

## The Mech 5991

### Chapter 5991 A Life of Struggle

Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was in pain.

For days on end, he spent his time lying on a bed that had been moved to the darkened mech workshop.

His stomach and gradually the rest of his body continued to suffer as tiny quantities of phasewater dispersed throughout his bloodstream and constantly threatened to tear open his veins and other body tissue.

"Nghh..."

He should have known that this would happen.

He was not ignorant about the consequences of ingesting phasewater. There were so many warning stories on the galactic net that even children knew better than to get into contact with this lethal substance.

Just because it had 'water' in its name did not mean it was drinkable!

Yet despite how foolish it was for him to do so, Tusa did not refuse Ves' challenge.

The competitive part of his mind irrationally wanted to accept the challenge.

Since Ves believed that Tusa could do it, then what was the harm of swallowing a bit of phase lord blood?

He already regretted this decision shortly after phasewater began to wreak havoc in his mind.

Fortunately, Ves was right that Tusa's willpower along with Blackwing's shadow control could exert just enough suppression to keep the phasewater in line.

It was not easy. Tusa constantly felt as if he was holding the leash of a bucking horse. He had to maintain constant focus and keep his willpower active on drops of phasewater that continued to circulate throughout his body.

While Tusa had reasons to feel confident that he could stay in control at first, as the struggle to exert his willpower and keep track of the phasewater in his body dragged on, he became increasingly more strained over time.

The difficulty of keeping phasewater in check constantly rose as a result. The struggle turned more and more life-threatening as Tusa found himself straining his willpower far longer than he used to whenever he was piloting his expert mech.

The battles he participated in never demanded Tusa to resonate with his mech and strain his willpower for hours or days on end!

Tusa had always considered himself to be a sprinter rather than a marathon runner. He excelled in quick and surgical strikes. Neither his combat approach nor the Dark Zephyr were suited for prolonged attrition warfare.

Yet that was exactly what he ended up with after ingesting a bit of phasewater!

Tusa cursed under his breath for the umpteenth time as he blamed Ves for accepting a challenge that happened to target one of his weaknesses.

"No wonder they call him the Devil Tongue!"

After accompanying Ves for so many years, Tusa finally fell victim to the patriarch's infernal persuasion.

The result was that Tusa unexpectedly entered into another struggle of his life!

The hours that passed since the expert pilot got hoodwinked by Ves had become one of the most difficult tests of his life.

The mental burden of exerting his willpower was already bad enough. Whenever he slipped up, he would have to endure the pain of feeling his own flesh shift in ways they shouldn't!

He already began to suffer a few instances of internal bleeding!

If not for the fact that his own piloting suit came with automated injury treatment functions, he would have been in much worse shape by this time!

Unfortunately, the suit had never been designed to neutralize or remove any phasewater that happened to enter his body. Tusa could only rely on his own efforts to keep his body whole.

"Pf! I am not going to let that smug bastard's blood defeat my resolve. This isn't the first struggle of my life!"

Since the day he was born in the Larkinson Family, he learned that he was a little different from his other cousins.

Many Larkinsons took pride in their names. The spouses that married into one of the relatively famous military families of the Bright Republic mostly abandoned their old family names in order to embrace a more honorable mantle.

Not so for Tusa's branch of the family. His parents and ancestors took pride in calling themselves the Billingsley-Larkinsons.

The implication at the time was that they considered the Billingsley Family on the same level as the Larkinson Family.

Although neither family objected to the union, the Billingsley-Larkinsons often stood out from the rest of their generation due to their names alone.

Tusa had to fight against the childish suspicions and faint exclusions of the other children he grew up alongside. There were times where he cried in his bed because his cousins treated him as if he was an outsider rather than a Larkinson.

For this reason, the first struggle of his life was to prove he was a genuine Larkinson!

There was little he could do to prove himself as a child. Neither the adults nor the other kids took him seriously.

However, Tusa quickly realized that the age of 10 was a watershed moment for every descendant of the Larkinson Family.

Each child who reached this age got tested for their genetic aptitudes.

A large majority of boys and girls came out of the testing room with crushed expressions. It was not strange for them to cry every day of the week as they failed to recognize reality.

Once they had no tears left to cry, the new teenagers reluctantly acknowledged the truth and went on to think about growing up to fulfill other jobs.

Tusa did not want to join their ranks. There was nothing wrong with becoming a norm, but the young Billingsley-Larkinson believed that it was ten times harder to prove that he was a part of the family if he failed to distinguish himself this way!

As a baseline human that never showed any notable talent, Tusa did not have anything special going for him. He was not an academic genius, nor an artist in the making.

Unlike his grandfather, he knew nothing about business and got bored whenever he was forced to learn how to manage real estate.

Tusa never wanted to study those boring subjects! He hated the thought of becoming a businessman!

If he was fated to become a norm, then at least he wanted to enlist in the Mech Corps in order to support the true heroes of the Bright Republic!

His odds were not the best. Unlike numerous other children, neither his parents nor grandparents were potentates. To children as young as Tusa, that meant that they probably faced an uphill battle when it came to acquiring the right genetic aptitude!

The worst part about growing up in that age bracket was the complete inability for children to improve their developing genetic aptitudes.

Each kid learned plenty of ways on how to reduce their chances of becoming a mech pilot.

In contrast, the Larkinsons always emphasized to their children that there was essentially nothing they could do to promote their chances. No matter whether they spent most of their time on playing sports, studying knowledge or socializing with each other, no single activity had ever been correlated with the development of the right genetic aptitude.

Getting their head hammered to the point of suffering actual brain damage was a surefire way to ruin one's genetic aptitude. Poor nutrition or outright starvation also weakened brain development to the point of sealing people's fates as norms.

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This left a lot of children anxious and restless as they approached the critical age. Every 9-year old kid became increasingly more aware that the first major turning point of their lives was about to arrive.

Tusa was no exception!

This was the only struggle where he truly felt helpless to change his fate. No amount of fighting or work could make a difference. He could only spend his days at school with constant doubts on his mind.

This was why the outcome of the test granted him so much relief.

"I'm a potentate! I can pilot mechs!"

Discovering that he not only possessed the right genetic aptitude, but also above the threshold required to pilot combat mechs in a serious capacity "My genetic aptitude is C! I can enroll in any mech academy!"

Third-rate states such as the Bright Republic never imposed high demands on genetic aptitude.

Many mech academies even accepted potentates with D-grade genetic aptitudes as they could still serve as cannon fodder once they learned how to pilot frontline mechs.

His life started to pick up after that. It was as if he finally received compensation for all of the doubts and misery of his early childhood.

Many other cousins failed to obtain the right genetic aptitude. The Larkinson Family always raised a lot of descendants with the obvious expectation that only a fraction of them would be able to serve in the Mech Corps as mech pilots.

Instantly, many boys and girls that previously pretended to be better Larkinsons than Tusa had no leg to stand on anymore. How dare these norms claim that Tusa was a fake when they couldn't even contribute to their state as fighters?

Tusa was over the moon. The Larkinson Family possessed excellent connections with numerous mech academies, so he had no issue with enrolling into one that already did a good job in training a lot of Larkinson descendants.

In fact, it was not unusual for retired Larkinson mech pilots to serve as mech instructors in those very same mech academies!

It was then that Tusa began the second struggle of his life.

"Mech piloting is hard."

It took 12 to 15 years of full-time studying and training in order to become a qualified mech pilot.

Tusa had to spend much of that time on learning math and science. Even if the mech academies dumbed all of the complicated science down, it was still difficult for the mech cadets to become proficient in subjects that did not interest them in the slightest!

Then Tusa had to exercise his body and practice personal combat skills. Since the combat effectiveness of a mech was highly dependent on the fighting skills of the mech pilot, mech academies always forced their cadets to become proficient fighters even without the involvement of a mech.

The physical training might not be too intense, but it often sapped their strength, causing them to retain less energy for other training!

The piloting sessions were the most enjoyable moments for the mech cadets. Tusa spent a lot of time on virtual reality training simulations where he could fool around with virtual mechs without worrying about breaking anything expensive.

Yet it was the realspace practice sessions that excited him the most!

The chance to interface with actual mechs granted him validation and allowed him to feel that he had become an actual Larkinson.

However, Tusa soon learned that piloting mechs was not easy.

It did not matter if he crashed a virtual mech, but the story was completely different with actual mechs. He could not afford to make any mistakes and often had to practice the same repetitive movements and actions over and over again until he completely mastered all sorts of operations.

Plenty of classmates began to overtake him. Tusa felt less worthy of the Larkinson name as his learning ability and his genetic aptitude failed to make him stand out from the rest of his fellow cadets.

Though the Larkinson Family always helped out its descendants by offering private training, they only helped Tusa up to a certain point.

It became too difficult for him to excel in any of his classes!

This was why he decided to specialize in a single mech archetype early on. If he wanted to become more than an ordinary grunt in the Mech Corps, then he needed to forget about mastering everything and put all of his effort into mastering a single mech.

This turned out to be a lot harder than he thought. As a young mech cadet, he had yet to develop his skills, let alone put enough time in becoming familiar with every possible mech type.

How the hell was he supposed to figure out his specialization without wasting so much time on training combat skills that ultimately became irrelevant?

#### Chapter 5992 Tusa's Anxieties

When Tusa looked back at his academy days, he thought of the central struggle that defined his teenage years.

Mech cadets with C-grade genetic aptitudes were not special at all. They were so common and dispensable that they needed to rely on other strengths in order to earn higher grades.

It was during those days that Tusa learned that being a Larkinson was not so great after all. Every fellow cadet looked at him and the handful of other Larkinsons among them with a lot of expectations.

It was as if the mech cadets were absolutely convinced that Larkinsons such as Tusa would be able to vanquish them in sparring sessions and reach the top of the ranking of their class!

Though growing up in the Larkinson Family indeed granted Tusa a lot of advantages, none of that translated into exceptional performance in any of his classes.

His fellow cadets soon began to change their faces when they encountered him. Though they did not harbor any ill intent towards a descendant of a notable military family, Tusa did not like their glances in the slightest.

He could guess their thoughts from the faint signs of doubt and content from their expressions.

They thought that Tusa was not good enough to bear the Larkinson name.

They dismissed Tusa as a talentless descendant who would never be able to make the Larkinsons proud.

They began to assume that the Larkinsons weren't as good as everyone thought. Perhaps the media constantly hyped them up in order to keep up morale whenever the Bright-Vesia Wars flared up again.

Tusa initially did not bear the weight of disappointment well.

His mood deteriorated and he found it harder to make friends with other cadets.

Commiserating with other Larkinsons cadets did not help that much either. It turned out that he was not the only member of the Larkinson Family who had to meet people's inflated expectations.

These were the days when Tusa treated his Larkinson name as a burden rather than a blessing.

Fortunately, the Larkinson Family was not ignorant of this problem. It had built up its reputation over many generations. Many descendants attended mech academies on Rittersberg and elsewhere, and there were always family members who discovered the downsides of bearing a famous name.

His name brought him far more grief than benefits as a young teenager looking to prove himself found himself unable to do as people already cast their judgment based on his disappointing class performance!

Fortunately, the Larkinson Family was not ignorant of this problem. It had built up its reputation over many generations. Many descendants attended mech academies on Rittersberg and elsewhere, and there were always family members who discovered the downsides of bearing a famous name.

During his stay at the Larkinson Estate, an uncle approached Tusa one day.

The older man looked down at the mech cadet that was sitting in the back garden of the Larkinson Estate as if he was an abandoned son.

"It is hard, isn't it, Tusa?"

The morose teenage potentate sighed. "Is this what every Larkinson has to endure when they enter a mech academy?"

"Not every Larkinson. Only the normal ones. There are only a few genuinely gifted ones who possess both talent and discipline. In my generation, Ark Larkinson stood out as the leader of us all. With his B+ genetic aptitude, he breezed through all of the piloting classes and won almost every sparring session. He also lived up to Elder Benjamin's legacy by being diligent and studious enough to rank at the top of his theoretical classes. Ark... was a monster who everyone thinks of when they hear any mention of the Larkinson Family."

Tusa twitched his lips. Just like any other Larkinson, he was quite familiar with Colonel Ark Larkinson's illustrious track record. The two were nothing alike!

"I can't measure up to that monster." The younger Larkinson said.

"You don't have to." The uncle reassured Tusa. "A talent like Ark only comes once every couple of generations. Most of us can't replicate his success. Instead of treating him as a role model, you should follow the example of other Larkinson potentates. Do you know that Ark has a younger brother who entered the mech academy a few years later?"

"Uhm..."

There were way too many members of the Larkinson Family for Tusa to remember the name of every relative. He only memorized the most important ones. Since he couldn't recall the name of Ark's younger brother, he probably wasn't a big deal.

The uncle smiled at Tusa. "Ryncol performed worse in every conceivable way. His genetic is C+, which is quite decent, but nothing special in comparison to that of his older brother. He is not as smart or diligent, so he scored much less in all of his theoretical classes. His discipline also wasn't the best, so he did not make the best use of his practice time. These issues became compounded by the constant looks of disappointment from his fellow cadets. Ryncol never had a chance of getting out of the shadow of his much more impressive brother. Do you think your suffering is any worse than that of Ark's younger brother?"

"No." Tusa admitted. "I don't have an older brother or sister who has set a lot of expectations on my family line. I am the first potentate among the Billingsley-Larkinsons in several generations. I... cannot imagine how Ryncol managed to survive the mech academy when he is always seen as Ark's inferior sibling. Did he manage to become a successful mech pilot?"

"He did. Ryncol managed to make it through the academy and enlist in the Mech Corps. He fought and survived the last Bright-Vesia War, which is a better result than most. While he hasn't managed to become an impressive expert pilot and mech commander like his older brother, Ryncol did not let down the Larkinson name in the slightest."

Tusa perked up when he heard his uncle's story.

If Ryncol was able to endure all of the disappointment and go on to become a veteran of the previous Bright-Vesia War, then how could Tusa do any worse?

"Can you tell me how Ryncol managed to do it, uncle?"

"It is not that difficult when you think about it. His first correct decision is to listen to the advice of his elders in the Larkinson Family. Benjamin had plenty of time to set Ryncol straight. His second correct decision is to stop getting captured by public opinion. So what if you are not a shining star like Ark? You are you. Instead of letting people's judgment of you drag you down, it is better to ignore it all and focus on your own development. Make your own goals. Set your own pace. Follow it through. This is all you need to do in order to graduate from a mech academy. Don't think about comparing yourself to better mech cadets, even if they are blood relatives."

This was exactly what Tusa needed to hear. He no longer felt as depressed as before. Ryncol's situation used to be a lot worse, but he managed to find his own way as a Larkinson mech pilot.

Tusa did not want to do any worse when his circumstances were not as bad as that of Uncle Ryncol!

That would be a personal failure that he would never be able to accept!

He was stronger than that! He was a Larkinson! He needed to go all-out in order to make his parents and grandparents proud!

Now that Tusa found a guiding light, he shifted his attention to his most pressing problem. He explained his difficulty in choosing a suitable specialization for himself.

"I am not like those Larkinsons who pick up a rifle or a sword the first time and instantly feel a connection with a weapon." The mech cadet spoke. "I don't have any favorite weapons, and it is difficult for me to choose which ones I like the most. I am so new and unfamiliar with wielding

them that I can't make a decision on which ones I should specialize in. I suppose I can wait until I become more familiar with the weapons, but I don't want to end up as a mediocre mech pilot. I want to achieve more in my career. What do you think I should do, uncle?"

"I can understand your difficulty. It is indeed difficult to excel in battle if you spend much of your early academy days on trying out so many different weapons. The only way you can solve this dilemma is to make a choice and hope that you are right."

"Is that it?" Tusa hesitantly asked

"Part of being a qualified soldier is to know when you need to make a move, even when you are operating with very little verified information. Since you don't have any obvious connection with any weapons, you should settle your choice by using another criteria. What sort of mech pilot do you want to become? What mech type speaks the most to you? Do you have any obvious favorites?"

"Now that I think about it, I... don't have a clear favorite. I don't like to pilot a heavy mech, but there are so many good points about light mechs and medium mechs that I can't make up my mind. As long as they are not too difficult to pilot, I am fine with piloting any mech type that falls within those weight classes."

The older Larkinson looked at Tusa with greater comprehension.

"You are obviously worried about the ease of piloting a mech. Why not specialize in piloting knight mechs if that is the case? They have the lowest skill floors. It is difficult to do bad when piloting them as it doesn't take much effort to shelter behind a thick and imposing tower shield."

Tusa thought for a moment. "That makes a lot of sense, but... I don't like to specialize in a knight mech just because it is easier to pilot. It feels like a copout to be honest. I do not want to define my career by making a cowardly decision."

"Knight mech pilots are not cowards, Tusa. They are brave and heroic in their own way. They have to face a large amount of enemy attacks head-on. They cannot flinch or move away because there are many comrades who rely on their protection."

While Tusa had nothing against knight mechs and those who specialize in them, he really did not want to shackle himself to a clumsy machine that was characterized by low mobility.

"I want to pilot something that gives me more choice and initiative." Tusa spoke.

"Then... what about light skirmishers?"

"What? That... is the other extreme! They are much more dangerous to pilot since they are so lightly armored. Besides, they move so quickly that I can't catch up to their speed. I am too slow. My genetic aptitude is not good enough to pilot these fast machines."

The uncle firmly shook his head. "I disagree. You do not understand light mechs as well as I do. There are many C-grade mech pilots who have done well while piloting light skirmishers. They don't have as many parts as larger machines, so the data throughput is not too great. Your genetic aptitude will not limit your ability to pilot a light skirmisher."

"Then what about reaction speed? According to the latest tests, my reaction speed is not poor, but it is not great either."

"Reaction speed can help, but if you look into it deeply enough, you will find that many successful light mech pilots throughout the Milky Way do not score particularly well in this area. There are many other strengths that can make a greater difference. Do you know why I think it is not a bad idea for you to specialize in piloting light skirmishers?"

"No. I don't think I fit the profile for this mech type." Tusa looked utterly confused.

"Forget about profile. What you should be thinking about is your goal and how much you are willing to endure in order to fulfill it. You don't want to become an average mech pilot. You want to become a champion, an expert pilot. To do that, you need to excel in combat, and that is difficult to accomplish with most mech types. You see, each of them require a lot of talent or a strong willingness to train with them day after day. I do not think this is suitable for you because I do not think you are interested in becoming a weapons master."

Compared to other Larkinsons, Tusa indeed found it difficult to muster up the same degree of passion when wielding a sword or a rifle.

"Then why tell me that I should think about specializing in light skirmishers?"

"Because it is the best way to transform your life."

Chapter 5993 The Virtue of Courage

Why specialize in light skirmishers?

Tusa was wondering about this ever since his uncle tried to nudge him in this direction.

In his impression, light skirmishers were not easy to pilot at all. Their mech frames may be smaller and simpler, but they moved and acted so quickly that the pilot in question needed to be incredibly sharp and responsible.

Light skirmishers had a reputation for being unforgiving machines. Though Tusa admittedly enjoyed it whenever he piloted a virtual light mech in a simulation program, that was because his clumsy operations and frequent mistakes never led to any permanent consequences.

He became a lot slower and more apprehensive whenever he piloted a light training mech during realspace practice sessions!

Even if the training versions of light skirmishers had been simplified to a very large extent in order to make them safe to control for younger mech cadets such as Tusa, he still performed worse than usual due to his constant worries!

"I like piloting light skirmishers." Tusa admitted. "I like the speed. I like how agile they move. What I don't like is how little it takes to ruin it and endanger my life in the process."

"No mech is perfect, Tusa. Many mech pilots regard light skirmishers as deathtraps, and they are not completely wrong about that. If you can overlook this fault, then you may find that they can offer a lot to you. In my opinion, you may have what it takes to do well if you decide to specialize in this mech archetype."

"Why? I don't understand, uncle."

"As I have explained to you before, having a good genetic aptitude and possessing faster reaction speeds definitely helps, but when people pilot light skirmishers in actual battle, it becomes clear that they are not the most important traits that decide whether you can win or lose a battle. This is

because light skirmishers rarely fight protracted duels against other powerful melee mechs. Something has gone horribly wrong if they are forced to use their short blades to overpower a swordsman mech or a spearman mech."

"Huh?"

Tusa had yet to learn any lessons related to matchups. Even so, growing up in the Larkinson Clan already allowed him to learn a lot about which sort of mechs fared better or worse against other kinds of machines.

In his opinion, light skirmishers might not be the strongest in melee combat, but they could hold their own against other melee mechs.

The older Larkinson smiled knowingly at Tusa. "Don't think that all of those virtual battles are all accurate. Real light skirmishers do not dare to rush the melee mechs they see and try to outfight their formidable opponents or die trying. Actual light skirmishers are more akin to vultures. They pick on the weak and avoid the strong. The reason why they are so maneuverable is that they can do more by taking advantage of weaknesses spread across the battlefield. It is not their job to fight a standing battle and fight tough battles against melee mechs that are larger, heavier and possess more leverage."

Tusa looked thoughtful as he processed this information. "Are you saying that I do not have to possess a lot of skill in knife fighting in order to do well in piloting light skirmishers?"

"It helps, but it is not the most important quality a light skirmisher pilot should have. The advantage of specializing in light skirmishers is that mech pilots do not have to be highly talented, skilled or superior in mind and body. As long as they are decent enough, they can defeat many enemies, save the lives of many comrades and make their mark in the history of our state."

That appealed to Tusa. In the time he spent in the academy, he already recognized that he would never be able to imitate the likes of Ark Larkinson.

That might be fine if all Tusa wanted to become was a normal mech pilot.

However, if he wanted to do well enough to have his name passed down to the Larkinsons of future generations, then he needed to find a way to do better!

Though Tusa was not entirely convinced that this was the right way to go, he became more and more interested in this direction.

"What quality does a mech pilot need the most in order to make the most out of a light skirmisher?"

"Courage." The uncle responded. "Yes, every mech pilot that fights for a living already possesses a degree of courage. However, it takes a lot more courage to pilot a light skirmisher as opposed to a heavy artillery mech. The more courageous you are, the greater the likelihood that you will rise to become a champion."

Tusa looked confused. Out of all of the possible answers, courage sounded like a meaningless answer.

"What difference does it make for a light mech specialist to possess a lot of bravery? Doesn't that make the pilot overly reckless to the point of becoming suicidal?"

"Hahaha! Bravery is not the same as courage! Most people don't think about it, but if you want to specialize in light skirmishers, then you must understand it well. Many servicemen of the Mech Corps are brave, yet that is not always good. To be brave is to confront your difficulties without fear. Brave mech pilots tend to be heroic and unflappable, but they are also prone to suffering avoidable casualties. Courage is different. Courage is recognizing the dangers of confronting a powerful enemy, but choosing to press ahead because it is the right thing to do. Courageous mech pilots do not erase their fears. They acknowledge it, but also overcome it in order to fulfill a greater goal."

If this was correct, then the differences were easy enough for Tusa to understand.

Brave mech pilots sounded like brainless fools that rushed in at the first sight of danger.

Courageous mech pilots could be equated to more thoughtful soldiers who voluntarily performed dangerous missions out of duty.

Tusa certainly knew which sort of mech pilot he preferred to be. His concern was whether he possessed enough courage in the first place.

"Can I... can I ever muster up the courage to not only pilot light skirmishers, but do better than others?"

"No one can say for sure." The uncle shrugged his shoulders. "It is not a mistake to feel apprehensive at the thought of piloting light skirmishers. Remember that courage does not require you to erase your fears. You can preserve them if you wish, but you need to defeat all of your fears if you want to excel in combat. No one can gift you courage. You need to build it up yourself. This will not be easy. I have seen many mech pilots who can only grow their courage for a short time until they hit a ceiling. At that point, their sense of duty cannot overcome their fears and their selfish desires anymore. That is not necessarily a fault, but as long as you understand their type, you will learn that they have no chance of becoming expert pilots."

Tusa narrowed his eyes. He began to comprehend his uncle's argument.

Courage was an essential quality to any mech pilot. It separated the good ones from the bad ones. It was one of the most essential criteria for breakthroughs.

Since expert pilots tended to possess a lot more courage than ordinary mech pilots, Tusa could not escape the fact that he needed to acquire lots of it. Since that was the case, he might as well specialize in piloting light skirmisher, which was a mech archetype that did not impose too many demands on talent, skill and physical qualities. As long as Tusa possessed a lot of courage, he had the makings of a great expert pilot!

Yet... it was not so easy for Tusa to bring himself to commit to such a high-risk mech type.

"How... how can I build up the courage to pilot light skirmishers well enough when I don't have much of a basis to begin with? My Larkinson bloodline doesn't do much for me, and you know how poorly I am doing in the mech academy. I have no source of confidence that I can rely on to produce enough courage."

"Who says that you need any of that in order to build courage?" The older man amusingly asked.

"The thing about bravery and courage is that you do not necessarily need to possess a good reason or any reason for that matter to build them up. Sure, it is much easier to gather bravery than

courage, but as long as you put in enough effort, I am sure that a fine mech cadet such as yourself can learn to overcome any fear in a matter of years."

"How?"

The uncle reached out and pressed his hand on Tusa's chest. "By believing in yourself. Nothing more is required. Every light skirmisher specialist has their own unique way of gathering lots of courage, but generally speaking, it is best not to overthink this. Just believe in yourself and go from there. So long as you can take the first steps in learning how to master the art of piloting light skirmishers, you will find that you are not as bad as you think. What you need to do is take this realization and use it to build up more courage. If you are successful enough, you will perform better with light mechs, which allows you to obtain additional courage, and so on. This is what people call a positive feedback loop. As long as you start it up, you will become good at this mech type just in time to start your career."

It sounded rather easy when the older Larkinson put it this way. Tusa did not believe it was that simple to gather so much courage.

However, he became convinced that courage may be the decisive factor that would allow him to attain greatness while piloting light skirmishers.

Many of his doubts and confusion faded away. Tusa still yearned to fulfill his original goal. If he did not want to turn his back on this, then the only way for him to go forward was to follow his uncle's advice and commit wholeheartedly to specializing in light skirmishers!

Even if his courage was not sufficient at this time, Tusa could still make up for it in the following months and years.

As long as he possessed the determination to become an expert pilot, then he could not allow himself to fail in this struggle!

The difficulty of breaking through to the rank of expert candidate was much greater than mustering up the courage to pilot a light skirmisher!

Tusa did not want to grow up to be a disappointment. Conquering the latter would give him much more confidence in conquering the former!

A fire burned in his heart. Tusa no longer felt as morose as before. Now that he obtained a solid direction on what he needed to do in order to fulfill his dream, he felt more motivated to do well in the academy than before!

As he stood up and faced his helpful advisor, Tusa made a sincere bow.

"Thank you for guiding me, uncle. I appreciate your efforts to cheer me up. You have helped me so much that I will probably remember this conversation for the rest of my life. If I ever achieve greatness... I will honor you as best I can. That is a promise."

The veteran Larkinson smiled in a good-natured manner. "I do not owe any credit for your success. You are family. Larkinsons should look out for each other. I offer my advice freely, so do not think you owe me anything. It is up to you to make something out of your mech piloting career. Any success you manage to attain in the following decades is largely thanks to your own hard work and effort. It will not be easy for you to build up your courage and avoid the many possible endings

along the way. If you manage to make it through this difficult gauntlet, then do your best to use your newfound power for good."

Tusa respectfully nodded in agreement. "I can't waste my time anymore. I feel the urge to go back and practice with as many virtual light skirmishers as possible. Before I go, can I have your name? You vaguely look familiar to me, but I don't recognize you. You are not a resident of the Larkinson Estate."

The older mech pilot grinned in response. "I am not. After the last war, I chose to get away from the center of it all. I have settled on a quiet and boring planet called Cloudy Curtain. I have a son who is roughly your age who is just starting to become a mech designer. Perhaps he will design a nice mech for you one day. As for my name, you may call me Ryncol. Ryncol Larkinson."

Tusa reacted with astonishment when he finally learned the name of his benefactor!

"You... you..."

"Yes. I am 'that' Ryncol. I am the younger, less talented and less successful brother of Colonel Ark Larkinson. I have made my fair share of mistakes in my life and career, but... I do not regret any of them. I hope that my advice will serve you better. If you truly want to step on the path to godhood, then you must build up the courage to face greater challenges, or die in the process. I hope that you will embark on this journey with open eyes. There may be times where you are asked to confront threats so severe that they may lead to certain death. The strongest pilots are formed in these crucibles. Expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots emerge exactly because they have mustered up the willpower to override their doom!"

Tusa remained inspired by Ryncol Larkinson's words for a long time.

## Chapter 5994 The Purpose of Skirmishing

When Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson chose to specialize in piloting light skirmishers, he fully committed to this decision.

Good mech pilots always acted decisively once they settled on a strategy. The Larkinson Family taught him that. There was a time and place for doubts and second-guessing, but doing so after the order had been issued was counterproductive.

Tusa knew that committing to light skirmishers would lock in his career trajectory forever. All of the time spent on improving his capacity to pilot light mechs took away time he could have spent on improving his competence with other mech types.

As a young teenage mech cadet, it was impossible for Tusa to possess absolute certainty in his chosen course of action.

There were many times throughout his teenage years where he couldn't help but question whether he had made the right choice.

Was he truly cut out to become a light skirmisher pilot?

Had he inadvertently missed out on discovering that he was much more suited to pilot another kind of mech?

What if he possessed a lot of talent in piloting heavy knight mechs, yet never found out because he did not sign up for the optional classes that allowed him to train in this mech type?

These questions and more constantly haunted him. Whenever he thought about giving in to his doubts, Tusa thought back on the advice provided by Ryncol and his other aunts and uncles.

The father of Ves Larkinson was not the only family member who offered guidance to him. Tusa rediscovered the benefits of carrying the Larkinson name when he freely obtained guidance from a handful of light skirmisher pilots within the family.

No Larkinson veteran refused to offer their advice to the younger generations of their family. It did not matter who his parents were or how well he performed in the mech academy. The older generations did not discriminate or play favorites.

As far as the current mech pilots of the Larkinson Family were concerned, they possessed an unbreakable obligation to assist in raising mech cadets that followed in their footsteps.

The better the future mech pilots of the Larkinson Family became, the greater the likelihood that they would survive the next Bright-Vesia War that would inevitably erupt!

The Larkinson Family existed long enough to live through periods when entire generations of mech pilots became decimated after the war.

Although there were always plenty of norms left in the family to rejuvenate the bloodline, the loss of so many mech pilots always dealt a severe blow to the survivors!

This was why the Larkinsons developed such a strong collective attitude towards raising the next generation.

In any case, Tusa's love and affection for his family deepened during this period.

Tusa studied alongside descendants of other powerful families, but their internal relationships were a lot more turbulent.

Even though he had no interest in gossip, he couldn't help but overhear instances of intrigue where different branches of the same family tried to sabotage each other.

All of those stories only made Tusa more appreciative of the unconditional love and support of the Larkinson Family.

It was only later on that he understood that the reason for this was because the Larkinson Family possessed a strong military orientation.

Although the Larkinsons managed a sizable portfolio of real estate and business investments, they were ants compared to the true movers and shakers of the Bright Republic!

The prevalence of honorable mech pilots and the lack of strong economic interests engendered a lot of harmony within the family.

Sure, the Larkinsons were a lot poorer and couldn't afford as many luxuries as the members of the founding families, but Tusa never had any reason to complain.

From the moment he chose to specialize in piloting light skirmishers, his performance in his classes began to improve straight away.

He recognized that much of it came from his newfound sense of confidence and certainty. The doubts and hesitation that tormented him in the past no longer distracted him anymore.

Now that he found his mission and direction, Tusa was able to put more focus in his classes. This alone was enough to overcome his lack of talent and his average learning ability.

Although every mech cadet needed to become proficient in piloting knight mechs and rifleman mechs, they could all choose to forgo more advanced classes on those mech types if they no longer saw any need to branch out any further.

There were still mech cadets who remained undecided about their future choice, but Tusa was different.

Once he ceased to take any further classes in wielding swords, spears, rifles and so on, he was much more able to concentrate on wielding knives and daggers in combat.

Of course, Tusa was hardly the best knife fighter in his class. No matter whether he practiced with a single weapon or dual weapons, he regularly got trounced by classmates who practiced with them a lot longer or possessed greater fighting ability than himself.

If it was the Tusa of before, he would have felt crushed and disappointed that he failed to live up to his Larkinson heritage.

However, after getting enlightened by Ryncol, Tusa no longer fixated on becoming the best duelist.

A good light skirmisher pilot did not have to be able to defeat every opponent head-on. He just needed to be able to fulfill his objectives, which wasn't always the same.

Some of the tactical classes reinforced this lesson.

"Why are light melee mechs called light skirmishers?" A mech instructor and retired veteran asked in front of his class of mech cadets. "That is because they are designed to skirmish. These light mechs are not meant to form solid battle lines or clash against enemy mechs in the center. They do not have the weight or firepower to keep up against their heavier counterparts. Light skirmisher mechs are the equivalent to light infantry in humanity's pre-space period. The latter usually consist of light armored irregular troops that provide a screen for the main army and fulfill a variety of objectives, ranging from scouting, harassment, anti-harassment and more. The overall purpose of doing all of this is to soften up an enemy force and possibly win the battle before it has even started."

In order to make this clearer to the mech cadets, a projection appeared that showed simulations of ancient battles. All sorts of messy infantry stalked the forests and roamed across the lands while looking for enemy troops.

Whenever the skirmishers encountered foes, they used slings, javelins and later on rifles to take potshots at their targets.

If the enemy consisted of heavy infantry or other powerful unit types, then the skirmishers only stuck around for a short time before retreating. This left their enemies unable to retaliate!

The simulated clips also showed other instances where light skirmishers made themselves useful.

They circled behind enemy lines and destroyed the supply trains that kept enemy armies fed.

They generated mischief at the periphery of an army camp, creating noise and launching projectiles throughout the night in order to prevent enemy soldiers from enjoying a good night's sleep.

They chased after routed enemy soldiers, relying on their lighter loadouts to catch up to fleeing troops. The skirmishers either forced the soldiers to surrender or outright killed them in order to deny precious manpower to the enemy.

"What is your first impression of skirmishers?" The mech instructor asked.

"They do not fight as honorably as line soldiers." A mech cadet spoke.

"Correct. Do you think that is wrong, cadet?"

"Uhm... maybe... honor is not as important as winning."

The mech instructor looked disappointed when he heard this answer.

"If you think that light skirmisher specialists have to abandon their honor in order to do their jobs, then you are sorely mistaken. Skirmishing used to be performed by irregular and non-professional combatants. This is why far too many people considered it to be dishonorable, but this does not have to be the case. In modern mech combat, skirmishing is a vital and honorable activity. Many missions that used to be performed in the past by skirmishers still need to be performed today. From scouting to raiding vulnerable enemy artillery units, larger and slower mechs cannot fulfill these roles as well as light skirmishers."

Tusa along with every other cadet that decided to take classes related to light skirmishers thoroughly learned what this specialization entailed.

Light skirmisher pilots had to adopt a substantially different mindset and approach towards combat.

They needed to be accustomed to operating by themselves or in small, isolated mech units.

They needed to be able to venture so deep into the field that they may cross into enemy territory.

They needed to learn how to operate independently for days on end without counting on any form of support.

One of the most important lessons the mech instructors taught was knowing when to commit and when to retreat.

"Many light skirmisher pilots need to learn how to read the battlefield and make decisions on their own." An instructor lectured to his class. "Do not expect mech lieutenants or mech captains to be present and hold your hands all of the time. Centralized command will not be present as heavy jamming and the need to keep your presence hidden will cut you off from any communication networks. Whenever light mechs encounter a vulnerable gathering of enemy mechs, the pilots of the former must decide if it is worth the risk to attack. In many cases, the answer to this question will be no. It is better for the light skirmishers to keep their distance than to commit to a fight."

The mech instructor adopted a stern expression. "I cannot tell you how many friends and comrades I have lost because they chose differently. It is foolish to start a fight where your side will lose as many mechs as the enemy. Light skirmishers are not supposed to fight equal battles. Just because you have a chance to attack does not mean you have to take it. Always maintain your awareness of the battlefield. Understand your place in it and how you can best contribute to your objectives. In many cases, the best course of action is not to go on the attack, but to do nothing."

The mech cadets all looked puzzled at that. How could they win a battle by doing nothing?

"Are you doubting my answer? You should not. I will present many combat scenarios over the course of this semester where you shall learn that light skirmishers can already contribute to a battle by hovering in the background. You see, light skirmishers are valuable because they can act as a restraint. The threat of taking action can already prevent the enemy from acting too unscrupulously. For example, an enemy mech army will become much more reluctant to launch an all-out assault when the opposing commander is aware that light skirmishers are waiting to swoop in on his vulnerable backline. This is but one of many examples where a company of light mechs can achieve more results than an entire mech regiment!"

Tusa grew fascinated by the tactical significance of light skirmishers. The lack of strong direction and coordination bothered him, but he also became attracted by the agency of this mech type.

A good light skirmisher pilot could easily affect the entire flow of battle by relying on underhanded means such as raiding supply lines, threatening enemies into assuming a defensive posture and picking on the weak!

Sure, none of these actions sounded particularly honorable, but professional light mech pilots always made sure they adhered to a strong bottom line.

Tusa learned that as long as his intentions were noble, he would still be able to remain as upright as any other mech pilot!

Although Tusa never considered himself to be particularly smart or cunning, piloting light skirmishers still appealed to him because they indeed did not require him to possess the best fighting skills.

Just as Ryncol said, he just needed to possess the courage to take action whenever he judged it necessary.

Being too reckless was a surefire way for a light skirmisher pilot to perish in battle, but being too timid would never allow the same pilot to exceed his limitations and become an expert pilot!

If Tusa wanted to become a champion that would always be remembered by the Larkinsons, then he needed to balance between courage and forbearance.

## Chapter 5995 The Power of Incremental Improvement

By the time Tusa neared graduation, he had become a much different Larkinson than before.

He grew taller and more athletic.

His endurance had improved remarkably as he had taken on long-distance running as a sport.

Light skirmishers often traversed the longest distances in a typical engagement. They were expected to circle around the battlefield and perform exhaustive scouting duties.

It made sense for Tusa to exercise his body by running a lot. Not only did the act of jogging clear his mind and allow him to review his prior lessons, but he also felt that he was becoming more in tune with how light skirmishers were supposed to operate in the field.

The more he began to become proficient in them, the more he learned how he needed to be patient.

Tusa learned that many of the simulated combat scenarios contributed to a distortion impression on what light skirmisher pilots were supposed to do when deployed in the field.

The simulated battles between virtual mechs often skipped out on a lot of boring sequences where light mechs tended to be most active.

Before Tusa learned to be courageous, he first needed to learn how to maintain restraint.

Light skirmishers were not that powerful when confronting other mech types on equal ground.

Sure, Tusa frequently became impressed when a light skirmisher outfight a swordsman mech or a knight mech in the mech arenas, but competitive fighting was not representative of real combat.

The Bright-Vesia Wars taught the Brighters how light skirmishers should actually fight.

Every lesson and every combat tactic had been tested millions of times over dozens of wars.

The mech academies of the Bright Republic had long phased out any lessons that proved to be useless or counterproductive.

Combined with the private tutoring from the veteran soldiers of the Larkinson Family, Tusa made steady gains with each passing year.

He did not improve as quickly as the most talented mech cadets, but Tusa made sure to always attend his practice sessions and grind away at his own pace.

Whereas the grades of many of his fellow cadets bounced up and down due to family drama, motivation problems, relationship issues, injuries and so on, Tusa steadily stood out due to his consistency.

He learned from Ryncol's example and did not allow others to affect the training and studying plan he set in advance.

Tusa was ambitious. He did not let go of his goal of becoming a mech pilot. Yet he could not possibly rise above the crowd from the beginning like Uncle Ark.

This was why he decided to become the tortoise instead of the hare. He constantly reminded himself that as long as he kept improving, it shouldn't matter too much that he was taking his time.

His steady pace of improvement also allowed him to work on building his courage.

Tusa did not attempt to pursue quick gains. He just set small challenges for himself and tried his best to fulfill them over the course of a day or a week. The important part was that the challenges had to be beyond his current means. There was no gain in courage if he tried to pull off a move he already mastered.

Doing it once or twice was not impressive at all. Any of his fellow cadets could do the same.

Yet as long as he continued to expand his skillset, he eventually managed to make the jump from piloting landbound light skirmishers to aerial light skirmishers.

This was a massive improvement in his development. Aerial light skirmishers tended to be a lot more mobile, but also became a lot more exposed to the enemy.

It took a lot of guts for Tusa to specialize in aerial mechs and light ones at that. However, he mustered up the courage to commit to it anyway because he gained much more agency and room for development.

Not only would he be playing a more important role on the battlefield, he could also branch out to spaceborn light skirmishers with much greater ease.

It was a lot more frightening for Tusa to pilot aerial light mechs knowing that there were many more ways for him to die.

The lack of cover and the absence of solid ground made Tusa extremely conscious about how easily enemies could snipe his light skirmisher from the skies.

He became forced to strengthen his ability to leverage the strongest advantage of any light mech.

He learned how to become good at evasion.

Fortunately, the mech academy dedicated entire classes towards evasion, anticipating enemies and reading the battlefield for the purpose of avoiding strong anti-air defenses.

There was so much depth and nuance about how to survive and thrive as a successful light skirmisher pilot that Tusa constantly found new challenges for himself.

He successfully managed to create the positive feedback loop described by Uncle Ryncol. It sounded so simple, but it gave Tusa so much satisfaction and fulfillment. Both his skills and his courage grew with each passing year.

By the time he graduated from the mech academy, he not only earned grades that he could be proud of, but also gained an easy entry into the Mech Corps!

That was where his true life as a mech pilot began.

Everything he learned in the mech academy was child's play compared to the training he received in a military environment.

The abundance of real war veterans and the use of actual military mechs as training devices gave Tusa a real taste of mech warfare!

It just so happened that the last Bright-Vesia War to ever erupt in the Komodo Star Sector kicked off just as Tusa gained enough proficiency in piloting the predominant aerial light skirmisher models of the Mech Corps!

Tusa still remembered his experiences during the brief but intense war.

The Bright Republic and the Vesia Kingdom had clashed against each other so many times that they understood each other well.

On the one hand, this was good as the Brighters had learned how to excel in fighting defensive battles.

On the other hand, this was bad because the Vesians had become masters on how to breach strong defenses!

The Vesian Mech Legion crossed the border between the two third-rate states and assailed many different planets at once.

Lesser star systems fell quickly, but the more strategic nodes became host to a lot of bloody actions.

It was during the start of this war where Tusa started his third struggle of his life.

"I don't want to survive the war." He told himself as he remained on standby in the cockpit of his dormant mech. "My life should have greater meaning than becoming another retired veteran who passes on his wisdom to the next generation. If I want to be remembered, then I need to fight like a god, not as a man!"

He decided to use the same approach as before. He fought cautiously at first, knowing that rookies without any real combat experience like himself shouldn't be roaming around the battlefield like he owned the place.

Tusa could never fight like a god. He would die in the first few minutes after deploying on the battlefield.

He decided to use the same approach as before. He fought cautiously at first, knowing that rookies without any real combat experience like himself shouldn't be roaming around the battlefield like he owned the place.

He followed orders, he listened to the advice of the veterans in his units and tried his best to build up a reputation for being a reliable soldier.

Tusa learned from the other Larkinsons that he needed to learn how to walk before he could run.

So that was what he did. He tempered his excitement and abided by his fears. He avoided action whenever he perceived a substantial amount of risk and did not try to earn commendations.

This turned out to be a prudent course of action. Many light skirmisher pilots either lost their mechs or died within the first months of the war.

Meanwhile, Tusa not only managed to keep his mech in one piece, but also improved rapidly just by doing his best to stay alive whenever he deployed on a contested planet!

It turned out that the Mech Corps used the first half year of every Bright-Vesia War to separate the chaff from the wheat.

Tusa only learned later on that the military only truly began to develop the potential of its younger mech pilots after they had proved themselves in the field.

As a Larkinson, Tusa already received recognition in advance, but his diligent performance earned him a promotion to more elite mech units.

Tusa began to pilot more powerful and capable aerial light skirmishers. His responsibilities also increased. He received more dangerous missions and found himself mustering up the courage to take riskier actions than normal.

All of this would have overwhelmed him if he started to fight like this right after graduation, but because Tusa took the time to grind his way to elite status, the adaptation process was not as abrupt as he feared.

When the Vesians steadily pushed the battle lines closer and closer to the Bentheim System, Tusa eventually had his dream come true.

He broke through.

He exceeded his limitations and pierced the veil that prevented him from exceeding his own mortality.

He became an expert candidate!

From the moment he returned from battle with a half-broken aerial light skirmisher and much stronger willpower than before, Tusa knew back then that he had finally lived up to the expectations of the Larkinson Family.

"I'm an expert candidate..."

Even though expert candidates only possessed a minute fraction of the power of an expert pilot, it was the starting point for every mech pilot who yearned for greatness!

A huge number of Larkinsons and other soldiers grew envious at Tusa for being one of the few mech pilots who managed to cross this critical threshold.

While there were no guarantees that expert candidates could advance to expert pilots, the success rate was a lot higher!

No expert candidate lacked confidence in himself. From the moment he gained a taste of what it was like to wield the power of a demigod, Tusa's courage swelled as he became confident that he could break through so long as he threw himself into enough pitched battles.

Then, the Bright-Vesia War came to an end.

Tusa became perplexed. So did many other soldiers of the Mech Corps.

"How could the war end so early? Shouldn't it drag on for a couple more years?"

All kinds of rumors circulated. Tusa even heard that his cousin Ves actually played an integral role in facilitating the peace talks!

Whatever the case, Tusa became crushed.

Although he knew that it was of great benefit to the Bright Republic that the Vesian troops withdrew from its space, Tusa felt incredibly regretful that he no longer possessed a stage where he could become the star of his own show.

He felt guilty for harboring these selfish thoughts. Shouldn't he prioritize the protection of his state and its citizens over his own desire to become an expert pilot and a hero of the Larkinson Family.

Tusa became lost as the Mech Corps steadily winded down its troop deployments.

Once the Bright Republic retreated from its war footing and entered into a recovery period, Tusa no longer had any chance to prove himself in the cauldron of war.

He needed to find combat elsewhere. If that meant leaving the Mech Corps, then so be it. He could always rejoin the military once he managed to become an expert pilot elsewhere.

It just so happened that the Larkinson Family wanted to allocate more family members to Ves' growing organization.

Tusa had no idea at the time what he was in store for. How could he have known that serving under the craziest and most audacious mech designer of his generation could lead Tusa from a quiet corner of the Milky Way to the frontlines of a displaced Red Ocean?!

One thing was for sure, though.

Tusa received plenty of opportunities to prove himself.

Ves possessed such a strong ability to attract trouble that Tusa unwillingly found himself fighting against enemies he couldn't even imagine in his wildest dreams!

Suffice to say, Tusa felt very ambivalent about fighting under Ves.

#### Chapter 5996 Constraint on Offensive Power

As Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson continued to exert his willpower to keep the phasewater of his body in check, he had plenty of time to reflect on his time of service in the Larkinson Clan.

"Damnit, Ves..."

He continued to lie on his bed while his piloting suit occasionally injected fluids and nutrients to sustain his body.

There was no need for him to visit the bathroom and risk losing his focus as his advanced suit took care of that business with as little distraction as possible.

While much of his attention was directed towards tracking and suppressing the drops of phasewater dispersed throughout his body, he stayed awake for so many hours that he could still reflect on his turbulent service in the Larkinson Clan.

Tusa still resented Ves for setting events into motion that ultimately led to the downfall of the Larkinson Family and the deaths or arrests of so many family members.

Even though many Larkinsons at the time had moved on from that dark period of their history, Tusa never forgot that Ves was the main culprit behind those tragedies.

The Larkinsons became exiled from the Bright Republic.

What was worse was that the Larkinsons also became split. The old family led by Ark Larkinsons turned mercenary for a time, while the clan founded by Ves grew explosively now that he had unshackled himself from the Bright Republic.

One of the reasons why Tusa felt so ambivalent about joining the clan was because he grew much stronger than he ever could have imagined.

He knew that if he continued to serve in the Mech Corps as a member of the Larkinson Family, he might be able to advance to the rank of expert pilot, yet would likely retire as one.

Third-rate states such as the Bright Republic could not support the development of ace pilots. Third-class expert mechs simply weren't powerful enough to boost the growth of more powerful expert pilots.

Tusa did not have to worry about that problem while serving under a mech designer like Ves.

Unfortunately, the privilege of piloting the Blueshift, a custom mech designed by Ves, came with a heavy price.

Too many Larkinsons died in those early days. Even when Ves made the radical decision to open the clan to widespread recruitment, Tusa still bore the guilt of failing to save as many lives as he could.

No matter whether the clansmen were trueblood or adopted, Tusa had an obligation to protect them from harm.

He might not be as extreme about it as his cousin Jannzi, but he still lamented every Larkinson that fell in battle, even if the individual in question accepted the risks of becoming a soldier.

It was because of Ves' persistent habit of throwing the Larkinsons into battle that Tusa developed a greater urgency to grow stronger.

As long as he became strong enough to single-handedly dominate a battlefield, he could reduce the amount of casualties by as much as 90 percent!

It all came to a head during the Battle against the Abyss.

He could never have imagined that inside the Nyxian Gap, he along with the rest of the Larkinson Clan was forced to confront an armada of pirate warships as well as three 'dark gods'!

Tusa gained a much better understanding of what they were today, but back then he became overwhelmed at the enemies he was supposed to fight against.

The Blinding One. The Inexorable One. The Unending One.

Those were the names used by the pirates and the cultists of the Nyxian Gap.

He did not really care too much about the effort to defeat the Blinding One and the Unending One.

All he remembered from that life-changing battle was his attempts to stop the Inexorable One.

He despaired at first. How was he supposed to defeat a giant avian beast made out of energy that flew faster than his mech and was impossible to slow down?

Combined with an aggressive and opportunistic mindset, the Inexorable One terrorized the fleet of the Larkinson Clan.

Seeing that the big bird was about to slay a lot of Larkinsons, Tusa finally couldn't take it any longer and triggered his apotheosis!

He could remember it even now. He not only managed to push back the Inexorable One, but also managed to avoid the avian entity's energy vortices!

Tusa finally understood his true strength for the first time.

It was freedom.

He had conquered many of his struggles by freeing himself from the constraints that held him back.

Whether it was the expectations set by his fellow mech cadets or the obstacles placed by his enemies, Tusa defeated them all by denying their ability to hinder his efforts!

It felt so liberating to gain the power to ignore the obstacles in his way and achieve his goals in ways that his enemies did not expect!

After that battle, Tusa thought that his career would truly begin as he finally gained the power of an expert pilot.

The reality was less than ideal.

It took a long time for Ves and Gloriana to design and deliver the promised expert mech.

Fortunately, the wait was worth it. The Dark Zephyr was far greater than the typical low-tier expert mechs that the Mech Corps issued to its expert pilots.

The Dark Zephyr was a living mech, one that had been tailored for Tusa's use from beginning to end.

Even though the machine wasn't able to speak or communicate with clear sentences at the time, Tusa already knew that he would start an unforgettable partnership with the expert light skirmisher.

Years went by as Tusa continued to get dragged in battle on occasion. He was glad that Ves started to become more measured when it came to seeking confrontation.

However, the fateful decision to relocate to the Red Ocean brought so many changes and advancements that Tusa felt as if he could never take the time to settle down.

So much had happened during the end of the Age of Mechs.

Tusa fought for the Larkinson Clan much longer than he did for the Mech Corps.

He developed his piloting skills and steadily exercised his willpower.

He married Ranya Wodin-Larkinson and started a family with the director of the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

Life was going well for Tusa. Even if his progress started to slow down due to the lack of intensive battles, the relative period of calm and stability allowed him to polish his newly developed skills and consolidate all of the gains he made in the previous years.

Just as Tusa thought that he would be able to grind his way up again by participating in the Trailblazer Expedition, the Great Severing occurred!

His entire life got caught by events outside of his control yet again.

The Red War turned into an existential crisis to red humanity.

Ves decided to become a lot more high profile and attract lots of unwelcome attention in the process.

The expeditionary fleet continued to fight against alien raiding fleets, yet without the presence of Ves, several Larkinson expert pilots and a heap of veteran soldiers.

Nothing was the same anymore. While the combined leadership of the Golden Skull Alliance was a lot more rational than Ves, the native aliens got a lot more serious as well!

Tusa should have felt glad about getting into more fights, yet he felt anything but satisfied.

"Those alien warships are too frustrating to fight against!"

Even the worst alien warships took a lot of effort to destroy. Their transphasic defenses resisted a lot of attacks and their abundance of powerful gun batteries always exacted a price from the Larkinson Army.

If not for the fact that the expeditionary fleet was accompanied by several ace mechs belonging to the other partners of the Golden Skull Alliance, the Larkinsons would have lost a lot more mechs and mech pilots from the repeated engagements!

Some expert pilots started to unleash their greater potential. Venerable Isobel Kotin was a good example of that. Her Promethea was exceptionally good at burning down entire warships, so much

so that she had to restrain her firepower for fear of turning every salvageable hull into worthless slag!

Tusa had a much worse time in comparison. He entered into a brand new struggle where he tried to figure out his place in the battles of the Red War.

Light skirmishers had a place in battles between mechs.

They had never been designed to fight in a battle between mechs and warships!

Even at the expert mech level, the Dark Zephyr often struggled to neutralize enemy warships fast enough.

The Shadow Dance that he learned from a mysterious fruit gifted by Ves had become irrelevant in the face of powerful transphasic energy shields and hulls so big that they could fit entire cities.

Tusa considered it to be a shame that he was forced to equip his Dark Zephyr with transphasic grenades in order to defeat enemy warships fast enough.

He had no objections towards the existence of these powerful grenades.

He just felt it was a personal failure for him to resort to these expensive boondoggles just so that he could carry his own weight.

Compared to more destructive expert pilots such as Venerable Davia Stark and Commander Casella Ingvar, his capacity to inflict damage was the lowest!

Not even the fact that he managed to master a powerful ability called the Leap of True Freedom could change this fundamental shortcoming.

Tusa frequently thought back on what it meant to be a light skirmisher specialist.

Light skirmishers were irregular combat units. They were never meant to confront enemies head-on. They were supposed to keep their distance from enemies that outmassed them and outgunned them. They were also supposed to rely on the superior firepower of other mechs to make up for their lack of offensive power.

The more Tusa thought about it, the more frustrated he became.

Even though he agreed with the doctrine built around light skirmishers, he personally felt frustrated by the fact that he became so powerful, yet also stayed weak at the same time!

His anger and frustration stimulated his willpower and caused the surrounding shadow energy to deform around his body.

His grievances about his lack of hard combat power caused him to look forward to the long-awaited upgrade of the Dark Zephyr even more.

Tusa opened his eyes and glanced towards the distance. Though much of the mech frame was dimly lit, the expert pilot could still see and feel his high-tier expert mech being reconstructed a single piece at a time!

It would not be long before he finally gained an opportunity to command more power than ever.

He particularly looked forward to activating the Dark Wind Module that promised to transform his Dark Zephyr to a much more powerful threat than before!

Even though the Ultimate Module was highly experimental and had never been properly tested, Tusa believed in Ves' work.

His eyes burned as he thought of all of the ways his upgrade expert mech could shatter powerful alien warships by destructively phasing through their hulls.

From the moment the Dark Zephyr completed his latest transformation, he would no longer become trapped by the constraints of the light skirmisher archetype.

The Dark Wind Module effectively freed his battle partner from the expectation that light skirmishers were unable to inflict powerful blows!

Tusa looked forward to his own liberation as well. The expected capabilities of the Dark Zephyr Mark III promised to open up his options and allow him to fight much more aggressively than before!

"Ah!"

His mind became so distracted that he failed to suppress the small amount of phasewater circulating in his left arm.

Muscles tore apart while blood spurted from the open wound!

Fortunately, his piloting suit instantly reacted by pressing on the tear in his skin and injecting nanomachines that rapidly restored and knitted the damaged tissue back together.

The painful slipup reminded Tusa that before he could fully enjoy his transformed expert mech, he first needed to transform his body to remove its weakness against phasewater!

Tusa had managed to overcome many challenges throughout his life and career.

He refused to let this one break his will!

## Chapter 5997 Restrained Upgrades

The Dark Zephyr Mark III gradually began to take shape.

Ves and Gloriana worked with utmost concentration, as much as they could under the circumstances.

Ves clearly coped a lot better with the abnormal environment than his wife. The mutated Living Workshop ability rendered the entire hall into a space where he felt completely at home.

They already obtained a lot of relief by overcoming a major hurdle. They successfully transformed a large batch of expensive and high-quality resources.

Ves did not hesitate to add another massive expense to the Larkinson Clan by investing over 500 million MTA credits in rare hyper materials, high-performance light-weight exotic alloys and exclusive composite materials.

Many of these materials could only be found in first-class expert mechs!

While the materials far exceeded the parameters of second-class mechs and quasi-first-class mechs, they were considered serviceable but not exceptional when compared to genuine first-class expert mechs.

Although Ves tried his best to future proof the Dark Zephyr by anticipating the living mech's needs once Tusa grew stronger and transferred to the Premier Branch, there was a limit to how much he could elevate the machine's structural performance.

The radical conversion into an archemech and the already massive anticipated boost in performance would definitely induce a huge amount of strain onto the expert mech.

It was impossible for a human to transform into a True God in a single leap!

Under normal circumstances, breakthroughs needed to happen step by step. If the Dark Zephyr was a product designed by other mech designers, then there was no need to pay attention to this matter.

Let alone upgrade the Dark Zephyr with exceedingly high-quality materials worth as much as several billion MTA credits, Ves could have invested all of that money into designing and fabricating a brand-new machine!

The reason why he did not do so was because the Dark Zephyr was a unique living machine. The expert light skirmisher had painstakingly accumulated 14 Ascension Runes, each of which strengthened and specialized his spiritual capabilities along two distinct directions.

As far as Ves was concerned, the value of those 14 Ascension Runes far exceeded a blank expert mech worth billions of MTA credits!

Aside from that, the personality of the Dark Zephyr also held a lot of value in itself. The living mech grew up alongside Tusa from the beginning. As both of them became more powerful, their cooperation and coordination also became a lot more effective.

The difference this made was huge!

If Tusa and the Dark Zephyr dueled against a high-tier expert pilot paired with a non-living version of a high-tier expert light skirmisher, the former combination would win 8 out of 10 times without a doubt.

This was the value of the excellent synergy of an expert pilot and a third order living expert mech! This was the most direct expression of Ves' design philosophy!

In any case, Ves and Gloriana both understood that they were pushing the limit of what the Dark Zephyr could tolerate.

The material form of a living mech had a very large impact on the spiritual foundation of the same machine.

Elevating the former usually brought up the latter, but if the transition was too big and abrupt, the probability that the spiritual foundation might tear or break increased dramatically!

Ves never encountered this doom scenario before, but that was because he never took the initiative to get close enough for this possibility to come to pass.

This was the first time he disregarded the safety rules concerning this possible outcome.

Even though he wanted to play it safe, the situation did not allow for it. The current order in human space was beginning to deteriorate. Ves had read enough reports and observed enough clues to deduce that things would go worse from this point.

Instead of settling down and pursuing stable development, Ves chose to speed up his pace and accrue greater strength at a more reckless pace.

This was why he hoped that the Dark Zephyr Mark III would start off at a considerably stronger footing than normal.

Ves and Gloriana made good use of the expensive materials and designed a complicated archemesh frame that largely conformed to high-quality first-class standards.

Of course, the implementation of these first-class materials was relatively basic and simplistic. While Ves and Gloriana most definitely tried to make the most out of all of the hypers and exotics, they mostly focused on upgrading the structural components and armor plating.

They deliberately kept the power reactor and a number of other key components at the quasi-first-class level in order to allow the Dark Zephyr Mark III to fight alongside other second-class mechs.

In order to pave the way for the quasi-first-class expert mech's future ascension into a first-class ace mech, Ves and Gloriana designed the Dark Zephyr Mark III with enough semi-modularity that they could easily swap out the quasi-first-class components with genuine first-class components.

They also made sure to increase the accessibility to the Dark Zephyr's original resonating materials.

Once it was time to install the defining features of a genuine ace mech, it shouldn't take too long for a competent mech designer to swap out the remaining pieces of Perfidious Steel and Bissonat, and replace them with much more powerful ace mech-grade resonating exotics.

There was a huge gap in performance between expert mech and ace mech-grade resonating exotics.

In fact, Ves did not fully understand the differences as he never worked with the latter. Only Master Mech Designers and higher possessed the qualifications to work with them. That meant that the Larkinson Clan needed to gain the cooperation of an external mech designer in order to upgrade the Dark Zephyr Mark III into an ace mech.

The necessity of resorting to outside help to further strengthen the most strategic assets of the Larkinson Clan was a huge headache for Ves. He did not look forward to dealing with this problem.

The best solution was to wait until he managed to advance to Master Mech Designer and design an ace mech upgrade himself.

However, Ves did not think he would be able to breakthrough anytime soon, especially when he needed to spend much of his time on mastering the art of designing first-class mechs.

Ves vaguely predicted that if he decided to stick with designing second-class mechs, he should be able to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer within a decade.

His many insights, his innovative design applications and his rapid progress so far all gave him the capital to challenge the Polymath's record!

However, rank was not everything.

The Red Association already forced him to become a first-class mech designer. Since that was the case, he might as well go all-in, trying to master enough principles of high technologies to be able to design the most powerful first-class multipurpose mechs.

Even though he might delay his breakthrough by one or two decades, his foundation became much broader and stronger.

All of this sounded nice, but it did not leave Ves in the best position in the short term. This was why he had already accepted the need to give up a lot of confidentiality and let another Master transform the Dark Zephyr Mark III into an ace mech.

He already formulated a few plans with regards to this future need.

"Pay attention, Ves. The incompatibility between archetech and conventional technology is creating more issues than expected."

"Ah, sorry. I am on it, Gloriana."

The pair had already fabricated all of the necessary archetech components.

The two mech designers usually treated the assembly phase as a cakewalk. So long as the mech design did not contain too many finicky components, it was relatively easy to fit all of the parts together.

Upgrade runs were different due to the need to keep an existing living mech alive throughout the entire process.

However, the difficulty of the assembly phase for the Dark Zephyr Mark III exceeded that of any other project!

The archetech used to develop all of the new parts worked on a completely foreign tech base.

Gloriana employed completely different technical standards, ranging from the standard voltage settings to the use of a completely different set of programming languages.

Therefore, trying to upgrade a conventional mech by taking out old components and filling up the gap with new components was far more troublesome this time!

Gloriana may have anticipated this problem in advance and constructed all kinds of bridges, stopgap components and converters to force temporary mergers between two different tech bases, handling them during the assembly phase was anything but simple.

As the difficult work proceeded at a fairly slow but still risky pace, Ves felt as if he was trying to transform an ordinary human into an orven while keeping the individual's personality as intact as possible!

Such a conversion process should have been impossible to pull off. Even if the conversion process was viable from a biological perspective, the mentality of the subject would have collapsed instantly due to the complete lack of familiarity!

This was why Gloriana could not complete the transformation of the Dark Zephyr alone. She may be a lot more skilled and proficient in conducting the complicated physical conversion, but she did not possess the expertise to help the spiritual foundation adapt to the insertion of a completely foreign part.

"It's okay, Dark Zephyr. We expressly designed these archemetal parts for your use. Feel them out. They will feel as natural as your old parts as long as you spend a bit more time acclimating with them. Be patient. Once most of your mech frame consists of archemetal components, the sense of incompatibility will fade."

Ves and Gloriana stretched and abused the Ship of Theseus concept much more extensively than before!

It was a considerable gamble on their part. So long as the Dark Zephyr still managed to retain his core identity after such a radical upgrade, Gloriana would have no qualms about converting the other Larkinson expert mechs into archemechs!

As time continued to pass, the Miracle Couple gradually gained more confidence in their work.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III was starting to take shape without any obvious signs of collapse or other undesirable complications.

Although a few incidents happened here and there, Ves already anticipated them in advance and activated the appropriate contingency plans to prevent the irregularities from cascading into more serious problems.

A lot more shadow energy and other E energies began to accumulate into the increasingly more complete archemech.

Exchanging Unending alloy for more specialized hyper materials made the Dark Zephyr a lot purer and more efficient in his interactions with E energy.

His total capacity also grew by a moderate extent after Ves carefully installed the Dark Wind Module.

Ves had been worried whether the partially disassembled frame of the Dark Zephyr would produce a lot of disturbances when he installed the powerful Ultimate Module, but the actual outcome was quite mild.

Aside from saturating the Dark Zephyr with even more shadow energy, the expert mech remained stable for the most part.

This was a testament to Gloriana's excellent design work. The design of the Dark Zephyr was fairly solid and robust for a light mech. This was also one of the advantages of working with archetech.

As the reconstructed expert mech neared completion, the pace slowed down even further as Ves and Gloriana were beginning to apply the finishing touches

Their main concerns no longer centered around the Dark Zephyr.

They became more and more concerned about whether Venerable Tusa would be ready to pilot his new and improved expert mech when the time had come.

"Is he...?"

"Give him more time, Gloriana. I can tell that his mental state is in an unusually active state at the moment. Let's see whether he can tame the phasewater rampaging inside his body by relying on his own strength. In any case, it is already admirable that he managed to last so long."

The time had come for Tusa to prove himself.

Did he need medical assistance in order to extract the phasewater from his body, or would he be able to solve this problem by exerting his willpower?

Chapter 5998 My Prison

After a lengthy and difficult upgrade process, the Dark Zephyr Mark III gradually neared completion.

It became clear to everyone that the upgrade project no longer had any chance of failure.

The Larkinson Clan's first true archmech was less than an hour away from becoming operational.

This should have been good news, but none of the Larkinsons had any cause to celebrate just yet. Nobody could tell for certain whether the Dark Zephyr Mark III reached masterwork quality.

Although the upgraded expert mech could still evolve into a masterwork by relying on the god body method integrated into the archmech, it was different from becoming a masterwork by virtue of pure craftsmanship.

The Red Association only awarded masterwork certificates in the latter case.

Aside from that, creating masterwork mechs was the only reliable method for Ves to earn radiant lottery tickets.

Ves was afraid that the Mech Designer System might suspend this overly generous reward one day.

Compared to his past state where he had to rely on luck and serendipity in order to fabricate a masterwork mech, his craftsmanship improved so much that he could produce masterwork mechs every couple of months if he was in a good state of mind.

Once he started to accumulate dozens of radiant lottery tickets, he was not sure whether the System would want to add to his collection!

In any case, Ves had a good feeling about the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

Sure, many of the early foibles related to producing archemetal components in the first day affected their quality to an extent, but the ones produced later on were remarkably superior.

Ves had also put a lot of effort into preserving the mech's spiritual foundation. Even now, the Dark Zephyr's existing personality was tentatively integrating with his brand-new archemetal frame.

This was why he paid more attention to Tusa's delicate and volatile state.

Through the design network, he gained a pretty good understanding of the expert pilot's mental journey.

Although Tusa managed to adapt to his exposure to phasewater to an extent, it was not enough.

The expert pilot relied a lot on Blackwing's control of shadow energy to suppress the spatial turbulence generated by phasewater.

While that was not necessarily bad as the companion spirit increased his familiarity with the properties of phasewater, the main point of the challenge issued by Ves was to force Tusa's willpower to undergo a significant improvement.

Right now, Tusa had remained awake for almost a week. If not for the fact that he had already exceeded human limitations, he would have lost this struggle a few days prior!

Even so, his lack of augmentations still meant that he needed to receive regular injections of stimulants to maintain his focus and awareness in the absence of sleep.

This was not a sustainable form of treatment, but it was enough to keep Tusa awake on a continuous basis.

Although the lengthy effort had strained his willpower far beyond his previous limits, his overarching desire to overcome this challenge and force the phasewater into submission had successfully allowed him to last all this time!

The threat posed by the phasewater that was very clearly running through his body like timebombs had stimulated him into drawing out his potential.

This was an amazing result, and one that Tusa should already be proud of! He had always considered himself to be a sprinter, but now he managed to fare surprisingly well in a marathon run!

Yet this was not enough for Tusa. He never set out to win an endurance race. The only victory that mattered to him was vanquishing the threat of phasewater by himself!

He did not spend the previous days in vain. Although Tusa had spent an awful lot of time reminiscing about the past and reviewing the journey that brought him up to this point, his increasingly severe exhaustion could not stop him from formulating a plan on how he could break this deadlock!

"Ngh... I have won every struggle in the past by freeing myself from the constraints that hold me back... If this is true, then I should make use of this to deal with the phasewater in my body!"

It would have been a lot easier for him to do this if he was interfacing with the Dark Zephyr. The powerful true resonance generated by a high-tier expert pilot and a properly adjusted high-tier expert mech was already very strong.

Although it was not as magical and far-reaching as the Saint Kingdom of an ace pilot and ace mech, Tusa did not think it would take much effort to neutralize the phasewater in his blood in a permanent fashion.

Yet this challenge was never about borrowing the strength of his expert mech. He needed to solve this problem by himself if he wanted to prove he was worthy to pilot his new and improved mech.

In the last two years, Tusa had gotten the sense that his growth had outpaced his expert mech.

He always tried his best to treat the Dark Zephyr as an equal, but since they interfaced with each other so many times, he could never hide his true thoughts from his battle partner.

Each day that passed by without an upgrade was another day where the Dark Zephyr was getting further left behind.

This increasing tension was one of the reasons why Tusa urged Ves and Gloriana to upgrade his expert mech as quickly as possible.

Now that he was finally getting his wish, Tusa felt concerned for a different reason.

He could tell that the Dark Zephyr Mark III had become much more powerful than before, so much so that the upgraded expert mech exceeded the strength of his expert pilot!

It was quite difficult to produce such a large and noticeable gap.

Tusa had recently become an ace pilot candidate with the help of general cultivation elixirs, and fought enough battles against alien raiding fleets to digest most of his rapid gains.

His multi-day phasewater torture session had also tempered his extraordinary willpower further.

Tusa could feel that if he stepped away from this situation without any further improvements, he would continue to display a lot more endurance than before!

Yet despite all of these improvements, Tusa still felt that he fell short of reaching parity with the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

He should have been happy about this discrepancy, because it indicated that he would have plenty of room to grow. It should take a lot more years before he needed to crawl back to the Design Department and beg for another upgrade to his battle partner.

However, his pride and ego did not allow him to accept the disparity in strength.

He felt in the bottom of his heart that he could do better!

The shadows around his body swirled faster as his force of will started to become more volatile.

Tusa decided to be more proactive!

Simply using his willpower as a defense against phasewater was not enough.

He realized that he needed to utilize his willpower to change reality in order to force a permanent change!

Doing so outside the cockpit of his expert mech was nearly impossible, but Tusa no longer thought about other people's claims.

An expert pilot should never compromise his ideals due to outside pressure!

The more Tusa comprehended this truth, the more he was able to focus his willpower.

As every Larkinson present in the darkened workshop continued to observe the struggling expert pilot in silence, Tusa finally gained an epiphany.

"I can already use the Leap of True Freedom to make my mech ignore any transphasic energy shields in his path. This means that I am already familiar with using the power of freedom. If this is the case, then I should be able to use it for other purposes!"

That was easier said than done. Freedom was a very abstract concept, and Tusa never channeled this E energy attribute outside of the cockpit.

However, that did not stop him from trying!

The only uncertainty left was how exactly Tusa wanted to leverage the power of freedom to solve his current condition.

Should he pull off the Leap of True Freedom by himself and try to move aside while leaving the phasewater in his body behind?

He shook his head. That was too clumsy and exhausting. His willpower shouldn't be able to pull off such a major feat.

Should he employ his extraordinary willpower to liberate the drops of phasewater by displacing them from his body?

This was a much less costly solution, but Tusa did not like it. His body still remained susceptible to the danger posed by phasewater.

Besides, Tusa also needed to display a lot of fine control to pull it off. The likelihood of accidents was too high as it was difficult for him to exert so much control over foreign contaminants, especially ones that possessed so many weird and powerful properties related to space.

Should he employ the power of freedom to liberate his body's vulnerability towards phasewater?

This was an option that aligned a lot more with his inclinations. It was a solution that could temporarily or permanently make him immune to the spatial disturbances produced by phasewater.

Of course, Tusa did not expect that he could gain absolute immunity. Ves had only injected a small amount of phasewater. If the quantity and concentration of phasewater was much higher, then it would not be as easy to withstand the stronger spatial phenomena!

"It's enough."

One of the lessons that Tusa learned over the course of his career was that he should never be too greedy. He was already pushing his limit by trying to resolve the threat of phasewater on his own.

He had managed to make it this far by relying on a lot of incremental improvements. There was no need to break this pattern.

Now that Tusa settled on an action plan, he began to execute it right away.

"Nggh! I need your help, Blackwing!"

"Chirp! Chirp!"

The avian companion spirit had almost completely blended in the surrounding shadows, but became a lot more visible when he strained in an effort to channel more shadow energy into Tusa's body.

Although Blackwing couldn't keep up this intensive effort forever, he could still buy time for Tusa to shift the focus of his willpower!

What he did next was extremely dangerous.

He lowered his suppression of phasewater. This freed up much of his willpower, which he promptly focused on his body as a whole.

Soon enough, Tusa began to exert more of his willpower than ever before!

Even though he had abused his willpower to the point where he had squeezed out its potential, Tusa firmly believed that he could still produce another miracle!

"Come on... transform!"

"Chirp! Chirp!"

His willpower continued to surge across his body, yet without the suppression of before, the phasewater circulating inside began to wreak havoc!

"Ahh!"

His right arm, his left thigh and one of his lungs started to tear as Blackwing tried and failed to suppress the phasewater that had spread to those areas!

"Chirp chirp chirp!"

Blackwing was already doing his best to limit the damage. The companion spirit prioritized the suppression of phasewater that had spread to Tusa's brain and heart. This meant that there were less resources left to prevent the phasewater located in less sensitive parts of the body from injuring Tusa!

The outburst of injuries alarmed the medical team. The doctors were already on the verge of stepping in to stabilize the expert pilot's body and remove the phasewater in a hurry, but the pain and injuries only stimulated Tusa further!

"I SHALL NOT LET MY BODY BECOME MY PRISON!"

A barrier seemed to break!

Tusa's willpower surged to the point a lot of wind suddenly flew in his direction!

His body flashed as a fundamental transformation took place!

By the time the doctors arrived alongside Tusa's bed, they discovered that the expert pilot had somehow stabilized the phasewater circulating in his body.

Tusa had managed to overcome his vulnerability towards phasewater!

Chapter 5999 Floating

Tusa felt unprecedentedly free.

His body was no longer as weak as before.

He managed to change it somehow.

He did not understand the first thing about biology, so he was not able to quantify the changes like a scientist.

The expert pilot could just feel that he was no longer inhabiting the same collection of meat and bone as before.

He could vaguely sense that his plan succeeded.

He managed to alter his body on a fundamental level.

The changes might not be too strong, but it already made a huge difference as far as he was concerned!

His willpower could still sense the presence of phasewater dispersed through his injured but recovering body.

As the doctors around him had already taken action to restore one of his lungs as well as the other parts of his body that had gotten torn, Tusa already started to laugh.

"Hahaha... I did it... phasewater... can't do anything to me anymore!"

While his statement was a bit exaggerated, he instinctively knew that his relationship with phasewater had changed forever!

His perception of space had changed on a small but fundamental level. As Tusa disregarded his physical pain, he became fascinated by how much he gained from vanquishing the threat posed by phasewater.

It was difficult to describe all of the changes.

His body felt... lighter somehow. His weight did not change, but... it was as if he had become a little less anchored in reality than before.

He had the illusion that as long as he flipped a switch that did not exist, he could phase his body out of the material dimensions in a similar fashion to Lucky.

This was an amazing gain if his judgment was correct!

Tusa no longer had any fears that he would put himself in any harm if the Dark Zephyr gained the capacity to phase through other objects.

What mattered the most right now was that he successfully managed to neutralize the threat posed by the phasewater that was buried in various parts of his body.

22:29

However, there were more changes than that. His perception of space was rather strange. It was not an effect that he expected or desired. It was not that strong either as the sensitivity of this new awareness of space did not stretch across the entire mech workshop.

What mattered the most right now was that he successfully managed to neutralize the threat posed by the phasewater that was buried in various parts of his body.

Somehow, his body and the space occupied by it just refused to give in to the harmful effects produced by phasewater.

Even though Tusa and his companion spirit no longer exerted any active form of suppression against phasewater, it was fine.

As far as Tusa could tell, his transformed body simply... refused to allow the space it occupied to bend and tear.

He interpreted it as a more advanced form of evasion.

The most straightforward form of evasion was to physically move his body out of harm's way.

What he had done now was to occupy the same space, but somehow deceive reality into treating as if his body occupied a different location from where the phasewater was doing all of the harm.

It was a bit more complicated than that, but Tusa felt this was as good of an explanation as any.

All he cared about was that this new capability not only made him impervious to the harm posed by Ves' blood, but also gave him inspiration on how he should develop his ability to avoid harm when piloting the Dark Zephyr!

"This is our future!"

The Dark Zephyr had already been leaning in this direction from the start. The prime abilities and resonance abilities already granted his expert mech the ability to draw fire at his apparent location without actually getting hit.

The potential to allow his expert mech to phase through attacks that were certain hits on command was the next evolution of his piloting journey!

Freedom tasted sweeter than ever before.

In the rush and euphoria of his weird sublimation, Tusa felt as if he could liberate himself from more shackles of reality!

However, that was a consideration for later.

Right now, he wanted to pilot the Dark Zephyr Mark III more than ever before.

He already knew without entering the cockpit that he had definitely improved his ability to phase through space alongside his expert mech.

He no longer felt he was holding back his expert mech anymore.

Tusa smiled as wide as he could. He did not disappoint himself. He just managed to catch up when his new expert mech was about to assume his new and improved form!

"Yes!" He asked with a hoarse voice. "When... when is my machine ready?"

"Just ten minutes to go." Ves responded from the open cockpit of the new archemeh. "We are putting the finishing touches to your new expert mech. The upgrade has succeeded as you can tell. We just need to make a few final adjustments to tune your machine in the most optimal state."

Tusa almost couldn't wait!

He restrained his urges as much as possible. He knew that the additional wait was worth it in the end. He had already managed to keep the phasewater in his body suppressed for almost a week. He could wait a little longer to get his hands on his new machine.

"Then hurry up! I want to pilot it right after you are done."

"Are you sure about that, Tusa? It is really impressive how you have managed to endure the test for so long, but your brain and willpower are probably stretched beyond their limits. You urgently need to rest in order to recuperate and heal."

"NO! I will not wait any longer! I have waited far too long for this! Don't stop me, Ves! I can still pilot my improved mech."

Though Ves had reasons to doubt that, did not attempt to deny Tusa his wish.

The expert pilot may be in a bad shape right now, but his desire and enthusiasm had reached a new peak!

Ves exchanged glances with Gloriana and continued to finish up the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

By now, the entire machine had almost fully converted into his new archetech configuration.

Whenever Gloriana tested the archemetal parts to verify that they had fully integrated into the brand-new mech frame, she grew more pleased when she confirmed that the new components linked up with each other.

Alas, she was only able to verify that the archemetal parts could successfully link up on a one-to-one basis.

It still remained unclear whether the entire archemach would be able to function as a single whole. The fact that the living mech still remained intact throughout the comprehensive transformation of his physical form was a good sign.

As the final minute ticked down, Gloriana completed her own task and floated over to the cockpit to see whether her husband was done with his own handiwork.

Ves had just affixed an amended status plate below the main console.

"Done! Let's head back outside!"

When Ves and Gloriana quickly floated out of the cockpit, they looked back to see whether their expert mech managed to pass muster.

"It's happening!" Gloriana gasped!

She noticed it before Ves.

As the living mech fully settled into his new and massively improved form, a wonderful physical transformation took place.

"The Dark Zephyr has turned into a masterwork!" One of the Journeymen standing at the side exclaimed!

While the masterwork transformation was already familiar to the Miracle Couple, it was completely novel to the recent recruits!

They had never seen a masterwork mech take shape with their own eyes! This was the first time they received the privilege of observing it in realtime!

Every mech designer could no longer keep their distance anymore. They hopped over the railings and moved towards the newly elevated masterwork mech in order to observe and feel the mysterious transformation up close!

Fortunately for them, neither Ves nor Gloriana cared about the presumptuous actions of their subordinates.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III was Ves' 12th and Gloriana's 11th masterwork mech.

Normally, that should have meant that they had already witnessed this transformation enough time to harvest most of the insights that they could obtain from this sort of event.

The reality was different this time.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III was their first true archemach, and thus turned into a radically different masterwork mech than the two had ever made before!

Gloriana became delighted when she managed to harvest a dozen completely novel insights that she never came across in the past!

This was just the beginning as the masterwork transformation began to expose other imperfections and areas of improvement that she never noticed before

It became clear that she was still so new to archetech that she had only scratched the surface of its greater potential.

There were still a lot of nuances that she had yet to master. This partially resulted in a rough and less optimal archemtech design.

Gloriana briefly glanced towards Ves.

As much as she wanted to take credit for turning the Dark Zephyr Mark III into a masterwork mech, the decision to use archetech had dragged down the expert light skirmisher's quality.

If not for the fact that Ves had been insanely brilliant by inventing his first new Ultimate Module and using a strange gem that possessed a remarkably useful effect, the only other way for the Dark Zephyr Mark III was to rely on her god body solution to compensate for her many mistakes over time.

All of this reinforced the fact that the Dark Zephyr's intangible properties had become even more impressive than his tangible properties!

Soon enough, the new and unprecedented masterwork transformation had run its course. The Dark Zephyr Mark III finally assumed his final form in truth now that he had managed to climb up to the second rung of the Craftsmanship Ladder.

Silence descended onto the dimly lit mech workshop.

Though Ves and Gloriana had worked hard to successfully convert the Dark Zephyr to his current state, their exhaustion was nothing compared to that of Tusa!

Everyone wanted to find out how Tusa fared with his new expert mech.

The expert pilot did not disappoint the crowd.

With the help of a few more stimulants and a bit of emergency treatment, Tusa managed to regain enough energy and fitness to lift himself off the bed.

He activated the antigrav module of his piloting suit and steadily floated up to the cockpit.

"Can I...?"

"He's all yours, Tusa."

The expert pilot reverently entered the cockpit and settled onto the new piloting chair.

Almost nothing looked the same anymore.

Though Ves and Gloriana had tried their best to make the layout and so on identical, the use of new materials and more advanced tech had left their mark on the entire mech frame.

Tusa did not regret the loss of familiarity. Change was inevitable. What he cared about the most was whether he could adapt to all of the improvements of his machine.

From the moment he activated the Dark Zephyr Mark III, a very different neural interface began to form a stronger but also more comfortable man-machine connection with an archemtech.

Tusa momentarily blanked out as he connected to a vastly different but unquestionably more powerful archemtech!

As his mind and willpower began to resonate with the Dark Zephyr Mark III, his body began to experience sensations that made Tusa feel as if he was floating.

What delighted Tusa even more was that he could feel as if his new expert mech was floating in sync with his own body!

As the activation sequence slowly ran its course, the Dark Zephyr Mark III already began to move!

The gathered mech designers all moved back in order to distance themselves from the large but very threatening machine.

The Dark Zephyr's glowing eyes seemed to focus on the floating form of Ves.

The true resonance generated by the expert mech also began to lock onto one of his progenitors!

A strong sense of battle intent radiated from the freshly upgraded archemch.

The Dark Zephyr raised an eager fist.

"Let's fight!"

## Chapter 6000 The Fuchsia Cell

A figure shrouded in brown robes strode through a gunmetal gray corridor with a purposeful stride.

The underground base had been built in a hurry. Much of the construction of the hallways and the rooms deep underneath the surface of a barren rock hardly showed any refinement.

The bare metal walls only occasionally bore markings. Meaningless strings of numbers, letters and alien typography denoted the locations of research laboratories, material storerooms and staff dormitories.

The entire research facility only existed for less than 2 years, but it had already become a bustling site. Thousands of researchers and other staff lived and worked inside this underground base shortly after the start of the Age of Dawn.

Researchers continued to move in and out of their labs. Bots carrying materials and caged biological specimens occasionally moved back and forth.

Since the base was under the full control of the cosmopolitans, the researchers and workers did not hide their true identities.

The researchers predominantly wore lab coats or protective suits that always depicted gray scalpels on their backs.

The Gray Scalpels distinguished themselves from other human researchers by mastering a human scientific field and at least three alien scientific fields.

The visitor in black harbored great respect towards the Gray Scalpels. The scientists and engineers of the Cosmopolitan Movements had to study much more difficult and diverse sciences in order to earn the right to bear a Gray Scalpel on their uniforms. Their ability to blend advanced human high tech and exotic alien tech was unmatched in human civilization!

The junior researchers and assistants that had yet to meet the stringent requirements bore yellow shells on their backs.

The Yellow Shells had yet to prove themselves. They ranked at the bottom, but possessed multiple promotion opportunities.

Every cell managed their personnel differently, but the Fuchsia Cell generally allowed its members to freely choose their specializations.

Due to the goals and strategy adopted by the Fuchsia Cell, most of its members consisted of Gray Scalpels. Research and more specifically bioresearch was absolutely vital to their current master plan.

In contrast, the Fuchsia Cell did not produce a lot of White Flags and Black Hoods among their ranks. The cosmopolitans of this cell did not have much demand for diplomats and infiltrators.

At the very least, the Fuchsia Cell should only start to raise more White Flags once it had completed its ambitious plan.

As for Black Hoods, the Fuchsias generally left the job of infiltrating human organizations and institutions to other cells.

As a cell that firmly belonged to the moderate camp of the Cosmopolitan Movement, the Fuchsias disdained the skullduggery that others liked to engage in. Too many cosmopolitans engaged in underhanded means without ever asking whether their actions had any meaning.

The Black Hoods of the Cosmopolitan Movement had infiltrated and sabotaged the current human order for thousands of years.

None of them had succeeded in convincing human society to reject their xenophobic ideals.

The only thing the Black Hoods were good for was passing on information and technological secrets.

As the man in black robes continued to move past Gray Scalpels and Yellow Shells, he contemplated the great cause that was on the cusp of changing the Red Ocean forever!

All of the research conducted in this secretive facility hidden deep away from the prying eyes of unenlightened humans served a single overarching purpose.

To engineer the revival of the Cosmopolitan Movement.

The man shrouded in robes scowled at the thought of how little progress the other cells of the Cosmopolitan Movement had made since the Great Severing.

Prior to this epochal event, the cosmopolitans secretly transferred many cells to the Red Ocean.

This was because the cosmopolitans understood the potential of the Red Ocean before it opened up to the public.

A new galaxy opened up new options as many of the most powerful and stubborn enemies of the Cosmopolitan Movement predominantly chose to remain behind in the Milky Way.

This was why the cosmopolitan cells that managed to build up friendly relations with the Red Cabal did everything in their power to encourage the aliens to initiate their Ancient Refuge Plan.

It had taken great effort to separate and isolate red humanity from the Milky Way.

Cut off from the immense power base of original humanity, the orphaned red humans should have understood how hopeless it was for them to resist the full might of the Red Cabal by themselves.

The cosmopolitans all believed that they only needed to nudge the lost and frightened leaders of red humanity in the right direction in order to break the taboo against cooperating with alien races.

Even if red humanity only reluctantly considered the possibility of allying with weaker alien races that had never gotten along with the Red Cabal, this was already significant enough!

The Cosmopolitan Movement had been trying to move humans away from their imbecilic human supremacist ideals for multiple millenia.

None of the cells had made any progress during the Age of Conquest and the Age of Mechs, so many of the cosmopolitans in the Red Ocean hoped that the Age of Dawn would be different.

Yet just when the machinations of the cosmopolitans were getting closer to bearing fruit, the Red Two ruthlessly struck the Red Cabal's strongholds during Operation Night Jazz!

The outcome was catastrophic for the Cosmopolitan Movement!

No matter whether it was the radical cells or the moderate cells, each of their plans had to be scrapped or revised in order to account for the strong surge in human confidence.

The people of red humanity all witnessed multiple battles where god pilots defeated ancient phase whales with varying degrees of ease.

This gave many humans the illusion that red humanity's god pilots and dreadnoughts would be enough to safeguard their civilization in the new frontier.

"How wrong they are." The figure shrouded in brown robes uttered in contempt. "Without cooperating with aliens, how can our unenlightened cousins possibly prevail against the numerical superiority of their adversaries?"

Unlike most humans, the cosmopolitans possessed a much better understanding of the state of alien civilizations in the Red Ocean.

The aliens simply had too much of everything. They had so many soldiers, researchers, factories, homeships and phase leaders that their victory was already inevitable.

This was why the figure in brown robes chose to support the Fuchsia Cell.

Many cosmopolitans wanted red humanity to get humbled. The members of the Cosmopolitan Movement did not want all of those people to go extinct!

After all, their ultimate ideal was to create a pan-species galactic community where humans could live alongside aliens in total peace and harmony.

It was not their intention to exclude humans entirely. After all, the cosmopolitans were humans as well, and they all wanted to have a place in this ideal society.

Soon enough, the figure in brown robes stopped before a well-defended gate. The man allowed the security guards to conduct a thorough inspection.

The Red Claws were particularly thorough when it came to inspecting the Brown Mandible's cargo.

The visitor had come to deliver a package to the leader of the Fuchsia Cell.

While the Red Claws could not possibly understand the depth of the precious treasure locked inside the secure container, they gave the greenlight after confirming that it did not contain any weapons or tracking devices.

The Brown Mandible nodded quietly to the Red Claws before stepping through the unlocked gates that led to the main research lab of the secret facility.

The chamber was massive. Much of the biolab was occupied by workstations, biotech lab machines and many different cages that contained a lot of biological specimens.

The Gray Scalpels and Yellow Shells that previously worked in this large lab had already suspended their work.

Instead, they gathered in front of a massive containment chamber that was enclosed by a thick transparent wall as well as multiple transphasic energy shields.

The Fuchsia Cell had clearly invested a lot of effort into keeping the key subject safely contained!

As the man in brown robes strode past the rows of Gray Scalpels and Yellow Shells, he finally stopped in front of an older researcher who wore a dazzling golden coat.

"Brown Mandible Xiv-Nihar, at your service." The newcomer bowed and introduced himself. "I have a delivery for the leader of the Fuchsia Cell."

"You have found him." The man in charge of the research facility responded. "I am Golden Wing Mihael Pentaq. I have just transmitted my verification codes to you. Please present the object that you have brought."

Cosmopolitans had many ways of identifying each other. Their checks went way beyond transmitting a bunch of encrypted data. The mention of verification codes was mostly designed to serve as a trap to fool would-be spies into thinking that was enough to infiltrate the Cosmopolitan Movement.

The two cosmopolitans already completed the real verification process. Everything was in order, so the Brown Mandible was able to unlock the protected container and cautiously bring out the object stored inside.

Many Gray Scalpels and Yellow Shells observed the fruit-like object with glee and satisfaction.

They already heard so much about it. When they learned that it could possibly play a key role in their great endeavor, they had been waiting for this day for many months!

"One companion spirit fruit. Several allied cells have burned too many bridges to obtain it, let alone process it and transfer it to your cell."

The orange pear-like fruit radiated a sense of power and mystery to those sensitive enough to perceive it. The companion spirit fruit looked as fresh as if it had just been plucked from the tree that initially grew it. Multiple cosmopolitans already developed the urge to devour the fruit!

"We will not forget the sacrifices made by our fellow cosmopolitans." The Golden Wing vowed as he carefully took hold of the precious fruit. "We shall fully compensate the cells involved with its acquisition once we have initiated our grand plan."

Brown Mandible Xiv Nihar scowled. "You do not understand the magnitude of what we have done. Every companion spirit fruit tree is grown in highly secure facilities that are constantly being

supervised by a god pilot or a Star Designer. Each companion spirit fruit grown from the trees are constantly being tracked and monitored until they are ingested by guests who visit from afar. In order to smuggle out a single fruit, our exalted benefactor risked exposure by removing it without triggering any alarms. Furthermore, our benefactor had to alter all of the digital records that record the existence of this fruit and distort the memories of every worker that was aware of its existence."

Suffice to say, no average infiltrator could make all of this happen, especially in the middle of a stronghold controlled by the Red Association!

"Has our benefactor been exposed?"

"We cannot say." The Brown Mandible responded. "We cannot afford to make use of this asset again. He is not the only ally who has aided us. Each companion spirit fruit is mysteriously protected so that it will not produce its desired effect when ingested by unauthorized subjects. In order to remove the sight of the Earth Goddess and remove any other restrictions, our other exalted benefactor altered the fruit in accordance to your demands."

"Can the fruit be ingested by alien species?"

"Yes, but our second benefactor has warned that his manipulation is not precise. There may be side effects, but multiple Gray Scalpels have confirmed that the fruit has retained its core function."

The Golden Wing grinned as he held the precious fruit. "That is good. Nothing else matters aside from the ability to produce a companion spirit. Only when an alien being is able to spawn a more rational personality that is divorced from the savage instincts of his biology can there be grounds for cooperation!"

The man in golden robes turned around and raised the fruit towards a large and very alien monstrosity that was currently being restrained in the middle of the enormous holding chamber!

"Rejoice, my fellow Fuchsians! Our catalyst has arrived! From today onwards, our cell shall finally change the new frontier for the better. Instead of trying to change the minds of stubborn red humans or persuading the Red Cabal to seek coexistence with our species in vain, we shall enact true change in this dwarf galaxy. Too many ages have passed where our Cosmopolitan Movement has remained powerless and hidden in the dark. Our lack of power has long prevented us from possessing enough bargaining power to make our voices heard. No more! So long as we manage to enlighten the Devourer Queen with this companion spirit fruit and bring her under our control, our cell shall become a galactic power that cannot be ignored anymore!"

This was the Galactic Parity Plan of the Fuchsia Cell!

Golden Wing Mihael Pentaq no longer believed that they could produce meaningful change by persuading others from a position of weakness.

In order for the Cosmopolitan Movement to get taken seriously, it needed to gain enough power to pose a threat against human and alien civilizations!

What better than to weaponize and control one of the most ubiquitous but often dismissed major alien races of the Red Ocean?

Everyone turned to the so-called Devourer Queen.

Even though the massive and highly mutated alien being was utterly unique, there were enough familiar biological features to indicate that she was derived from the infamous voribug race!