

## Mech Touch 6321

### Chapter 6321 Space Maze

As soon as the Winter round arrived and exploded in the midst of lots of biopods, the fragments spreading out from every direction seemed to bring the onset of winter on this part of the battlefield!

It made no sense for space to experience winter as it was purely a terrestrial phenomenon. The biopods also shouldn't be so susceptible to freezing considering that their organic constructions were highly resistant towards extreme temperature fluctuations.

Yet when coming into contact with the cold and merciless arrival of Saint Dostoevsky's winter, the biopods could not resist the freezing effect that sapped all temperature from their organic masses!

Every single biopod affected by the Winter fragmentation round had frozen solid. There was no way they could shake off the chill as they had already died from the lack of warmth!

This was one of the weaknesses of the biopods. They may have come from fairly powerful greater phase lords, but the mental strength of these individual lifeforms were far too weak to put up a meaningful resistance!

The relatively weak physiques of all of these biopods also made them a lot more vulnerable to the physical freezing effect than the nearby greater phase lords!

Their relatively resilient phasewater-infused bodies allowed them to resist the effect a little better, but the difference in power was so great that the biopods could not escape the fate of getting frozen as long as they were within range.

Saint Tusa started to feel a little chillier himself as he was able to perceive the artistic conception that backed up this particular ability.

The Messenger of Silence formed this ability from the old and storied heritage of his ancient clan.

The Dostoevsky name went back far in human history. In a time where humans were still locked on a single planet, they waged war in all kinds of climates.

The distant ancestors of Saint Dostoevsky came from a cold and bitter country that had endured many wars.

In a number of those wars, the outcome was decided not through strength of arms or clever strategies.

As a descendant of the line of citizens that lived through those harrowing wars, the ace pilot worked hard to turn the power of winter into a part of his arsenal.

Instead, the deciding factors that allowed the country to survive and win was subjecting its enemies to the relentless force of winter. Entire armies froze to death! The relentless freeze that chilled the lands and sapped all warmth from the environment was an enemy that could never be defeated, only endured.

This was the winter envisioned and empowered by the Messenger of Silence.

As a descendant of the line of citizens that lived through those harrowing wars, the ace pilot worked hard to turn the power of winter into a part of his arsenal.

He went on a tour that allowed him to visit many different planets with prominent arctic environments.

The powerful ace pilot willingly left his warm and cozy cockpit behind and ventured forth into the snow-covered landscape with nothing but warm clothing and essential survival gear.

All of those months of trekking through tundras, climbing mountains taller than capital ships with ancient tools devoid of higher technologies and filling up his stomach by relying on nothing but the exobeasts hunted through his own efforts, Saint Dostoevsky managed to experience the raw force of winter on over a dozen different planets!

The saint did not endure all of these different winters because he was a glutton for punishment.

He merely believed it was the only way he could get close to replicating the processes of developing his other signature abilities.

He was right.

Reading about winter and studying it from the comfort of his climate-controlled cockpit was not comparable to experiencing the freezing chill, the raging blizzards and the moments of utter stillness during a windless day in person!

The fruits of his labor became evident when he fired multiple Winter fragmentation rounds that proved to be remarkably effective at clearing out swathes of biopods!

"MY CHILDREN!"

The Biopod Mother responded with fury to see so many of her biopods getting frozen to death without being able to complete their mission.

Personally, Saint Tusa found it strange that the Biopod Mother cared so much about the lives of her 'children' when she herself sent them all on a suicide mission.

Whatever the case, the deaths of so many biopods provided much-needed breathing space for the Dark Zephyr. The ace light skirmisher managed to slip out of the immediate envelopment of all of the organic threats and gave his defenses a much-needed break.

However, the Messenger of Silence had also directed attention away from the Diffraction Lord, giving the greater phase lord just enough time to recover more of his strength!

As his enormous physique worked overtime to regenerate his battle damage and knit back his disabled phasewater organs, the angry jureg phase lord forcibly activated his strongest and most developed spatial ability and began to bend the fabric of space in such a confusing wrinkle that it was no longer easy to travel in a straight line anymore!

"DISAPPEAR IN A MAZE OF TWISTED SPACE!"

Even vision became distorted as nothing was straight anymore!

The Dark Zephyr immediately found himself losing control over his own trajectory as his Saint Kingdom was not powerful enough to unravel all of the bending and warping of the surrounding space.

The Diffraction Lord acted a lot more clever than before. Instead of trying and failing to attack or debilitate the Dark Zephyr directly, the jureg phase lord instead opted to manipulate the surrounding space.

While the section of space closest to the Dark Zephyr managed to resist this effect with the help of the Saint Kingdom, Much of the immediate space beyond this protective sphere had become inevitably tangled!

Prevention was much easier than reversing. Saint Tusa found that his willpower was simply not up to the level where he could unravel one of the trump cards of the Diffraction Lord.

The Larkinson ace pilot quickly grew frustrated when his ace mech constantly went off-course and looped back to the place where he began.

His Saint Kingdom was steadily unraveling the folds and bends in space, but the pace was too slow!

By the time his ace mech got free, the Diffraction Lord would be long gone!

Fortunately, his backup and mentor in the rear solved his problem once again.

Silence.

A single resonance-empowered gauss round cut straight through the invisible space maze and tore a straight line that led straight out of this trap!

The Messenger of Silence even repositioned his Whispering Willow in such a way that his shot went on to hit the Diffraction Lord just as he was on the verge of teleporting away!

"NO! YOU FILTHY SHELL-LESS HERETIC!"

The Dark Zephyr quickly flew out of the safe route created by the Messenger of Silence and quickly closed in on the Diffraction Lord before he could make a getaway.

Now that he was being subjected to the full brunt of the Dark Zephyr's space suppressor, the Diffraction Lord became dismayed again.

Although his enormous bulk ensured that he was not at risk of dying soon, the constant disruptions and debilitations were taking a toll on the old greater phase lord.

"SAINT TUSA!" A boosted transmission cut through the powerful noise and interference.

"Lieutenant?"

"The battle has shifted! The greater phase lords have called for backup. 5 lesser phase lords had managed to disengage from the front and are making their way back to eliminate you. Each phase lord is either a brawler or possesses powers that can limit your maneuverability. You cannot afford to fight against both the greater phase lords as well as a kill team that is especially composed to eliminate the threat posed by your Dark Zephyr. You need to withdraw right away!"

"What? Now? The Diffraction Lord is injured and has eaten through much of his reserves! We can finish him off as long as the Messenger of Silence and I continue to harry him for 10 more minutes."

"You have already done enough! Look beyond and observe the state of the battlefield. Our great champion has managed to inflict repeated blows against the Diffraction Lord while the two greater phase lords hardly managed to make you sweat. Do you understand how that affects morale on both sides?"

Saint Tusa had a tendency to lose a lot of situational awareness when he was in the moment. Now that he began to study the local plot, he noticed that the alien transphasic gunships were perishing at a higher rate than before!

The jureg pilots all saw their senior gods getting beat up by the foul human mechs. Even if the damage of every hit was not too strong, the superstitious crustacean aliens all believed that their gods were getting pummeled and humiliated by their human counterparts!

How could the jureg soldiers possibly maintain the same degree of confidence than before?

The Diffraction Lord was not just their chief god. He was also their best supporter and leader!

If such a powerful figure repeatedly got struck without having the ability to retaliate, then that had an enormous negative effect on the morale of any allies and subordinates!

The humans noticed this shift as well, and instantly pounced on this opportunity to push back the native aliens and completely break their will to take over New Cartagena II!

The native alien fleet began to buckle under the pressure exerted by the Messenger of Silence.

To their credit, the elite jureg soldiers did not break and flee as if their lives depended on it. Instead, the aquatic alien soldiers made their way out in an orderly and well-planned fashion.

The juregs were not just pulling back their lesser phase lords.

The aliens knew that once they took away more phase lords, the remaining ones would have a much harder time defeating the remainder!

Since the juregs in charge did not wish to see their compatriots get outnumbered and defeated in detail, they already demonstrated the intention to abort their all-out assault and withdraw in an orderly manner.

It was an expensive and unwieldy method of withdrawal, but it was actually the right choice to make if the juregs wanted to limit the damage as much as possible.

"The battle is already over." Tusa realized.

The greater phase lords lost their nerves first, which showed that they could still experience fear.

"Coward." Tusa accused.

The greater phase lord did not concentrate on those words at all. He did not have any obligation to be brave and fearless like the mech pilots. He felt no shame for ordering an orderly but total withdrawal before his life hung by a thread!

The Messenger of Silence kept pumping more Silence and Suffer Rounds into the body of the Diffraction Lord, but the greater phase whale simply hunkered down and waited for reinforcements to arrive.

The greater phase lord suffered greater and greater damage as a consequence, but none of the rounds managed to inflict more damage than that. The chances that the peak ace pilot could kill the Diffraction Lord with a single shot had dropped to almost zero.

Saint Tusa knew what this meant. There was little point for him to stick around for much longer when there were a bunch of enemies heading in his ace mech's direction.

He and the Dark Zephyr took one last look at the distressed greater phase lords and silently chose to disengage and pull back to friendly lines.

The timely retreat of the ace light skirmisher finally freed the Diffraction Lord from the annoying space suppressor.

The enemy lines were pulling back in every place. The greater phase lords had lost their nerves, but not their sanity. They continued to micromanage and tweak the games so that they could become more attractive.

With that thought in mind, the vengeful Terran defenders did not go too far in blasting apart their retreating jureg foes.

The umpteenth Battle of New Cartagena II came to an end. Though Tusa felt upset about not being able to do more to kill off the Diffraction Lord entirely, Lieutenant Daria disagreed.

"This is a marathon, not a sprint. We have waged many battles in this star system where both sides restrain themselves enough to pull back the testers. Killing the Diffraction Lord outright is a fantasy with your skills. It is already a win in my opinion if we can drive away the jureg armada and force them to spend more years repairing their assets. We have bought at least a week of time, allowing us to secure all of the resources on new Cartagena II and call in further reinforcements to prepare for the resumption of attacks."

Delaying the juregs had been the main goal all along. Saint Tusa felt gratified for contributing to an outcome that benefited so many different people.

It could not surpass the rush he felt whenever he won a duel against a formidable enemy, but beggars shouldn't complain!

#### Chapter 6322 God Kingdom Building Theory

After the latest Battle of Cartagena II came to a conclusion, the Terran soldiers reacted with restrained jubilation.

They were quite happy with the results of this battle!

Though they failed to attain a more significant victory, they were already happy that they managed to beat off a determined alien assault.

The fighting also ended at a fairly early stage, thereby sparing them from a lot of grueling fighting.

The only Terrans that reacted with slight dissatisfaction were the battle maniacs among the mech pilots who sought to push themselves beyond their limits when the urgency was greater.

After the Dark Zephyr spent a few hours shadowing the organized withdrawal of the jureg armada in order to make sure the aliens were not trying to pull off a secret ruse, the ace light skirmisher leisurely flew back to the orbit of New Cartagena II.

As the ace light skirmisher made his way back to the flagship of the Brusilov Fleet, Tusa received plenty of praises from the soldiers still in the field.

The pilots of the powerful first-class multipurpose mechs that cost so much money that Tusa could not imagine it a few years ago all expressed their heartfelt gratitude and admiration.

Tusa felt both... gratified and bewildered.

As an ace pilot, he could clearly feel that these Terrans were sincere in their messages. This went beyond politics or national pride. On this day, they had fought side by side as defenders of red humanity, and they managed to inflict a defeat that the juregs would be feeling for quite a while!

Everyone knew that Saint Tusa and his Dark Zephyr played the decisive role in delivering victory this time. The new ace light skirmisher cooperated so well with the Whispering Willow that the latter was able to make much more telling blows than in past battles!



Though Tusa did not entirely feel that he deserved so much praise for essentially imitating a very annoying mosquito tormenting a random person, he somehow felt much more fulfilled than he did in his previous battles during the Red War.

Tusa was not exactly a man who was good with words. He was unable to completely figure out why he felt a lot better about himself.

Perhaps it was just the simple fact that he had piloted a powerful first-class ace mech in battle for the very first time. The difference in performance between the current and previous iteration of the Dark Zephyr was very obvious!

"Madame Gloriana and Master Benedict Cortez have done good work." Tusa said as he felt sincerely grateful to the two mech designers who successfully converted the Dark Zephyr into a powerful first-class ace mech. "It will be hard for them to top this work."

The Dark Zephyr was already so brilliantly powerful that Tusa could not imagine how the mech designers could make his living mech any more powerful.

Of course, he knew that he was most definitely wrong about this. Technology became better all of the time. It was only a matter of time before Ves or another brilliant mech designer introduced a radical new tech that rewrote the rules and set an entirely new standard in the mech community.

After the Dark Zephyr entered a more private hangar bay and set down right next to the Whispering Willow, Saint Tusa shut down his machine and exited the cockpit.

He grew a little disappointed that his mentor was not around, but it was unreasonable to expect such a powerful and important figure to wait in the hangar bay for several hours.

Fortunately, Tusa met with a familiar face.

"You have done well, Saint Tusa." Lieutenant Daria Dostoevskaya greeted him with respect. "Please follow me to the changing room where you can freshen yourself up and wear a dress uniform. We have organized a victory banquet that will start shortly after you arrive."

Tusa raised his eyebrow. It was not unusual for the Larkinsons to organize banquets and parties to celebrate particularly notable victories, but he did not exactly feel that driving away the juregs from New Cartagena II merited such an occasion.

The Dostoevsky's thought differently, though.

"Fine. Will the Messenger of Silence be around?"

"He shall, but he will be seated far away from the rest of the officers invited to the main banquet hall. He can be rather... intense. He does not want to spoil the mood of others, but still wishes to convey his satisfaction, so he is seated at a privileged table. You shall join him as well."

"I see."

Tusa had a feeling that this banquet would be much different from the more cozy and relaxed ones organized by the Larkinsons and he was exactly right.

The banquet hall was far more grand and artistic than the other compartments of an already artistic capital ship.

From carved marble statues of past heroes and rulers, to preserved banners of old military units, the banquet hall celebrated the glory attained by the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan in the past and present.

The wooden tables themselves looked older than many colonies in the old galaxy. They had been exquisitely cared for, but faint imperfections and marks of age revealed the immense amount of years they had been used in this capacity.

It all seemed impressive to Tusa, especially once the young junior officers entered from the side and started to deliver exquisite dishes by hand.

While most of the officers and champions sat on the main floor, the Messenger of Silence and Saint Tusa sat on a raised balcony that was positioned on the far side of the hall. This caused the space to resemble an opera house of sorts.

Saint Tusa was not accustomed to attending formal events. He was born and raised as a slightly notable third-class mech pilot. He may have climbed quickly in the years since, but that left him

with very little time on learning how he should behave and comfort himself in a Terran victory banquet!

Fortunately, the Terrans did not pay attention to how out of place he was. Saints had risen above petty human standards. Would anyone dare to criticize a powerful champion with a bright future ahead of him? They might become god pilots one day!

Aside from the completely silent champion of the Brusilov Fleet, the only other person that kept Tusa company was his familiar liaison.

She did most of the talking.

"Do not mischaracterize the outcome of this battle, Saint Tusa. We have won a major victory today. Killing one of the greater phase lords would have made our gains much greater, but it was never our primary goal. The juregs advanced upon New Cartagena II to capture the planet and prevent us from mining any more Copenhagen Copper."

Tusa furrowed his brows. "So that is what it is all about? You just want to delay the aliens long enough to mine every scrap of CopCop left?"

"By repelling their determined assault and forcing them to withdraw in haste due to a remarkably fast collapse in morale, we have managed to bleed the juregs to the extent that they cannot recover and mount another assault for at least two weeks. That buys us precious time where we can mine that much more ore containing CopCop. Perhaps we may even hollow out this planet entirely before the juregs have returned, which means we can abandon whatever is left of this broken globe and concentrate our defenses at New Cartagena VII-F."

From that perspective, the outcome of the battle was indeed heavily in the favor of the Terran defenders.

Although Tusa could understand the logic behind this rationale, he still felt dissatisfied in his bones.

He shook his head in regret. "We really could have inflicted a more permanent blow on the aliens if I fought a little better. The juregs did not know about me and my ace mech, so we were able to catch them by surprise. This was probably our best shot at assassinating the Diffraction Lord and inflicting a permanent blow on enemy morale. Now that both greater phase lords managed to limp back with their lives intact, they will learn their lessons and gather as much intelligence they have

on me to guard against my future stealth approaches. The jureg leaders will not be as complacent as before."

The Messenger of Silence decided to respond through his Saint Kingdom.

"..."

Saint Tusa sighed. "Maybe you are right. I am being too ambitious by gunning for the life of a greater phase whale when I am still a fresh ace pilot. I just wish that I was strong enough to keep my mech unscathed against the attacks of the Diffraction Lord and the Biopod Mother. Evasion is my specialty, but I found myself unable to deal with all of their moves. You had to bail me out several times. This gave the Diffraction Lord enough of a break to recover from all of the damage."

"..."

"I guess so. A long campaign consists of more than a single battle. There will be other opportunities next time. I just have to become stronger and develop my skillsets further. Speaking of that, I am grateful to you for teaching me how ace pilots are able to develop such strong techniques. I found it much easier to channel my strength in an image that expresses one of my strong ideals. How many of these images have you created for yourself?"

"..."

"That few? I would have expected for a peak ace pilot like yourself to amass a sizable arsenal."

"..."

"I see. So it is quality that matters, not quantity. The relevance and how much you care about stuff is more important than thoughtlessly creating a lot of abilities that ultimately lead to dead ends because you can't grow them any further."

"..."

Tusa widened his eyes as his mentor wordlessly conveyed a more critical lesson!

The theory claims that ace pilots could make a head-start to developing their god kingdoms by selectively creating strong artistic conceptions that were related to each other.

"That... I did not know that. Thank you for telling me that. Perhaps there are other ways to cross the great divide, but doing it like this sounds more reliable than the alternatives."

The Messenger of Silence just espoused a possible theory on how ace pilots could one day successfully cross the road of no return and advance to the coveted rank of god pilot!

The theory claims that ace pilots could make a head-start to developing their god kingdoms by selectively creating strong artistic conceptions that were related to each other.

To a veteran Terran ace pilot like Saint Dostoevsky, a God Kingdom should be much more complex and multifaceted than a Saint Kingdom.

The former should begin to resemble a kingdom in a more literal sense. It had to consist of several 'territories' comprising multiple different artistic conceptions that were not only relevant to the pilot, but also carried strong emotional attachments.

If successful enough, a peak ace pilot that attempted to transcend to godhood would find that it was much faster and easier to transition their domain fields into fully-fledged God Kingdoms!

This was why the theory shared by the Messenger of Silence was called the God Kingdom Building Theory.

By 'completing their homework' in advance, these peak ace pilots did not have to rely on the Mech Body Merger Process to forcefully fill up all of the gaps and hastily convert their weaker domain fields into much more powerful God kingdoms. The assumption here was that the extra energy and effort that ace pilot had to expend on making up for this shortcoming was a critical reason why so many of them ultimately fell short.

"How common is this theory? Has it been proven to be true?"

"..."

Tusa grew disappointed. There was not enough data to prove that it had any significant effect on the success rate.

The biggest problem was that the sample size was too low. Not all god pilots managed to emerge while following this theory.

The ace pilot that tried to follow the recommendations of the God Kingdom Building Theory still died on an overwhelming basis. The ones that somehow succeeded could have easily survived for many other reasons besides this single factor!

That did not stop Tusa from embracing it, though. He had no way of knowing whether it was correct, but he was convinced by its logic. The fact that an ace pilot as powerful and admirable as the Messenger of Silence made use of it himself was also a convincing reason to give it a try!

#### Chapter 6323 Confidence over Theory

The God Kingdom Building Theory first circulated among ace pilots at around the 250th year of the Age of Mechs.

It claimed that ace pilots aspiring to tread upon the road of no return could slightly increase the success rate of their ascension processes by doing additional preparation work.

One of them was to bridge the gap between their Saint Kingdoms and their possible God Kingdoms as much as possible.

It was the difference between doing one's homework over many days as opposed to trying to rush it to completion on the night before the submission deadline!

In their desire to produce more god pilots, a bunch of Star Designers from the Mech Trade Association conducted an extensive study on the differences between peak ace pilots and relatively junior god pilots.

By comparing the two groups and contrasting their properties against each other, the Star Designers were able to discover a lot of interesting data that they had not noticed before.

The many differences between Saint Kingdoms and God Kingdoms stood out the most.

The domain field was one of the defining characteristics of high-ranking mech pilots. Any improvement in this aspect could potentially result in drastic improvements down the line.

The God Kingdom Building Theory was a typical product from a group of Star Designers. It presented a clean and logical theory about how ace pilots needed to develop their Saint Kingdoms.

It was a pity that not enough successful breakthroughs occurred to deliver conclusive proof that the theory had a positive effect on the success rate.

Although the Messenger of Silence decided to follow the theory, he did so with open eyes.

"..."

Saint Dostoevsky essentially warned Tusa that it didn't actually matter if the theory was right or wrong.

Ace pilots no longer abided by logic anymore. The root of their strength centered around their willpower. The development of this attribute was more important than everything else.

If following a theory that they thought made sense and felt good about caused their resonance strength to grow faster and smoother than before, then they were clearly doing something good!

The implication here was that it didn't really matter what crazy theories ace pilots decided to pursue. As long as they thought it worked, then that was enough to make it worthwhile.

When it came to high-ranking mech pilots, the placebo effect was often stronger than the actual effects!

Belief always trumped logic and the laws of physics!

"There are multiple theories like this that claim to increase our chances of breaking through to god pilot?" Saint Tusa asked. "What are they, if I may ask?"

"..."

The Messenger of Silence briefly mentioned a few through his Saint Kingdom.

There was the Deification Theory that claimed that peak ace pilots could transcend to godhood much easier if they had a large body of worshipers that already regarded them as literal gods in human form.

There was the Worthy God Theory that claimed that peak ace pilots must challenge a god-like entity in a serious fight and either win or survive long enough to prove that they possessed the courage and worth of a god pilot.

That was not all. Ace pilots already circulated whackier and more dangerous theories among themselves. The Messenger of Silence only decided to share them to Saint Tusa to warn him against the madness espoused by gurus who claimed without merit that they knew better.

One such crazy idea was a full-blown conspiracy theory called the Secret Resource Theory. It claimed that the Kingdom of Mechs — and by extension the Red Kingdom — secretly manipulated the success rate of breakthroughs of individual pilots.

The theory's main claim was that it took a very precious and unique resource to produce a successful god pilot.

This unique resource could only be found among ace pilots, but the problem was that even ace pilots could only accumulate 1 to 3 percent of the total amount needed to guarantee a successful ascension.

There was almost no way they could successfully break through with such a huge disparity!

The success rate was far too low!

So how could this fundamental resource scarcity problem be solved?

The answer was that the Kingdom of Mechs secretly robbed unwitting ace pilots of this unique resource and redistributed it to a small selection of 'approved' saints.

Once these saints unknowingly gained all of the required resources needed to break through, they were able to transcend to godhood much easier than others!



Their success rate might not have reached 100 percent, but it should have at least risen to 70 percent or higher!

Suffice to say, the MTA and every Star Designer vehemently denied that there was any truth to the conspiratorial Secret Resource Theory!

Nobody had ever managed to provide convincing proof of the existence and relevance of this unique resource.

Saint Tusa shook his head as he thought about this nefarious idea. "I don't think the MTA and RA are as bad as this conspiracy theory claims. They have always been good to ace pilots like ourselves."

Saint Dostoevsky did not comment on that remark and instead proceeded to share one more dubious theory.

Particularly desperate peak ace pilots that had waited too long to attempt their breakthroughs tended to sink their chances of surviving the road to no return.

Once they reached this state, there was almost no way they could dig themselves out of their holes.

However, a dangerous theory had spread that claimed that there was still hope in the midst of their despair.

The so-called Highlander Theory was a controversial and dangerous idea. Its central claim was that a peak ace pilot had a high chance of successfully breaking through if they dueled another peer to death.

The two must engage in a fair ritualistic competition and fight each other with the intent to kill. Outside interference was absolutely not allowed as that would taint the sanctity of the duel.

As long as the winner 'beheads' the loser, the former would proceed to 'absorb the energies' of the latter, which combined with the fulfillment gained from overcoming a powerful opponent would force an instant breakthrough on the spot!

"Why is it called the Highlander Theory?" Tusa puzzlingly asked.

The Messenger of Silence wordlessly shrugged.

Whatever the case, Tusa personally thought this theory sounded absolutely crazy. Perhaps it was because of the way that his mentor had presented it to him, but the Larkinson ace pilot really could not imagine any saint believing that they had to kill each other in order to break through.

"Did ace pilots actually believe so much in this Highlander Theory that they dueled each other to the death?"

"..."

"Did it work?"

"..."

"I see."

No matter the theory, a successful breakthrough could never be attributed to any single cause or reason. There were so many variables at play that it was impossible to isolate one deciding factor as the decisive reason for a success case.

This was why the Messenger of Silence cautioned Tusa not to overcomplicate this matter. It was best just to pick any theory he liked as long as it was harmless enough.

No matter whether it worked or not, at least he was being proactive enough. Action was always better than inaction when it came to high-raking mech pilots.

His mentor encapsulated this thought with a succinct phrase.

Confidence over theory.

Ace pilots were not Master Mech Designers. They did not need to study a lot of textbooks, calculate their solutions to a failure rate of 0.00034 percent or construct highly convoluted theories that explained their powers.

All they needed was confidence in themselves. Their willpower was rooted in their confidence. The more they believed in themselves, the stronger they became. No god pilot ever emerged from ace pilots that still doubted themselves to the point where they needed to use nebulous theories as crutches.

The Messenger of Silence outlined his approach based on the God Kingdom Building Theory a bit further.

Saint Tusa nodded in full agreement with his mentor. Ultimately, he needed to use the blueprint of the God Kingdom Building Theory as one of the many tools to pave his way to his ultimate destination.

Time passed by. The two ace pilots began to partake in a few exotic and expensive dishes made predominantly from processed seafood harvested from the oceans of New Cartagena VII-F.

The Messenger of Silence outlined his approach based on the God Kingdom Building Theory a bit further.

The overall goal was to construct the prototype of his possible future God Kingdom by forming and filling up several different territories that comprised a single cohesive system.

It was not necessary to build artistic conceptions that were literally framed as capital cities, agricultural provinces, industrial regions, commercial zones and etc. An ace pilot just had to create a harmonious collection of images that could form the core of a god pilot's most fundamental power base.

Saint Dostoevsky's central image was his overwhelming desire for silence and serenity. This was his base. He built all of his other artistic conceptions on top of his fundamental need for stillness.

When Tusa learned a bit more about how his mentor visualized his expanding Saint Kingdom, the Larkinson ace pilot tried to imagine how he should build his own underdeveloped domain.

It started with a base which corresponded to his greatest desire or ambition. His newly developed Free Flight ability already occupied this role. All of his other abilities as an ace pilot had to be tethered to his fundamental desire to fly free in order to build up a sensible prototype of his possible God Kingdom.

The story was a bit more complicated for him, though. He was different from his mentor because he also possessed a companion spirit!

Blackwing's domain was centered around the concept of shadow rather than the concept of freedom.

This presented Tusa with an extra set of options that he could use to expand his range of solutions and gain additional specializations that he could not attain through his normal domain!

To use the analogy of the God Kingdom Building Theory, Blackwing's domain could essentially be treated as a distant colony that could provide additional help and resources from an exotic location!

Of course, this also meant that Saint Tusa had to do a lot more work in order to gain the most out of Blackwing's domain. He needed to spend additional time figuring out new abilities and strong images that he could relate to that were based on the shadow element.

As the banquet gradually transitioned into the 'drink liberal amounts of alcohol phase', both the Messenger of Silence and Tusa began to drink a traditional warm drink consisting of honey mixed with spices and jam of all ingredients.

Saint Dostoevsky had no more lessons to convey to the guest pilot for today. He had already fulfilled his responsibilities by imparting a lot of useful lessons and tips.

At this point, Tusa needed to apply the lessons he learned and start with building up his own system. It did not necessarily have to be based on the God Kingdom Building Theory. Anything was fine so long as he derived additional confidence from his solution.

"The defeat we inflicted on the juregs has stalled their plans to conquer this star system." Lieutenant Daria remarked. "That will create a lull in this campaign where you have at least 2 weeks to practice your piloting skills, experiment with your powers and develop new abilities. This should be enough time for you to substantially improve your performance in the next major battle."

Tusa responded with a strained smile. "That is true. I am certain that I will do better next time. I am still too new to my newly upgraded ace mech. What I am concerned about is that our enemies will also be making use of all of this time to prepare for another bout against my Dark Zephyr. They won't be caught by surprise anymore. They know who I am and what I can do. I will try my best to create more openings for my mentor, but it will be much harder to do so next time."

"Then you will just have to improve faster than our jureg adversaries."

#### Chapter 6324 How To Win The Ultimate Race

Now that the juregs had been beaten back to the outskirts of the New Cartagena System, Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson enjoyed enough 'free time' to figure out his combat system and build up a proper foundation for himself.

He had already broken through months ago, but it seemed that he had been wasting much of his time while he waited for his Dark Zephyr to get upgraded.

When Tusa looked back on all of the time he spent fighting alongside the expeditionary fleet, he painfully recognized that he had not been doing his best to speed up his progress and work towards his next breakthrough. He still retained a bit of the mentality of an expert pilot and did not think big enough to act like a proper saint.

Just because he remained stuck with an expert mech for a time was not a valid excuse for his lack of progress. There were more ways he could grow stronger than to obsess over his resonance strength.

As far as Tusa was concerned, his mentorship with the Messenger of Silence was definitely worth whatever price that the Larkinson Clan had paid to the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan.

Saint Kalasandra Boojay and Patriarch Reginald Cross were both powerful ace pilots in their own right, but they were clearly strong-headed individuals who committed to their own unique trajectories towards greatness. They were not necessarily following the wrong methods, but what worked for them did not necessarily work for others.

In comparison, the Messenger of Silence was a lot more reasonable despite his infamous mental affliction.

The Terran peak ace pilot did not reject outside input and possessed a sober perspective on all of the theories that people came up with to describe all of the extraordinary phenomena surrounding high-ranking mech pilots.

Saint Dostoevsky also gave Tusa the freedom to figure out stuff by himself and choose his own way forward. The former did not judge the latter for preferring one solution over another.

Every ace pilot was different. Not a single god pilot emerged from saints that tried to copy others.

This encouraged Tusa and increased his motivation towards his latest endeavors.

In the two weeks of relative calm and peace that ensued after the jureg forces pulled back to lick their wounds, Tusa had been setting up the framework of his future God Kingdom.

This was more difficult than he thought, because he needed to extrapolate his current state and develop a reasonable impression of what he would be like once he became a god pilot.

Tusa had to let his imagination go wild and convince himself that it was plausible for him to be able fly his entire god mech through one end to another end of a planet without crashing against anything.

It was difficult for him to build up a complete vision of himself as a god pilot because he would definitely have mastered more abilities by that time. Technology would also progress by a lot, so his god mech should definitely be equipped with more game-changing tech.

Nonetheless, it was not too important for him to build up a complete and detailed image of his desired end state. It was enough to figure out a reasonable direction that called to his heart.

After he followed this methodology, Tusa made an important conclusion about himself.

"My main strength lies in mobility. Movement is everything to me. If I lose the ability to maneuver, I might as well be dead. Sure, it would be nice if my Dark Zephyr also comes with powerful guns, sharp weapons and impenetrable defenses, but I would never want to obtain them at the cost of compromising my mobility."

It was impossible for the Dark Zephyr to maintain a high degree of combat effectiveness if his offensive and defensive capabilities were way below standards, but it did not matter to Tusa if they were not that impressive.

So long as the Dark Zephyr's attack and defensive capabilities remained serviceable, Saint Tusa remained confident that he could rely on his superior mobility to defeat any opponent!

In that context, he could have done a lot better in his first bout against the greater phase lords if he could make his Dark Zephyr move faster and evade more threats.

This was also the source of one of his new problems.

As much as he liked how easy it became to evade attacks after he activated his Free Flight ability, the Biopod Mother had already managed to develop an effective counter.

Tusa even managed to gain the cooperation of the Brusilov Fleet to test his assumption.

Thousands of small, disposable drones proceeded to chase after the Dark Zephyr in an effort to explode and inflict at least some damage to the ace light skirmisher.

If the enemy figured out that the Dark Zephyr had to linger in a limited space in order to apply a space suppression field onto a target, then it was possible to deploy lots of explosive drones and completely surround the place before converging towards the ace mech!

It was pretty easy for the Dark Zephyr to evade the explosive drones if there were no limits on his movement. The living mech was faster than pretty much any mech or machine, so it should never lose in a straightforward race against anything other than fired projectiles.

The problem arose when the Dark Zephyr needed to stay within a limited area of space, which was exactly what imperiled the ace light skirmisher during the last fight.

If the enemy figured out that the Dark Zephyr had to linger in a limited space in order to apply a space suppression field onto a target, then it was possible to deploy lots of explosive drones and completely surround the place before converging towards the ace mech!

As long as the quantity of explosive devices was great enough, there was no way for the Dark Zephyr to escape the torrent of blasts!

There was no easy way to resolve this problem for Tusa and his battle partner.

The Dark Zephyr's limited arsenal was unable to blow them all up. His Saint Kingdom was not strong enough to freeze or weaken the explosive drones either. His defenses were also not good enough to be able to withstand all of these explosions for a long time.

Abandoning the requirement to stay in one place was a viable but highly undesirable way to solve this problem, because Tusa envisioned more scenarios in the future where his Dark Zephyr needed to maintain his position.

Tusa tried hard to see how he could continue to evade massed attacks under the condition of limited freedom of movement.

He failed.

No answer came to mind. He couldn't help but feel that this was an impossible problem to solve.

In the end, he approached the Messenger of Silence and asked for advice.

"..."

The Terran peak ace pilot was not surprised by Tusa's inability to come up with a good solution.

Saint Dostoevsky reassured the guest pilot that this was a completely normal problem among ace pilots. None of them were perfect and it was rare for them to have all of the answers.

A solution would come to them in time as long as the necessity was great enough. A combination of frequent experimentation and subjecting himself to the pressure of combat would eventually cause Tusa to gain an epiphany that would culminate in the creation of a powerful new ability that just so happened to solve his greatest shortcoming at the time.

The only problem was that it not only took time, but also luck in order to yield a satisfying result.

"..."



Tusa would also have to make sure he could cope with his enemies and survive without possessing the full toolset he desired.

His mentor did not mince his meaning about this struggle.

"..."

"I get it." Saint Tusa diligently nodded. "No one can teach me how I should fight. Every ace pilot needs to build their own combat system that makes sense to them. Since there is no detailed blueprint, I will have to figure out a lot of stuff through trial and error."

The Messenger of Silence could not teach Tusa the specific abilities he needed to master, but the saint from the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan could still offer feedback as well as more general guidance on how to make progress.

Under the older ace pilot's tutelage, Saint Tusa not only performed specific experiments in the field, but also rewatched all of the archival footage of every battle he fought in the past.

It was a good thing that the Larkinson Clan pretty much stored all of the footage and logs of all of the battles it had fought since Ves founded it back in the Bright Republic.

Tusa felt rather strange as he sat in the cockpit of his Dark Zephyr and watched how his younger and much less skilled version of himself piloted much weaker light skirmishers such as the Blazing Zephyr and the Piranha Prime.

"Damn. These battles bring back a lot of memories." He said.

"YOU WERE MUCH SLOWER AND CLUMSIER DURING THESE BATTLES. IT IS AMAZING TO SEE HOW FAR YOU HAVE GROWN." The Dark Zephyr also watched the footage. "I JUST WISH I WAS BORN BACK THEN SO THAT I COULD ACCOMPANY YOU MUCH SOONER."

Though there were many times where Tusa outright felt embarrassed about how he handled himself a decade or two decades ago, watching the footage of his fights was quite an illuminating experience.

His memories of how he fought those battles did not match up to the actual reality of what had happened. Comparing his old self to his current self created a strong contrast that made it very obvious what he improved upon the most as well as the least.

Though Tusa ultimately failed to gain the epiphany he sought to spontaneously create another powerful ability, he gained a lot of clarity about himself. He knew where he started, how he progressed, and how he needed to improve in the future in order to fulfill his ambition.

The journey from a human to a god was a lengthy odyssey. The final hurdle at the very end was an incredibly difficult 'final exam' that brutally tested all of the ace pilot's hard work and convictions.

As an ace pilot who had progressed to the point where he could essentially go no further unless he applied for this 'final exam', the Messenger of Silence gave Tusa a solemn warning about wasting his potential as an ace pilot.

"..."

Tusa earnestly nodded as he took the lesson to heart. "I understand. Ace pilots can't afford to rest on their laurels and feel satisfied with how far they have come. It takes so much more to become a god pilot that I cannot afford to slack off when I have only reached the midpoint of my evolution. I need to triple or quadruple the work I put in to advance to this point and make sure I hit my next bottleneck from a position of strength as opposed to a position of weakness."

The dreaded final bottleneck deterred many once-confident ace pilots from breaking through right away. They all felt that they would die without any hope of a turnaround if they carelessly took a single step forward.

That was the point where many peak ace pilots frantically began to do a lot of remedial work in order to make up for the opportunities they ignored in the past.

This was one of the most valuable lessons that the Messenger of Silence imparted to Saint Tusa.

The guest pilot ultimately learned that it was better to start training and improving himself at full throttle right from the beginning rather than push it off for later.

By the time his resonance strength reached 1545 laverses, his confidence had probably reached its highest point. If he broke through shortly after reaching this hard limit, then he would initiate the Mech Body Merger Process with great confidence and momentum!

However, if his foundation was not strong enough to give him a good basis of confidence that he would survive the irreversible metamorphosis, then the subsequent years of delay spent on making up for his inadequacies would cause his momentum to fade, thereby making his eventual breakthrough attempt much more precarious than it should!

Of course, the Messenger of Silence was cautious enough to warn Tusa that not everyone ascribed to this theory. There were also others who believed that every peak ace pilot needed to temper themselves for at least a century in order to strengthen their qualifications to the point they maximized their theoretical success rates.

Saint Tusa did not have the patience to wait that long. He loathed the very idea of remaining stuck as a peak ace pilot for an extended period of time. He did not want to become the next Mace of Retaliation and become known as a civilization-wide disappointment and a negative example to all of his peers.

He had his own pride!

Speed also defined his willpower! Tusa was willing to concede other competitions, but he absolutely refused to lose any contest where he needed to be the fastest!

"I am not slow!"

He felt it would be a massive personal failure on his part if he was not the first Larkinson to break through as a god pilot.

He had already 'won' the race to become the first ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan. He would damn well make sure he won the race after that as well, or else he wouldn't be Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson!

Chapter 6325 Helpful Feedback

"Hmph. Interesting. Very interesting."

As Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson continued to learn from the Messenger of Silence while serving alongside the Dostoevsky Clan, he regularly reported back to his clan.

Sometimes, Gloriana answered his calls. Other times, Ves managed to free enough time in his schedule to have a good talk with the first and most experienced ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan.

They not only went over some of the lessons that Tusa learned, but also studied the battle logs of the Dark Zephyr in order to explore how the ace light skirmisher could be improved in a future update.

"I appreciate it that you are willing to share the wisdom espoused by the Messenger of Silence." Ves told Tusa over the comm. "It is certainly interesting to hear all of the theories that people have come up with to explain how ace pilots should develop. I don't know enough about this kind of stuff to tell you which ones are plausible or not. You should use your own judgment for that. As a mech designer, I am more interested in how your gradual evolution and development should be paired with matching upgrades to your Dark Zephyr. What are your thoughts on this subject?"

The Larkinson ace pilot looked thoughtful. "Hmmm. I don't feel particularly short on anything when it comes to my battle partner. I am still getting used to the huge amount of power that I have gained after piloting the Mark II version for a long time. The jump in performance is just too big. If I am being really honest, I would have liked to obtain a more effective area-clearing weapon, and also have a more effective way to harm or impair a powerful phase lord, but these are old and familiar shortcomings."

"This is the inherent limitation to sticking to a light skirmisher archetype, Tusa. If you are willing to forgo the purity of this template and agree to mount integrated energy weapons or install missile launchers onto the shoulders, I give your machine more effective area denial weapons that are excellent at clearing large amounts of cannon fodder. Does this sound like an interesting solution to you, or do you want your machine to remain classic?"

"I think... it is better for me to work with the strengths and limitations of my current configuration of my mech." Tusa reluctantly said. "Light skirmishers can't do a lot of stuff, but maybe that is for the better. Mobility is everything to me. If too much of the mech is dedicated to other priorities such as launching stronger attacks, it will make my mech slower somehow. I know just enough about mech design to figure that out. I think it is better if I can maintain my speed and maneuverability advantages as much as possible. I can still cope with a weaker arsenal, especially with the knowledge that there are other Larkinson ace pilots that can compensate for my shortcomings."

"You had a great time working together with a marksman mech specialist, eh?" Ves knowingly smiled.

"I can't describe how luxurious it feels to not have to worry about my inadequate attack capabilities. I can completely devote myself to doing what I do best, which is being really fast and making myself impossible to hit. The Messenger of Silence has assisted me and complemented me in battle in a way that I have never experienced from anyone else in the Larkinson Clan. Venerable Davia Stark could definitely learn a lot of lessons from this saint."

"The circumstances are entirely different, Tusa. You can't make a fair comparison between the two. The Messenger of Silence clearly prioritized his cooperation with you and took special care of you. His primary objectives are also very clear, which is targeting the greater phase lords that are leading the alien fleets in your warzone. In contrast, Davia Stark is much weaker, and she needs to cover the backs of every friendly high-ranking mech as well as do her part to keep our overall strategic direction intact."

Tusa sighed. "You're right. I get it. I think my experiences with the Terrans show that it is really important to have a powerful ranged attacker in our mech forces. Now that I have confronted these greater phase lords, I have learned that it has become all the more important to have a way to effectively threaten their lives. If we don't have what it takes to bring them down quickly enough, they will just wade into our lines and collapse our forces by relying on brute force. If you ever want to raise a first-class mech force and play in the big leagues, you cannot afford to lack this capability. We need to have a powerful saint that can deter these giant bastards."

Both Larkinsons had one ace pilot in mind.

Of the three ace pilots to emerge from the Larkinson Clan up to this point, Saint Isobel Kotin was by far the most destructive and offensive of them all. The purple sun that she managed to conjure during her dramatic breakthrough event proved to be powerful enough to overcome the insane resilience and regeneration of the Emperor Tree and turn its entire core into ash and cinders!

Ves looked regretful. "We can't count on Saint Isobel yet. She is still stuck in the brain-and-spine-in-a-jar phase. According to the regular reports that I have received, her recovery process is on schedule, which is both good and bad news. The good news is that our biotech researchers don't anticipate too many complications that could risk her life. The bad news is that it will take a minimum of 4 years or so to develop a fire-proof bio-engineered post-human body that can fully merge with her surviving organs."

This took too much time. With the Red Tide Offensive hammering at red humanity's defensive lines, the Larkinsons needed Isobel's awesome firepower sooner rather than later!

Unfortunately, even if Ves decided to switch up his strategy and rush Saint Isobel's restoration, it would still take several years for her to recover from all of the trauma of burning up her own body and familiarizing herself with a newly regenerated physique.

Since that was the case, the Larkinsons might as well take their time and go for quality.

The two Larkinsons began to shift their attention towards another name, one that had become a lot more prominent than before!

"Can Casella do it?" Tusa questioned.

"Possibly. Not entirely. Our study of the Saint Commander's improved Commandeering ability and newly gained Enfeoffment ability shows that she can massively amplify the firepower of a large mech force while also elevating the firepower of dozens of mechs to the standard of a low-tier expert mech. Combined, this can definitely multiply the effective firepower of our mech force to a formidable degree, but the maximum degree of empowerment still remains limited. The temporarily endowed 'Knights' and 'Barons' as we call them can only gain so much true resonance assistance. Their current level of firepower can definitely threaten lesser phase lords, but I am not so sure that remains the same towards greater phase lords."

Greater phase lords, just like senior ace pilots, had reached a threshold of power that allowed them to become virtually impervious against massed small arms fire.

When their tough phasewater-empowered true bodies reached the size of metropoli or even small moons, then the sheer quantity of attacks of the mechs under the command of the Saint Commander simply came across as shooting lots of needles!

Sure, these needles had enough power to wear down the greater phase lord's spatial barrier and induce pain when struck his physical body, but there was no way these tiny attacks could seriously damage a well-protected phasewater organ or have any chance of inflicting a crippling injury.

Command specialists seemed to be incredibly powerful, but they always had trouble with confronting powerful enemies at the same level or higher.

A powerful enough champion could ignore any army arrayed against him and rampage with impunity!

The Diffraction Lord and the Biopod Mother both seemed excellently suited to counter a mech army led by Saint Commander Casella.

The Diffraction Lord would be able to weave a lot of false images and misdirect a lot of incoming firepower.

The Biopod Mother could produce a seemingly endless tide of disposable biomonsters that could force the mech army into a grueling contest of attrition. The Biopod Mother was so massive that she could definitely spawn a lot more biopods than the amount of mechs that any typical mech force could muster!

A well-rounded first-class mech force, no, a mech corps geared towards fighting the most powerful alien fleets had to be led by multiple different ace pilots.

There were many viable ace mech compositions, but at least one of them had to possess the attack power to inflict real harm onto a greater phase lord. Whether that ace mech was primarily melee or ranged focused did not matter too much. The machine had to be able to kill an opponent that possessed body proportions that ranged in the hundreds of kilometers!

Ves and Tusa eventually went back to discussing the Dark Zephyr. There was little point in talking about subjects outside of their immediate control.

"I still need to unlock the remaining potential of the current version of the Dark Zephyr before I have a better idea on what should be improved." Saint Tusa told his cousin. "I have barely scratched the surface of what it is capable of. For example, I have begun to experiment with Erlemin and tried to banish many different objects. I am not satisfied with the scale of stuff I can banish. I need to keep practicing and increase my resonance strength to the point where I can whisk away entire chunks from alien warships."

"How much time will you need until you can properly weaponize your Banish ability against enemy warships?"

"I don't know." Tusa shrugged. "I have been trying to create a so-called artistic conception based on this resonating ability that should hopefully speed up my progress, but it is hard to create an image that I am invested in when this is completely new to me. I need to put in a lot more time and practice before I am ready to combine this resonating ability with my domain field."

The God Kingdom Building Theory gave Saint Tusa a clear enough direction and methodology to develop his set of abilities. However, the formulaic approach also demanded a lot of trial and error. There was no substitute for hard work.

"Take your time, Tusa. Erlemin and its effects are new to us as well. We need to gather all of the data related to it and crunch the numbers in order to better attune your Dark Zephyr to its unique properties. I am glad to hear that we don't have to perform an urgent upgrade or correction at this time. Our Design Department doesn't have the time to revisit the design of the latest iteration of your ace mech at the moment."

"How are the other high-end projects coming along?" Saint Tusa eagerly asked.

"Saint Commander Casella Ingvar won't be joining you on the battlefield soon. The Minerva Mark II Project has almost reached the halfway point and still requires a lot more work. The good news is that the Amaranto Mark III Project and the Riot Mark III Project are much closer to completion. Gloriana and her collaborators have managed to solve many of the difficult problems that stalled them for a while. Once they overcome the most challenging hurdles, they can essentially do the rest of the work on autopilot. It just takes time to flesh out the designs of the two high-tier expert mechs. Whether Venerable Davia Stark and Venerable Rosa Orfan will be able to break through shortly after receiving their powerful new machines is another question, though. So far, neither my grandfather nor my uncle have managed to obtain any luck."

That caused Tusa to frown. "Once I have completed my tour with the Dostoevsky Clan, I'll come back and instruct them in person. I have learned so much more about what makes an ace pilot. Maybe I can set them on the right path."

"Let's hope so. If they can't break through even after that... then maybe they are never meant to transcend their limitations any further..."

Chapter 6326 Good and Bad Progress

Much had changed in the months since Ves first presided over a session of the Interim Leadership Council.

He revealed his ambitions to become a major player of human civilization and managed to cobble together a Coalition of Faiths.

The Red Two, the Terrans and the Rubarthans had cautiously begun to roll out their newly authorized kinship networks.



So far, the feedback had been universally positive. No one who connected to the new networks had regrets about it. In fact, the early adopters had become the most ardent supporters of accelerating the rollout of the kinship networks!

It was a pity that the powers that be still stuck to their caution and insisted on a months-long observation period to see whether the people connected to kinship networks would slowly go crazy or become brainwashed over time.

Fortunately, the paranoia of all of those bigshots eventually had to make way for necessity. The Red Tide Offensive may have slowed down a lot, but it was still grinding away at red humanity's lines despite all of the exterminations committed by the patrolling god pilots and dreadnoughts.

In the months since the start of the Red Tide Offensive, the third defensive band eventually succumbed through sheer attrition.

No matter how many mechs, starfighters and warships that red humanity could muster, the native aliens always managed to bring more!

Even if the human defenders managed to put up a valiant fight and attain a hard-fought victory in the field, it did not seem to matter too much on a strategic level.

In order for humans to gain the upper hand in the Red Tide Offensive, they had to keep winning their battles or at least force their enemies into draws. They could not afford to fail too many times because they lost ground each time they did so. Mounting an attack to retake lost territory was much costlier than defending. This was why each defeat, though rare, set them all back on an incremental basis.

In contrast, the native aliens had it much easier. Sure, their winning rates were terrible. They were often unable to overcome the superior grit and tech employed by the defending humans.

Yet it was fine. Regardless of the outcome of a battle, each fight exhausted the humans a little more.

Their mech pilots and support personnel got killed. Their mechs got damaged on a large scale. Their logistics became overstrained in an effort to replenish all of the machines that got destroyed. The supplies they relied upon to fight at their best eventually became exhausted.

Since reinforcements were very limited, all of these fights gradually depleted the combat effectiveness of the defending troops.

The attacking aliens only really had to succeed once in order to make all of their prior sacrifices worth it! Their reserves were so much greater than their human adversaries that they could keep banging their heads against a wall until it finally crumbled due to all of the repeated knocks!

The Red War was profoundly asymmetrical. Red humanity still retained their quality advantage, but the native aliens ruthlessly exploited their quantity advantage to the fullest!

The Red Cabal and their alien collaborators did not hesitate to throw away the lives of trillions of hapless alien cannon fodder just to get rid of the extragalactic invaders as quickly as possible!

The orbits of many planets had turned into huge junk belts. So much debris of fallen warships and phasefighters floated lifelessly in space that the human salvagers simply lacked the numbers to pick up all of the valuable wrecks and break them down into usable materials.

While the bounty of materials recycled from all of those broken mechs did much to relieve red humanity's resource shortages, its factories were working at full capacity and could not produce war materiel any faster.

Two major bottlenecks constrained red humanity's warmaking potential to an increasing degree.

The first was strained logistics. It took a lot of cargo ships to haul stuff around. Human shipyards were pumping out new hulls as fast as they could manage, but the expansion in transportation capacity simply couldn't keep up with the constantly rising demand.

The second was the lack of trained soldiers. Red humanity still had a large population of civilians, but only a fraction of them were potentates that possessed the aptitude to pilot mechs.

Of all potentates, only a minority of them had taken the life of a professional mech pilot.

The remaining potentates ultimately did not enter the cockpit due to a variety of reasons.

Perhaps they lacked the courage and guts to enter the battlefield and stare death in the eyes.

Perhaps their genetic aptitudes measured below the threshold that would open up promising mech piloting careers.

Perhaps they were bad or motivated students that failed to graduate from the mech academies.

Whatever the case, a lot of states and organizations had become increasingly more desperate to mobilize these initially unqualified potentates.

With martial law in effect, these potentates that had previously been living well among the civilians got ripped from their homes and put into high-intensity boot camps.

No matter how awful they were at piloting mechs, at least they could still control a mech when it mattered!

Many mech manufacturing complexes had begun to fabricate a large amount of cheap but easily-to-pilot frontline mechs in order to put these pilots to good use.

Whether the attempt to convert all of these additional potentates into useful soldiers succeeded or not, it was worth a try to increase the amount of mechs on the battlefield.

Still, it took a lot of time to complete these training programs. Red humanity needed a faster solution to ensure enough troops held the line.

The Red Fleet's Starfighter Corps had become increasingly more prominent for this reason.

The fleeters invested a lot of effort into supporting its rise.

They not only did whatever they could to partner up with many states to construct massive factories that churned out one strike craft after another, but also started to glamorize the life of a heroic starfighter pilot!

Ves found it rather funny to see the fleeters attempting to imitate the mechers by turning well-performing starfighter pilots into heroes.

Their public relations and marketing departments must be working hard to find notable individual starfighter pilots that performed way above average and turn them into war heroes.

Though red humanity was still too enormous with mechs to take starfighters seriously, the persistent efforts of the fleeters slowly started to take root.

The general public was gradually beginning to appreciate the soldiers who fought in the same battlefields as mechs and alien phasefighters with nothing but flimsy craft that possessed none of the advantages of the others.

When so many people volunteered or got conscripted to serve in the Starfighter Corps, it was inevitable that a few outliers would emerge that performed brilliantly and displayed excellent talent.

These were probably the sorts of prodigies and geniuses that would have broken through to a higher rank if they could!

Unfortunately, starfighter pilots did not possess the capacity to do so. Ves figured that it was theoretically possible to plagiarize the development trajectory of a mech pilot and change stuff around so that it accommodated mechs instead, but it wouldn't nearly as well without the support of a pinnacle work like the Red Kingdom.

Without this powerful but invisible automated construct, there was no way for starfighter pilots to be able to break through en masse and collective work towards attaining godhood.

This was why Ves started to hear talk about what the fleeters intended to do in order to solve this problem.

Ves personally guessed that the fleeters were thinking about erecting their own version of the Red Kingdom, but the truth was a lot more pragmatic and controversial!

"What?! Are the fleeters crazy?!"

"I am being serious, Ves." Jovy Armalon said. "I have heard from reliable sources that the admirals of the RF have started secret talks with the leaders of the RA about opening the Red Kingdom to starfighters and starfighter pilots."

Ves looked absolutely gobsmacked at this news. The mere notion of expanding the responsibilities of the mech community's precious Red Kingdom to encompass starfighters and everything related to it sounded like heresy to the highest degree!

There was no way for him to interpret this move as anything other than a betrayal of everything a mech designer stood for! Ves struggled to believe that Star Designers were willing to entertain this notion!

Even Jovy struggled to hold in his own reluctance towards this potential development.

"Is it even possible to expand the Red Kingdom to encompass starfighters and starfighter pilots?"

Jovy shrugged. "It is possible in theory. Whether it will work in practice is another matter. The Star Designers who administer the Red Kingdom will have to make extensive renovations in order to accommodate this potential development. The Red Kingdom may even become split in half because of this. I do not think that anyone really knows how to make this happen. There is legitimate fear that experimenting too much with the Red Kingdom will cause its existing services to the mech community to degrade, thereby inflicting untold damage to all of our mechs and mech pilots."

"Damn! They better not mess up our greatest dependence!"

"There is no immediate cause for concern, Ves. The talks have remained just that. Talks. No progress has been made, which shows that the speakers on our side are holding fast. If not for the urgency of the Red War, we wouldn't be entertaining the fleeters in the first place. The Polymath's prolonged absence is clearly felt at this time."

"What does the Polymath have to do with this subject?"

"Her knowledge base is vast. If there is anyone among red humanity that can come up with a viable plan to alter the Red Kingdom to accommodate starfighters, it is the Polymath." Jovy answered. "Since she still remains out of contact inside the persistent spacetime bubble surrounding Bridgehead One, we cannot count on her services, which makes everyone much less confident about successfully altering the Red Kingdom."

"Oh. That... kind of makes sense. It is rather weird that so many people put a lot of faith in the Polymath. There are plenty of other Star Designers in the Red Ocean."

"Yes, but many of them are too specialized and do not particularly possess any brilliant insights in subjects that fall well outside of their areas of expertise. They are also not as fast to learn and master the necessary knowledge to perform the changes as intended."

Ves found it kind of funny that the Polymath's involuntary separation from the rest of the Red Ocean actually hindered the fleeters from tacking starfighters onto the Red Kingdom!

"I take it that there is another big reason why the RA is stalling on this issue."

Jovy smirked. "Yes. That reason is you, or rather the comprehensive Swarm Project that you are leading. It is already nearing its highly anticipated completion, which means that it will most definitely become relevant soon. It appears we have succeeded in maintaining the secrecy of Carmine mechs despite the progressively greater number of people that are involved in our ambitious project. The Red Admiralty truly has no clue that their hopeful Starfighter Corps may become red humanity's discarded toy overnight."

With the support of the Survivalist Faction and the Transhumanist Faction, Ves had managed to make extensive progress in designing all of the versions of mechs that encompassed the Swarm Project.

Prototype testing had already begun despite the fact that Ves and his collaborators had yet to complete the design of several features such as modular weapon systems.

Nonetheless, the early tests of the Carmine System based on organic ultra-large enhanced cockpits consistently produced good and reliable results!

No significant accidents occurred that could call into question whether the Carmine System applied in this unusual manner posed a serious short to medium term health risk.

No mecher dared to assume that the Carmine System was safe to use over the long term, but most people weren't able to cast their visions that far anymore.

The point was that the Swarm Project showed such promise at this point that the introduction of Carmine mechs to the masses would definitely outshine all of the effort the fleeters put into promoting their starfighters!

"We red humans are still mech fanatics at heart." Ves remarked. "The Age of Mechs has not ended long enough for people to stop their unreasonably strong obsession towards mechs. As long as we dangle the promise of piloting mechs without the need to possess the right genetic aptitude in front of their faces, starfighters will probably become yesterday's news."

"Hence why certain leaders of ours are continuing to stall the talks to prevent starfighters from gaining the support of the Red Kingdom. They all hold the same beliefs as you, Ves. Your Carmine mechs will soon change our civilization forever."

Chapter 6327 Almost Done

Ves did not like the notion of expanding the mech community's precious Red Kingdom to the Starfighter Corps.

He did not even know whether it was even possible, but if the bigshots of the Red Association went through with this crazy plan, then that would change the meaning of mechs forever!

Ves did not necessarily hate starfighters. He did not look down on the brave pilots who had no choice to pilot these strike craft in battle due to their inadequate genetic aptitudes. The inclusion of more and more starfighters on the battlefield massively reduced the burden on mechs and helped them survive longer.

Yet... despite all of the contributions made by starfighters and their brave pilots, Ves still did not want them to be regarded as equals to their mech counterparts.

Perhaps it did not sound fair, but Ves was ultimately a mech designer. It was in his job description to play favorites. He could not possibly remain impartial and still remain in this business!

The message that Jovy tried to convey was very clear. The Swarm Project had to be introduced to the public according to schedule. The longer the project was delayed, the closer the Red Admiralty came to getting its wish.

In fact, even after the introduction of Carmine mechs, an argument could still be made to allow the Red Kingdom to extend its immense influence to starfighters.

The Carmine System technically only gave Carmine pilots a single shot at living their dream.

If the Carmine mech pilots survived a battle but somehow lost their mechs and more importantly their ultra-large cockpits, then they were soulbound to never pilot another mech for the rest of their lives!

This was a devastating setback that could end the promising careers of many Carmine mech pilots in the years to come. All of their accumulated piloting skills and combat experience would largely go to waste as they were forced to retire from the field and apply themselves in other areas.

While veteran Carmine mech pilots would certainly be able to contribute to society outside of the battlefield in plenty of ways, it just wasn't the same. There were lots of people who were already working as mech instructors, military advisers, staff officers and etcetera.

What red humanity was short of were soldiers and warriors who had what it took to confront alien warships head-on with the intent to win!

In that sense, the Starfighter Corps could still play a useful role... if a much diminished one. It was the option of last resort for combat capable personnel. The requirements to pilot a starfighter was almost nothing compared to piloting a classical mech or a Carmine mech. Their relative simplicity should allow most mech pilots to quickly figure out how to make decent use of starfighters.

"There should not be a problem with introducing the finished versions of all of the mechs of the Swarm Project at the planned date, correct?" Jovy pressed Ves. "A delay of any sort will disrupt far too many plans. Much hinges on the successful unveiling of your Carmine mechs at the right place and the right time. We have already prepared a grand venue and sent out the invitations. Even if most people are still unaware of what we are about to unleash onto our society, they should already have enough clues to guess that this is a product unveiling that they should not miss."

"I don't foresee any problems." Ves replied. "I mean, we already solved the most difficult technical problems. Your Association also handled the logistical challenges involved with mass producing cybernetic mechs on an unprecedented scale. I don't see any reason why we would have to postpone the introduction. Everything is already set in stone. We're just doing a lot of testing, optimization and tweaking work at this point."

The work was a little more complicated than that. The Swarm Project encompassed 6 mech designs in total, with half of them Carmine mechs of different classes. The use of first-class, second-class and third-class tech caused the designs to diverge a lot from each other, which made it a lot harder to keep the general piloting experience as homogeneous and universal as possible.



On certain days, the need to keep up with several different versions of the same mech concept almost drove Ves crazy!

He was looking forward to concluding this exhaustive project and work on more reasonable mech design projects going forward. The urgency to design and publish a set of Carmine mechs would disappear as soon as the Swarm Project finally made its well-deserved debut.

Jovy still looked a bit suspicious towards Ves. "You occasionally have a habit of gaining epiphanies which causes you to revise your original plan and delay your projects in order to accommodate your latest ideas. This may be acceptable at other times, but the Swarm Project does not require any further innovation. The Carmine System itself is already the crown jewel as far as we are concerned. If you truly want to iterate on the mechs of the Swarm Project further, then you can wait until we have published the current version before working on a future update."

"Hey, relax. I get it. I am aware of the dangers of feature creep. I am still pretty sure that I have exhausted most of my creative ideas at this time." Ves had much to be proud of, even if his input on the designs were less than usual.

The subordinate models that should attract all of the attention offered relatively economic solutions for every state. The materials used to make the machines were deliberately chosen to be as common and widely available as possible. The tech was also kept either simple or easy to fabricate in order to reduce the chance of complications and delays.

Although these design priorities dragged down the combat performance of the subordinate mechs of the Swarm project, it shouldn't matter too much. Every subordinate mech was shaped like a wasp with modular hardpoints for each limb. Ves envisioned the rise of another thriving market centered around the servicing and upgrades of these revolutionary Carmine mech models.

Others could easily make use of expensive materials and fancy tech to produce modular upgrades and modifications that surpassed the very mediocre performance of the base models.

Ves pretty much banked on this phenomenon to spare him the trouble of designing additional Carmine mechs to fulfill the needs of customers who did not exactly find what they sought.

Of course, Ves had not given up on designing Carmine mechs. It was the opposite. He had many ideas he wanted to explore later on, but each of them had to be substantially different from the works he designed in the past. The new Carmine mechs had to fulfill roles that the machines of the Swarm Project could never fulfill unless they went through excessive upgrades.

He could think about that later. For now, his main priority was to wrap up the Swarm Project. Once he got rid of this huge burden, he could finally breathe easier and make up for lost time by investing more work in the ongoing high-ranking mech design projects.

After Ves and Jovy finally moved past the critical subject of the Swarm Project, they discussed a few other matters.

"How is the war effort going so far?"

"It is doing better." Jovy reluctantly replied. "Ever since the 3rd defensive band eventually succumbed from all of the persistent assaults, it appears that the Red Cabal can no longer ignore the complaints of the alien masses. Not even the most devout believers in the 'descendants of the Elder Gods' are willing to throw themselves into the meat grinder to such an enormous extent with very little results in return. Even the aliens can figure out that the price-to-performance ratio of their bloody attacks is far below the standard."

"Ever since the aliens have begun to siege the 4th defensive wall, the news doesn't broadcast as much fallen star systems per week as they did before. Have the aliens run out of steam already?"

"Oh no. They still have abundant reserves at their disposal. The native aliens are not yet close to depleting their enormous stock of military assets and the personnel needed to crew all of them. The reason why they have lowered their operational tempo is because their soldiers are not accustomed to waging war with such intensity. Cannon fodder does not want to be treated as cannon fodder. By recklessly throwing phasefighters and warships at prepared human defenses, many native aliens end up dying without earning any honor or glory. The sheer callousness in which their 'gods' drive their worshipers to their doom has begun to upset the rank-and-file. The Red Cabal has little choice but to adjust their strategies in order to topple the remaining two defensive bands."

That actually sounded plausible. The native aliens may be different from humans in many ways, but they still possessed the fundamental drive for life, reproduction and satisfying their greed.

"So what is their current strategy?" Ves asked.

"The native aliens have ceased to send their warships at our fortified planets in waves in the hopes that our defenses will eventually break. Instead, they have chosen to gather many different fleets in adjacent star systems. By splitting up the fleet elements and placing them in many different locations, they are preventing our god pilots and dreadnoughts from mopping them all up at once. It

takes valuable time for our best protectors to hop from star system to star system, so they are getting eliminated at a much lower rate than before. The only time they converge together is when they receive orders to launch a single all-out assault on a human-occupied star system."

That was indeed a clever way to cope with the reality of god pilots and dreadnoughts roaming across the frontlines slaughtering every alien present in a star system.

As much native alien assets as these great protectors had already managed to eliminate, there was always more!

By switching their strategies, the attacking aliens indeed managed to decrease their loss rate and have enough forces left over to pull off daring attacks.

"The fourth defensive band shouldn't fall in the near future, then." Ves concluded. "The native aliens still have a quantity advantage, but our side has scientists and stuff, so we should theoretically be growing stronger just due to the time difference alone."

Humans did not fight and die in vain. The mech pilots and other soldiers bought valuable time for red humanity to further fortify the frontlines.

The 4th defensive band had gained real significance. The 5th defensive band had become much stronger and better-protected against exotic effects.

No matter what clever tricks the native aliens tried to employ, they had little choice but to rely on brute force in order to overcome their various shortcomings!

"How is the mood among the defenders?" Ves asked.

"Morale is mixed. It depends on who we serve and other variables. Most of the pilots are veterans now, and they may become elites if they survived their ordeals longer. Total defeats are fairly rare. Most battles end up with one side limping back to safe harbor, thereby allowing them to fight another day. That becomes much less possible if the aliens decide to strike all at once with overwhelming numbers."

Red humans did not easily back off from their missions. Many mech pilots wanted to preserve the integrity of his machine, nothing more.

"How probable do you think morale will sink?"

"Not likely." Jovy responded. "I have great expectations for you. Your Carmine System and everything that comes with it will produce such a massive shock in the mech community that your presentation will jolt it back to life. The mech community as we know it will change forever as we welcome many new Carmine mech pilots. The entry of so many relatively fresh and green newcomers will do much to ease people's tensions and remind them what they are fighting to preserve."

Chapter 6328 Missing Key Material

"So how are our high-end projects coming along?"

Gloriana looked up and directed an annoyed glance towards her approaching husband.

"You have eyes. You can see for yourself. I do not need to explain everything about a project that you were supposed to help with. If you cannot keep up at this point, you may as well keep yourself out entirely."

Ves entered her lab without any forewarning, thereby disrupting the scheduled time period that she intended to devote to an intensive solitary design session.

The projection of the incredibly intricate, half-completed design of the Minerva Mark II unfolded before her gaze.

The upgrade project for the Minerva was much more expansive than what she had done for the Dark Zephyr.

In the case of the first Larkinson ace mech, the Dark Zephyr first got upgraded from his Mark II version to the Mark III version. Tusa broke through immediately after piloting this edition for the first time, which prompted the need to design the Mark III Revision 2 in order to accommodate his strength as an ace pilot.

The Minerva skipped this intermediary step. She went straight from a quasi-first-class low-to-mid tier expert mech to a true first-class ace mech.

Combined with all of the other drastic game-changing upgrades such as archetech and a brand-new Ultimate Module, the divide between the Minerva Mark I and the Minerva Mark II was incredibly vast!

It was not disingenuous to say that the Mark II could very well be regarded as an entirely new mech that just happened to imitate some of the vestiges of the previous version!

All of this extra work should have demanded a lot more time and effort in order to complete this ambitious project.

However, the reality was that the extra workload was quite modest. Sure, the Minerva Mark II Project most definitely presented numerous new challenges that demanded a lot of time in order to resolve, but there were also many familiar elements that Ves and Gloriana already tackled in their last projects.

Just as Ves envisioned, the Dark Zephyr Mark III and the Mark III Revision 2 served as trailblazers for an entirely new generation of Larkinson high-end mechs.

Gloriana had already solved the massive issues with trying to learn enough archetech to successfully adapt it to her mech designs.

Though she personally believed that she needed to master archetech to a much greater extent before trying to transform it into her own 'Glorianatech', her current progress was already sufficient enough to serve as an excellent technical base for the high-ranking mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

This saved a lot of time as the recycling of old solutions from the Dark Zephyr enabled Gloriana to 'fast-forward' a lot of design steps that previously should have taken days, weeks or months to complete.

The Minerva Mark II Project was therefore progressing at a comfortable rate. There was no chance to complete it in the next month, but it should probably be done within half a year, especially once Ves was able to devote more time to project.

"I see there is something missing in the design." Ves frowned as he studied the half-completed design a bit more. He noticed a distinct gap in the design that Gloriana deliberately left empty for whatever reason. "The hyper technology applied to this design is unusual. You have minimized the use of hyper material. Aside from the inclusion of water hypers to increase the performance of the

azure shield generator and other established combinations, you have declined to impart a heavy attribute slant on this design."

"Finally, you noticed. Can you deduce what kind of attribute or hyper material I want to add to the Minerva? What powerful new hyper material complements a command specialist the best?"

That put Ves to thought.

Unlike pure combat mechs such as the Dark Zephyr and so on, the Minerva was never designed to fight in person all of the time.

Her original incarnation could still look like a decent rifleman mech, but her mech frame also accommodated a lot of command and control modules that took the place of more combat-relevant parts.

The Minerva Mark II took this shift a step further by devoting even more internal capacity to squeezing in as many powerful first-class command and control systems as possible.

This ensured that the first-class ace command mech would be able to penetrate through lots of interference, remain in contact with millions of machines and process a huge amount of data without blowing up the computing systems.

The addition of extremely powerful processors was extremely important to a command mech as it would grant Saint Commander Casella the ability to shunt a lot of data-intensive tasks to her mech as opposed to her transcendent but ultimately limited brain.

Casella Ingvar was already doing pretty fine with the Minerva Mark I Revision 2. The hastily and modestly upgraded expert mech was not able to channel the new ace commander's splendor, but the living mech still did an adequate job of serving as a stopgap solution in the past half year.

Ves eagerly looked forward to granting the Saint Commander a powerful ace command mech that would enable her to truly unleash her power, but a lot of work still had to be done before he could make this vision come true.

"You are missing a high-end application of hyper technology that is meant to amplify the performance of the command and control modules." Ves eventually figured out the situation after studying the incomplete design. "You are not seeking to enhance the firepower or other direct

combat-related parameters of the Minerva Mark II. There is an obvious contrast between this design and what you did with the Amaranto Mark III Project. What is interesting is the specific approach you have chosen for this design."

His wife looked rather amused by this time. "Oh? What is my master plan, Ves?"

"You have discarded the use of regular medium to high-grade hyper materials. This allows you to increase the proportion of high-grade exotics used in the construction of C&C modules, thereby increasing their performance in one way, but taking it away in another sense. All of this will only produce a net positive change on total performance if you compensate for this design choice by adding in a very powerful hyper material at the conspicuous gap in the center. In fact, you deliberately designed this entire section around this key hyper material. The only question now is what hyper material you have chosen as the centerpiece. It has to be more powerful than usual, and it also has to be related to all of this activity."

Red humanity managed to discover and invent a lot of new hyper materials as of late. Most of them were fairly moderate in power, but the development of exciting new hyper alloys opened a range of new options for eager mech designers.

Ves did not think in this direction, though. The vast majority of new hyper alloys were overwhelmingly slanted towards amplifying the direct combat power of mechs. They functioned as force multipliers for weapon systems, armor systems, flight systems and so on. Few research institutions were interested in developing new solutions that did not possess a direct combat application.

His mind therefore settled on a powerful mind-attributed hyper material that still remained extremely rare but also highly coveted in human society.

It was a very luxurious material that Ves was already familiar with, because both his wife and personal assistant relied on it every day to perform way past the human norm!

"Mentalist Crystal." Ves uttered his increasingly more certain guess. "You want to augmented all of the C&C systems with one of the few and by far the most powerful mind-attributed hyper materials that red humanity has discovered."

Gloriana finally grinned. "Exactly! Casella's greatest weapon is not her marksmanship, which is good but not the best, nor her sword dueling skills, which are actually quite mediocre compared to her peers. Her greatest weapon is her comprehensive command ability. This not only encompasses her 'mortal' leadership abilities, but also her ability to empower other mechs with her Command

Field. I have looked hard to find a hyper material that can complement and amplify the performance of both areas instead of just one. I have trialed many different alternatives that are more readily available, but none of them are able to satisfy my demands. It was only when I was able to borrow a sample loaned to me by the Mech Supremacist Faction that I discovered that a Mentalist Crystal is the solution to all of my problems."

She changed the projection to show a version of the Minerva Mark II with a whole Mentalist Crystal slotted in its place of pride.

"I have experimented with both a whole Crystal and a fragment of one. The latter is considerably more common and easier to acquire, but it is not powerful enough to choose over other hyper materials. Only a single, whole Mentalist Crystal that remains pristine after harvesting it from the brain of a dead mutated beast can fulfill all of the criteria that I have set. From the limited testing that I have conducted with the cooperation of the Saint Commander, I have modeled the approximate increase in performance in a large range of parameters. Here are my estimates."

She flicked her finger, activating a projection of research report that was filled with graphs and data tables.

Ves skimmed through the report. He quickly comprehended his wife's experimental design and applauded her for coming up with a scheme that enabled her to gather a lot of data under very limited circumstances.

Though the accuracy and validity of the data was not too high, the numbers could still be used to paint a broad sketch.

Right now, that sketch looked incredibly powerful and ambitious. Ves quickly skipped over how a Mentalist Crystal could boost the performance of the processors and so on and moved straight over to the more extraordinary characteristics of the Minerva.

"Wait, are these estimates for real? Do you really think you can amplify the range of Casella's Command Field by 20 percent with the help of a Mentalist Crystal?"

"Yes!"

This was a massive improvement! As far as Ves knew, Casella's Command Field was shaped like a three-dimensional sphere, which meant that increasing the radius by a single meter required



exponentially greater effort and energy. If Casella's Command Field was smaller, then the use of a Mentalist Crystal could potentially double or triple its range instead!

A boost of 20 percent at this point was already a massive gain as that enabled Casella to keep track of everything in every direction a lot easier than before.

The Saint Commander and her Minerva wouldn't be forced to expose themselves to the enemy as much as they could affect the entire battlefield while remaining safely in the rear.

Saint Commander Casella would also be able to detect and respond to flanking enemy units that sought to take her by surprise.

"What about the estimated performance boost to her Commandeering and Enfeoffment abilities?"

"The estimates I made in relation to these topics are less certain than the others. Nonetheless, I predict that a Mentalist Crystal will produce a quantitative performance increase to Casella's iconic abilities."

Ves looked a little disappointed. He hoped that using a more powerful mind-attributed hyper material would enable Casella to empower a select group of mechs into Counts as opposed to Barons.

That was a significant power boost as it meant the difference between the combat power of low-tier expert mechs and the combat power of mid-tier expert mechs!

Ves scrolled down to the table that contained the relevant estimates.

His wife predicted that the much more likely effect of a Mentalist Crystal was to enable Commander Casella to spread significant concentrations of her true resonance to a greater quantity of lucky mechs.

For example, if Casella was able to Enfeoff 35 mechs with the Minerva Mark I Revision 2, then she should be able to Enfeoff 40 or 45 mechs with the Minerva Mark II!

It was not impossible for this figure to rise even further if the design contained additional synergies.

This was the difference that a good ace mech could make to Commander Casella!

#### Chapter 6329 Mentalist Crystal Monopoly

The benefits of integrating a Mentalist Crystal into the Minerva was far greater than integrating it into any other high-ranking mech.

While Ves believed that putting a Mentalist Crystal in the Dark Zephyr would make Saint Tusa sharper and more responsive. It may even help him utilize the Banish resonating ability more effectively, as the precise manipulation of Erlemin forced Tusa to be precise and detailed in his power application.

However, the benefits were too marginal compared to using other hyper materials. The Dark Zephyr was a fast-moving mech that Saint Tusa piloted more with his highly developed instincts and intuition as opposed to his mind.

The Minerva Mark II was different. Under ideal circumstances, the upcoming ace command mech shouldn't even fight her adversaries directly, let alone move from her commanding position from the rear.

Ves envisioned her to become the Larkinson Clan's ultimate manipulator of the battlefield. The living mech needed to function as a conductor of many other mech units, channeling lots of true resonance to her subordinates so that they may act as her weapon systems.

All of this did not require the Minerva to acquire a deadlier rifle, a tougher armor system or a faster flight system.

While Ves and Gloriana made sure to strengthen these aspects anyway in order to guard against emergencies where the Saint Commander had no other choice, these wouldn't be situations where she fought at her best.

The strength of an ace command mech lay in inspiring and leading a large number of troops to accomplish victories that were otherwise unattainable.

Casella Ingvar possessed the potential to lead any mech army and defeat enemy forces that were easily five times or even ten times stronger on paper!

While all of that sounded impressive, it was much harder for her to realize this potential in practice. Her Minerva served as both an enabler and a limiter to her power. Depending on how her ace command mech was designed and built, the living mech would strengthen some of her capabilities while weakening her other aspects.

The goal that Ves and Gloriana had set for the Minerva Mark II Project was to strengthen Casella's ace mech's command capabilities as much as possible.

They purposely decided to sacrifice the mech's direct combat capabilities if they had to choose between the two. They were willing to go quite far in trading one for the other, up to the point where the diminishing returns became too strong to make it worthwhile anymore.

In any case, Gloriana had chosen to design the Minerva Mark II in a way that would probably make her into one of the best junior ace command mechs to exist, but only if she was able to draw mind energy from a whole Mentalist Crystal.

Ves crossed his arms as he thought about this situation. He figured out that his wife already prepared this presentation for him for the purpose of begging him for the key material that could elevate the Minerva Mark II to a whole new level.

"Gloriana..."

"I do not like that tone, Ves."

"Oh, come on. You should have a good understanding how difficult it is to obtain a Mentalist Crystal. Many people have tried to set up their own business around harvesting and selling them for exorbitant prices, but none of them have the ability to hunt down clever mutated beasts that have developed abnormally high intelligences as the trackers of the Hunting Association. They are the only ones who derive their power and knowledge directly from the Huntsman, thereby allowing them to find the needles in a haystack on a consistent basis."

"So? Since the side branches of our clan have failed to harvest a single Mentalist Crystal, then let us leave that to the professionals. Let us approach the Hunting Association and pay whatever we need to secure a Crystal."

"It's not as simple as you think!" Ves exasperatingly said. "As long as the HA maintains its highly coveted monopoly on Mentalist Crystals, it will take huge concessions for us to trade one for yourself. In fact, I don't exactly have a good relation with the HA at the moment, so I can't just

approach them and propose a deal with the Hunters. You are not doing us any favors by requesting a whole Crystal instead of a bunch of fragments. Can't you just design the Minerva without this material? I can already guess you designed an alternative version that uses regular hyper materials."

Gloriana shot up to her feet! "Do not give me your excuses, Ves! I refuse to settle for less when there is a much superior option available! The Minerva Mark II augmented with a Mentalist Crystal is much closer to a perfect vessel for Casella than any other variation that I can design. I can accept it if we do not have the status and wealth to acquire a whole Mentalist Crystal, but this is not the case. You are more than a mech designer these days! I have read the news and heard the rumors. You command far more than the Larkinson Clan these days. As the Hierarch of the Coalition of Faiths and the future leader of the High Council of the Red Collective, obtaining a Mentalist Crystal should be a trivial task to your high and mighty self! Even if you cannot request one from the Hunting Association due to strained relations or such, you can still approach other friendly organizations for their Crystals!"

"Impossible!" Ves sputtered. "Mentalist Crystals are used up almost as soon as they are delivered to their intended recipients. No one keeps them lying around. Do you know how many statesmen, Master Mech Designers and other high-and-mighty figures are waiting to upgrade their cranial implants with ones empowered by this highly coveted hyper material? I have even heard of cases where they were stolen in transit in shocking heists! By the way, how the hell did you manage to get a Mentalist Crystal on loan anyway?"

"A Master Mech Designer from the Mech Supremacist Faction acquired one from the Hunting Association. The Crystal was already in transit. The escort fleet merely took a short detour in order to let me use it for a battery of experiments. I believe it has now been integrated into a brand-new implant suite similar to my own augmentations."

"I see. You were really lucky that you managed to obtain this opportunity. As this example shows, other parties simply don't hold onto their Mentalist Crystals. If they place them into their vaults, then a group of expert heisters will find a way to break in and steal the Crystals under everyone's noses. These damn Crystals are more valuable than phasewater these days. They have become one of the most coveted strategic materials in our civilization. In fact, I hear that even the aliens are eager to obtain them for their own purposes."

His wife did not seem moved by his counterarguments. She raised her eyebrows as she continued to stare at him as if he owed her 15 top-of-the-line handbags.

"You have often complained how your status is rising faster than your ability to protect yourself. This is your chance to rectify this problem to a large extent. We all need the Saint Commander at her best. If she is paired with a Minerva Mark II that is enhanced with a Mentalist Crystal, there will

not be many enemies that can directly threaten us anymore. I thought you would have done everything to increase your protection now that you are on the cusp of becoming the highest leaders of the Red Collective."

"Look, I would really like a Mentalist Crystal of our own, but the price is too high. I can't get one from other parties because they always use them up too quickly. Even if they can get one that has remained intact and unused, then we will have to pay an even higher price than if we requested one from the Hunting Association directly."

"If that is an issue, then why are you so opposed to negotiating with the Hunters?"

"It's complicated." Ves sighed. "The Hunting Association has become too powerful to bow its head to the Red Collective, but it is not powerful enough to become a rival. It has occupied a very favorable position in high-level politics. It can afford to remain aloof because no one wants to spoil their relations with this powerful organization."

"That sounds interesting, but what is the issue?"

"The problem is that it is not in the best interest of the Collective to let the Hunters stray too far from its orbit, as they are technically cultivators. It is best for the RC if the HA accepts our jurisdiction, but there has been a months-long standoff on this issue. Many people simply do not want to piss off the Hunters, or else they will lose their only channel of Mentalist Crystals. It would be extremely embarrassing for me if I have to beg the HA for a Mentalist Crystal. If I do this, I will weaken the bargaining position of my own superorganization."

He needed to think beyond his own perspective and the perspective of the Larkinson Clan these days.

Now that he had entered the game of high politics, he needed to be a lot more mindful of the repercussions of all of his decisions. His wife finally accepted the gravity of this troublesome situation. She furrowed her brows as she thought about how she could still attain her goal.

"Will you be able to ask for a Mentalist Crystal once your Red Collective has solved its ongoing impasse with the Hunting Association?"

"Yes, but do you understand how difficult that is? There is only one real chance of reconciling the two organizations before the start of the highly-anticipated founding ceremony of the Red Collective. I will be traveling to the Yernstall Star Node very soon to preside over this event and

open the doors of its brand-new headquarters. Since so many movers and shakers of human civilization will be attending this historic event as well, I plan to take care of a lot of other important business as well. One of them includes participating in a last-ditch effort to convince the Hunting Association to accept the jurisdiction of the Red Collective."

This was a really dubious attempt, but it was the last chance the Red Collective had left to bring what could arguably be described as the most powerful human sect at this time to heel.

"You are taking care of much more business while you are staying in Yernstall, correct?"

"That's an understatement." Ves chuckled. "I hear that there is a good chance that the Evolution Witch will be present to provide security for the founding ceremony and handle a few matters related to her future role in the Red Collective. I have been asking her office for months for a personal meeting with the god pilot, and I think I will finally get my chance at Yernstall. I have a couple of important... matters to discuss with her. I believe she may have her own reasons to seek me out and talk about important matters."

Ves intended to take care of a lot of important matters in the Yernstall Central Star Node. A great convergence was on the horizon. The culmination of many different plans was about to occur at the same place and time.

There was no way this was a coincidence. Everything was interconnected, somehow.

"What else will you be doing in Yernstall, Ves?"

"Well, I will be paying a personal visit to Starfarer Bay. I have already toured it by remote, but that is different from being physically present. I want to make sure one of our shipyards is working hard to churn out first-class sub-capital ships for our latest fleet according to the specifications that I have set."

"That shouldn't be all. You have been preparing for a more important and significant event. Do not deny it. I can tell from the way you return from your secretive design sessions aboard the Tarrasque. Are you finally ready to introduce your Carmine mechs to the dwarf galaxy?"

Ves assumed a grave expression. "I am. It's a bit rushed, but it is not as if I have any choice. This... is going to change everything. You and the kids will need to be prepared for a huge reaction towards my upcoming work. You will notice vastly greater security covering you all while I am gone."

"I see. This was going to happen sooner or later. No one can remain calm when the greater masses finally gain an opportunity to pilot mechs. This is a true paradigm shift."

#### Chapter 6330 Security Risks

Yernstall had become a focus of red humanity.

During these trying times where the Red Tide Offensive managed to topple 3 defensive bands, people had very few good developments to look forward to. The news from the frontlines remained bleak as the native aliens continued to leverage their superior numbers and resources to fulfill their goal of eradicating all humans in their dwarf galaxy.

The founding ceremony of the Red Collective was meant to revive people's hopes and give them an extra source of optimism.

The Red Collective was not just a regulatory organization. It was also meant to become a dominant power, one that was meant to organize up-and-coming cultivators and shape them into effective combatants that could contribute to the Red War in their own unique ways!

The founding ceremony was therefore way more than a symbolic occasion. The Red Collective and its many supporters had prepared numerous initiatives meant to give the new superorganization a lot of momentum.

From expanding kinship networks to a greater share of the population to setting up RC-sponsored academies to educate the next generation of cultivators for its own purposes, the founding ceremony would give people plenty of reasons to rejoice!

The introduction of Carmine mechs to the public could be considered as one of those events, though the Red Association insisted on claiming jurisdiction over this new category of mechs.

It didn't matter. As long as Carmine mechs dispelled some of the darkness that had overtaken red humanity, it would still provide a beneficial change. Ves did not want his civilization to collapse, after all. He would let the mechers have their toys.

There was still plenty of other stuff for Ves to look forward to in his capacity as a major leader of the Red Collective.

In the previous sessions he presided over, the councilors managed to fully flesh out the hierarchy and organizational structure.

The Upper Council and the Lower Council decided the overall policies and direction of the RC, but they did not run the superorganization directly.

That was the job of the executors, the heads of all of the departments of the Red Collective. They were the day-to-day leaders that were responsible for executing the policies accepted by the two Councils.

Ves readily admitted that he had played a sizable role in empowering the executors. As a mech designer, he was far too busy to take charge of every single issue related to the RC.

If people wanted him to become the leader of the Upper Council so much, then they should at least allow him to do so on a part-time basis. He would never be willing to sacrifice his main occupation for other job opportunities.

So long as the right executors got selected and put into their high offices, they would make sure that the Red Collective would run smoothly and according to the will of the Councils. This should massively reduce Ves' obligations and allow him to spend more time on his own priorities.

While empowering the executors would inevitably weaken the power of the councilors to an extent, Ves still believed it was a worthwhile tradeoff. He was more than willing to sacrifice a bit of power to free up a massive portion of his schedule.

He didn't even care if this would weaken his overall prestige and leadership position in the Red Collective. He was already fine with wielding a moderate amount of power and influence. Accepting any more would vastly increase his work obligations and keep him mired with irrelevant duties.

Ves even managed to set up the Councils so that people did not even have to attend the sessions in person at the Red Collective's new headquarters.

They could continue to attend the meetings by remote provided that they could guarantee reasonably stable and secure communication channels.



Ves even argued that this was the superior option to forcing the councilors to move to Yernstall on a permanent basis.

"The Red Collective is supposed to be different from the Red Association and the Red Fleet." Ves argued during a past session. "Our Collective should maintain much closer ties to the grassroots that form its fundamental base of support. How better to ensure we remain connected to the masses if our councilors continue to live among them? Yernstall is definitely a great place if it has become known as the Sapphire of the Red Ocean, but in my eyes it is just a giant ivory tower. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the mechers and the fleeters."

He almost couldn't believe this argument actually worked. A lot of councilors bought this excuse and agreed that there shouldn't be any problems with continuing to hold important council sessions in a purely virtual setting.

They could even broadcast the virtual council sessions to show the Red Collective's commitment to transparency!

A lot of important decisions made by the RA and the RF happened behind closed doors. They had no interest in showing transparency, not necessarily because they were shy or arrogant, but because they probably discussed a lot of topics on confidential matters.

The RC would probably do that as well, but Ves at least wanted to broadcast the sessions where the councilors talked about more mundane affairs just to make a statement.

Long story short, as long as Ves successfully set everything up, he could look forward to sitting back and let the RC run itself for the most part.

Ves only had to attend and preside over the sessions of the Upper Council every so often in order to set a new strategic direction or modify the current ones.

However, there was no way for him to avoid the first gathering of important figures. He needed to be present in Yernstall to show up, claim responsibility and earn much of the credit for bringing an endeavor as massive as the Red Collective to life.

Before Ves moved to the Yernstall Central Star Node, he still had to take care of a lot of preparations.

"The journey from New Constantinople to Yernstall will not take long, but do not underestimate the risks." Jovy Armalon told Ves. "We are confident we have managed to prevent or stifle any potential leaks relating to our Carmine mechs, but we cannot guarantee that others have learned about what we are busy with. Those whose interests are on track of getting harmed due to the abrupt rise of Carmine mechs will have many reasons to spoil this launch."

That caused Ves to look concerned. "Are you saying... that enemies may try to attack our Bluejay Fleet in transit so they can assassinate me in the hopes of strangling Carmine mechs in the cradle?"

"It is... a plausible scenario." Jovy said with a concerned expression. "Our intelligence agencies have not detected any signs of a serious assassination attempt against you, but if such a plot is truly in the works, then the journey from New Constantinople to Yernstall is by far the best window of opportunity to take away your life. Our fleet will not be easy to defeat after we have received temporary reinforcements, but it is still easier to attack it in the middle of nowhere than to launch an attack in New Constantinople or Yernstall."

It was very difficult for any secret force to arrive on New Constantinople VIII in large numbers.

The Devos Ancient Clan did a good job at controlling the inflow of traffic to the busy planet, and always tried to limit the mechs and other destructive hardware that people wanted to bring to the surface.

Approaching Diandi Base where Ves spent most of his time was also a difficult prospect. It was located in a rural part of the planet where any hostile approach easily stood out from the terrain.

The mechers had set up robust defenses and detection systems that were effective enough to sniff out infiltrators. A lot of sneaky bastards got caught due to underestimating how many checks and layers the mechers employed to prevent anyone from posing a threat to Ves and his family!

Ves suddenly had a feeling that he needed to consult Ylvaine for any early warnings about a possible assassination attempt.

There were many reasons for people to claim his head.

There were Cosmopolitans who still wanted to reap the bounty offered by the Red Cabal.

There were paranoid bastards among the Red Two that feared that Ves was working towards reviving the Five Scrolls Compact in the new frontier.

There were supporters of the Starfighter Corps and members of the existing mech community whose interests would be fundamentally threatened by the rise of Carmine mechs.

There were also members of the Red Two and numerous other organizations that really did not want to see the rise of the Red Collective!

Any one of these groups or more could have designs on Ves' life. It was already bad enough if they worked by themselves to launch a credible assassination attempt.

It would be much worse if they somehow discovered each other and collectively prepared an ambush!

In any case, Ves needed to stay on his toes during the entire strip to the central star node. Only after he arrived in Yernstall would he be able to relax and remain secure.

Sure, Yernstall was an incredibly busy place that attracted a lot of mechers, fleeters, Terrans and Rubarthans, but that also merited a very strict security regime.

Even if a nefarious party managed to overcome the strict prevention methods and come close to harming Ves, he could still count on Saint Tusa and his Dark Zephyr to squash most challengers!

Ves was allowed to bring along the ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan as his main security detail. His high position, importance and known enemies practically mandated this arrangement.

Even if Saint Tusa and his powerful Dark Zephyr were not up to the task of repelling the enemy assassins, then the Evolution Witch would definitely intervene to avoid everything spiraling out of control!"

Ves truly assumed that none of his enemies would be able to lay a single hand on him so long as he remained under the protection of a god pilot.

He would become vulnerable once more after his Bluejay Fleet transported him back to New Constantinople VIII, but by then, it was too late to many of his enemies.

"I really hope those reinforcements are something, because I have a feeling we will need their protection. Will we gain the protection of additional ace mechs?"

"None. You can only bring your own to Yernstall. Our ace pilots are already spread thin, as you know. Maintaining the 4th defensive band is still a critical endeavor."

Ves looked disappointed. There was another Larkinson ace pilot in the form of Saint Commander Casella Ingvar, but he doubted whether it was worthwhile to bring her along. Her Minerva Mark I Revision B was still a quasi-first-class expert mech and lacked the raw power and sophistication to keep up with first-class battles.

"Ugh." Ves rubbed his face with his palm. "I have nothing against your Bluejay Fleet. I would rather like it if my own organization can take care of security. I will see if I cannot scrounge a coalition fleet together by borrowing from the escort forces of all of those friendly faiths."

This could wait for later. Ves continued to listen to Jovy explain his itinerary.

"Whatever you do, make sure you clean up and present yourself at your best before the critical moment. You need to make a professional sales pitch to achieve the greatest possible impact. Once you have ignited a new war, you may be permitted to retreat and remain out of sight."

"What if the native aliens actually dare to attack the Yernstall Central Star Node?"

"Then you should do whatever you can to help our forces vanquish against these powerful foes, Ves. Reinforcements are always present. You only need to buy enough time for them to come and step in. I suggest you invest in a better and stronger shield generator."

"I'm a phase lord. I do not necessarily need such a gadget anymore. I would rather outfit myself with a fitting raiment."

"...You can do that as well."