be doing in the next few months.

He re-read the briefing package on the New Cartagena System.

Located in the 3rd defense band of the Urikas Upper Zone, New Cartagena was a binary star system centered around a yellow dwarf star and a red subdwarf star.

The Terran Alliance designated it as one of the most important strategic locations of the 3rd defensive band due to a single reason.

New Cartagena was extremely rich in high-value resources.

There were three types of high-end resources in particular that made the binary star system essential to the large and hungry Terran war machine.

New Cartagena II was a hot terrestrial planet that orbited fairly closely to the binary stars.

The complicated orbits of the two stars along with other satellites caused New Cartagena II to become subjected to extreme swings in climate.

There were days when it was scorching everyone, and there were other days where the heat levels were fairly tame.

Nobody knew why, but New Cartagena II happened to possess large deposits of a first-class exotic material known as Copenhagen Copper.

Copenhagen Copper was also present in the Milky Way Galaxy, but it was less prevalent over there. Humans had discovered long ago that 'CopCop' was an inherently disruptive material just by existing.

It scrambled up a lot of signals and other wireless transmissions.

More importantly, it also disrupted a lot of spatial activity. This turned it into one of the key materials for the production of lots of first-class space suppressors, first-class interdiction field generators and anti-teleportation countermeasures!

There was never enough CopCop to go around. The demand for this exotic was considerable and the Terran Alliance wanted to preserve their hold over New Cartagena II long enough to destructively stripmine the entire planet.

The Terrans weren't entirely confident they could keep hold of the star system forever, so they decisively switched from more ecologically friendly mining methods to tearing out chunks of it and picking up any pieces of ore that contained CopCop.

While the speed of mining had increased by a huge extent, the native alien attackers pressed New Cartagena II even harder in an attempt to deprive the humans access to any further quantities of a high-grade exotic that countered every piece of phasewater technology!

While New Cartagena II had become the short-term priority in this strategic location, New Cartagena VII-F also couldn't be neglected.

The oceanic moon was one of many satellites orbiting a large gas giant. It stood out from the other moons by possessing a lot of sustainable phasewater deposits!

This moon alone accounted for a hefty chunk of phasewater production in the local region!

Before the Terrans arrived to colonize this extremely precious moon, it was occupied by the jureg race, an aquatic crustacean race that was known as the biggest fans of the phase whale race.

The juregs had long considered New Cartagena VII-F to be one of their paradises and a holy site of great religious significance.

Suffice to say, the juregs were pissed at the Terrans for taking away one of their most precious territorial possessions and fought hard in order to get it back!

To the juregs, the Battle of New Cartagena was not an obligation forced upon them by the Red Cabal.

It was personal. And holy.

Led by their hardy and obstinate phase lords, the juregs threw themselves onto the defensive lines of the Terrans in a fanatical effort to wrestle back control of New Cartagena VII-F and restore the underwater holy sites to their former glory!

Faced with this onslaught of attacks from the aggressive major alien race, the Terrans responded in kind and stationed much of their crack troops to the strategic location.

Chief among them was their champion, who was known as one of the deadliest peak ace pilots of Red Humanity.

And Tusa was just about to meet this living legend in person.

His courier vessel first approached the large and astonishingly white capital ship orbiting New Cartagena II.

The Third Rome was the flagship of the Brusilov Fleet. She was a 6-kilometer long fleet carrier that could easily reach the top 10 of a contest that pitted the most beautiful warships made by humans against each other.

Not even the Spirit of Bentheim could compare to the artistic marbled exterior that appeared to be covered with hand-carved sculptures.

Tusa figured it must be really expensive and time-consuming for the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan to repair her exterior if she ever sustained a lot of material damage.

Yet with a peak ace pilot as powerful as the Messenger of Silence using the Third Rome as his home base, the native aliens had yet to land a single scratch on her beautiful exterior!

Before he met with the strongest defender of New Cartagena, he first got received by a dignitary from the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan.

Saint Tusa continued to look impressed as he entered a hall that was filled with tasteful but not overwhelming artworks.

Classical paintings, unpainted sculptures and the occasional plants made it seem as if he had entered a luxury ark ship rather than a military capital ship.

The Dostoevsky's certainly loved to show off, just like any other group of Terrans.

A female junior officer finally came close and stopped in front of Tusa.

"Lieutenant Daria Dimitrievna Dostoevskaya. I am one of the assistants of the Messenger of Silence. I have been tasked to serve as your guide while you remain a guest aboard the Third Rome. Please follow me to the bowels of our flagship. Our great champion is currently free to meet you in person."

The relatively young ace pilot nodded and followed after the woman through the extensive hallways of the large vessel.

"So what is with your name, lieutenant? Are you a member of the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan, or do you come from one of its off-shoots?"

The woman looked amused. "I come from the main branch of the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan. You foreigners always ask the same questions. We follow an old naming tradition that originated from an ancient nation-state that predated the Terran Empire. You only have to know that our ancient clan varies our last names based on sex. Our male descendants generally carry the name Dostoevsky, while our female descendants carry the name Dostoevskaya. I can transfer a number of books about our ancient traditions if you care for it, but they make for a dry read."

Tusa raised his palm. "No thanks. I am okay so long as I don't have to remember too many convoluted rules."

The ace pilot did not hate studying, but he dislikes spending lots of time on relatively passive and boring activities. He had always been an active person, and would rather spend his time on exercise or practice.

"Very well. In truth, aside from the other Terran lineages that still take pride in our pre-Age of Stars heritage, there are very few families left in red humanity that uphold the same traditions. It is... a regrettable loss of culture for so many descendants to forget where their bloodlines originated from. So much has been lost throughout the ages, and not all of it was due to death and destruction. In our rush to seek out new territories and put down our roots on brand-new planets, too many of us shed the names and traditions of our forefathers and instead create our own cheap customs as inferior substitutes. We are one of the few people that has resisted this habit, and we take pride in preserving one of the oldest continuous lineages of the human race."

While Daria Dostoeskaya sounded very passionate when she boasted about her old and storied heritage, Saint Tusa couldn't bring himself to pretend he cared.

He was not a Terran and cared little about ancient history. Most modern humans never really thought about what their ancestors did a few thousand years ago. It was just too distant from their current lives.

Fortunately, Lieutenant Daria did not harp too much on the greatness of the old Dostoevsky Ancient Clan. She came back to her main responsibility and provided Tusa with the necessary instructions for him to interact with the Messenger of Silence.

"Our great Saint is burdened with heavy responsibilities." The woman spoke in a more serious and subdued tone. "The juregs are highly motivated in their attempts to take back the New Cartagena System, and do not hesitate to send their shell-covered soldiers to this star system in droves in order to choke us to death. The juregs do not hesitate to send their greater phase lords to this battlefield, only pulling them back sporadically when they have indications that the Light of Sol is approaching

in this direction. The timing of your arrival is relatively fortuitous. You have come just in time for this rare lull to happen."

The native aliens weren't stupid. Even if they were prepared to sacrifice the lives of a lot of phase lords, they were not willing to let them die so cheaply against the god pilots!

The Red Cabal and the colluding Cosmopolitan Movement had become increasingly better at tracking and predicting the movements of all of the god pilots.

Even if the aliens were wrong about their predictions of where the god pilots would be going next, it was better to be safe than sorry!

"Does that mean that the Messenger of Silence has ample amount of time to fulfill his duties as a mentor?" Tusa asked.

"He should. It depends on his mood. The Messenger of Silence... is not known to be the most social of ace pilots. Despite the many glorious victories that he has delivered to our ancient clan since, he is still haunted by the battlefield loss that has defined him ever since."

"That matches what I have read." Tusa quietly responded. "He is known to be more... melodramatic than many of our other peers. He also doesn't speak anymore."

The lieutenant solemnly nodded. "That is correct. However, it is important to note that while he does not choose to speak, that is not the same as not choosing to communicate. He prefers to convey his intentions with his domain field. You may feel highly disconcerted when you meet and communicate with him the first time, but I can promise you that you shall quickly become accustomed to it. Perhaps in time, you may even appreciate the manner in which our great champion expresses his beautiful soul towards everyone."

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"...I see. Do you know why the Messenger of Silence chose to accept my clan's request to mentor me? He does not appear to be a person that likes hanging out with others."

The lieutenant shook her head. "It is not in my place to answer your question. Our champion has his own motives, I am sure. I can tell you that this is not an obligation imposed by our ancient clan or certain other authorities. He wants to mentor you, if only for a relatively brief period. I can assure you of that. You cannot imagine the amount of mech pilots that would kill to be in your place. It is a great honor for you to be chosen by him. Do not dishonor him by taking this opportunity too lightly, and do your best to fight with greater courage and skill to demonstrate that you have benefited from his tutelage."

"I shall do my best not to dishonor his teachings." Tusa earnestly said.

Chapter 6312 The Messenger of Silence

The closer to the center of the Third Rome, the less busy the interior of the capital ship became.

The artworks became grander and more imposing, but the amount of Dostoevsky crew members that moved around steadily dropped.

That was not all. The noise levels gradually appeared to dim as they moved closer.

This was not a result of the Messenger of Silence's impressively strong Saint Kingdom.

As powerful as he may be once he interfaced with his famous ace mech, it was impossible for him to radiate his willpower too far from his body outside of the cockpit.

The only way this could change was if he had stepped on the road to no return and completed at least some of the unions between man and machine.

All of this meant that the gradual reduction in ambient and background noise was a deliberate effect produced by the operators of this large fleet carrier.

Behavioral restrictions combined with technological sound dampening gradually reduced the maximum amount of noise that people can make.

The various ship systems that always produced constant hums or other persistent background noise began to fade as well.

If Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was not aware of all of the reasons why these changes happened, then he would have feared that he may actually be losing his hearing!

Lieutenant Daria Doststoevskaya's whole demeanor changed as well. Her posture became more rigid. Her behavior became more professional. She spoke more softly than before.

"We are close." She literally whispered to Tusa. "We have no further special instructions to give you. Despite his acquired reputation, our great champion is not intolerant to different personalities. As long as you treat him with sincerity, he shall reciprocate. If it turns out your personality does not fit well with him, we can end this exchange program early and send you back to the Larkinson Clan in advance."

"That will not be necessary, I hope." Tusa whispered back.

The two stopped before a well-armored gate that was completely closed shut at the moment. A squad of honor guards equipped with extremely high-tech suits of combat armor examined Tusa from top to bottom before clearing him to proceed.

Not that Tusa had any realistic hope of harming a much more powerful ace pilot, but the necessary precautions had to be taken.

The ace pilot residing in the chamber beyond this gate was one of the best chances for the Terran Alliance to spawn another god pilot!

Absolutely nothing could go wrong for the Messenger of Silence. All of his requests had to be met unless they were clearly unrealistic such as disbanding the Red Association.

Since the Messenger of Silence felt like mentoring a fresh ace pilot all of a sudden, then the Dostoevsky's were happy to oblige!

The young lieutenant no longer accompanied Tusa any further. She made a series of standard military hand signals that Tusa could easily interpret.

"Very well. I shall speak normally, if the Messenger of Silence does not dislike my voice. It is a... relief to hear that I am not obliged to follow this particular custom. No offense, but things have become too quiet for my liking.

The silence had become disconcerting to Tusa!

Places like these shouldn't sound so still and frozen. It was as if everyone aboard the Third Rome was already dead, but only persisted in their duties due to the commands of a higher authority.

The heavy reinforced gates slowly slid open. The mechanisms had been smoothed to such a point that they did not produce a single noise!

As Saint Tusa slowly passed through, he entered what appeared to be a monument to the dead.

To put it in a less charitable fashion, Tusa felt as if he had stepped right in the middle of a large graveyard!

It was downright macabre for him to enter into such a place of remembrance and contemplation.

Certainly, it was not unusual for large fleet carriers and other military vessels to dedicate shrines or memorials to pay tribute to the honored dead that once served on the ships, but to dedicate so much internal real estate to build a huge graveyard in one of the most well-protected sections of the ship was something else!

Tusa cautiously navigated through the graveyard. The low grass, the perfectly maintained traditional gravestones and the utter silence all caused him to become metaphorically pressed by the dead.

His domain field, as weak as it was without the amplification of his Dark Zephyr, could barely sense that there were real bodies buried beneath every gravestone!

Not all of the coffins were filled with actual corpses. This was not a surprise as many soldiers tended to die after getting blown up by mech-grade or more recently warship-grade weapon systems.

Regardless of whether the coffins were filled or not, each gravestone carried a strong weight of guilt and sentiment.

These associations did not come from the objects themselves. Tusa could clearly tell that the Messenger of Silence spent so much time mourning the names on the gravestones that his willpower permanently reshaped the individual monuments!

Once Tusa approached a central clearing, he finally caught sight of his target.

Saint Isaiah Simovich Dostoevsky did exactly what Tusa expected from a person who hung out in a graveyard.

The peak ace pilot wore a black formal outfit that one would wear to funerals. The man showed none of the demeanor of a man who was just four steps away from ascending to godhood.

The Messenger of Silence looked incredibly vulnerable as he stood in front of one of the many graves!

Despite his strange appearance, Tusa did not feel as if the other ace pilot was weak or a pushover.

The older ace pilot's willpower was much stronger. Much, much stronger. It was like the difference between a small moon and an enormous gas giant!

Tusa even had the illusion that all it took was a single spark to ignite the gas giant and spawn a brand-new star!

Yet... it was always the last few steps that hindered god pilot candidates the most. The Messenger of Silence had yet to step on the road to no return, and he must have his reasons for doing so. Outside pressure increasingly compelled him to begin the irreversible Mech Body Merger Process, but the powerful saint appeared to be resisting this life-changing decision... for the time being.

Once Tusa stopped at a respectful distance from the ace pilot, he could already feel his weaker willpower rubbing against the much more intense willpower of his mentor.

The initial contact was not pleasant. It was never pleasant. The two may have left the cockpits of their mechs, but that did not mean that their 'Saint Kingdoms' liked getting encroached upon!

However, the collision between Saint Kingdoms was also one of the best ways for two unfamiliar ace pilots to quickly familiarize themselves with each other.

In the span of a few seconds, Tusa almost became overtaken by the overwhelmingly strong emotions of his mentor.

The overarching sensations of loss, regret and mourning practically generated illusions in Tusa's mind that put him back to the fateful battlefield where the Terrans suffered a devastating loss against the Rubarthans in one of the many territorial scuffles that used to take place in the old galaxy!

Though the Terrans and the Rubarthans generally did not consider the battle to be significant enough, it was completely different for the Messenger of Silence!

That single loss completely broke his confident and arrogant demeanor and turned him into the dour and constantly mourning champion he was today!

There was another facet about the Messenger of Silence that disconcerted Tusa a lot.

The meeting between domain fields also caused Tusa to perceive that the Messenger of Silence was locked in his own illusions.

The Terran ace pilot was haunted by the dead.

From the perspective of the Messenger of Silence, all of the lost Terran souls from that devastating defeat had latched onto Saint Isaiah Dostoevsky and never gave him any rest!

No wonder the man had become so obsessed with silence. Tusa realized that his mentor had been chasing after an escape from all of the tortured screams and recriminations from the ghosts that haunted his psyche!

Soon enough, the illusions that briefly overwhelmed Tusa faded a bit. He knew that the Messenger of Silence must have gained a similar impression of him as well. Both automatically grew a little more familiar in each other's presence.

As the younger and much weaker ace pilot among the two, Tusa placed his hand on his chest and made a moderate bow.

"It is an honor to meet you, Messenger. I am Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson. The Larkinson Clan has loaned me out to the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan for a duration of three months, with the option to extend my stay multiple times. I am to fight on behalf of your ancient clan in exchange for receiving your guidance and tutelage on how to fight as a first-class ace pilot on dangerous battlefields."

A few moments of silence passed. It was incredibly eerie for Tusa to hear absolutely nothing aside from his own voice and breathing. He felt as if he had violated the sanctity of this temple by having the temerity to actually speak!

He was sure he received an allowance for it, so he did not hold these thoughts for long.

The Messenger of Silence eventually communicated with Tusa. He used his domain field along with a few subtle gestures of his arm to convey a surprisingly rich and precise meaning.

"..."

The younger ace pilot bowed lower to express his earnest respect and gratitude. "Please instruct me. I am new to first-class mech combat and fighting alongside other first-class forces. There is far far too much for me to learn. I have tried to work on my shortcomings by reading numerous books and watching a lot of recent battle footage, but that is anything but enough to prepare me for the challenges ahead."

Tusa relaxed. The worst outcome did not come to pass. The Messenger of Silence did not develop an instant dislike for the Larkinson ace pilot and reaffirmed his commitment to act as a mentor!

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The Messenger of Silence nodded.

"..."

Tusa looked surprised. "Thank you. I... was not aware that my application to be mentored held so much significance to you. I did not know that you have been haunted by ghosts on a constant basis for such a long time that you have been working so hard to get rid of them. Are you... are you sure that you will be able to free yourself from your ghosts if you successfully manage to advance?"

"..."

This was a deeply personal issue to Saint Dostoevsky.

Personally, Tusa suspected that these ghosts did not exist in any reality. They were purely products of the ace pilot's disordered imagination.

If this was the case, then ascending to godhood might not allow the Messenger of Silence to free himself from this psychological burden.

He would just continue to get haunted by ghosts strong enough to torment god pilots, and wasn't that a frightening thought!

Tusa kept these guesses to himself, though he knew that a powerhouse of Saint Dostoevsky's caliber must have picked up on it anyway.

"I am not quite sure what I am supposed to learn from you, to be honest. Our skillsets and specializations are too far apart from each other. If I have to choose what I want to learn the most from you, it is your skill and ability to completely isolate powerful adversaries. My new ace mech has granted me a similar ability of sorts. While it works on completely different principles, I hope that you can help me become more proficient in its use so that I can unleash my greater potential much sooner than normal."

"..."

"I would love to show you what I can do with my ace mech. I have heard much about your famous abilities. I think... I should experience it myself at least once."

Chapter 6313 The Sharpest Knife

Saint Tusa did not receive much instruction from the Messenger of Silence on the first day of their meeting.

The latter was understandably a man of few words. Very few words. Hardly any words.

Though the Messenger of Silence did not prohibit himself from communicating in a non-verbal manner, he was not the sort of saint that preferred to chat for hours on end. His vow of silence had caused him to become a lot more economical about how much time he spent on socializing.

Tusa sort of understood why Saint Dostoevsky no longer talked as much. He could feel it through the contact between their respective domain fields.

The man was haunted.

The Messenger of Silence never enjoyed any peace. Since the fateful battle where he and his fellow Terran mech pilots suffered a grave defeat against the Rubarthans, his dead comrades continually haunted psyche with each waking hour.

Not even breaking through and becoming more powerful helped to relieve him from the ghosts that tortured him on an unending basis. The apparitions were already dead, yet were filled with so much resentment that they never knew how to tire.

How could any man remain sane after receiving pleas, insults and blame from all of these ghosts?

A normal human would have already committed suicide from all of this mental baggage!

Yet the Messenger of Silence persevered.

For decades, he carried a mountain of burdens on his shoulders. He remained silent in the hopes that his lack of engagement would not rile up the ghosts as much.

However, the ultimate reason why he managed to maintain a semblance of his sanity and retain his lust for life was because he constantly polished his willpower against his ghosts.

It was brilliant, really.

Just like how Ves deliberately infected Tusa with his phasewater-infused blood, the Messenger of Silence constantly tested his mental endurance against the deceased comrades who constantly blamed him for living while they suffered the ultimate punishment.

In other words, the Messenger of Silence actually turned his own psychological debilitation from a crippling affliction into a permanent growth boost!

He turned his own haunting into an advantage!

Almost no one in his position would have been able to do this. Only a man of extraordinary willpower as well as the absolute determination to make it right again could endure this ceaseless torment.

This was why the Messenger of Silence was able to progress so quickly after his complete turnaround. He was only 109 years old at this time, which made him a lot younger than the typical peak ace pilot.

Even the famous General Axelar Streon was a few decades older.

However, there was a price for everything.

The Messenger of Silence benefited enormously from his haunting. He was constantly under an invisible siege, so his willpower never enjoyed any rest and constantly grew stronger at an accelerated rate.

Yet now that Saint Dostoevsky had reached the limit of what his resonance strength could reach at this stage, the good times had passed.

There was no direct benefit to any further haunting anymore. His resonance strength had reached a bottleneck and could not grow a single lavere further.

His haunting had turned into a pure disadvantage again. As strong as his willpower had become, the lack of progress for a long time gradually made him feel discouraged.

How long could the Messenger of Silence endure his haunting and the prolonged stagnation of his growth?

Tusa feared that this period may be a lot shorter for his new mentor than for other peak ace pilots!

The Larkinson ace pilot felt quite concerned about this situation. He found it distressing that an ace pilot who was much more powerful than him suffered so much agony that he may actually not be able to hold out as long anymore.

The Messenger of Silence was living on borrowed time.

Sooner or later, he would be forced to step on the road to no return... or get drowned by the ghosts that would finally be able to drag him into their abyss.

As Saint Tusa exited the enormous graveyard compartment, he nodded to Lieutenant Daria Dostoevskaya, who gestured for him to follow.

The two quietly made their way out of the center of the Third Rome. They did not speak because they were still in the zone where creating any noise was apparently a taboo.

Once they reached a more normal section of the fleet carrier, Lieutenant Daria finally dared to speak again.

"You know."

"I do. I guess."

"We would appreciate it if you keep your thoughts about our great champion to yourself. It is not a secret of what our saint is enduring, but we prefer for our people to have an impression of him at his best, not the opposite."

"That is understandable. Don't worry. My lips are sealed. I am not a tattletale."

"Good. Let me lead you to your stateroom where you will be staying for the foreseeable time. I will also lead you to the hangar bay where your ace mech is being serviced by your accompanying mech technicians. I will then proceed to teach you a number of laws, protocols and cultural customs that apply to our Brusilov Fleet. We tend to do things differently from many other mech forces. You do

not have to abide by all of them, but you must be aware of what we do in order to prevent any misunderstandings when you fight alongside our mech units later. Only then will you be permitted to sortie into battle."

"Understood. I am eager to take the field as soon as possible. Please instruct me and teach me more about how to get along with the Messenger of Silence while you are at it. I could use all of the help that I can get."

The young lieutenant smiled at Tusa. "That is good to hear."

A few days went by as Tusa acclimated to the Brusilov Fleet. It took a bit of time for the guest pilot to learn all of the rules. The Terrans were highly traditional, and the Dostoevsky's took that to a greater extreme.

He became familiar with their communication protocols as well as their general tactics and strategies. He memorized their table of organization and learned about many of their cultural customs.

While it was nice for Tusa to become enlightened to a different culture, not much of it was useful to him. He was an ace pilot. His place in the battle order was already higher than that of the grunts. Many of the rules no longer applied to him because he fought a lot better if he was able to act freely.

The real point of all of this instruction was to gain enough familiarity with how the Brusilov Fleet operated so that he would not get in its way during combat.

"To be honest, our Dostoevsky Ancient Clan does not prefer to wage war all of the time." Lieutenant Daria remarked to Tusa at one time. "Many of us actually prefer to engage in more... productive pursuits. Did you know that our ancient clan is famed for our arts and sciences? One of the reasons why our heritage has persisted for so long is because we are much better creators and destroyers. The latter can help us survive in periods where only violence holds sway, but it is the former that has allowed us to continually build on the foundation erected by our ancestors."

Tusa swept his gaze across the compartment and admired the artistic carvings and paintings. The Third Rome truly exemplified the Dostoevsky's pursuit of the arts.

"I kind of understand what you mean. It is... nice. Your ancient clan is not bad at all. I would have loved to grow up in it, but I already have it pretty good in the Larkinson Clan."

Every family had its strong points. Tusa hadn't stayed here for long, but he already noticed a few less pleasant aspects about the Dostoevsky's.

He refrained from mentioning any of them to his hosts. He did not come here to critique and deconstruct their way of life.

"So when will I be able to receive real instruction from the Messenger of Silence?"

"Patience, Saint Tusa. Our great champion prefers to demonstrate in the field. The juregs may have temporarily pulled back their forces from the New Cartagena System, but they will be back soon. They always will, for they cannot afford to give up on New Cartagena VII-F. In the meantime, you can deploy your Dark Zephyr into space and further familiarize yourself with the power of a first-class ace mech. It is best if you have a good grasp of your machine's new level of performance when you sortie with the Messenger of Silence."

So that was what Tusa did. He brought out the Banisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr for testing and practice and quickly grew familiar with his living mech's upgraded features.

He also experimented with the Banish resonating ability he gained after resonating with Erlemin. There was always an asteroid belt around that offered an endless amount of disposable practice targets.

The mech designers were right about its usage. Tusa found it easy to Banish relatively small objects.

At his current resonance strength and proficiency level, he was not able to do anything too impressive.

It was easy enough for him to banish an unresisting asteroid that was roughly the size of his ace mech.

He had to put in a lot more effort to do the same to an asteroid that was several times larger.

He was unable to Banish an asteroid that was ten times larger than his own machine.

Tusa tried to employ his Banish resonating ability in a different way by only disappearing a portion of that asteroid.

His initial attempts failed numerous times. He tried to make it work, but always encountered resistance that was hard to overcome. He executed the resonating ability in different ways until he finally lucked out and managed to take a large 'bite' out of the asteroid!

"It works!"

The temporarily displaced chunk of space rock only disappeared for half a second before coming back again, but the damage was already done! The Dark Zephyr effectively split the larger asteroid without employing any of his knives!

Tusa did not really care that the Banishment duration was a lot shorter than normal since he invested a lot of energy into severing a portion of the asteroid away.

The fact was that Tusa and his battle partner confirmed for themselves that Erlemin had become a much larger and sharper 'knife' for them than their handheld weapons!

"OH YES. I AM SO GOING TO ENJOY THIS NEW RESONATING ABILITY." The upbeat Dark Zephyr crowed. "NOBODY WILL EVER ACCUSE ME FOR POSSESSING THE WORST ARSENAL ANYMORE."

The living mech always appreciated a stronger weapon!

The Dark Wind Module had solved the Dark Zephyr's most acute offensive shortcoming, but it was not exactly a weapon that he could employ willy-nilly.

The consumption of the Banish resonating ability was a lot more flexible. It could be extremely costly if Tusa tried to push it to the limit, but he could make repeated use of it as long as he paced himself.

Saint Tusa and the Dark Zephyr only scratched the surface of what they were capable of. The ace pilot clearly felt that he was being limited by his resonance strength and lack of control.

There was not much he could do about the former, but he could actively work on the latter through continuous practice and experimentation.

"Let's see how much we can improve the way we Banish different things." Tusa said in an upbeat tone. "We need to be faster, more precise and use up less willpower in the process. I feel as if I'm a mech cadet interfacing with a training mech for the first time again."

The mech designers hadn't been lying when they warned him that Erlemin came with an insanely high learning curve!

Tusa was only able to scratch the surface of the immense potential of this newly-developed resonating material!

After another day of basic practice and familiarization, the guest pilot finally learned of an important development.

The juregs were back.

And they were on their way to mount an offensive on New Cartagena II.

"Finally."

Chapter 6314 Whispering Willow

The juregs had only temporarily vacated their greater phase lords and other strategic assets from the New Cartagena System.

They stayed away just long enough to confirm that the Light of Sol was no longer heading in their direction anymore. The god pilot tried to be as unpredictable as possible in where he showed up, but he could not afford to spend so much time on traveling when he could be demolishing alien armadas left and right.

It was a constant game of cat-and-mouse.

There were times where the Light of Sol managed to beat the predictions of his opponents and manage to slay greater phase lords that were originally used to hold back human senior ace pilots.

There were other times where the Light of Sol arrived in a star system where the aliens only left a token force behind. The Red Cabal managed to fool the god pilot by projection convincing illusions, causing the local humans to feed false intelligence to the god pilot.

The aliens were getting better at exploiting the limitations of god pilots. As invincible as they were in direct combat, they were very poor at long distance power projection!

God pilots and god mechs were so specialized in dominating the battlefield at the tactical level that they were not as helpful at the strategic level.

At least the Rubarthans had it better. Two roaming god pilots made it a lot harder for the native aliens to form their plan around.

The Terrans unfortunately only had a single god pilot to rely upon, but they were not able to provide the best help because their intelligence apparatus delivered less-than-perfect results.

However, none of that was relevant in the New Cartagena System. The juregs absolutely were not attempting to pull off a bluff. Their motivations to recapture the star system was a matter of faith. They wanted their precious ocean moon back so badly that they immediately moved to attack as soon as they returned!

The mood in the Brusilov Fleet changed. The professional soldiers suspended their R&R and switched to a more serious and focused mindset.

None of the first-class multipurpose mech pilots were afraid. They endured huge amounts of pressure during their mech cadet days, so they could easily endure the pressure of preparing for a battle against a powerful alien armada.

The quantity of small craft and warships on both sides was not as much as Tusa expected.

In a battle of this magnitude and importance, the Brusilov Fleet only fielded 10,000 first-class multipurpose mechs, with other mech forces fielding an additional 20,000 first-class multipurpose mechs.

They were all high-quality mechs, at least.

Aside from that, the various mech forces also deployed a temporary defensive ring around New Cartagena II as well as tens of thousands of weaker and more specialized first-class mechs that provided assistance in various ways.

The fleeters also maintained a relatively small squadron of warships, but they were mostly assigned to defend critically important strategic assets and would not engage the aliens proactively. They had declined to employ their Starfighter Corps in this star system.

The message was very clear. The Terrans needed to solve their own problems. If they were unable or unwilling to do so, then they had no right to rule over the Terran Alliance.

The Dostoevsky Ancient Clan may be renowned for producing many brilliant artists and scientists every generation, but it had not neglected the need to form a strong military core.

While the Dostoevsky's did not field a mech army as large and expansive as the much more militant Streon Ancient Clan, but keeping their main military force relatively small enabled them to invest a lot more in raising the quality of their troops!

"What are the specialties of your Dostoevsky mechs?" Saint Tusa asked as he entered the cockpit of his ace mech and corresponded with his liaison. "Your ancient clan is big on high technology, so your machines must be equipped with exotic tech than what I have read in the basic information packages."

"Well, you should already know that the mech units of our Brusilov Fleet excel at melee combat." Lieutenant Daria Dostoevskaya said over a private communication channel. "Our most premier unit is the Cossack Lancer Battalion. The first-class multipurpose mechs are adequate at attacking from range, but they are most noted for their ability to charge at their targets with their precious tier 6 Destroyer lances. Serving in this elite battalion is a highly coveted dream to many Terrans."

Tusa slightly widened his eyes. Tier 6 Destroyer weapons were nothing to scoff at! While it was not as extravagant as the tier 3 Destroyer spear that Ves had reserved for Rosa Orfan, the advantage of the Cossack Lancers was that they had so many of them! He could not think of many mech units that could resist the charge of 500 Destroyer lances at the same time.

"We have many other notable elite mech units, but they do not require any hand-holding from you." Lieutenant Daria continued. "We only wish for you to keep an eye on our Cossack Lancers and save them from an ambush if possible. The Destroyer lances are priceless and irreplaceable. We are fortunate that we have managed to salvage every lance lost by fallen mechs so far, but we cannot retrieve them if the juregs have struck them too hard. Our great champion excels at ranged

takedowns, but we fear the aliens may be luring him to a trap if they use the Cossack Lancers as bait."

"I understand. I am much more suited to venture into perilous areas and deal with problems on site. At worst, I can slip away just as easily." Tusa readily said.

This was the difference in specializations. As powerful as Saint Isaiah Dostoevsky may be, he much preferred to solve his problems from a comfortable distance. He was much like Venerable Davia Stark in this regard.

Tusa on the other hand liked to be in the thick of action. He hardly experienced any fear or hesitation when he sent his mech right at the enemy.

Of course, the new ace pilot realized that he needed to restrain himself this time. He was still new to first-class combat and was not entirely familiar with all of the crazy stuff that the enemy threw at the human defenders.

As his Dark Zephyr launched from the Third Rome and floated above most of the first-class mech units that dispersed in different directions, Saint Tusa and the others were waiting for the arrival of the native aliens as well as the entry of the strongest combatant in the field.

"He is coming!"

Though Saint Tusa was also an ace pilot, his entry into the field hardly elicited any attention from the surrounding Terrans.

His Dark Zephyr may be an impressive piece of hardware, but it was small and not designed to grab people's attention. In fact, impregnating the mech frame with Solus Gas dampened much of his emissions and made the machine less noticeable than before.

Tusa did not radiate his Saint Kingdom at full strength, but even if he did, it wouldn't have amounted to much compared to what the defenders of New Cartagena witnessed in every major battle.

A part of Tusa still felt insulted and belittled for being dismissed as if he was just a faceless grunt.

Those hard feelings instantly disappeared from the moment the Whispering Willow entered into space.

It was as if everything around the famous ace mech went still.

The ace mech that had been upgraded to the point where it had become eligible to transform into a god mech was coated in pale white and nothing else.

The legendary machine did not need any further markings or embellishments to signify its extreme lethality.

Its mere presence was like the onset of a cold winter onto a helpless and unprepared army of belligerents.

Soldiers armed with rifles and bayonets could defeat mortal enemy troops The sight of the white ace mech became a lot more intimidating when it was accompanied by the strongest Saint Kingdom that Tusa had ever witnessed.

Tusa had fought alongside Saint Kalasandra Boojay many times as an expert pilot and more recently an ace pilot in the expeditionary fleet. The hero of the exiled Boojay Family was much older and had much more time to polish her willpower to the point where she grew into a senior ace pilot.

However, the difference between a senior ace pilot and a true peak ace pilot was still vast!

The former could already be regarded as a mainstay among ace pilots, but the latter had already started to diverge from the trappings of this rank!

Tusa had heard that every peak ace pilot could already be treated as a preparatory god pilot.

In this moment, he realized that those descriptions were not exaggerations.

Peak ace pilots may be bottlenecked by the hard ceiling of their resonance strength, but there were still other ways they could develop their powers!

In the case of the famous Messenger of Silence, the ace pilot clearly put much of his energy into refining and improving his Saint Kingdom. Its range, energy density and the strength of conviction behind it was so much better than anything Tusa had witnessed!

All of these quantitative improvements led to a qualitative transformation.

Although it was still far short from reaching the standards of a genuine God Kingdom, Tusa could clearly feel as if the Messenger of Silence had near-absolute control of whatever took place inside his powerful domain.

The Saint Kingdom complemented and amplified the performance of the Whispering Willow in a way that almost turned the ace mech into a divine creation.

The Messenger of Silence's willpower had become so strong that he was already replacing numerous physical laws with his own ones! Physics simply worked differently around machine because the ace pilot did not permit another outcome!

The sheer amount of confidence and self-assurance required to manipulate reality to such an extensive degree impressed Tusa a lot!

His own attempts to impose his own willpower onto reality was like a pale imitation in comparison!

"He is indeed a man of few words."

Saint Tusa understood his mentor's preferred teaching method.

Just by showing himself off, the Messenger of Silence already taught Tusa numerous lessons about willpower expression, practice targets, end goals and more.

The Whispering Willow lifted its famous primary weapon. Simply named Stella, the intimidating high-tech gauss rifle possessed a muzzle velocity that was so damn high that the Messenger of Silence was actually able to reliably hit his targets millions of kilometers away!

It was not too unusual for ace mechs armed with laser rifles or other energy weapons to accomplish this feat, but it was a different story for kinetic weapons!

The Dostoevsky's must have invested a huge amount of research and materials into developing this unique weapon.

The greatest advantage to sniping with a kinetic weapon was that it enabled the wielder to make use of specially developed projectiles. The Dostoevsky's best scientists had developed numerous high-end gauss rounds that perfectly synergized with the Messenger of Silence's skills and abilities!

This turned the peak ace pilot into one of the deadliest long-ranged combatants of the Terran Alliance!

However, the native aliens were no slouches either. In order to constrain the firepower of the Messenger of Silence and prevent him from wreaking havoc, the juregs deployed their own formidable champions!

"We have detected the approach of two greater phase lords and 15 lesser phase lords!"

"Identifying... confirmed. The jureg armada is led by the Diffraction Lord and the Biopod Mother!"

These were the two juregs that had been confronting the Messenger of Silence for a while now. Either of them were difficult to deal with, but when the two worked together, they not only managed to contain the Whispering Willow, but also caused the mech troops to bleed!

The peak ace pilot and the two greater phase lords confronted each other enough times to grow familiar with what they could do. None of them had managed to kill each other so far, but they did manage to kill or inflict heavy injuries on lesser champions!

Saint Tusa gulped. A battle involving the two powerful jureg phase lords would definitely serve as a trial by fire to the new ace pilot!

Chapter 6315 Jureg Assault

While the juregs clearly wanted to wrestle control over the New Cartegena System by wresting away control over the second planet, they did not advance at their best speed.

Their warships and carrier vessels slowed down and maintained their distance for the time being.

The alien carriers began to launch remarkably large strike craft that the fleeters had already classified as gunships.

Different from the much more common interceptors and increasingly more prevalent bombers, gunships tended to be larger craft that already began to take on a few trappings of warships.

Jureg gunships preferred to exchange blows with enemies, trusting that their superior transphasic defenses and punishing kinetic weapons would cause them to outlast any direct contest!

Naturally, the jureg race only deployed their best and most expensive gunships in the New Cartagena System. Every large strike craft performed just low below a typical first-class multipurpose mech. What they lacked in mobility and versatility, they made up for these shortcomings with superior attack weight, superior penetration capabilities and superior defenses!

Tusa couldn't imagine how much phasewater and other high-end resources the juregs invested into these craft to build so much of them. While they were not abundant enough to defeat the human first-class multipurpose mechs alone, they provided excellent cover to their warships.

"The juregs enjoy a headstart on modern small craft development as they have always fielded armed aquatic submersibles." Lieutenant Daria spoke over a communication channel. "Their initial strike craft were hastily converted from their existing submersibles, but they have since designed and produced dedicated gunships designed for space combat."

Despite their formidable performance, Saint Tusa still believed his Dark Zephyr could defeat them in the field with little effort. Their lack of mobility alone made them easily abusable by his ace light skirmisher.

However, he had no expectation of wiping them out by the hundreds. There were just too much of them, and they were just hardy enough that his Dark Zephyr would have to expend a notable amount of power to eliminate every transphasic gunship.

"Do not be concerned. Our ranged mechs may experience challenges when trying to whittle their numbers from a distance, but our melee mechs can get past their defenses much easier by relying on their space suppression modules."

Red humanity's heavy reliance on space suppressors to even the scale was the entire reason why the native aliens attacked New Cartagena II!

The destructive mining of the crumbling planet was partially complete. It was too difficult to quickly break the planet up and sort out all of the CopCop from the regular junk.

The more time the defenders bought, the more CopCop and subsequently first-class space suppressors became available. It was worth making a stand in the orbit of this dying planet.

"The first phase is beginning soon." The lieutenant said. "The probing phase may drag on as both sides seek to test each other with long-ranged attacks and skirmishes at the flanks."

Neither side was willing to commit too much as of yet. They mostly took potshots at each other with their most effective long-ranged energy weapons.

Most of the shots ended up missing due to the extreme range and lack of precision of the armaments, but the few strikes that ended up hitting stuff revealed lots of small details that could be of use in the later rounds.

Both sides already had a pretty good idea of the performance of each other's hardware, but the probing attacks continued as the native aliens wanted to make sure there were not too many new and unexpected surprises.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision II even had to spin out of the way and dance in space as numerous jureg warships had received orders to land an attack on the ace mech.

None of the attacks ever landed, but that already told the aliens quite a lot. Their warships suspended their fruitless endeavors and directed their attention elsewhere.

"The juregs may have recognized the silhouette and appearance of your Dark Zephyr. It is best to assume they know what your old self was capable of. They will expect to face a fast and highly maneuverable light mech that cannot pose a significant threat against greater phase lords."

"Then they are working on outdated information. My Dark Zephyr has gained a powerful trick up his sleeve." Tusa grinned.

He wanted to prove the intelligent crustacean race wrong!

The Terran light mechs were still multipurpose, but their armaments were pretty mild compared to their bigger and heavier counterparts. They lacked the raw attack power to quickly eliminate a lot of gunships, but they did their jobs when they obtained more detailed scan data of the enemy fleet composition.

The probing attacks began to fall off after half an hour of exploration.

The most exciting part of this phase was when the Terran light mechs tested the flanks of the jureg armada.

Tusa wanted to be a part of them, but that was no longer feasible anymore. His Dark Zephyr was too far removed from these standard mechs to blend in with the crowd.

The Terran light mechs were still multipurpose, but their armaments were pretty mild compared to their bigger and heavier counterparts. They lacked the raw attack power to quickly eliminate a lot of gunships, but they did their jobs when they obtained more detailed scan data of the enemy fleet composition.

The command net began to bloom with greater details. Old ships got readily recognized while new hulls received other markings.

All-in-all, it appeared the juregs did not carry too many surprises to this battlefield today.

"Careful. The juregs like to employ one of several different strategies at this stage. They may choose to halt at this distance and bombard our forces from long range in an attempt to lure out our melee mechs. They may also choose to rush forward and launch an astronomical amount of missiles that will detonate among our lines just before the jureg transphasic gunships and warships assail us with their heavy kinetic guns at a distance that makes it harder for them to miss."

Tusa grunted. "What do you expect to happen? What is my role?"

"Our think tank predicts that there is a 73 percent probability that the juregs intend to commit to a costly assault and attempt to close the distance on us. They shall fire many missiles into space but hold them back until they can crash into our ranks. The fighting will be hectic and both sides will suffer extensive casualties."

This sounded like a critical battle!

The outcome of this fight may very well determine how long New Cartagena remained in the Terran Alliance's hands!

Tusa certainly got what he asked for when he requested a posting at a location that experienced heavy fighting.

He just wished he enjoyed a week or two of training time so that he could optimize his new fighting style with his upgraded living mech.

"Most of the tactics and maneuvering does not concern you too much." Lieutenant Daris reminded him. "Our forces can handle the onslaught of warships and transphasic gunships. What they cannot respond to are the two greater phase lords. The Diffraction Lord is able to perform an ability similar to one of your old ones. He is able to manipulate space and diffract signals in a manner that makes him, along with any other friendly assets in the vicinity, appear in over a dozen places at once."

"Shouldn't the Messenger of Silence be able to find the actual Diffraction Lord and snipe his giant shell?"

"It is not as simple as it sounds. The Diffraction Lord is not only able to mask his presence well, but also employs a subtle form of teleportation that allows him to swap places to his decoys, thereby turning false into reality. In previous battles, we have learned that the Diffraction Lord cannot take too many allies with him as he teleports away, and he cannot use it too often."

"That is good to know. What about the Biopod Mother?"

"Her body is much larger and more massive. Her personal fighting capabilities are mediocre, but she makes up for it by being able to spawn and launch many of her biopods. These are many small organic missiles that seek to bury into unshielded starship hulls and large structures. Once the biopods reach their destination, they will unleash terrible biomonsters that can feed off any people they catch and spawn more copies of themselves. While a biopod is individually weak, the Biopod Mother is so enormous that she can spawn millions of them without paying a significant price."

"I see. So the Diffraction Lord is covering for the Biopod Mother, is that it?" Tusa asked.

"Yes. The juregs are already notable for developing a large reliance on missile weapons, but if the Biopod Mother launches her own organic projectiles, then our point defenses will be stretched past

their limits. Although the spores are unable to penetrate through energy shields, they are extremely debilitating to unshielded and vulnerable ships and structures. We once had to completely scuttle dozens of sub-capital ships and 20 defensive installations in order to eliminate all of the spores left by the Biopod Mother's 'children'."

"Has... has the Messenger of Silence ever managed to get close to killing the two greater phase lords?"

"He has come close enough, but only when he was lucky enough to lock onto their real bodies. It is always uncertain whether he is targeting the real greater phase lords, and whether the Diffraction Lord has secretly teleported himself and the Biopod Mother away. His intuition is strong, but it cannot avail him in this confrontation."

"Have you tried to send scout mechs or probes in their vicinity to feed more accurate and detailed sensor data to the Whispering Willow?"

"We did, but few of our mechs can return unscathed. The two greater phase lords are also threatening at closer distances. This is where you come on, Saint Tusa."

"Wait... are these the reasons why you accepted me as your guest?! You want me to play scout for the Messenger of Silence?"

"It is true, saint." Daria confirmed. "You are not obliged to accept, but our great champion believes you may succeed where others have failed. Despite your lack of resonance strength and experience, evasion is one of your greatest strengths, and your ace mech is much more modern and equipped with notable high technologies. Your Dark Zephyr is not only alive, but also an archemeh as well as a masterwork mech. With all of these qualifications, the Messenger of Silence at least expects you to be able to withdraw safely if you find yourself outmatched and overwhelmed."

Saint Tusa felt burdened by pressure. He had his misgivings about taking an Ark-style risk by diving head-first into the two greater phase lords without sufficient preparation, but he understood the necessity of this assignment.

The native aliens were playing for keeps, and New Cartagena II may very well slip out of Terran hands if he did not make enough contributions in this battle!

As Tusa tried to weigh his decision as rationally as possible, he felt the approach and change of aura from the Whispering Willow.

The Messenger of Silence understood Tusa's concerns, but reassured him. The peak ace pilot would do his best to cover the Dark Zephyr from the rear.

Somehow, the absolute confidence along with the earnest trust and expectation conveyed by the mute ace pilot reassured Tusa.

He was not alone in this. With one of the most powerful ace pilots covering his back, Tusa gained a margin of error that vastly increased his chances of making it back alive and unharmed!

Saint Tusa remembered that he was not strictly fighting for himself or the Larkinson Clan anymore. He was also fighting for the good of red humanity as a whole.

The greatest human heroes needed to step up and do more in order to help their race survive.

If Tusa did not possess the courage and altruism to act in a similar fashion, then he had no right to regard himself as one of those great heroes. This was not conducive to his growth!

"Thank you, Saint Dostoevsky. You have taught me another lesson."

"..."

Saint Tusa slowly began to accelerate his Dark Zephyr forward in preparation for a risky assignment.

Although his mission sounded dangerous, it was more than worth it in his opinion. The synergy between a marksman mech and a light skirmisher was high. Tusa believed he could accomplish even greater feats if he was able to team up with the Messenger of Silence!

Chapter 6316 Aquapen Technology

The battle between the Terran defenders and the jureg invaders was a precious moment for Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson.

He received the privilege of how some of the best forces on both sides waged war at their highest level.

What struck Tusa first was that neither side sustained much damage at first.

In the battles involving second-class forces, it was rather typical for warships, defensive installations and in certain cases small craft to blow up or limp away with heavy battle damage.

The existence of azure energy shields and other forms of energy shielding mitigated this problem somewhat, but they were not excessively strong, especially for human mech forces that struggled to source more phasewater.

This meant that it generally took less attacks to overcome energy barriers and inflict material damage.

Battles taking place in the Middle Zones tended to be quite destructive. The weapons were fairly powerful and both sides fielded a lot of assets. The constant pressure exerted by the alien invaders tested red humanity's strength in salvage, recovery and reconstruction operations.

Battles in the Upper Zones tended to progress significantly slower when neither side had managed to close in on each other.

The weapons wielded by both sides were certainly much more powerful. The primary armaments of the premier jureg warships were brutal. Many of their guns began to assail the defensive installations of the temporary defensive ring built around New Cartagena II, as they were the most static and easy-to-hit targets.

Yet it was exactly because of their stationary nature that the defensive ring possessed stronger and more formidable azure energy shields!

Tusa was amazed by the awesome damage inflicted by the enemy warships. The juregs were no strangers to energy weapons, but they overwhelmingly preferred to make use of kinetic and missile armaments.

The enemy vessels had yet to resort to their devastating missile armaments, but the alien equivalent to gauss cannons were already doing a lot of damage!

The primary guns on those jureg warships were particularly impressive!

The modern transphasic water hyper gauss cannons shot large and powerful transphasic rounds that did more than impact the azure energy shields protecting the human defensive installations.

They actually managed to partially 'sink' into the azure energy shields before finally stopping!

Repeated hits on the same azure energy shield not only caused the barrier to weaken at an accelerated rate, but also allowed the enemy transphasic rounds to sink deeper and deeper into the shields!

The effect was incredibly strange to see as Tusa had never witnessed such an effect before!

"I see." Lieutenant Daria Dostoevskaya noted with a grim voice. "We have received 95 percent confirmation that the juregs intend to fully commit their troops to this assault. Normally, they do not make use of their Aquapen Rounds due to their cost and scarcity. For the juregs to bring them out this time shows they intend to break our defense of New Cartagena II by the end of this day. The aliens are prepared to suffer significant losses in the process, but their gambit will pay off as long as they can take control of this planet and the surrounding orbit. The rich salvage they can harvest from this area will more than make up for their losses."

That was another aspect that became a lot more important in first-class warfare. The tech and materials used by both sides in the Upper Zones were leagues more valuable than in the Middle and Lower Zones!

The proportion of phasewater used in the construction of all of the hardware was considerably higher on average. A first-class weapon and a second-class weapon could both possess transphasic properties, but this description alone did not make any distinction on how much phasewater had been used to augment the penetration power of both armaments.

On average, both sides liked to employ as much as ten times more phasewater for a craft of the same size. One of the main reasons why phasewater was so scarce in the open market was because the big players spent too much of it on amplifying the combat power of their main forces.

They had no choice!

If the humans did not invest so much phasewater in their mechs, starships and orbital defenses, their assets would crumble far too quickly, causing them to suffer too much attrition and ceding too many star systems to their foes.

Yet no matter how much phasewater the humans pumped into their military assets, the aliens always managed to beat them on this front!

What was worse was that the native aliens worked with phasewater for so long that they developed a myriad of unique proprietary technologies.

Tusa had recently been briefed on one of the jureg's signature technologies.

"Aquapen technology is the development of special kinetic rounds that integrate phasewater in a weird way that helps them get past transphasic energy shields much easier, correct?"

"Yes, saint. The juregs have also recently updated their signature tech with hyper technology, so they are also capable of penetrating azure energy shields with relative ease. The notable effectiveness of Aquapen Rounds is one of the other reasons why the juregs have developed a love for kinetic armaments."

"Since this Aquapen Technology is so absurdly effective, why haven't we figured out the secret to making them? We could make good use of these Aquapen Rounds!"

"Not necessarily." Lieutenant Daria disagreed. "The juregs have managed to protect the working principles of this technology as well as their special production method for many years. The puelmers are especially greedy for this alien tech, yet they never succeeded in stealing it. Our human agents are also unable to achieve better results. The main reason for these results is that the juregs place their most important research labs and production facilities deep underwater. Their aquatic detection methods are unparalleled, so they always catch infiltrators before they can reach their target destinations."

That sounded interesting, but it was not too relevant to Tusa. All he needed to know was that the juregs possessed hard-hitting kinetic rounds that could penetrate azure energy shields with much greater ease.

He was already witnessing this as the various defensive platforms and orbital space fortresses started to incur real damage to their exteriors!

The Aquapen Rounds fired by the distant enemy warships sank all the way through the weakened azure energy shields, not caring that the barriers were still active for the most part!

This was game changing technology that made every form of energy protection a lot less effective than before.

Fortunately, the physical defenses of the artificial satellites under siege were also fairly impressive. High-grade alloys managed to hold together and dampen and disperse the transference of excessive kinetic energies. Only parts of the defensive installations crumbled to pieces with every hit.

Directional boosters also came online and began to spin the cumbersome defensive stations. This allowed them to make their damaged sections untargetable while presenting their undamaged exteriors to the enemy guns.

Even so, the defensive ring still started to take a toll from all of the kinetic bombardment.

Aquapen Rounds were difficult and expensive to produce, but the juregs showed no hesitation when it came to expending their limited stock of their special ammunition.

Saint Tusa could feel the ebb and flow of the battle shifting as a response to this development.

The juregs became even more motivated than before. Not only were they fighting directly under the command of two of their most senior gods, but they were also crumbling the formidable enemy defensive ring with 'blessed' ammunition!

The Terran defenders on the other hand settled in for a bloodier and more gruesome fight than usual. They understood the significance of Aquapen Rounds quite well, and knew that the juregs would not back off so easily this time!

Nonetheless, the proud and professional Terran soldiers did not grow discouraged from this. They were accustomed to dealing with pressure since their academy days and fought many prior battles in the short but intensive Red War.

The thought that hung in the back of everyone's minds was that heroes were usually born in battles like these!

The stakes were high, the enemies were formidable and the agency of standard mech pilots was very small. Only by stepping up and breaking through would they gain the power to tilt the balance in their favor!

There were circumstances where the presence of powerful expert pilots and ace pilots depressed this feeling of urgency, but Tusa did not observe this situation from the Terrans.

As powerful as the Messenger of Silence may be, not even he could single-handedly fight off a powerful first-class jureg armada, especially when it was led by two tricky greater phase lords!

"Our vanguard mech units are beginning to clash against the first wave of jureg gunships."

A deathly dance ensued in the center and the flanks as thousands of first-class multipurpose mechs and jureg transphasic gunships began to dance and fight against each other!

Both sides suffered much greater material losses as the craft did not hold back in their attempts to take each other down.

The melee mechs generally held an advantage when they got close and utilized their transphasic space suppressors to weaken the performance of the transphasic gunships.

It did not help that the gunships were quite slow and less maneuverable, so they could not play any cat-and-mouse games with the human mechs.

What they did have were superior defenses and powerful armaments. Their guns struck at the Terran melee mechs and pummeled their defenses in turn!

The more powerful azure energy shields protecting the jureg gunships may have lost much of their phasewater amplification, but their base performance was still good enough to buy valuable seconds, enabling them to pummel more mechs and keeping them occupied a little longer before they inevitably fell!

While the Terran mechs also possessed a large variety of integrated ranged weapons that enabled them to harass their enemies from a distance, the gunships carried larger and more powerful guns that gave them a distinct advantage in ranged combat.

Their transphasic hyper kinetic guns might not be loaded with Aquapen Rounds, but the penetrating ammunition still succeeded in rapidly weakening the energy defenses of the attacking mechs!

More and more first-class multipurpose mechs and powerful transphasic gunships fell. Their wreckage formed an increasingly more expansive debris field that promised the winner of this battle the right to salvage materials worth trillions of MTA credits or more!

"When... do I get to move?" Tusa asked as he grew increasingly more excited due to all of the fighting. "My battle partner and I are itching to move forward and do something useful. We are not made to remain on standby all of this time."

The guest pilot expected to be told that he needed to stay put and wait for the right moment, as if this was a grand game of chess.

Instead, he received a more palatable instruction.

"You have permission to enter the battlefield in earnest, saint. The Messenger of Silence hopes that you can circle around and approach the Diffraction Lord and the Biopod Mother as much as possible without attracting attention. The strange alloy used to construct your Dark Zephyr is noticeably more difficult to detect and track than usual. If you adopt a stealthier approach, you may just be able to sneak in. Our mech forces will coordinate with your movements as best as possible by directing more firepower along your approximate route. This will generate more local interference that will make it harder to distinguish your ace mech's energy signature from all of the noise."

That was quite an inventive if somewhat risky plan. Saint Tusa grinned. "I like it, but I do not think I can get too close without eventually getting spotted. My Dark Zephyr is still an ace mech at the end of the day. It is impossible for the native aliens to completely overlook my machine."

"We have a solution for that. To be more precise, our great champion can increase your infiltration chances. You need to retract your Saint Kingdom and lower your resistance to his willpower first."

Venerable Tusa already had an inkling of what would happen next. He tried his best to withdraw his Saint Kingdom and offer as little resistance as possible.

It wouldn't have mattered too much because he suddenly felt the Messenger of Silence's domain imposing itself onto his ace mech!

Mirage.

The Terran hero's willpower was so much stronger and more ominous that Tusa immediately felt as if he had entered into a zone of absolute silence and stillness!

Then, the pressure had suddenly disappeared.

What did not go away was the stillness effect. Tusa instinctively understood that the Messenger of Silence had somehow imbued a part of his power onto the Dark Zephyr, causing its emissions to become a lot more dampened than before!

It was as if the ace light skirmisher received a free cloaking effect!

It was not perfect, especially when the Dark Zephyr started to put up more distance from the Whispering Willow, but the temporary beneficial effect stacked nicely with the effect produced by Solus Gas and other measures!

Saint Tusa suddenly became a lot more confident about his ability to sneak up on the two greater phase lords!

Chapter 6317 An Image with Feeling

The battle raged on as the Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision 2 quietly slipped away.

The large and formidable jureg warships were still pummeling the defensive ring with their primary armaments. Their excellent sieging capabilities and their willingness to empty out their reserves of Aquapen Rounds meant that the defensive works were crumbling far faster than usual!

Defensive installations worth as much as second-class capital ships or more were crumbling in droves. Large orbital space fortresses started to launch evacuation pods and shuttles as the highly-trained station operators needed to be brought away before the large structures collapsed in their entirety.

Expensive first-class multipurpose mechs started to fall at an increasing rate.

The enemy gunships predominantly fired transphasic rounds that shred through the azure energy shields of the first-class multipurpose mechs with much greater ease.

On occasion, the gunships also launched their short-ranged but highly destructive transphasic missiles at a vulnerable prey, thereby preventing many damaged first-class multipurpose mechs from returning to the rear with their mech frames intact!

Though the gunships only carried a limited complement of missiles, as long as they still had them, their lethality temporarily surpassed that of the powerful mechs they were fighting against!

Of course, the Terrans were not letting the gunships shoot down their machines with impunity. A large proportion of first-class multipurpose mechs fearlessly weathered the storm and closed in on their targets, utilizing their superior mobility to quickly gang up on many gunships with at least 3 machines.

The first-class multipurpose mechs relied heavily on their excellent space suppressors to weaken the gunship's defensive and offensive properties, thereby not only reducing the threat level of the heavy alien strike craft, but also soften up their defenses so that they could be taken down quicker!

The asymmetrical matchup between mechs and gunships led to a lot of tragedies and feats of heroism. The jureg gunship pilots fought and died without any fear or remorse, and the Terran pilots did not show any intention to back down unless instructed otherwise!

As the cauldron of war and death continued to expand from the center of the battlefield, nobody seemed to pay any further attention to a new first-class ace light skirmisher that had recently joined the clan.

This shouldn't have happened. Ace mechs were too obvious, especially since they were surrounded by their own Saint Kingdoms that were very easy to detect.

Although Tusa managed to retract his Saint Kingdom, this was not a feat that he could pull off to perfection. Saints bore their hearts and will to the entire universe and openly declared their existence. It went against their nature to withdraw themselves to such an extent.

Yet somehow, the Messenger of Silence managed to turn his Dark Zephyr into the most unassuming mech on the battlefield.

It was impossible. It was a contradiction. It was a paradox. How could an ace mech suddenly become no more interesting than a random piece of debris floating around in space?

Saint Tusa knew why, because he was personally being subjected to the effect.

The Messenger of Silence demonstrated several impressive feats at once.

First, he separated a part of his willpower and imposed it onto the Dark Zephyr, completely overcoming the resistance of Tusa's own willpower.

The disparity in strength between them was so great that Saint Tusa couldn't even muster up the thought of resisting!

Of course, it helped that he did not consider the Messenger of Silence to be hostile. It was still scary that the peak ace pilot managed to overcome the instinctual defenses of another ace pilot!

Tusa could see how useful it is to master the method to imbue a part of his willpower and Saint Kingdom onto external objects, but this was an advanced subject that demanded much greater resonance strength as well as the right application of technique.

His eyes were already opened, though. He was confident he would be able to master a rudimentary form of this method sooner rather than later!

Another feat that the Messenger of Silence demonstrated was the ability to rewrite reality to a much more extensive degree than directly applying willpower.

For when the Messenger of Silence applied his Mirage ability onto the Dark Zephyr, Saint Tusa became directly exposed to the more powerful saint's willpower, and also his technique.

Saint Dostoevsky did not hide the mechanics of the technique behind his Mirage ability. He deliberately exposed it to Tusa as a gift.

Not that it would have hurt him all that much if his enemies knew how it worked. Only he was able to perform this particular technique. Knowing how it worked helped little because it could only be overcome by defeating his willpower, which was a tall order.

There was not much that Tusa could understand or learn from the powerful saint's Mirage ability. It relied on concepts that were entirely foreign to him. They could even be described as his antithesis.

What Tusa found most valuable about getting a good feel for the Mirage ability was the more general methods and applications demonstrated by the Messenger of Silence.

The Saint managed to strengthen and broaden his ability to form a field of silence by channeling it through a very strong defined image.

Tusa almost did not feel as if he was flying away from the orbit of New Cartagena at the moment.

If he stopped paying attention with his normal senses and started to listen to his other senses, then he had the illusion that he was walking through the graveyard that he visited during his first meeting with the Messenger of Silence.

A shout of absolute silence surrounded him as his passage did nothing to disturb the rest of the honored dead. The Messenger of Silence essentially framed his Mirage ability as a solemn visit to a graveyard.

He somehow managed to transform his repeated devotion to the dead and his earnest tending of the graves of his fallen Terran comrades into a strong image, one that when infused with enough willpower, became strong enough to substitute real with false!

It was as if Saint Dostoevsky literally replaced the reality in and around the Dark Zephyr with the reality depicted in his image!

This was not an ability that normal ace pilots could replicate, especially when applied outside of their Saint Kingdoms. A technique of this magnitude already crossed into the territory of a god pilot! There was no way that Tusa could replicate the power and splendor of the Mirage ability!

Even so, Tusa highly valued this silent lesson. He not only learned the direction where he should develop his own unique abilities, but also learned of the importance of building up strong images that could serve as excellent conduits of his willpower.

He recalled Ves mentioning something about artistic conceptions in the past. This must be what he meant.

Tusa wanted to experiment with it right away. He believed that if he worked together with his companion spirit Blackwing, he could obscure his Dark Zephyr even further!

He refrained from doing so, however. His living mech was currently covered by the Messenger of Silence's strong Mirage ability. His willpower could not coexist in the same space as that of another saint. Reasserting his own Saint Kingdom meant displacing the current effect. That was not conducive to his goals.

The Mirage ability was too useful, especially for an ace pilot like Saint Tusa who enjoyed being subtle at times.

When paired with the effects of Solus Gas as well as limiting the energy consumption of his machine, the combination with the Mirage ability resulted in an ace mech that both human and alien forces magically dismissed as a damaged piece of cannon fodder that strayed from his unit or whatever.

The native aliens could easily shoot down the errant mech, but it posed very little threat on its own. They all had more higher priority targets to deal with, so none of them spared any attention to the very subtle ace mech.

What amazed Tusa even more was that even automated systems dismissed the threat posed by the Dark Zephyr!

He would have thought that his ace mech would have tripped a few hundred alarms and attracted the automated fire of numerous warship gun batteries by now. Yet the alien programming seemed to get fooled as well, which emphasized the techniques utilized by the Messenger of Silence even more!

The peak ace pilot imposed a change in reality that reached the conceptual level. The changes weren't illusionary at all. Reality had truly changed, if only for as long as the powerful saint's willpower remained active.

Time passed by. More and more humans and aliens got killed.

The leading figures of both sides made no moves, though. Neither the Whispering Winter nor the pair of greater phase lords took action in person.

Part of that was to allow their general troops to do their jobs and consume their opponents as much as possible.

Another part of it was that the side that moved the first in a high-level confrontation usually suffered a penalty.

Unless the battle had reached a late phase or unless one of the sides could not stave off defeat by itself, then that was the time for the big boys to get into play.

This was why sending the Dark Zephyr ahead so early was such a brilliant move.

If Saint Tusa and his battle partner could successfully approach the two greater phase lords without getting 'detected', then that could enable him and the Messenger of Silence to gain the initiative by launching a surprise attack!

Normally, making the first move was a bad idea, but this did not apply to successful surprise attacks!

The emphasis was on surprise. As the Dark Zephyr slowly circled around and used the increasing interference as well as random pieces of floating debris as cover, the ace mech actually managed to get close!

It would only take another minute before the Dark Zephyr reached his target position.

The only problem was that there was not a single target position per se. In order to guard against a sudden sniping attack from the Whispering Willow, the Diffraction Lord had already employed his signature ability to project multiple mirror images of himself and the Biopod Mother across a large line.

There were enough kilometers separating every identical mirror image from each other that the Dark Zephyr had to get close to each individual one in order to allow his sensors to distinguish between truth or false.

The Diffraction Lord's power over this illusionary ability was so good that he and his fellow greater phase lord could be anywhere, even at the extreme end of the line of mirror images.

What was worse was that he could also swap himself and the Biopod Mother to their illusionary counterparts without generating any obvious activity, thereby causing Tusa to declare a false positive!

The best way to prevent that and give the Messenger of Silence a solid target to shoot with his Stella was to get close and activate the Dark Zephyr's new space suppressor to stop or delay any attempt to teleport away.

The Larkinson expert pilot's expression went grave. That also meant exposing his Dark Zephyr, which would certainly draw the ire of two very angry and very close greater phase lords!

Tusa smirked.

Challenge accepted.

Even though he was well aware that he was taking on an Ark-style challenge, there was a huge difference between himself and General Ark.

He was an ace pilot. A fresh one, but a genuine ace pilot nonetheless.

There was also another difference that gave Tusa greater confidence in his next move.

The Messenger of Silence was a far better and more reliable form of backup than Patriarch Reginald Cross!

Saint Dostoevsky wouldn't have sent the Dark Zephyr forward if he was unable to provide support at such a large distance.

This situation was almost ideal for the peak ace pilot. The Whispering Willow remained safely in the rear, and was not at risk. The Dark Zephyr not only acted as its forward scout, but also served as a lightning rod of attraction that was bound to distract the two greater phase lords!

Chapter 6318 Tusa the Scout

Saint Tusa understood his role well. It was not his job to land the killing blow this time. He was not expected to do any damage in the first place. His only job was to keep his ace mech alive as best as possible while attracting the attention of the Diffraction Lord and the Biopod Mother.

This was not a debut where he needed to play the main protagonist of the show. He was supposed to fulfill his role as a side character and create opportunities for the real hero to save the day.

Saint Tusa completely accepted his role.

There was a time and place where he could play the hero of his own story, but that day was not today. He had fully accepted that he was the student while Saint Dostoevsky was the master.

Soon enough, the Master was about to showcase what he was truly capable of. The Mirage ability was just the tip of the iceberg. Tusa grew more and more excited at the prospect of witnessing the power of a peak ace pilot up close.

He needed to do this right.

He had become more and more careful about controlling the movements of his Dark Zephyr.

He was banking hard on the Solus Gas treatment to dampen his machine's emissions as much as possible.

The properties of Solus Gas were so comprehensive that they were even able to fool the intuition of expert pilots.

Tusa hoped that it would also help to fool the senses of the two greater phase lords.

Together with the Mirage effect, the ace pilot dared to get closer to the unsuspecting alien leaders!

The Dark Zephyr lazily followed a trajectory that just so happened to bring the machine close enough to get a closer look at all of the mirror images of the two greater phase lords.

Tusa paid close attention to the sensor systems of his machine. He was pretty sure that the Mirage ability could also help to discern true from false now that the Dark Zephyr had come so close to the main targets, but he would rather confirm the results himself.

That became more problematic than he expected when he noted that the sensor systems produced the exact same readings of two adjacent mirror images.

One of them could be real, or both of them could be false. Whatever the case, the modern and up-to-date passive sensor systems couldn't determine whether there was any difference!

The only way to obtain more definite results was to get a lot closer or to turn on the active sensor systems.

Neither of these two options were ideal. Getting too close was too egregious a disruption. Turning on active sensor systems would light up his machine and amplify outgoing emissions.

Tusa suddenly paused. He had other ways to discern true from false.

He silently communicated with his battle partner. He did not dare to whisper his request, as any noise might break the Mirage.

The Dark Zephyr understood his request and began to act accordingly.

A living mech, especially a third order one, was partially a spiritual life form. The Dark Zephyr possessed extraordinary senses of his own and could detect other spirits. He was also able to detect other life forms, though his life detection ability was nowhere near as strong as that of the Everchanger.

Even so, the Dark Zephyr was no slouch, having absorbed the willpower baptism of a genuine ace pilot! That provided the living mech with a qualitative boost that sharpened his senses just enough to make this plan viable!

Through the man-machine connection, Tusa patiently borrowed his battle partner's senses and tried to perceive the presence of life.

It should be quite easy to detect the lives of two greater phase lords. Their bodies were enormous, which meant they were filled with so much vitality that it was impossible to miss them at this distance!

The problem was that every mirror image conveyed life. The mirror image was the product of warped perception, which meant that what people could observe was not necessarily false.

It was not until the Dark Zephyr swung by the eight mirror images in a row that Tusa just knew he managed to find the real deal!

His eyebrows rose with excitement as he detected a subtle difference that could not be perceived up close!

From the senses of his Dark Zephyr, there was a minute change in alignment in how he perceived the strong life energies of the two greater phase lords. It was like how a straight rod suddenly became crooked if the bottom half was submerged underwater, but the effect was a bit subtler than that. Tusa and his battle partner could have easily missed it if they were not paying so much attention to any fluctuations in the perception of life energies.

Tusa did not need to spend any further time on confirmation. Now that his Dark Zephyr had gathered a strong clue, his intuition filled in the rest. This was the right set. His ace mech did not drift close to another mirror image. The machine had come close to their actual bodies!

At this time, the pair of greater phase lords had yet to unfold their true bodies to their greatest sizes. This spoke of a lack of alertness that seemed encouraging. The aliens should not have noticed that one of the human ace mechs had quietly entered into their midst!

Tusa's job was not yet done. One of the other reasons why the jureg phase lords managed to stay unharmed so long despite confronting the Messenger of Silence was because the Diffraction Lord still had a trick up his sleeve!

As soon as the greater phase lord recognized that his real body's position had become exposed, he would definitely displace himself to the coordinates of one of his mirror images! He would do the same for the Biopod Mother as well!

The Larkinson ace pilot took a deep but silent breath. He needed to bring his Dark Zephyr close and activate his space suppressor at full strength to inhibit the Diffraction Lord's evacuation.

There was no way for him and his ace mech to hide anymore. They would have to expose themselves fully to the strongest phase lords in this star system, ones that clashed against the Messenger of Silence multiple times and came away with light damage.

Tusa would be lying if he claimed he was fearless.

Yet... his heart sang louder and his mood became more pumped.

This was what he wanted to do the most!

He wanted to approach a pair of formidable enemies and prove their complete inability to capture or harm him in any way!

Tusa felt as if this would test his courage as well as his ideals. He wanted to prove that he could remain free even when his adversaries in the field tried their best to inhibit his movements!

"Hahahaha!" Tusa laughed as he broke the spell of silence around him with his willpower.
"Freedom is most precious when it is hard-fought!"

The Mirage ability whisked away as if it never existed. The illusions of graveyards and paying respects to the gravestones faded away, causing the Dark Zephyr to become a bit more noticeable than before!

"Chip Chip!"

Solus Gas impregnation or not, the Diffraction Lord and the Biopod Monsters could not possibly miss the fact that one of the powerful human ace mechs had come terrifyingly close to their current positions, all without tripping any alarms!

Before the Diffraction Lord could even think of performing his handy mirror image swap technique, the blazingly fast Dark Zephyr had already reached their midst and activated his space suppressor at full power!

"Blackwing, pump as much true resonance into it as you can!"

"Chip Chip!"

Tusa had already sent his companion spirit to the relatively small space suppression module. This helped to channel more willpower into the recently developed part, thereby further amplifying its performance beyond its ordinary limits!

The effect was pretty good. Fresh ace pilot or not, Tusa and his Dark Zephyr was just powerful enough to stall the Diffraction Lord's effort to teleport away!

It had been close. If the Dark Zephyr was not so damn fast, the greater phase lord would have already disappeared!

"YOU DRY MAMMAL! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!"

Tusa did not listen to the translated speech of the angry jureg phase lord at all. He was doing his best to keep his Dark Zephyr close while also evading the quick retaliation of both phase lords!

The Diffraction Lord swung out dozens of concentrated spatial blades that were reinforced enough to endure the space suppression field.

The Biopod Mother extended hundreds of needle-like nozzles from her body and fired small plasma bolts that saturated the immediate space around the greater phase lord.

Tusa had to work extremely hard and push the Dark Zephyr's speed and maneuverability to their limits in order to evade every single attack!

The spatial blades were relatively easy to evade, but the small plasma bolts were much harder to dodge since so many of them had fired in the ace mech's direction.

The Dark Zephyr only managed to gain a small reprieve by putting the Diffraction Lord's bulky body in the way.

This was not ideal as the Biopod Mother was no longer as affected by the space suppression field anymore.

The alien took advantage of that by distancing herself from the Dark Zephyr while at the same time unfolding her true body!

The Diffraction Lord was able to overcome the space suppression field to unfold his true body as well, but the rate of progress was slower!

This left the latter in an awkward situation, as he needed to unfold his true body in order to unleash his full might!

Just as the Diffraction Lord attempted to pull the Dark Zephyr into an illusionary cage that should keep the ace mech busy, the greater phase lord suddenly felt as if his body had become frozen!

There was no sound in space, but at this point, the jureg phase lord felt as if sound had become completely forbidden inside and outside his body!

A sense of deep paralysis began to affect the exterior of his half-unfolded body. The effect had trouble reaching into the vast center of the phase lord's form, but the current effect was already alarming enough!

The greater phase lord's thinking slowed. His body became less responsive. A sudden burst of pain originated from the front of his shell, but why did he feel this way?

The Diffraction Lord belatedly realized that the Whispering Willow had already taken advantage of an opening and fired a shot from his Stella!

Silence.

The passage of the custom-developed gauss round was completely silent and virtually undetectable.

It projected a very strong resonance-empowered energy field that spread a sense of silence and paralysis that strangely brought peace... yet that was exactly the opposite of what the Diffraction Lord needed!

Under the Messenger of Silence's domineering influence, the Diffraction Lord suffered error after error.

The passage of the enemy projectile was undetectable.

The pain generated by the penetrating round did not register until it was too late.

The enforced calmness and paralysis was making him far too complacent despite getting struck by a life-threatening attack.

For whatever reason, the Diffraction Lord suddenly had an illusion that he was back in his infant days where he was at the mercy of any larger predator!

He should have felt much more alarmed about this, but the aforementioned effects kept him pinned and complacent even as the round punched through the phase lord's hard shell and proceeded to penetrate through multiple precious phasewater organs!

The greater phase lord wanted to scream his rage and suffering, but the unnatural silence enforced onto the alien leader prevented him from making himself heard!

"...!"

Eventually, the powerful round fired by the Whispering Willow managed to penetrate through an unknown number of vital phasewater organs before colliding against the shell at the opposite side before halting.

The damage was bad. The Diffraction Lord already looked as if he had become partially crippled.

Even if the greater phase lord still retained access to his abilities, they were not as strong as before!

This was excellent news to the Messenger of Silence as a weakened prey presented much more openings to his hungry Stella!

The Whispering Willow minutely adjusted the aim of its formidable marksman rifle and proceeded to fire another scary projectile.

Suffer.

By the time the Diffraction Lord got struck by the second round, he suddenly went from paralysis and muted sensations to an overload of suffering!

"THE SCREAMS ARE TOO MUCH!"

Ghosts haunted the greater phase lord's unprepared psyche!

Chapter 6319 Free Flight

All of the waiting, preparation and setup had given way to action!

From the moment the Dark Zephyr detected and confirmed the coordinates of the actual greater phase lords, the ace light skirmisher along with the much more powerful ace marksman mech stationed in the rear exploded into action and managed to land the first true blow against the Diffraction Lord.

Among the jureg phase lords, the Diffraction Lord had long built up a reputation for being nearly impossible to injure. As his translated title suggested, he excelled at making himself appear elsewhere than his true location. Many enemies who attempted to attack him from a distance or tried to approach him for a brawl found themselves frustrated as they never managed to touch the real phase lord!

This was quite peculiar as most jureg phase lords tended to develop their bodies a bit more than their spatial abilities. Each of them tended to develop increasingly stronger, tougher and more massive transphasic exoskeletons as they grew in size. This lent them a powerful organic defensive barrier that enabled them to endure more attacks than usual.

However, the Diffraction Lord did not spend as much effort developing his physical gifts, opting to acquire a large amount of phasewater organs that strengthened and amplified his spatial manipulation abilities.

Much of his phasewater organs also amplified and synergized with his primary specialization, which was crafting large-scale, remote illusions that affected both armies and powerful individuals alike!

Combined with a small collection of strong spatial attack abilities, the Diffraction Lord clearly preferred to act like a wizard that liked to torment his opponents with illusions from a comfortable distance!

This came with a big disadvantage.

He was not comfortable with fighting at close range. His racial endowments might allow him to take a greater beating than normal, but the lack of practice and phasewater organs that further enhanced the combat prowess of his true body limited his options. He was not a good brawler, and this showed when the Diffraction Lord continually tried and failed to swat the circling ace light skirmisher buzzing around his unfolding true body!

That did not make Tusa complacent though. He focused fully on evasion and made sure to put his ace mech out of line of sight from the threatening Biopod Mother at all times.

Tusa had no thoughts about launching any attacks. He very much doubted that the Dark Zephyr's small knives, underdeveloped Banish resonating ability and a very risky Ultimate Ability could inflict a killing or crippling blow against the Diffraction Lord.

At this time, the greater phase lord had unfolded his true body to the fullest, turning him from a giant crustacean into a behemoth that was larger than most cities!

When a creature had reached such a stupendous size, most mechs simply lost the ability to inflict any significant damage to such a monstrosity. The Dark Zephyr suffered from this problem right now.

It was not the fault of the living ace mech. The Erlemin integrated into his mech frame was especially designed to cope with exaggaratingly large phase lords and phase whales one day.

The problem was Tusa. His resonance strength was still too weak, and his lack of practice with Erlemin left him unable to bite even a small chunk from the Diffraction Lord's transphasic shell.

The story would have been different if Saint Tusa had become a senior ace pilot and had a lot more practice under his belt, but for now, his offensive contributions remained virtually zero!

And he was fine with that this time!

"Hahaha! What is the use of flinging all of those spatial attacks when none of them can land on my machine?!"

The Dark Zephyr did what he had always done best, and that was buzzing around like an annoying fly that could not be struck!

Even though the Diffraction Lord already figured out that the Dark Zephyr did not pose a direct risk to his life, the resonance-empowered space suppression field generated by this annoying machine was not only weakening all of his spatial abilities, but also prevented him from teleporting away!

The greater phase lord could have powered through an emergency displacement if not for the fact that the Dark Zephyr stuck so close to his true body.

Saint Tusa understood that the effectiveness of the space suppression module was highly dependent on range, so he courageously kept his machine close to a greater phase lord that might very well inflict a crippling blow if he ever managed to land a heavy blow.

Yet that did not happen because Tusa and his battle partner continually succeeded in evading the spatial blades, spatial storms and other spatial attacks!

The greatest hindrance that the Dark Zephyr encountered so far were the occasional area attacks and illusionary tricks.

The Diffraction Lord tried to squeeze space apart, create tunnels that unexpectedly turned the Dark Zephyr in a different direction and so on. He also created smaller but more focused illusions that occasionally tripped Saint Tusa up and caused him to almost crash into the body of the greater phase lord a few times.

Even that was not enough to stop Tusa from fulfilling his most important responsibility.

His Saint Kingdom was working hard to resist all of these spatial effects. Blackwing was working harder than ever to amplify the output of the space suppressor as much as possible. Combined with the Dark Zephyr's much higher phasewater content, the ace mech was just able to crush or mitigate the effects of most of these harmful effects.

The balance between risk and danger was so precarious that Saint Tusa felt more excited and alive than he had since his breakthrough.

This was what a real ace pilot should do! His previous battles no longer impressed him in the slightest as he was unable to unleash his true power as an ace pilot. Being able to pilot a much more powerful first-class ace mech also pumped him up as he felt far more powerful and capable than just a few months prior!

Tusa could practically feel his resonance strength growing by the second. The closer his Dark Zephyr managed to evade a nasty spatial blade, the more he felt as if he was proving his commitment to unrestricted freedom!

As his ace mech continued to dance around the Diffraction Lord's flailing, the ace pilot already started to imitate his mentor by letting his imagination go wild.

Saint Tusa was already applying the lessons he learned from his mentor!

He visualized that he and his battle partner had turned into a flitty bird that playfully danced around a lumbering giant that continually tried and failed to swat the winged pest away.

There was little hostile intent behind the bird's actions. The animal merely felt playful and delighted in the freedom of movement imparted by his wings, and only intended to fly around his enemies as opposed to landing any attacks.

This purity of intent was important. Tusa instinctively felt he would fail if he tried to bite off more than he could chew.

As Tusa began to feed this image with his willpower, he vaguely felt as if it became more substantial.

He melded his willpower, his highly attuned combat intuition, his technical maneuvering skills, his faint feel for phasewater, Trisk's helpful glow, his sentiments about the freedom imparted by flight and fused them all together in a more focused ability that precisely matched his conditions!

It was remarkably easy for him to construct his first proper 'artistic conception'. It was as if Tusa always had the ability to create it, yet somehow neglected it and postponed it far too many times.

Even if he hadn't attempted to imitate his mentor's methodology, he probably would have created a similar ability eventually, but it would have been a lot slower and less precise!

As Tusa delighted in the creation of a new ability that perfectly harmonized with his Saint Kingdom, his Dark Zephyr began to glow brighter as if the ace mech had received a blessing!

A name came unbidden in his mind and automatically escaped from his throat as if it demanded to be announced!

"Free Flight!"

The declaration solidified the new effects on the Dark Zephyr and caused him to become even more elusive and untouchable than before!

By this time, the Diffraction Lord was not alone anymore. The Biopod Mother that initially chose to back off had launched her signature biopods from the open cavities of her malleable shell.

These biological monstrosities acted like organic strike craft and tried to converge upon the Dark Zephyr like a swarm.

The biopods were not too strong, but they still posed a threat to the Dark Zephyr, especially if they were able to gang up on the ace mech.

Many biopods also integrated various ranged cannons that fired a mixture of laser beams, bone projectiles and fleshy spores that tried to gnaw at anything they struck.

With thousands of biopods spreading out to envelop the Dark Zephyr, it became much harder for the ace mech to evade the multitude of attacks!

Yet now that Saint Tusa applied his newly developed Free Flight ability, his Dark Zephyr almost always managed to maneuver in the exact right position to evade the most attacks and incur the least amount of damage!

Tusa did not even have to think over every single move anymore like he did before. Instead of using his evolved mind and the Dark Zephyr's formidable first-class processors to calculate trajectories and evasion routes, he simply put his faith into the image of the free-flying bird that he created for himself.

This image was no longer a figment of his imagination anymore. It had turned into an artistic conception or whatever it was called, and gained definition and power on its own as a consequence!

Though the Messenger of Silence's artistic conceptions were so powerful and substantial that they could already substitute a significant chunk of reality, Saint Tusa's first attempt was only enough to subtly affect the reality at the center of his Saint Kingdom. This was a portion of space that was entirely occupied by his ace mech and little else!

Yet that was enough for Tusa's purposes!

The junior ace pilot did not seek to impose his willpower on enemies such as the Diffraction Lord. He only sought to improve himself and his battle partner, and the results he managed to attain exceeded his imagination!

"Hahahaha! You can't touch me anymore!"

As Tusa delighted in his freedom, he constantly grew more familiar with his Free Flight ability.

Not only did it automate and optimize the Dark Zephyr's evasion capabilities very close to their maximum theoretical limitations, it also overcame them during a few rare occasions!

Though it only happened sparingly when the Diffraction Lord or the Biopod Mother was just about to strike the Dark Zephyr with a more substantial attack or debilitation, his ace mech seemingly phased through the harm as if he was elsewhere!

Tusa's eyes glowed brighter when he noticed these occurrences. It reminded him a lot of his Leap of True Freedom ability, but this time the phasing effect was subtler, shorter and much less consuming.

While it was a waste for the Dark Zephyr to phase through weak attacks, it could be a lifesaver if the Dark Zephyr was about to get struck by a more threatening blow!

Of course, Tusa was not sure about how often and how reliable he could produce this phasing effect. He did not think he could pull it off continuously, as that would contradict the image of a free and worryless bird in flight.

As the ace pilot continued to keep his Dark Zephyr free from harm while continuing to refine his newly developed ability, his mentor had taken full advantage of all of the openings and managed to land numerous powerful and debilitating shots at the Diffraction Lord!

By now, his hard shell got punctured numerous times as their incredibly thickness failed to block the rounds launched from afar!

Chapter 6320 Debilitating Attacks

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson felt he was in his element.

His new Free Flight ability allowed him to truly exploit the potential of his powerful new ace mech.

The Dark Zephyr exulted in the seemingly effortless way he danced around in space and evaded a lot of attacks with a sense of playfulness.

The ace mech had yet to launch a single proper attack against the greater phase lords, but uncharacteristically Tusa did not mind that he was doing little else but fly around.

The joy of flying free in enemy territory was a pleasure that was indescribable to Tusa. He loved moving fast and he loved frustrating his enemies by evading their attacks. Free Flight combined these desires and more and encapsulated them into an image that directed the application of his willpower in a much more comprehensive way.

Free Flight was all Tusa needed because he only had one job now. That was to keep applying the Dark Zephyr's powerful space suppression field on the Diffraction Lord.

The job became a lot easier when Tusa could delegate much of this task to Blackwing. His companion spirit was able to dedicate much of his concentration on resonating with the space suppression module, allowing Tusa himself to immerse himself with the wonderful sensations produced by the act of flying free.

Saint Tusa did not have to do more, because he could completely count on his mentor to deal all of the damage on their behalf.

He learned another lesson from this battle. Just because he advanced to the rank of ace pilot did not mean that teamwork had become invalid.

He previously fought alongside Saint Marissa Lewandowski and Saint Kalasandra Boojay back when he was serving in the expeditionary fleet. While their teamwork was relatively decent, there was not that much synergy between combining two powerful light skirmishers with a spearman mech.

This was entirely different. Pairing up the Dark Zephyr with one of the most potent ace marksman mechs produced such a fantastic synergy that Tusa wondered why the Messenger of Silence hadn't paired up with a saint who specialized in light mechs before!

Perhaps Saint Dostoevsky did so in the past, but the ace pilots he partnered up with did not do as good of a job.

Saint Tusa did not consider himself strong compared to his peers.

He mainly managed to perform better than typical fresh ace pilots due to being paired with an excellent mech.

The advantages of an ace pilot that specialized in evasion, Solus Gas integration and more produced a wonderful combination of advantages that just so happened to make him perfect for this job.

Saint Tusa and his Dark Zephyr happened to be exactly what the Brusilov Fleet needed to counter the Diffraction Lord's confounding abilities.

This made Tusa feel more fulfilled than ever. He had heard many stories about the combat prowess of greater phase lords, and experienced it first-hand to a degree.

Even if he excelled at evasion, Saint Tusa was still cognizant that getting attacked by two different greater phase lords was an exceedingly dangerous proposition!

There was only so much that his fantastic ace mech could do to bail him out of a sticky situation.

There were two reasons why Tusa did not act on his mentor's warning to withdraw if the risks had become too great.

First, neither the Diffraction Lord nor the Biopod Mother were good duelists. Their powers and inclinations both turned them into battlefield manipulators that preferred to leave most of the fighting to their minions while they hovered comfortably in the rear. Even if they possessed a few notable self-defense capabilities, it was clear that they rarely had to resort to brawling at closer ranges during their long lifespans!

Second and more importantly, the Diffraction Lord had suffered a significant injury from the start, and continued to receive more injuries over time!

The first attack was the most critical one as it had caught the Diffraction Lord off-guard. He had neglected to put up all of his defenses, and got struck by an extremely penetrating round that not only partially paralyzed him, but also damaged numerous important phasewater organs!

Before the Diffraction Lord could even begin to respond to this provocation, he had already lost at least 20 percent of his combat effectiveness!

Silence was Saint Dostoevsky's signature ability. Tusa was close enough to the victim to get a good impression of the formidable image that his mentor used to anchor and strengthen this powerful attack.

The artistic conception behind the ability that earned the Messenger of Silence his title was surprisingly tame.

When Saint Dostoevsky imparted his silence onto his enemies, he channeled his strong and sincere yearning for relief from the ghosts that tormented him for years on end.

The man was so deeply afflicted by the ghosts that only he could see and hear that the only way he could shut them all out was to channel his willpower in a way that could silence his mental torment!

Suffice to say, the peak ace pilot had a lot of practice in silencing his ghosts, which allowed him to apply the same conditions to others!

The silencing effect was supposed to be a mercy, but when applied to enemies like the Diffraction Lord, he found that much of his body and many of his phasewater organs became partially or completely paralyzed.

This lowered his combat effectiveness even further! He was much less able to focus on swatting down the annoying ace light skirmisher that was circling around his true body as the Messenger of Silence regularly fired Silence rounds that not only inflicted further harm, but also extended the paralysis effect!

Still, it was not that easy to paralyze a greater phase lord. The Diffraction Lord might have suffered damage, but most of his body remained in good condition. When the powerful jurgen god actively took more control of his body and tried to repair or limit the damage, he was able to push back the effects of the Silence round by relying on the raw strength of his amazing phasewater-empowered physique!

The Messenger of Silence had to fire repeated Silence rounds into his target in order to prevent the Diffraction Lord from regaining most of his strength.

With every extraordinary gauss round that pierced through the jurgen phase lord's shell and inflicted damage to the flesh and organs, the Diffraction Lord had to do his work all over again.

What did not help was that on the occasions that the Diffraction Lord managed to erase the effects of the Silence ability on himself, Saint Dostoevsky might alternate his attacks by firing a Suffer round instead!

This was the complete opposite of his Silence round. There was no mercy in this empowered attack.

The peak ace pilot infused all of his suffering, pain and torment into the custom-developed gauss round before launching it from the muzzle of his Stella.

Supported by an artistic conception that brought all of the ghosts that tortured the Messenger of Silence for many years, the Suffer round had a much worse effect on the greater phase lord's psyche!

The willpower of an enormous phase lord was not as fragile as that of an ordinary jureg, but much of that strength was derived from his awesome physique and his advanced age.

In terms of grit and courage, the Diffraction Lord could not even come close to any human ace pilot!

This effectively meant that the Diffraction Lord's willpower was mainly strong due to quantitative instead of qualitative reasons.

Compared to a peak ace pilot that overcame many life-threatening challenges while also needing to fend off the ghosts that tormented him day and night, the Diffraction Lord's tolerance towards mental attacks was far too weak!

It was only because his body and his mind was so vast that the greater phase lord did not despair to the point of trying to commit suicide.

Even so, the constant suffering produced by the Messenger of Silence's most sadistic attack constantly distracted the greater phase lord and made it harder for him to maintain his focus.

The Diffraction Lord therefore became trapped in a loop of paralysis, suffering and distraction!

The Messenger of Silence did not waste the opportunities created by Saint Tusa and fired his Stella as fast as he was able.

Unfortunately, his firing rate was not that high. He was only able to make every shot count by infusing them with as much of his true resonance as possible.

That was already enough to crumble the Diffraction Lord's defenses and damage more of his precious phasewater organs.

Time was on the side of the human defenders. The longer this went on, more phasewater-infused blood spilled out of the jurgen phase lord's injured body!

As the Diffraction Lord continued to grow weaker, the Biopod Mother finally chose to intervene.

The female phase lord did not close in and utilize her superior physique to absorb the blows meant for her male counterpart. It appeared the two jureg phase lords were not close enough for the Biopod Mother to attract the ire of the Messenger of Silence.

Instead, she decided to change the instructions of the tens of thousands of mech-sized biopods that she had flung into the surrounding space.

The biopods no longer launched lots of ineffectual ranged attacks at the Dark Zephyr.

The machine was too damn fast and maneuverable for most of the attacks to land. Even if they struck the ace mech, the Saint Kingdom had sapped much of the power of the attacks while the azure energy shield depleted the rest.

The juregs needed to inflict more substantial damage, and the Biopod Mother decided to do so by driving her organic minions forward and induce them to self-destruct in close proximity to their target!

Dozens of powerful explosions erupted in space as the biopods that got close enough to the Dark Zephyr triggered their bombs, which were all amplified by phasewater imparted by their progenitor!

It was quite costly in terms of organic tissue and phasewater to induce these biopods to explode.

The Biopod Mother could afford it, though. Not only was her PPS working hard to make up for the loss of phasewater, but her biology was much better attuned to convert other forms of mass into organic materials.

More and more flesh grew to replace the portions that had been transformed and launched from her shell.

This meant that even more hostile biopods proliferated in every direction, with most of them charging straight towards the Dark Zephyr before blowing themselves up in a short blaze of glory!

The self-destruction of so many biopods threw Saint Tusa off his rhythm. He found himself forced to evade swarms of self-destructing organic transphasic missiles.

Whenever they detonated at a fairly close proximity, Tusa's willpower and other resources were getting consumed at a rapid rate. His Saint Kingdom was not only working overtime to dampen so many incoming attacks, but the azure energy shield that kept his machine pristine was also starting to grow strained.

The Dark Zephyr's defenses were getting tested like nothing else before. Each biopod exploded with the force of a first-class transphasic missile. While the ace light skirmisher was able to evade or outrun the vast majority of them, there was no way to truly avoid getting struck by the blasts if the ace light skirmisher wanted to stick close to the Diffraction Lord.

Even the ability to occasionally escape the blast damage failed in this instance as the Biopod Mother cleverly relied on a large quantity of smaller self-destructive attacks as opposed to a single big bang!

"I need help here, mentor!" Saint Tusa asked without any shame. "If these biopods continue to wear me down like this, my ace mech won't be able to stay for long. My Saint Kingdom is too weak to more effectively suppress the power of all of the explosions!"

The Messenger of Silence's response came not too soon.

Winter.

A fragmentation round silently slipped close and exploded into many different fragments before it had struck anything solid!

As soon as the fragments spread out, hundreds of biopods either died instantly or got injured and subsequently froze into popsicles!