

## **The Mech 6001**

### Chapter 6001 The Galactic Parity Plan

The Galactic Parity Plan was bound to change the political and racial divisions of the Red Ocean forever.

Golden Wing Mihael Pentaq came up with this grand plan because he had grown disillusioned at the Cosmopolitan Movement.

The man had fought for its great and righteous cause for over 3 centuries, only for nothing to happen.

As his long life began to enter its twilight years, the leader of the Fuchsia Cell eventually made the realization that he had never amounted to anything in his life.

So what if he managed to live for so long?

So what if he climbed his way up the ranks and took over the leadership of an entire cell?

The Cosmopolitan Movement still remained as unpopular among the stupid and prejudiced masses as ever!

Public opinion and support towards cosmopolitan ideals had not improved in any significant way.

In fact, recent events had caused the cosmopolitans to lose a substantial amount of sympathy!

The rise of the 'ancestral spirit' known as Caramond particularly proved to be a poisonous influence to red humanity.

From the moment he explosively came to life, the entity that bore the name of the most destructive human in history had single handedly raised the morale of a lot of doubting people!

Before the unexpected transformation of the Dominion of Man, a growing number of humans had turned into pragmatists. They understood that red humanity was far too outnumbered to win the Red War, and secretly formed plans to seek compromise or outright defect to the aliens!

While these defeatists had yet to join the Cosmopolitan Movement, they were prime recruits and could offer a lot of support to all of the cells operating inside human-occupied space.

Yet the rise of Caramond not only caused the pragmatists to abandon their nascent cosmopolitan inclinations, but also turned them into even more fanatical human supremacists!

Caramond's existence posed a huge threat to the Cosmopolitan Movement in the long run. His ideals and his growing influence over human society would make it harder for the various cells to establish contact with sympathizers and infiltrate powerful organizations.

Caramond's rise vindicated the Fuchsia Cell's decision to pursue a radically different strategy than before.

Power mattered.

Golden Wing Mihael Pentaq had become convinced that the reason why the Cosmopolitan Movement never made any significant progress in its ultimate goal was because every cell constantly pursued cooperation first!

It was rather ironic that the Cosmopolitan Movement had never succeeded because of its relentless adherence towards a diplomatic approach.

It had been difficult for the Golden Wing to accept this painful fact. It had been even more difficult to convince other cosmopolitans that they had been working in the wrong direction all this time.

Fortunately for him, he managed to drum up enough support to enact his Galactic Parity Plan.

As Golden Wing Mihael and Brown Mandible Xiv-Nihar prepared to pass through the lock that led into the holding chamber, the man who received the precious companion spirit fruit eagerly explained the significance of his plan.

Xiv-Nihar frowned.

"You will be the agent who is tasked with conveying our success as well as our first efforts to expand our power. Once we are able to use this companion spirit fruit to take control of the Devourer Queen, we shall use her authority over the voribugs to overrun every significant star system, regardless of whether they are occupied by intelligent species or not. The voribugs multiply quickly, but their ability to conquer and hold territory has always been stymied by their inability to stop themselves from devouring the starships that they have infiltrated. As long as the Devourer Queen can force her voribugs into hibernation, we can quietly transport them to any destination without fear of losing our starships."

Although the Brown Mandible was not a part of the Fuchsia Cell, his involvement so far already allowed him to understand the gist of the Galactic Parity Plan.

Xiv-Nihar frowned.

"I already know that the conquest of the star systems in this region is an essential step towards building an independent polity under the control of your cell. I am afraid that the excessive killing may be counterproductive to your plan. If the Devourer Queen cannot maintain enough control over her voribugs, the insectile minions will engage in indiscriminate slaughter, causing many tragedies and fostering many new hatreds among the surviving aliens that have managed to escape the voribug tide. How will your new polity be able to invite the intelligent aliens to the negotiating table?"

"Through extortion." The Golden Wing excitedly grinned. "The soft approach will never work for the Red Cabal and the other major alien races. They consider cosmopolitans to be fools who they can freely take advantage of. We need to correct their mistaken impression by voicing our determination to wage a war that the alien community cannot afford to fight. Not all of the rules of diplomacy are invalid. Irrational hatreds can never supersede rational interests. As long as our voribugs continue to overrun a region of space where the aliens have transferred away much of their homeships, we shall ultimately force the Red Cabal to negotiate with us regardless of how much they despise our actions."

"And the unenlightened humans?"

"They require much more convincing before they are amenable to negotiation. I do not expect to be able to open up a dialogue with the Red Two, or the Red Three, in the foreseeable time. We may have to demonstrate our power and the utter helplessness of red humanity's ability to resist a coordinated tide of voribugs. We shall first need to conquer a sufficient amount of alien-held star systems to do so. We are currently located too deep in alien space."

Many cells established their bases far away from human-occupied territory. That made them much less exposed to the humans that despised the Cosmopolitan Movement, but it also isolated the occupants of all of these secret bases.

"Be careful." The Golden Wing warned. "We are about to approach the Devourer Queen. Do not provoke her or address her directly. Let me handle communications. All of the hours I have spent at her side have allowed me to earn a measure of her trust, but this is only relative. Whatever happens, do not panic."

"I am not a Yellow Shell. I have made contact with many people and aliens. Remaining calm and in control are essential qualities to Brown Mandibles." Xiv-Nihar defensively retorted.

The Cosmopolitan Movement had been hunted down for so long that its cells had learned to become as independent as possible.

Yet the cosmopolitans also recognized that it was detrimental if they fractured into completely unrelated splinter organizations.

This was why Brown Mandibles came into being. They were among the very few individuals that facilitated and promoted inter-cell exchanges and coordination.

They served as the glue that kept the cells in touch with each other. The Brown Mandibles also monitored the cells they got in touch with and mobilized others to destroy any cell that had strayed too far from their collective goal.

Although the Fuchsia Cell had indeed deviated quite a lot from the principles and customs of the Cosmopolitan Movement, Golden Wing Mihael had no concerns about getting foiled by other cells.

His method may be a lot more crooked, but his intentions remained pure!

The fact that so many other cells had given the Fuchsia Cell crucial support meant that more cosmopolitans had become convinced by his theory that they needed to accrue power first.

The Brown Mandible suddenly slowed down.

"Do you feel her? That is the magnitude of her psionic power or soul. Powerful, is it not? This is a manifestation of her extensive ability to control voribugs across multiple light-hours. If not for the fact that we have lined this entire chamber with materials that can block and disrupt her attempts to establish control over other voribugs, she would have been able to summon a swarm to free her from captivity."

Xiv-Nihar looked partially impressed. "I have never heard of a beast that can control other organisms over interplanetary distances. How will you be able to make the Devourer Queen coordinate her voribugs across interstellar distances?"

"With the use of genetically modified voribugs." The Golden Wing answered. "We have experimented with adding many alien genes from a large variety of different species. We have finally managed to design an artificial voribug subspecies that can receive the Devourer Queen's psionic signals and amplify them before transmitting her commands over much larger distances."

"Will the Devourer Queen make use of them? From my understanding, voribugs are vehemently hostile towards any member of their species that have been unnaturally altered."

The Golden Wing frowned. "That has been a major obstacle to our plan. We cannot remove this instinct from their species. It is so well embedded into their genes that we have increasingly come to suspect that they are not natural. Our current theory is that they are an engineered biological war weapon that has somehow degenerated into their current state. It explains why their species contain so many protections that make it far too difficult to bring the insectile species under our control. This is why the companion spirit fruit is so crucial to us. It can force the voribugs to keep the relay voribugs and other modified variants of their species alive. The party that originally developed the voribugs must never have imagined that it is possible to circumvent all of those measures in this manner."

They finally came close enough for the two of them to gain a very clear glimpse of the Devourer Queen.

She... looked utterly monstrous. Even the oldest elder voribugs only grew as large as human heads, which caused them to appear a lot less threatening. The voribugs had always been a species that relied on quantity to overpower their prey.

The Devourer Queen utterly broke that pattern. The Brown Mandible roughly estimated that the heavily mutated voribug 5 times as large as a heavy mech!

The Brown Mandible resisted the urge to cry out in pain!

The massive voribug actually communicated with him! Although Xiv-Nihar failed to understand the alien's words, he could still feel her rampant hostility and hunger!

The Devourer Queen hardly looked as if she was ready to cooperate with the Fuchsia Cell and work towards building a peaceful pan-species galactic community.

"My apologies for that. The Devourer Queen possesses an uncontrollable temper. She has only reluctantly learned to tolerate my presence." Mihael Pentaq spoke as he fearlessly strode forward and placed his open palm against the massive creature's shell.

"This voribug... is a calamity beast, correct? Does that not make it an exobeast that is unremittingly hostile against alien civilizations?"

The cell leader shook his head. "That is only partially correct. If we assume that the voribugs are degenerated biological war weapons, then we believe that they can be uplifted into a proper intelligent alien species. They will still retain many of their swarm instincts, but we should be able to reason with them as long as their queen has become intelligent and rational enough. The fruit that you have delivered shall ensure this result."

"There is a large chance that the fruit will not take effect." The Brown Mandible warned.

"According to documentation that I have managed to access, these fruits only take effect on beings that are not psionically powerful. Calamity beasts such as your subject should fall outside this category."

"That is normally true, but not for this particular fruit." The Golden Wing grinned as he raised the object in his arm. "We sought the aid of our second exalted benefactor not just so we can make it compatible with alien species. One of the other reasons why we borrowed the help of such a

powerful ally is to imbue this fruit with the raw power to overcome the Devourer Queen's defenses!"

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The Devourer Queen shook against her restraints as the enlightenment fruit began to glow!

The captive calamity beast reacted poorly to a fruit that contained an immense amount of power!

## Chapter 6002 The Devourer Queen

Companion spirit fruits possessed amazing and life-changing effects.

Through mysterious means, Ves Larkinson and the researchers who worked for him managed to develop a tree that could grow fruits that magically enabled people to form their own companion spirits.

Not everyone obtained a companion spirit right away. Those with weaker souls only gained companion spirit seeds that needed to undergo a lot of growth before they turned into anything useful.

Regardless, many different people tried to figure out how the genetically modified trees were able to spawn these miraculous fruits, and how they worked so well on humans.

Virtually every attempt at reverse engineering them failed. Researchers from both the Red Association and the Red Fleet had tried to replicate the relatively simple biological structures of both the trees and the fruits, yet failed to gain the power to safely induce the formation of companion spirits in people's minds.

Despite all of these failures, the researchers made plenty of discoveries. These secrets subsequently passed on to the cosmopolitans, allowing Golden Wing Mihael Pentaq to formulate a daring plan to corrupt a fruit and allow it to work on aliens!

"The power of the fruit does not lie in its flesh. Its cells and DNA do not contain anything that can produce the desired effect." The cell leader spoke as preparations were made to control the Devourer Queen. "It turned out that we were looking in the wrong directions. The actual effect of the fruit is intangible, untouchable. Furthermore, the most crucial energy that is responsible for bringing life where none previously existed comes from an external provider that maintains a connection to every fruit. That being is called after one of humanity's ancient earth goddesses. She also happens to be the guardian that verifies that the fruits are being used by the right people."

The Brown Mandible looked impressed. He never accessed the information that explained how the fruits worked.

"If this fruit has been altered to the point where it has severed its connection to that earth goddess, does it still contain the crucial energy needed to form a companion spirit?"

"Fear not, Brown Mandible. I have just examined it and verified that it is present. Once we conduct the final inspections, we shall feed the fruit to the Devourer Queen and wait for her to spawn a companion spirit. That is the moment where I shall take action in person."

"How will you be able to gain control over the new companion spirit? As young as it may be, what if it is too powerful for you to control?"

"That is what all of our equipment is for." The cell leader responded while gesturing his arm towards all of the hyper devices extending from the tall ceiling. "These hyper emitters can either weaken or inflict damage to the Devourer Queen's soul. It pains me to resort to force in order to obtain her cooperation, but it may be the only means for us to turn this calamity beast into a controllable subject. If that is not enough, we are prepared to employ more physical means to subdue the creature."

Two powerful first-class multipurpose mechs stepped forward and kept their plasma spears in a firm grip.

More mechs and other forms of support were available as well. The Fuchsia Cell did not take this situation lightly and mustered as many resources as possible.

Time passed by. The companion spirit fruit had gone through many examinations. The Devourer Queen had also been prepped by injecting a huge amount of sedatives in her alien body.

The calamity beast possessed an amazing resistance towards drugs, but even she could not resist the sheer quantity of substances that were messing with her hormones and other biological levers.

The massive creature gradually turned sluggish to the point where she had fallen into a half-sleep state.

"All systems are green."

"Our facility is under full lockdown."

"The Devourer Queen's vital signs are within expected parameters."

"Commence the feeding process."

A long and flexible robotic arm extended from the side while holding the companion spirit fruit on its tendrils.

Almost immediately after that, the fruit's potent energies started to erupt, launching a powerful attack on the calamity beast's soul!

The arm continued to extend the fruit closer to the massive and intimidating mouth of the calamity beast.

Soon, the voribug queen instinctively swallowed the fruit.

Almost immediately after that, the fruit's potent energies started to erupt, launching a powerful attack on the calamity beast's soul!

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Despite the drugged condition of the Devourer Queen, the powerful attack to the core of her being forcibly caused her body to resist the drugs and become more active!

"Detecting rising activity levels from the Devourer Queen!"

"The subject's immune system is actively breaking down the sedatives circulating in her bloodstream!"

"Continue to inject more sedatives into her body! Ignore every prior dosage rule!"

"It is not working! Her body is adapting to our attempts to subdue her. Her drug resistance is continuing to rise without any sign of plateauing!"

"Then buy enough time for our Golden Wing to complete his actions!"

Many Gray Scalpels became a lot more active as they monitored the data and did whatever they could to keep the situation under control.

The Devourer Queen made that a lot more difficult as the surprisingly powerful blow inflicted by the companion spirit fruit caused her to feel she was under attack by a mortal enemy.

The voribug possessed far too many instincts to completely suppress her self-defense mechanisms.

Mihael Pentaq found himself forced to rush through his own process. He waited for the domineering fruit to crack open the Devourer Queen's soul and turn a part of it into a brand-new companion spirit.

"There!"

The psionically gifted Golden Wing observed the Devourer Queen carefully. It was not until the boosted companion spirit successfully converted a part of her wounded soul into a brand-new personality that he commenced the next phase of his operation!

"You are mine!"

A couple of hyper emitters went active, causing further injuries and suppression onto the Devourer Queen's soul.

The Golden Wing was not as susceptible to this suppression effect, so he proceeded to capture and subvert the newborn companion spirit before it had any time to grow into its power!

The timing was crucial. The ambitious cosmopolitan leader needed to act early enough to deny the Devourer Queen any chance of overturning the situation.

It was working!

The Golden Wing utilized a combination of alien technology, ancient cultivation techniques and unique methods developed by the Cosmopolitan Movement to inject more human rationality to the companion spirit and simultaneously transform it into Mihael's thrall!

The plan was flexible enough to account for multiple possible outcomes. The best-case scenario was that the Golden Wing took complete control over the Devourer Queen by hijacking her companion spirit first.

The worse but still acceptable scenario was that the Golden Wing failed to assume control over the companion spirit, but at least managed to make it 'human' enough to civilize the calamity beast. The Fuchsia Cell would at least be able to gain the Devourer Queen's cooperation through respectful dialogue.

So far, Mihael Pentaq became confident that he would be able to subvert the Devourer Queen in her entirety.

The stolen and heavily modified companion spirit fruit was much more powerful than he anticipated!

It not only dealt a severe blow to the Devourer Queen's soul, but continued to exert an overpowering suppressive effect that prevented her from regaining her awareness.

It should have been impossible for such a weak fruit to single-handedly bring a powerful calamity beast to heel, but the Golden Wing did not exhibit any surprise.

As Mihael Pentaq slowly managed to take near-absolute control over the very new and vulnerable companion spirit, a sudden action caught him off-guard.

The Devourer Queen's heavily injured soul abruptly swallowed the remaining energies contained within the companion spirit fruit!

"What!"

That was not supposed to happen!

The Devourer Queen may be powerful, but the exalted benefactor who transformed and empowered the stolen companion spirit fruit was much stronger!

The intervention of such a powerful helper should have prevented this outcome. The difference in power between the Devourer Queen and the exalted benefactor was too great!

Whatever the case, the turn of events happened far too quickly for the Golden Wing to respond.

The Devourer Queen quickly recovered her soul. Few cosmopolitans understood what just happened, but each of them understood that an enormous crisis was about to unfold!

"ABORT! ACTIVATE OMEGA-3 PURGE! FOXTROT-UNIFORM-GHAAA!"

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The Golden Wing received a powerful shock to his own soul!

His proximity to the Devourer Queen and his strong connection to her companion spirit had made her vulnerable to her counterattack!

Even as the first-class multipurpose mechs moved forward in order to thrust their plasma spears into the captive calamity beast's body, the leader of the Fuchsia Cell received another powerful shock that shattered his soul!

His body abruptly slumped. If not for his protective suit, he would have already collapsed onto the floor.

Alarms kept ringing while cosmopolitans kept yelling.

Despite activating multiple contingency plans at once, every attempt to subdue and weaken the Devourer Queen failed!

This was because she somehow generated a forcefield that blocked incoming attacks and severed many of her physical bonds!



The enraged voribug queen subsequently began to thrash with much greater strength than before, allowing her to remove the remaining restraints!

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"Ahhh!"

The psionic scream penetrated all of the dampening materials and went on to induce a disorienting blow to every nearby human!

The cosmopolitans increasingly concluded that the situation couldn't be salvaged anymore.

Since the Devourer Queen had not only gone out of control, but also absorbed a large source of energy, she had become a massive threat to both human and alien interests!

"INITIATE SELF-DESTRUCT! TRANSMIT THE CODES RIGHT NOW! ANNIHILATE EVERYTHING INSIDE THE CHAMBER NOW!"

"But that will kill the Golden Wing!"

"He is already dead! His sacrifice shall not be in vain!"

"Brown Mandible, take these logs and depart through our fastest evacuation channel. You must flee and bring news of what has happened here in case we cannot contain this threat anymore. Leave!"

Xiv-Nihar did not argue the necessity of this precaution. He took the logs and jumped into an escape hatch that just opened up on the side.

Shortly after his departure, the control room started to shake.

"What was that?!"

"Many of our labs have been breached! Oh no... our test subjects... our test subjects have broken out of their cages!"

"How?!"

"They have evolved! Each of them are larger and have developed brand-new abilities! Wait, they are converging on our location. They are moving to free their queen!"

"Exterminate them all! Our base defenses should be strong enough to stop their advance!"

"They are not moving through the corridors. They are eating through our walls and circumventing all of the kill zones. Not only that, they are eating away at the power lines that disable every device within their reach. The voribugs... are displaying unmatched coordination and direction!"

Many cosmopolitans widened their eyes in realization.

"The voribug queen is actively controlling them. They will breach her holding chamber within 3 minutes at this pace!"

"Why hasn't the Devourer Queen died already?!"

"Her defenses are too strong! She is adapting far too quickly to her current predicament! Look at our mechs!"

Over a dozen mechs that were previously on standby had attempted to destroy the Devourer Queen.

The holding chamber itself also activated a lot of emergency measures, from channeling flames to increasing gravity by hundreds of times.

None of these measures worked!

The Devourer Queen previously gave the impression that her enormous bulk was largely due to increasing her capacity to birth lots of powerful voribugs, but now her body had become much more capable of defending her against direct attacks!

The only hope for the cosmopolitans was to self-destruct the base and cause everything in the area to be wiped out by an antimatter bomb.

The members of the Fuchsia Cell did not bother to escape. They had all committed to the Galactic Parity Plan.

Now that it had backfired on their faces, none of them had any confidence that they could revive the Cosmopolitan Movement and enact real change.

"60 seconds until self-destruct."

"50 seconds until self-destruct."

"43 seconds until self-destruct-, wait, it is no longer counting down!"

"Why is it no longer counting down?!"

"A higher authority activated an override. The self-destruct command has paused!"

"Then manually trigger the antimatter bomb!"

"We can't! It is buried in a fully enclosed and armored space that is expressly designed to prevent tampering. Even if we attempt to drill into the chamber that holds the bomb, the voribugs will reach it before our emergency response teams!"

"Look!"

Multiple cosmopolitans looked through the transparent wall.

A very familiar human stared back at them with a distinctly inhuman gaze.

"Our Golden Wing!"

"Something is wrong!"

A very strange grin appeared on Mihael Nihar's face. The man shakingly began to utter a few words.

"My hive... shall... expand... and devour... the entire Red Ocean..."

"..."

Every cosmopolitan looked aghast. The Devourer Queen had turned the tables against the Golden Wing!

Instead of the human taking control of the voribug queen by hijacking her companion spirit, the powerful alien being had taken advantage of this connected state to directly dominate Mihael Nihar's mind and soul!

In other words, the cosmopolitan leader had effectively become the Devourer Queen's companion spirit!

This gave the strengthening calamity beast far more than a human meat puppet. The intelligent voribug queen somehow managed to assimilate the Golden Wing's human knowledge and understanding.

Her comprehension of human civilization had grown so much that she already managed to master human speech!

"Disable his authority and kill him before it is too late!"

A couple of mechs began to launch missiles and plasma bolts at the Golden Wing.

This should have killed him even if he wore a powerful personal shield generator.

However, the attacks produced no effect as the Golden Wing became surrounded by the same protective barrier that kept the Devourer Queen untouched!

"She's unstoppable!"

Chapter 6003 Fast and Furious

Far away from the underground facility where a certain voribug queen was about to break out and unleash a rapidly replicating tide of voribugs, the Dark Zephyr Mark III flew out of an underground entrance and flew in the direction of the open fields of grass that surrounded Diandi Base.

An exceptionally powerful resonance shield already surrounded the high-tier expert mech!

Despite his exhaustion and his poor physical condition, Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson had reached such an emotional high that he refused to exit the cockpit!

The new and improved Dark Zephyr was everything he hoped for and more!

Although the living mech superficially retained the appearance of the Mark III, the obvious transition to archotech had made his mech frame a bit more exotic and transcendent.

A powerful E energy vortex surrounded the expert light skirmisher. The Dark Zephyr drew in freedom-attributed E energy, which was largely related to the wind element.

It was for this reason that the wind surrounding the floating machine started to whip up. With each motion, the surrounding wind of New Constantinople VIII seemed to give the machine a small boat.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III also attracted a notably greater amount of shadow energy than before. The Dark Wind Module especially attracted this E energy attribute. If not for the fact that the sun happened to dip into the late afternoon on this side of the globe, the brand-new masterwork mech would have been able to immerse himself in shadow and darkness!

Venerable Tusa had no patience to wait until darkness descended over the planet. He wanted to test his expert mech's new capabilities and more importantly verify that he had grown strong enough to earn the right to pilot the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

"VES! Where are you?! Are you coming to fight me or not?! Don't be scared! I know you can take a hit!"

Any mech pilot who dared to challenge a mech designer to a duel would be regarded as crazy at best, and an outright murderer at worst!

How could a mech designer possibly defend himself against a high-tier expert mech?

It was absolutely impossible for a single mech designer to do so even if he locked himself in the middle of a well-equipped fortification that was filled with automated defenses.

Without an army of mechs or a few expert mechs on retainer, the mech designer had no way of repelling an opposing high-tier expert mech by himself.

Yet as the much smaller body of Ves Larkinson flew out of the same underground entrance, it became clear that one of the mech designers responsible for designing and upgrading the Dark Zephyr accepted the challenge!

This was completely unimaginable in any other context, but somehow the old rules did not apply to an oddball such as Ves.

This became clear when he did not appear in the open wearing his previous lab coat and toolbelt.

He had changed to an improved and thickened version of the nanosuit he wore in past engagements.

He also held a flute in his hands. The Oceancaller's glowing runes were already visible, signifying that the high-level artifact was ready to support Ves in battle.

A part of Ves was happy that his cousin had managed to overcome the phasewater test and become so high-spirited after reuniting with his expert mech.

Another part of Ves did not look forward to rolling in mud and getting beat up by his own creation of all possibilities.

It was extremely undignified for a tier 3 galactic citizen to be dragged into a giant-sized scrap.

Yet... Ves grew excited at the thought of testing his mettle against the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

He was curious to learn how much he could resist a mech as powerful as his most recent creation in his current state.

Even though he was just a lesser phase lord, his true body was already a lot larger than before!

Combined with all of the new tricks he learned during the last lightning tribulation, Ves wondered how extensively he could put up a fight well outside of the reach of a Spark Reactor.

"Get to it already, Ves! Come and show off your full body so that I can beat you down to size!"

Ves shook his head, but obliged nonetheless.

His body slowly began to magnify in size. The dimensions that folded his true body and shunted away much of his mass gradually began to smooth out again.

It took less than half a minute for his true body to tower over the Dark Zephyr!

Even with his latest upgrade, the archemch still hadn't increased in mass and volume!

The use of lightweight alloys and archetech allowed the Larkinsons to make the expert mech a lot more powerful while still maintaining the same dimensions.

How much more powerful the Dark Zephyr had become was not entirely clear. Ves figured that he would find out soon enough.

Ves lifted his Oceancaller, which had conveniently expanded to match his current scale, and began to play a rhythmic and repetitive tune.

Although his comprehension of the water element had not made any explosive leaps as of late, his latest sublimation along with increasing his comprehension of E energy as a whole allowed him to exert considerably stronger control than before!

"Mrow!"

Aside from that, a combative-looking Blinky appeared above Ves' giant shoulder and began to disgorge as much water-attributed E energy from his internal universe as he could.

The current Blinkyverse had already completed the third stage and made a start on the fourth stage.

Although the large internal universe could not fit an entire galaxy's worth of water energy, its current reservoir was still massive enough to easily keep up this effort for days without creating a severe imbalance!

The only factor that constrained Blinky's effort was the fact that the aperture between the two universes was still too small and narrow. The opening had grown wider compared to last time, but it was still not large enough to allow Ves to wield the strength he possessed during the lightning tribulation.

Ves would have to make do. He continued to play the flute until a large water tornado formed around his body.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III continued to hover and watch on. Tusa was not doing nothing. He was analyzing his latest foe while quietly accumulating more momentum.

The high-end archemeh began to draw a pair of knives from his rear holsters.

Soon enough, the knives began to release electric arcs, exposing their nature as stormblade knives!

The Dark Zephyr began to assume a peculiar offensive stance.

At the same time, the expert mech drew in more and more shadow energy.

"Shadow Dance!"

The expert light skirmisher exploded into action!

Clang!

Ves flinched as his spatial barrier received a very nasty double hit when the Dark Zephyr instantly hopped forward to deliver a lunging blow!

Before the human phase lord could ever think of launching a counterattack, the Dark Zephyr already began to twirl around in the air before launching another flurry of blows against Ves' spatial barrier!

Fortunately for Ves, he possessed enough phasewater in his body to produce a fairly powerful defensive layer.

What was not as good was that the Dark Zephyr was much better equipped to overcome transphasic energy defenses than before!

The pair of knives wielded by the Dark Zephyr were not only transphasic in nature, but also derived power from a hyper tech version of stormblade technology!

This meant that each knife blow not only penetrated deeper than normal, but also released electric sparks that had a particularly destabilizing effect against transphasic energy shields and spatial barriers alike!

Perhaps the only reason why the Dark Zephyr failed to crack open Ves' defenses so soon was because the latter had grown a lot bigger in scale.

"ANNOYING!"

Ves attempted to kick at the Dark Zephyr, only for his large but relatively sluggish leg to never come close to the blazing fast expert light skirmisher.

Shadow energy continued to fuel the archemesh as the living mesh continually flanked and circled around Ves.

Tusa had selected the exact right approach to deal with an oversized but clumsy adversary!

With his current physical parameters, Ves instantly understood that he could never land a single punch or kick at the Dark Zephyr without trying to restrain the machine somehow.

"THE FACT THAT YOU ARE CLOSE MEANS YOU ARE WITHIN MY RANGE."

Ves first tried to use his phasewater organs to solidify and thicken the space around his true body.

It did not work. The true resonance acting on the Dark Zephyr made the living mesh far too resistant to such a weak effect!

Even without the true resonance, the machine could still rely on his powerful parts and systems to overcome the spatial suppression field by relying on brute force!

"Wait, there is an easier way to deal with this trick!"

Venerable Tusa just recalled one of the new features of his upgrade machine. The Dark Zephyr's space suppressor became active.

Ves instantly felt weaker!

"Ugh! This is way more disruptive than I thought!"

The Dark Zephyr's space suppressor may be small, but it came in the most luxurious transphasic configuration. This meant that it was more than capable of weakening Ves' spatial abilities, especially when it was enhanced by true resonance!

Before the expert mesh could take advantage of the suppressive effect, a large wave of water collided against the expert mesh's resonance shield!

Of course, the water infused with E energy was a lot more damaging than it looked.

Although Venerable Tusa did not sense an immediate threat, his expert light skirmisher did not excel at defense.

The powerful machine fell back and paused well outside of the reach of the water waves.

"Stop holding back, Ves! I know you can do better! I can feel it! Bring out the big guns. These splashes of water is hardly enough to push me back. If you continue to fight like this, you won't challenge me in the slightest!"

Ves hesitated for a moment, before deciding to abide by Tusa's request.

"YOU ARE RIGHT. I HAVE BEEN HOLDING BACK. BE CAREFUL. I ESTIMATE THAT MY NEXT MOVE MAY POSE A SERIOUS THREAT AGAINST YOUR DARK ZEPHYR."

Ves did not take action himself.

"Mrow!"

Instead, it was Blinky that began to take serious action. He no longer released water energy from the Blinkyverse, but instead began to channel a lot of light energy.

That was not all!

Blinky actively invited the Illustrious One to descend onto his form.

The design spirit indulged the request and began to inhabit Blinky's malleable feline form.

Soon, the spiritual cat turned into a small-sized manifestation of the Illustrious One!

The bright and vaguely humanoid design spirit sparkled with reflection while also radiating a large amount of visible light as well as light-attributed E energy!

"Ah! That is a nasty move!"

"Heh! It is logical for me to make use of my advantages!"

While the light energy outputted by the descended form of the Illustrious One was not enough to keep the Dark Zephyr away, the shadow-infused machine clearly did not like the additional brightness.

Tusa and his battle partner had another reason to feel uncomfortable as the Illustrious One suddenly began to accumulate a lot of energies!

Not only was the design spirit preparing to launch a powerful light attack, but Blinky himself was beginning to draw a copious amount of Worclaw energy from Ves' internal cycle!

Although Worclaw energy took a long time to recharge, its raw power was nearly unmatched. It also happened to combine well with any form of attack.

This time, Tusa and the Dark Zephyr Mark III began to sense a much more acute threat from the Illustrious One!

They felt with great certainty that if the Illustrious One was able to land a hit with his combined energy attack, the Dark Zephyr's resonance shield might not be able to hold!

The machine risked suffering actual material harm!

"Tch!"

Tusa already commanded his expert mech to move and circle around Ves' true body at a rapid pace.

This should have made it nearly impossible for the Illustrious One to land a hit, but Ves had another response to this maneuver!

"Ylvaine, guide our aim!"

"You damn cheater!"

"All's fair in love and war." Ves chuckled even as he gained prophetic guidance.

With Ves, Blinky, the Illustrious One and Ylvaine working together to ensure a hit on the highly elusive expert mech, Tusa felt increasingly nervous as the energy accumulated by the Illustrious One was approaching a limit.

"ILLUMINATE THE SHADOWS!"

A blindingly bright flash of light erupted from the Illustrious One! Many sensors temporarily overloaded as they could not withstand the excess light released by the design spirit!

At the same time, a huge light beam blended with Worclaw energy struck the exact position that the Dark Zephyr had just moved towards.

This time, Tusa's vaunted intuition did not avail him as the excellent aim of the Illustrious One and the eerily accurate prediction made by Ylvaine negated his efforts to evade the attack!

Yet as the brightness began to fade, Ves and many distant observers reacted with surprise as the Dark Zephyr appeared in the exact same position completely unharmed and unscathed.

The archemesh's resonance shield did not even look like it had suffered any blow!

"You... did you manage to phase through my supercharged attack? Wait, are you?!"

The Dark Zephyr's resonance shield did not grow weaker.

Instead, it was doing the opposite.

It was growing stronger!

The powerful sky blue corona enveloping the expert light skirmisher was not only glowing brighter, but also began to expand in size!

It no longer surrounded the archemesh like a bubble, but began to balloon in size!

No high-tier expert pilot could produce such an absurdly large and strong resonance shield!

Only the Bastion could produce a similar effect, but it was not the same as the expert heavy space knight relied on other resonating exotics to produce a specialized defensive barrier.

The only way for an expert light skirmisher to emit such a huge and powerful 'resonance shield' was if it was transforming into a Saint Kingdom.

It only took a very brief pause for Ves and many others to realize what was happening.

"Second apotheosis!"

Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was no more.

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson had become the very first ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan!

Chapter 6004 Efficient Growth



When Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson broke through, everyone knew it. The manifestations were just too obvious.

"The resonance meter is spiking! 70 laveres! 90 laveres! 100 laveres! 105 laveres! 110 laveres! 113 laveres and holding!"

Although the numbers had more than doubled, Tusa's actual willpower had grown exponentially stronger!

The lavere scale was not linear, but instead followed a more complicated formula for reasons that took a long time to explain to a layman.

Whatever the case, the only rule that mech pilots and other people needed to know was that once a pilot was able to generate true resonance that exceeded 67 laveres, he had definitely transcended into a saint!

It was not just the resonance meter that made it clear that Tusa successfully overcame the bottleneck that halted his progress for a time.

The most visible manifestation that Tusa's strength had transformed on a quantitative as well as a qualitative level was the evolution of the Dark Zephyr's resonance shield!

A resonance shield was often treated as the seed form of a proper domain. Now that Tusa had advanced to the second major cultivation rank, he finally gained the qualifications to form his Saint Kingdom for the first time!

As one of the most powerful combat domains known to red humanity, the Saint Kingdom of a junior ace pilot was already oppressive and domineering to the vast majority of people.

Ves experienced its rapidly strengthening reach and intensity the most due to his proximity to the Dark Zephyr and his high spiritual perception!

A grin appeared on his face as he witnessed the emergence of the Larkinson Clan's first true ace pilot.

The Larkinson Family long dreamt of spawning an ace pilot among their ranks, but it had never succeeded since the Larkinson settled down in the Bright Republic.

It was only now that Ves had founded the Larkinson Clan and led his clansmen to a much greater height that he was able to create the conditions that were conducive to the emergence of ace pilots.

Ves felt incredibly fulfilled that his many contributions allowed an expert pilot in his 40s to break through to ace pilot at such an exceptionally young age!

As a mech designer, he loved nothing more than to see the users of his products prosper.

For an expert pilot to actually overcome the difficult hurdle that blocked many of their peers for a long time was the ultimate vindication that a mech designer could obtain!

Combined with the successful tests of the Dark Zephyr Mark III's many powerful features, Ves could feel that his design philosophy had made another stride forward.

This was the most obvious indication that Ves had become a substantially better mech designer than before!

The wildly successful outcome of the Dark Zephyr Mark III proved that Ves had truly managed to develop his living mechs to the sixth generation!

Ves briefly lamented the fact that far too little time had passed before he could fully refresh all of his old living mech designs to the very recent fifth generation, but it didn't matter.

He refused to hamper progress just because it did not conform to a consistent update cycle!

So what if he could have milked fifth generation living mechs for at least half a decade before rolling out sixth generation living mechs?

If Ves had to choose between maximizing his business interests and maximizing the progression of his design philosophy, he would always prioritize the latter!

An honest mech designer should always put the interests of the mech pilots first. Ves believed he had done so in a brilliant way by designing an innovative new high-tier expert mech and stimulating Tusa by presenting him with a challenge.

When Tusa had successfully managed to defeat the phasewater circulating in his body, Ves already had a hunch that his cousin was close to breaking through.

This was why Ves readily accepted the offer to fight a duel. What better way to stimulate Tusa further than a hearty fight?

This was also why Ves chose to employ a powerful Worclaw energy attack!

He knew that only an attack of this magnitude would truly cause Tusa to become desperate to attain greater power!

The fact that Tusa met all of Ves' expectations was like a dream come true.

It usually took a lot more accumulation for expert pilots to break through. The more talented ones were at least twice Tusa's age.

For example, powerful heroes and champions such as Patriarch Reginald Cross fought way more and endured a lot more hardships before he managed to trigger his own second apotheosis.

It was not unusual for high-tier expert pilots to break through after a century of living, but at that stage their bodies and mental acuity had already declined to an extent.

Although breaking through to ace pilot was a surefire way to rejuvenate them and extend their lifespans by reshaping their bodies with their willpower, these late bloomers often exhibited less potential.

Tusa did not have to worry about that. While much of the reason for his breakthrough could be attributed to getting paired with an excellent expert mech, it was undeniable that the new Saint had worked hard and proved that he deserved to advance to his impressive new rank!

Ves was especially glad that Tusa managed to break through without relying on a crutch like the transcendence glow.

In fact, Ves had secretly been thinking about borrowing Lufa for a moment in order to give Tusa a firm push in the right direction.

He was glad that he did not. Tusa's pride and confidence in himself would have never reached their current height if he had to rely on external help to break the barrier. This way, he gained more potential and his future became brighter.

Although it was way too premature to make this claim, Ves already began to regard Tusa as a potential god pilot candidate!

As long as Tusa used this powerful early start as a Saint to develop his strength and grow his domain, he would be in an excellent position to step onto the road to no return!

This was especially the case if he continued to pair up with the Dark Zephyr.

As a mech designer, Ves did not miss out on the many changes experienced by the high-tier expert mech that he had just overhauled.

In many cases, an expert pilot accumulated over multiple decades before managing to break through. Although their resonance strength stalled due to reaching the upper limit of what his rank could bear, that did not mean that all of their growth had stopped.

It was only when they broke through that all of that hidden energy got unleashed!

Tusa's breakthrough to ace pilot was actually weaker than other cases because he accumulated a lot less energy.

This meant that the Dark Zephyr's current forced resonance state was not as exaggeratingly powerful.

When factoring in the surprisingly robust and resilient first-class archemetal mech frame, the high-tier expert mech did not exhibit any signs of excessive stress or strain.

Ves was confident that the Dark Zephyr was strong enough to bear the temporary explosion in power! The machine should not be fragile enough to end up in a heavily damaged state that happened in other breakthrough situations!

"What a powerful growth surge."

Expert mechs always received substantial boosts when their pilots evolved into halfgods.

Although Tusa's weak accumulation substantially weakened this effect, the Dark Zephyr's efficiency in absorbing the excess breakthrough energies was much higher!

Ves defined his design philosophy as Mutual Growth in Adversity.

This meant that the growth of the mech pilot should feed back into the growth of the mech.

As a mech that was explicitly designed with growth in mind, the Dark Zephyr's spiritual foundation demonstrated a much higher capacity of absorbing the energies outputted by a newly unshackled ace pilot!

By channeling much of those energies into his cultivation method, the Dark Zephyr systematically attained a substantially higher yield than non-living mechs!

The most visible manifestation of his rapid growth surge was the arrival of additional Ascension Runes!

"Chirrup!"

Trisk just so happened to receive a hefty amount of high-quality spiritual feedback from this joyous occasion. The design spirit of the Dark Zephyr eagerly assisted the living mech in the formulation of 6 new Ascension Runes!

The Dark Zephyr advanced his Path of the Wind Dancer from 10 to 14 Ascension Runes.

The living mech also advanced his Path of the Shadow Dancer from 4 to 6 Ascension Runes.

This was a very noticeable leap in strength. When utilized by an ace pilot as opposed to an expert pilot, the effect of each individual Ascension Rune became at least an order of magnitude stronger than before!

As Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson gradually came off his indescribable high, the newly promoted ace pilot fixated his gaze onto Ves.

Though Ves did not feel much hostility, he sensed a much greater threat level from Tusa!

There was no way that Ves could last long against the new and improved version of his cousin.

Phase lord or not, Ves was not a professional combatant, and he had not invested enough time and resources into realizing his combat potential.

He already found it difficult to keep up with the Dark Zephyr's insane mobility. Now that Tusa became an ace pilot, it became even more difficult to land a single blow onto the elusive living mech!

Saint Tusa clearly figured this out as well, as his gaze shifted away as if the ace pilot completely dismissed the threat posed by Ves.

"Weak. You're too weak. I need a better fight! Who dares to accept my challenge?!"

Before Ves could respond, a squad of first-class multipurpose mechs boosted out of Diandi Base and flew straight towards the Dark Zephyr!

"We are willing to test your mettle against our high technology!" Major Simon Jankowski transmitted over a communication channel. "Congratulations for breaking through, Saint Tusa. The Red Association is curious to observe how much stronger you have become, and how well your upgraded mech can amplify your combat power. Aside from targeting our cockpits, please do not hold back. We will not charge you for any damage you inflict on our machines."

"That is just what I wanted to hear, major! Be careful! The power reactor of my expert mech might not be able to keep up with yours, but I don't need to rely on it to breach the defenses of your mechs. Let's have a good fight!"

While the Dark Zephyr Mark III prepared to test his mettle against a dozen first-class multipurpose mechs of the Red Association, Ves quickly retreated from the site that would soon become a lot more hazardous.

It was never healthy to remain close to a fight between multiple powerful mechs.

Ves had no reason to stop this bout. On the contrary, he wanted this to happen just as much as anyone else. He would be able to gain a much more complete impression of Saint Tusa and the Dark Zephyr's actual combat prowess from this spar!

"Who will win?"

Ves could not make a definitive judgment on this. Saint Tusa clearly possessed a lot more transcendent power, but his Saint Kingdom had just formed, so he probably wouldn't be able to harness his domain field as effectively as an established ace pilot.

The opposing mech pilots were all mortals, though well-trained and heavily augmented ones at that. The superior training and education of RA mech pilots should do much to reduce the skill gap.

Major Simon Jankowski stood out a lot more. He was not only the leader of the mech contingent of the Bluejay Fleet, he had already broken through to expert candidate while piloting the short-lived Elemental Lord.

Enough time had passed for Major Jankowski to recover from this ordeal and develop his strength as an expert candidate.

Even if that was not enough for him to keep up with Saint Tusa, Major Jankowski and his squad mates could still count on the superiority of their own machines!

The RA mech squad possessed the upper hand in terms of advanced tech and materials. They might not be archmechs, but they had all been designed according to the top-tier standards applied to first-class multipurpose mechs!

This became obvious when the RA mechs not only activated their azure energy shields, but also started to link them up with each other!

"Shield link technology!"

Such a setup was remarkably effective when confronting light skirmishers.

Chapter 6005 Strong Zephyr

As Ves retreated to a safe enough distance, he shrunk his body down to human size but continued to float in the open.

There was still a risk that he could get hit by an errant shot from a powerful weapon, but he was confident that he could withstand an errant blow.

Ves refused to back off any further because that would make it harder for him to observe the performance of his latest work with all of his senses.

"Mrow~!"

Blinky, having returned to his fluffy purple cat form, hovered alongside Ves and observed the powerful flows of E energy around all of the machines.

The Dark Zephyr attracted a lot of freedom and shadow energies. The living mech's Saint Kingdom had massively increased his effectiveness in absorbing and harnessing the power of exotic radiation.

Even if Tusa was not too skilled with leveraging the potential of all of these energies, it didn't matter because the Dark Zephyr's extensive hyper technology had already been designed for this purpose!

Harnessing freedom energy made the Dark Zephyr faster and more elusive. The machine already started to drift along the wind as if he weighed ten times less.

The Dark Zephyr's Ultimate Module also quietly attracted a lot of shadow energy.

The concentration of hyper materials and the use of Tristan's positive hyper gem powered up the Dark Wind Module, allowing it to take action at any time.

"The fight is starting!"

The Dark Zephyr abruptly boosted away from his former position and began to dance in the air as hundreds of powerful energy beams and projectiles attempted to land a hit on the high-tier expert mech!

Even though the Dark Zephyr had not fully caught up to Tusa's newfound status as an ace pilot, the living mech's technical specifications were still high enough to evade the storm of attacks without too much effort!

That was not to say that the mechs employed by the Red Association were incompetent.

Each of them were not only equipped with at least a dozen powerful integrated weapon systems, but also coordinated their firepower to a remarkable degree.

Every time the mech squad opened fire, they aimed their weapons to fill up every grid around their target.

As a result, the mechs spread out their attacks in such a fashion that it would be impossible for a light mech to evade every attack.

At least a couple of attacks should hit a machine like the Dark Zephyr regardless of how good he was at evasion.

Yet the expert mech no longer played by the old rules anymore.

In the blink of an eye, the Dark Zephyr Mark III flickered hundreds of meters away from his initial position!

"Combat Warp!" Ves identified.

Adrien Marceau's Combat Warp System granted the Dark Zephyr the ability to move in warp without needing to go through a long windup process.

Although the Dark Zephyr's replacement flight system was not able to reach a high warp factor, this was an acceptable tradeoff as its Combat Warp System amplified the expert mech's short-range mobility.

This made it so that the Dark Zephyr was easily able to sidestep and evade the combined firepower of 12 first-class multipurpose mechs!

None of the sophisticated targeting algorithms programmed into the RA mechs produced any positive results.

Even when the mech pilots manually tweaked and adjusted the firing pattern of the weapon suites of their mechs, none of the attacks came close to touching the powerful ace mech!

If an attack came close to striking the Dark Zephyr, the Saint Kingdom that surrounded the fast machine was able to sap the strength of any energy beam or projectile that entered its range!

In order to test this newly gained ability, Saint Tusa deliberately avoided the use of his battle partner's combat warp function.

The Dark Zephyr still turned out to be fast and nimble enough to evade the vast majority of incoming attacks, but the mechers finally managed to land a few hits by continually launching coordinated attacks.

Ace mechs no longer possessed resonance shields. Their Saint Kingdoms took over their functions.

Ves was vaguely able to perceive a lot of incoming attacks losing 20 to 40 percent of their potency before they finally struck the Dark Zephyr's powerful new azure energy shield.

While an attack launched by an expensive first-class multipurpose mech was not weak, the Dark Zephyr was still able to withstand these blows with his azure energy shield so long as the hits were not too frequent.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III continued to dance and weave through the combined firepower of the mech squad for several more minutes.

Saint Tusa did not appear to be in a hurry to go on the offensive. He was much more interested in familiarizing and improving his new evasion capabilities.

Ves was thoroughly impressed by how much Tusa's breakthrough made the Dark Zephyr so outrageously better at avoiding damage.

The living mech moved in the wind as if he was a carefree dancer. His evasive movements were initially a lot jerkier and more abrupt, but as Saint Tusa rapidly became familiar with the improved parameters of his battle partner, he piloted the expert light skirmisher with much greater control and fluidity!

The RA mech pilots were no slouches either. Their skill and learning ability could never catch up to that of an ace pilot, but their advanced augmentations allowed them to adapt to Tusa's evasion much better than normal.

The Red Association conducted the most research on high-ranking pilots. The mechers had developed a lot of tactics and coping strategies if their standard mechs ever confronted expert pilots and ace pilots in battle.

"Space suppressors!"

The RA mechs under the leadership of Major Jankowski finally decided to move this bout forward by activating their powerful space suppressors.

The fabric of space around their flexible formation already began to solidify a lot. Due to the inverse-square law, any form of third-party transphasic technology or spatial phenomena that was close to the first-class multipurpose mechs should become a lot less effective!

If the opposition was significantly weaker than the RA mechs, then their transphasic technologies may outright lose the advantages bestowed by phasewater.

Yet when the Dark Zephyr did not do anything to avoid the combined space suppression field and moved closer, it became clear that the expert light skirmisher did not become affected in the slightest.

The Dark Zephyr's Saint Kingdom easily negated this suppressive effect!

Ves' eyes lit up. "Compared to other ace pilots, Tusa should be particularly more effective in negating spatial suppression."

Tusa had managed to conquer the threat of phasewater a short time ago. His newly expanded domain was also largely empowered by the freedom element, which his machine relied upon to remain unrestrained.

The Dark Zephyr may not be able to win the record for being the fastest light skirmisher, but he had definitely become one of the most difficult machines to restrain!

The first-class multipurpose mechs possessed other means to weaken an opposing mech. Each of them were equipped with advanced ECM systems, yet hardly any of them took effect on the Dark Zephyr!

The Saint Kingdom easily weakened many of the electronic attacks directed towards the expert light skirmisher.

The Dark Zephyr's conversion into a full archemehch also invalidated a lot of targeted ECM measures. The living mech's new tech base was better able to cope with these measures!

Clang!

Now that the first-class mechs attempted to attack the Dark Zephyr up close with the hope that their space suppressors might actually take effect, Tusa had no reason to withhold his sharp edge anymore.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The first-class multipurpose mechs were fast, but their higher mass and the limitations of their mech pilots made it difficult for them to keep up with the Dark Zephyr.

However, what made it even more difficult for the RA mechs to keep up with their sole adversary was the fact that the Dark Zephyr activated his own space suppressor!

Although the expert light skirmisher was not able to channel as much electric energy to his space suppressor, the powerful amplification of true resonance multiplied the transphasic module's range and intensity by a huge extent.

The consequences became apparent right away when the RA mechs visibly weakened when they came closer to the Dark Zephyr.

Their azure energy shields lost strength and their own space suppressors lost a lot of backbone.

Saint Tusa took advantage of the comprehensive weakening of his opponents. His expert light skirmisher weaved and danced through the opposing mech formation with absolute superiority.

The Dark Zephyr's transphasic stormblade knives struck swift and accurate blows at every melee weapon or azure energy shield in the way.

Each time a stormblade knife struck an azure energy shield, the latter received a powerful shock that destabilized it by a considerable extent.

If not for the fact that the RA mechs relied on top-tier first-class power reactors to support their azure shield generators, a single flurry of electrifying blows should have been enough to expose their mech frames!



However, the Dark Zephyr did not stick around long enough to concentrate his attacks on a single adversary. The matte black expert mech appeared content to test the defenses of the RA mechs by giving each of them a couple of knife strikes each.

"Those shield links are annoying." Ves frowned as he continued to watch from a distance.

He learned enough about shield link technology to recognize that the shield link modules installed on the first-class multipurpose mechs were not entirely suitable to the current situations.

The shield link transceivers built into mechs were compact but limited in performance. They were remarkably good at receiving shield energy, yet were substantially less effective at transmitting it to other linked machines.

If the RA mechs wanted to make the most of their shield link technology, then they needed to link up with a dedicated support mech or a starship equipped with more powerful shield link modules.

Since these conditions did not apply to the current situation, Saint Tusa quickly recognized that his Dark Zephyr had a chance of breaching their defenses!

The expert light mech suddenly sped up a little more. His limbs continually swung the stormblade knives back and forth, generating a large amount of pressure onto the first-class multipurpose mechs that could do nothing to fend off the assaults.

The RA mechs had no hope of striking the Dark Zephyr with their ranged or melee attacks.

The more the Dark Zephyr ran through their formation, the more difficult it became to trap the machine in a firepower net!

With the combined suppression generated by a resonance-empowered space suppressor and a vigorous Saint Kingdom, the Dark Zephyr made up for any gaps in performance and quickly began to strip the azure energy shields of 3 unlucky targets.

By concentrating his attacks on these 3 targets, Saint Tusa was able to stay mobile while weakening his targets faster than they could restore with the help of their limited shield links.

"Broken!"

The three first-class multipurpose mechs finally lost their protection, thereby causing them to become completely exposed to the Dark Zephyr's sharp stormblade knives!

Saint Tusa immediately took advantage of this development and drove his expert mech forward.

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

The powerful transphasic stormblade knives managed to pierce through the weak points of the first-class mechs with moderate difficulty.

Despite all of the empowerment, the Dark Zephyr's quasi-first-class power reactor limited his performance in many aspects. It took a lot more effort for the expert light skirmisher to inflict serious or crippling damage to the RA mech's joints and surface modules!

Tusa had attempted to stab a knife through the thick transphasic hyper plating of a first-class multipurpose mech, but the RA invested so much in its armor system that it actually managed to hold for the time being!

The Dark Zephyr should be able to penetrate the thickest armor plating after launching repeated attacks onto the same location, but expert light skirmishers weren't supposed to fight this way.

So what if the expert mech was too underpowered to pierce through the armor of a first-class multipurpose mech?

By the time the Dark Zephyr was done with the three exposed RA mechs, their limbs, their weapon systems and even their flight systems became inoperable!

The crippled mechs helplessly lost altitude before they were quickly teleported back to their motherships that were hovering in high orbit over the planet.

Saint Tusa was not done with his sparring partners. He had already tested the Dark Zephyr's basic combat capabilities.

He was ready to test his upgraded mech's more advanced capabilities.

Shadow energy began to swirl around the Dark Zephyr, causing the machine to look more ominous and less substantial.

The sixth generation living mech was about to employ his defining feature against his sparring partners for the first time!

#### Chapter 6006 Ultimate Power

The sparring session was about to enter a new phase.

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson already proved that he could avoid the attacks and overcome the linked energy shields of the RA mech squad.

With 3 of their number down and out of the fight, the remaining 9 machines had much less of a chance to rely on their numbers advantage to take down a powerful machine that they could not pin down!

Ves chuckled at the sight. This bout was an illuminating experience for him. First-class multipurpose mechs tended to carry a huge amount of weapon modules and other nifty features in their mech frames.

All of these additions continually increased the mass and volume of the mechs to the point where they had to be sized a little bigger than second-class mechs to accommodate all of their gadgets.

That did not necessarily mean that they were slow. Every top-tier first-class multipurpose mech of the Hyper Generation came equipped with potent hyper power reactors and high-thrust transphasic hyper flight systems.

The combination of both granted these machines powerful straight-line acceleration capabilities.

This meant that as long as they traversed longer distances in straight or gently curved trajectories, they could theoretically catch up or surpass the Dark Zephyr!

However, whoever designed these first-class multipurpose mechs only made moderate attempts at increasing their agility and short-distance maneuverability.

Ves understood the logic behind the decision. The first-class multipurpose mechs carried way too many weapon systems and other modules ranging from plasma weapons, positron beam weapons, gravitic weapons, missile launchers, ECM systems and more.

There was no way they could maneuver as fast as light mechs while hauling all of that baggage!

In comparison, the Dark Zephyr's only means of attack was a pair of lightweight stormblade knives and a small Ultimate Module.

This was why the Dark Zephyr dominated the maneuvering game to such an extent!

The expert light skirmisher should have struggled to evade the attacks of the RA mech squad a lot more if Tusa was still an expert pilot.

His ascension to ace pilot completely changed the game. His skill increased too much and his Saint Kingdom amplified the performance of his Dark Zephyr by a much greater extent.

There was no way the mechers could move quickly enough to strike the Dark Zephyr up close or at a distance!

This was why the first-class multipurpose mechs did not even attempt to win the maneuvering game.

They instead abided by the most appropriate strategy for them, which was to rely on their formidable defenses and their most appropriate offensive solutions.

The Dark Zephyr's knife attacks were strong, but the RA mech pilots encountered stronger attacks in the past. Their mechs should be able to fend off the expert light skirmisher for at least a short amount of time.

The use of shotguns, flamethrowers, high-explosive missiles and other area-of-effect weapons should have been enough to damage fast-moving opponents.

Unfortunately, most of these weapon solutions lost too much of their potency as soon as they entered the Dark Zephyr's Saint Kingdom!

Tusa felt no more threat from his remaining adversaries, so he decided to finish this sparring session on a high note by testing the offensive capabilities of his Dark Wind Module for the first time!

There were still a number of new and old features of the Dark Zephyr that he had yet to trial.

For example, the Dark Zephyr still retained his old Endless Paths hyper ability that allowed him to produce half-illusionary clones of himself.

The archemec had also hadn't employed his new Electronic Gremlin System.

Tusa saw little point in trying them out. He was already familiar with the Endless Paths ability, and the Electronic Gremlin System was too low-tech and lacking in sophistication to ever be able to hack the most vulnerable modules of a state-of-the-art first-class multipurpose mech.

The only feature that excited him now was the Dark Zephyr's exclusive Ultimate Module.

"Blackwing, give me a hand!"

"Chip chip!"

In tandem with Tusa's breakthrough, his companion spirit also became a lot more powerful!

Blackwing had gained a domain of his own, allowing him to control and harness shadow energy to a much greater extent.

This hadn't been obvious before as the Dark Zephyr's Saint Kingdom was just so much stronger.

However, as soon as Blackwing entered the Dark Wind Module and began to imbue it with greater shadow energy and true resonance, he was finally beginning to show how much more assistance he could provide in combat!

The avian companion spirit still had a long way to go before he became as powerful and useful as Emma, but at least he managed to surpass all of the other companion spirits of the Larkinson Clan.

"Mrow!"

Even Blinky grew jealous at Blackwing's impressive leap of strength.

The Star Cat may have the advantage in versatility and long-term potential, but Blackwing's current hard power already carried the shadow of the 'dark gods' that the Larkinsons fought against in the past.

Therefore, when Blackwing began to amplify the Dark Wind Module, some of its parameters began to shoot up by as much as 200 percent!

This was not a surprise to Ves. As an advanced hyper module, this innovative device was designed to scale particularly well with a rise in energy levels.

As Blackwing not only allowed Tusa to resonate stronger with the Dark Wind Module, but also draw in a lot more shadow energy, the Ultimate Module finally reached a potent charged state!

Ves' eyes lit up as he recognized that the Dark Wind Module was able to exert more power due to another variable.

"Ultimate Runes! It has already acquired a handful of Ultimate Runes!"

The principle of an Ultimate Module was that it was supposed to contain a subordinate spirit of the living mech.

Ves came up with the idea that the Ultimate Module could accumulate its own separate version of Ascension Runes, but all of this had remained theoretical for the time being.

It was only now that the Dark Wind Module was charging up that he obtained empirical proof that it was truly capable of forming its own Ultimate Runes!

"It must have gained them when Tusa broke through!"

Normally, it should have taken months before the Dark Wind Module naturally formed its first Ultimate Rune, but the current situation had fast-forwarded this process.

Shadows continued to surge towards the Dark Zephyr as the expert mech very obviously radiated a huge amount of threat.

Major Simon Jankowski was barely able to resist the pressure owing to his stronger willpower, but the other mechers failed to maintain their full concentration despite their excellent training against such effects.

From their perspectives, the Dark Zephyr had surpassed the definition of a mech and started to turn into a giant shadow monster that was just about to sweep through their mechs with a single flap of his wings!

"WATCH OUT!"

An enormous streak of shadow ran through multiple first-class multipurpose mechs at once!

The Dark Zephyr had not only burst forward in an instant, but also activated the Dark Wind Passage hyper ability for the first time.

The results were dramatic as a thick streak of shadow energy ran from the expert mech's starting point all the way to a distant location over two kilometers away!

The trail of shadow energy finally started to fade as the Dark Zephyr slowed down and leisurely turned around.

In the meantime, Ves carefully studied the state of the multipurpose mechs that got struck by the shadow streak.

The changes did not become apparent right away, but as the seconds passed by, four mechs began to malfunction.

Their limbs froze up. Modules began to lose power. Sensor systems and other delicate components started to crumble and break apart as the shadows had weakened them past their breaking points.

Not everything crumbled into shadows. Much of their tough transphasic armor plating and reinforced components still managed to stay in one piece.

Nonetheless, the lethality of the Dark Wind Passage Ultimate Ability centered around its capacity to directly compromise the weak points of a target!

A armor and other forms of protection failed to block the Ultimate Ability. This was why the affected first-class multipurpose mechs all started to lose so many modules at once.

One of the downsides of employing a lot of miniaturized modules was that each of them were not particularly tough!

This caused them to be a lot more vulnerable to the weakening effect of Dark Wind Passage.

As four powerful RA mechs lost much of their combat power, the remaining RA mech pilots all lost their remaining battle intent.

They still had hope of eking out a victory or losing this bout in a graceful manner, but the Dark Wind Passage had been the straw that broke the camel's back!

Unless they received additional reinforcements, there was very little point in continuing this bout.

The mech pilots weren't stupid. They recognized that the Dark Zephyr could have reaped their lives if the newly upgraded machine aimed his Dark Wind Passage directly through the cockpits of their mechs.

Tusa instead opted to follow a trajectory that allowed the Dark Zephyr to damage the more peripheral components of the first-class multipurpose mechs.

While this may have allowed the RA mech pilots to preserve their lives, they failed to salvage their pride.

They knew they had lost this battle. Venerable Tusa and his companion spirit was a powerful combination, and the Dark Zephyr was much more powerful than a typical quasi-first-class high-tier expert mech!

How could Major Jankowski and his remaining subordinates ever take down Professor Larkinson's most perverse mech to date?

They still wouldn't be able to restrain the Dark Zephyr until they brought additional mech squads, particularly ones that excelled at enhancing friendly mechs while debilitating enemy ones!

"Our mechs are not configured to counter an ultra-maneuverable high-ranking mech. We... never stood a chance."

Saint Tusa clearly sensed the shift in morale, so he purposely slowed down his expert mech and weakened his Saint Kingdom.

The shadows around the Dark Zephyr began to fade. The machine also sheathed his stormblade knives.

Throughout this short but intense sparring session, the Dark Zephyr did not incur any damage.

Although the Dark Zephyr radiated much less threat than before, nobody could forget how extensively he dominated his adversaries!

"I am done for now." Tusa transmitted in a completely relaxed tone.

The expert mech turned around and flew back to Diandi Base. This signaled the definite end to Tusa and the upgraded Dark Zephyr's bombastic demonstration of power!

Ves was happy beyond belief as he flew back to base as well. The short but highly impactful sparring session told him that one of his dreams had finally come true.

The Larkinson Clan finally gained the power to defend against the Red Two.

Not completely. Far from it. Right now, the Larkinsons could only put up a very modest fight against just a fraction of the enormous military might of the Red Association and the Red Fleet.

Yet that was already enough for Ves to buy time to slip the Red Two's leash and run away if he wished!

"This is real progress."

Ves did not feel secure enough. The emergence of a single ace pilot may have elevated the Larkinson Clan, but it still had a lot to go before it could enter into the big leagues.

The Larkinsons at least needed to nurture half-a-dozen additional ace pilots and pair them all up with first-class ace mechs before they could effectively deter most threats!

That was still too far away for Ves. He first needed to think about arranging yet another upgrade for the Dark Zephyr.

His Mark III incarnation had only existed for a brief amount of time, and already he had become obsolete!

Even if the Dark Zephyr had been designed with an ace mech upgrade in mind, Ves still did not look forward to puzzling out the logistical issues of this necessary process.

As Ves returned to the mech workshop so that he could conduct a very thorough inspection of the willpower-baptized archemech, he suddenly halted in the air as he came across a shocking sight.

Gloriana stood in his path while plastering the widest grin across her face.

"Good news, Ves! I managed to break through! I have finally managed to catch up to you! You can call me Professor Gloriana soon!"

"That... that is great news!"

#### Chapter 6007 Double Joy

Close to the end of the second year of the Age of Dawn, the Larkinson Clan welcomed two favorable developments.

First, Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson amazingly managed to break through during his initial piloting session with the Dark Zephyr Mark III!

The Larkinson Clan therefore welcomed its very first ace pilot, thereby raising its military power above another threshold and finally gaining parity with the other members of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Second, the stellar success of the very first archemech of the Larkinson Clan had propelled Gloriana Wodin-Larkinson to the rank of Senior Mech Designer, thereby proving herself to be a talented professional who possessed the capital to remain Ves' closest work partner!

News of the double breakthroughs immediately spread through the galactic net within a single hour. The clan had already written public statements in advance, and it just so happened that two of them could finally be released to the public.

Many different parties immediately transmitted replies filled with congratulations and additional offers!

From the Inferno Spear Prince to the General Axelar Streon, many of the friends, allies and business partners of the Larkinsons all reacted positively to this development.

Previously, the Larkinson Clan occupied a relatively awkward position in red humanity's political landscape. Its foundation was incredibly shaky due to its rapid rise and its overdependence on its founder.

The breakthroughs of two key Larkinsons made a lot of parties reconsider the value of this clan!

Gloriana was hardly the only Senior Mech Designer who broke through while she was still in her forties.

The Red Association had many talents such as Jovy Armalon who enjoyed much better conditions.

Nonetheless, Gloriana's early breakthrough generated greater confidence in her ability to realize her ambitious design philosophy.

So long as she continued to progress further, a day might come where she would break through and become a Master Mech Designer, thereby contributing one or several fantastic new design applications to the mech community at large!

Gloriana already proved her ability to fund the Larkinson Clan to an extent. Her ability to design custom mechs had reached a level where other mech designers would be glad to collaborate with her on high-end mech design projects!

After all, Gloriana was not only an experienced masterwork mech designer, but could also design mechs that could automatically grow into masterworks if they failed to become one in the workshop.

Combined with her recently acquired mastery in archetech, every mech design project where she was allowed to apply her work freely would definitely gain a technological edge of the vast majority of other mechs of the same class!

Ves felt lucky to have Gloriana by his side. She truly complimented his own specializations, and continued to develop her abilities in ways that further enhanced the value proposition of their collaborative mech design projects.

So long as Gloriana remained by his side, Ves would not have to worry about the technical shortcomings of his high-ranking mech designs.

The biggest limitation to Gloriana's work was that she had no interest in designing mass production mechs. This was an inconvenient quirk as the LMC derived an enormous amount of income from selling standard mechs and licensing out their designs.

The potential income from designing custom mechs for third parties may be huge, but it was too incidental and not consistent enough.

The Larkinson Clan still had to rely on raising other mech designers. Ves was particularly optimistic about Ketis and Alexa Streon, and they were hardly the only talents in the Design Department.

"Tusa's breakthrough is also significant."

If Gloriana's ascension represented growth in the Larkinson Clan's economic and industrial foundation, then Tusa's rise completely elevated the Larkinson Clan's military power!

This was an area that Ves and many Larkinsons worried about. The new frontier was growing more turbulent by the day. Any accident might happen that could cause the frontlines to collapse. The current order became more and more fragile. Ves did not think it would take more than a decade for the current peaceful order to make way for a more martial atmosphere.

Having lots of wealth without the hard power needed to protect it all would just turn the Larkinson Clan into a fat sheep!

No matter how many friends and allies promised to protect Ves' interests, these fair-weather friends only played nice because he remained useful to them for the time being!

Once that condition no longer applied, the Ves and his clan needed to rely on themselves to protect their place in the Red Ocean.

Having an ace pilot was one of the best possible ways to guarantee his power base!

Ves had already witnessed many other instances where the presence and availability of ace pilots granted leaders priceless security.



Saint Kingdoms were so large and all-encompassing that no threats could remain hidden within their range. They were particularly good at sniffing out assassins, infiltrators, informers and other people with malicious intent!

Although Ves currently did not have much need for this additional protection, he knew that if he ever felt threatened, he could always summon an ace pilot to his side and enjoy much greater protection.

There should hardly be any threats that Saint Tusa could not deal with once his Dark Zephyr turned into a proper first-class ace mech!

Of course, it was not that simple to complete this necessary conversion. Ves needed to have a good talk with Gloriana and Tusa about this subject.

"An ace mech will come in time. What is important is that our clan has finally broken the ceiling."

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was the first individual who had managed to reach the second major cultivation rank. As a mech pilot who had managed to get much closer to becoming a True God than any other Larkinson, he had managed to gain valuable insights and comprehension about what it was like to wield greater power.

The rise of an ace pilot was usually a joyous occasion to a state or organization because that very same hero could provide invaluable guidance to other mech pilots!

The Larkinson Clan recently nurtured a lot of high-tier expert pilots. While many of them were occasionally able to approach the ace pilots of the Golden Skull Alliance for advice, the help these heroes provided was limited.

Only Larkinsons were willing to assist other Larkinsons without any barriers. The rise of Saint Tusa meant that other expert pilots such as Venerable Jannzi, Venerable Joshua and General Ark Larkinson finally gained access to a trustworthy mentor!

Even if Tusa's breakthrough conditions and process was utterly unique to him, the fact that he had become an ace pilot meant that he stood on a higher level in relation to expert pilots.

The mysteries that previously stymied him in the past no longer confounded him as much anymore!

As long as Tusa settled in as an ace pilot, he should be able to act as a qualified mentor to every expert pilot regardless of their unique conditions and convictions.

Of course, the fact that every expert pilot's journey was different meant that Tusa could not do all of the work.

In the end, expert pilots broke through because they managed to evolve their willpower past a critical threshold. This was a very ego-driven process, which meant that the warriors in question had to earn their breakthroughs the hard way.

The fact that Tusa managed to become an ace pilot with so little accumulation was the exception rather than the rule!

Fortunately, the Larkinson Clan only needed to obtain a single ace pilot in order to provide helpful guidance to all of the other high-tier expert pilots that were struggling to overcome their limitations.

"I wonder how Ark will react to this..."

Ves felt a little sorry for him, but his uncle had no one else to blame for his continued inability to break through.

The former war hero of the Larkinson Family had already received a fantastic high-tier expert mech in the form of the Lionheart. It also happened to be a masterwork mech, which was particularly conducive towards breakthroughs.

The fact that the older and much more experienced Larkinson expert pilot still hadn't managed to break through meant that he obviously wasn't as ready to reach the next rank as he thought!

Ves looked forward to seeing Ark's reaction towards Tusa once the celebration party began.

His wife had already scheduled one to celebrate the double breakthroughs. There was no need to turn it into a formal occasion, so his wife only invited the key figures of the Larkinson Clan that were currently available.

Before the celebration could begin, Ves, Gloriana and Tusa still had to handle a couple of immediate priorities.

Half an hour after the Dark Zephyr returned to the secure workshop, the powerful archemehch just went through a relatively quick inspection.

Ves and Gloriana resisted the urge to return to their abodes in order to sleep because they wanted to examine the changes to their latest work.

"Good news, Tusa." Ves spoke as he floated down to the ground where Tusa was sitting on a crate while looking at his battle partner with a renewed sense of fulfillment. "The Dark Zephyr is still in good condition. The forced resonance state produced by your breakthrough was very weak. Combined with the robustness of archetech, only a small proportion of delicate components have deteriorated. It shouldn't take more than a day to repair these minor issues."

"After studying the Dark Zephyr and analyzing the data logs, I can confirm that you can make excellent use of your battle partner in his current form. You do not necessarily need to wait until your machine is upgraded into an ace mech." A very happy-looking Gloriana announced.

Tusa frowned when he heard that. "Does that mean my mech will not get upgraded in the short term?"

"That is not the case." Gloriana shook her head. "An upgrade is still necessary, but it should take at least half a year or longer before we can successfully convert your machine. For now, piloting your Dark Zephyr in his Mark III incarnation is an acceptable stopgap measure. The lack of ace mech-grade resonating exotics will prevent your true resonance from reaching its fullest potential, but your current machine is already very strong for a high-tier expert mech. You can essentially treat him as a demi-ace mech."

Ves affirmed his wife's analysis. "The Dark Zephyr's technical performance is so high that his performance ceiling has become much higher than before. Your breakthrough may have made you a lot stronger, but we are confident that your current machine can properly withstand the elevated load that you will induce onto the mech frame. There are cases where old expert mechs fall apart after getting piloted by ace pilots who have recently broken through, but that is because the design budgets weren't as generous. Do not forget that while your battle partner is technically a quasi-first-class expert mech, his material composition alone is well into first-class territory."

In other words, the Dark Zephyr's tolerances and technical limitations had increased so much that Saint Tusa should still be able to pilot his machine without feeling too constrained!

This could not last forever, though.

"How long will I be able to pilot my mech without another upgrade?" Tusa critically asked.

"That is hard to say." Gloriana responded. "We know too little about ace pilots to know for certain. Based on my observations of Patriarch Reginald Cross and the Mars, you should not have to worry too much in the next handful of years. Your resonance strength should grow quickly during this initial period, so once you have surpassed a certain limit, you can no longer effectively channel greater power through your machine. Hopefully, we will be able to upgrade the Dark Zephyr into a proper ace mech before that happens."

Finding out that Tusa would be able to pilot the Dark Zephyr Mark III without too many limitations was good news.

It allowed the Larkinsons to take their time with converting the expert light skirmisher into a powerful ace mech.

Chapter 6008 A Critical Voice

"Congratulations, Saint Tusa!"

"Congratulations, Gloriana!"

Hundreds of Larkinsons spread across human space came together to celebrate the double breakthroughs.

The logistics of this celebratory banquet had been difficult to arrange. Many Larkinsons located in different star systems all had to enter a Hyper Chamber or other augmented reality setting in order to enjoy the illusion of entering a shared semi-virtual space.

On top of that, the invited guests also needed to be served with excellent dishes, each of which needed to be consistent in order to reduce the illusion of separation during the party.

Fortunately, the Larkinson Clan had plenty of planners and organizers on hand. They had come together and arranged everything within a couple of days.

Both Gloriana and Tusa felt honored and pleased to be able to show off and boast about their accomplishments.

"Chip! Chip!"

A much larger and stronger companion spirit was flying leisurely before a gathering of children.

"Wow! You've grown so much bigger, Blackwing." Andraste said as she reached out to touch the companion spirit's wing. "Is this how big a companion spirit can grow when you become an ace pilot? Can you make yourself any larger?"

Blackwing briefly concentrated and amplified in size. The shadowy bird briefly became as large as a shuttle before quickly returning to a more comfortable hound-sized form.

"Chip chip chip!"

"That is so cool!"

As Blackwing playfully began to show off a few other tricks, Saint Tusa stood before a gathering of admiring and ambivalent expert pilots.

Each of them were happy for Tusa's change in fortune, but they were also incredibly jealous that he got to be the first to realize this particular dream!

"It is fitting that you managed to break through sooner than everyone else." The physical projection of Venerable Joshua spoke. "You are the first to pilot a living expert mech. You have always been the fastest of us all. You have always challenged yourself more than the rest of us by throwing your expert light skirmisher into one enemy fleet of warships after another. I can hardly think of a more deserving pilot to break through than yours."

Another physical projection approached and casually slapped Tusa on the back!

"We won't let you keep your head-start for long!" Venerable Orfan exclaimed after she drained her glass of wine. "Our clan has become much safer now that you have managed to break through, but your Dark Zephyr doesn't have the staying power to fend off every powerful enemy. We will work hard and break through so that we can reinforce you soon enough. There is a tier 3 Destroyer spear waiting for my Riot, so you can bet that I will not keep you waiting. By the way, you can borrow my spear and make use of it in the meantime. It will definitely come handy in our next operation."

The junior ace pilot immediately rejected the suggestion. "That spear is too thick and heavy for my Dark Zephyr. I don't think I can keep that aggressive spear under control at all times. I am not even sure whether my mech can safely handle it. It is better to keep it here in Diandi Base and wait for a proper wielder to arrive."

Whether that wielder was Venerable Rosa Orfan or another pilot remained to be seen. The Destroyer spear was only fit to be wielded by a powerful ace pilot and a sturdy ace mech that had been designed to resist the destructive potency of the volatile weapon.

It was not that Saint Tusa was indifferent to the amazing destructive potential of the mech spear.

When Ves had invited Tusa to the vault where the dangerous weapon was stored inside its own protective container, the two explored whether it was possible for the Dark Zephyr to make use of the spear for the time being.

Alas, Tusa immediately concluded that it was a bad idea. The story might be different if he was presented with a pair of Destroyer knives, but the spear was way too unwieldy to be handled by a light skirmisher. He also did not have any foundation in spearmanship. His decision to specialize very early in his career had deprived him of the opportunity to develop proficiencies in other weapon types.

Of course, ace pilots had improved so much that they could easily master the use of other weapon types. This was actually quite common as ace pilots received the privilege of piloting much costlier ace mechs that gained access to a much greater variety of high-end weapon systems.

For example, the Dark Wind Module could be regarded as a very specialized weapon system that could only be installed on a high-ranking mech.

The problem was that Saint Tusa was not the sort of mech pilot who was as eager to explore and adopt new weapon systems like Venerable Joshua.

The ace pilot may have opened up a vast new world of mech combat, but he still insisted on sticking to his original specialization and mech type!

As far as Tusa was concerned, the only weapons his Dark Zephyr needed to carve up phase whales and wreck alien battleships was a good pair of knives!

The Dark Wind Module may technically constitute a separate weapon system, but Tusa preferred to treat it as a functional upgrade to his mech. The Ultimate Module simply weaponized the amazing speed of his battle partner.

In any case, Tusa had no demand for other weapon systems. Even if that left the Dark Zephyr vulnerable against powerful ranged opponents, the ace pilot had no desire to follow the footsteps of first-raters and demand his machine be equipped with all kinds of integrated weapon systems.

The most recent practice bout against the RA mech squad only reinforced this notion.

Multipurpose mechs were not absolutely superior. They merely performed well in most situations.

Tusa had personally confirmed that the RA's vaunted first-class multipurpose mechs were generalists that could maintain a uniform degree of combat effectiveness, but fared poorly when confronted by a single foe that surpassed them in strength by a large enough margin.

Rather than piloting these clumsy machines that seemed to possess hundreds of solutions to different problems yet excelled at none of them, the former third-rater preferred to commit to using a pair of short blades.

As long as he continued to train and develop his knife fighting skills, he could develop powerful new techniques that should allow his Dark Zephyr to launch energy attacks that could strike at targets that were located further away. Perhaps he should approach Venerable Dise and Ketis and ask for advice.

Tusa continued to chat with his former peers. As he did, he noticed to a regret that a barrier had already formed between himself and his former peers.

Ace pilots stood above expert pilots. This was an ironclad custom in the mech community.

Just his ascendant willpower alone made it a lot less comfortable for the expert pilots to maintain their own composure.

Every expert pilot possessed a force of will that sought to claim the surrounding space for their own. The effect was not too strong as the pilots lacked the support of true resonance, but it was still a representation of their strong egos and confidence in themselves.

If Tusa continued to stay close to other expert pilots, then the latter's confidence in themselves would become shakier as the much more superior domain of an ace pilot continued to suppress their willpower.

In other words, there was nothing they could do to stop a hierarchy from forming. Tusa might look as human as the other Larkinsons, but he had transcended his mortality by at least two major steps. His life level had already risen much higher compared to the rest of the clan.

This made the other Larkinson expert pilots both depressed but also eager.

They lamented their inability to break through as quickly as Tusa, but looked forward to the day where they could finally wield this kind of power for themselves!

After a bit more chatting, Tusa finally found himself face to face with General Ark Larkinson.

The leader of the Davute Branch looked a lot less impressive to Tusa today. Their positions had switched so abruptly that neither of the two had fully adjusted to the new status quo.

For a long time, every trueblood Larkinson looked up to Ark Larkinson. The son of Benjamin Larkinson was by far the most successful Larkinson expert pilot of his generation. Many people treated him as an idol and only thought they could follow in his footsteps at most.

Tusa was no exception to this. He had always assumed that with the talent and ability that Ark had always displayed, the older man would manage to break through sooner than every other Larkinson.

Yet the reality was different. Breakthroughs did not necessarily happen in a logical order. For Tusa to break through sooner than Ark sounded as absurd as the former graduating from the mech academy earlier than the latter!

Although Tusa felt happy that he had managed to surpass the expert pilot that he once idolized, he did not miss the obvious fact that Ark's self-esteem had just taken a huge blow.

"Ark."

"Yes, Tusa?"

"If there is one piece of advice that I can give you... it is that you worry too much." The ace pilot solemnly spoke to his former idol. "You are a great expert pilot, but that does not necessarily mean you have what it takes to become an ace pilot. In my opinion, one of the issues that may be holding you back is that you assume way too much responsibility over stuff."

That caused Ark to feel a bit defensive. "Assuming responsibility has always been a part of my identity. I am a branch leader, a mech general and an important military asset of the Larkinson Clan. Each day, my actions directly affect the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. I cannot divorce myself from my duties."

"I am not saying that you should drop every responsibility." Tusa clarified. "I just think that you may have gone too far in this direction. You have become so swamped with responsibilities that I think your dedication to serving as a simple mech pilot may have fallen in priority. How often do you train in your Lionheart compared to the other expert pilots in your command? How many times have you been forced to set aside your practice sessions in order to handle administration or take care of unexpected issues?"

"The work is time-consuming, but rewarding. The more I lead my people, the more they bestow their strength to me. I never fight by myself."

"I am not criticizing your combat approach, Ark. In fact, I think it is strong in its own right. I just think that Saints and Divines do not waste their time on trivial affairs. The closer you reach the level of a god, the more you need to set aside the parts that make you human. I am not sure how far you need to go with this or whether this is the only way for mech pilots to break through. I am merely thinking that this rule applies particularly well in your case."

Ark frowned deeper. Tusa's analysis and advice did not sound groundless.

Perhaps Ark was truly being held back by his human behavior. Now that he thought about it, Tusa made a lot of sense.

His good friend Reginald Cross managed to become an ace pilot. Despite holding the position of patriarch, the man never really cared too much about carrying out the duties of a clan leader.

In fact, Reginald was outright negligent in this aspect! If not for the fact that Master Benedict Cortez effectively filled in for this role, the Cross Clan would have deteriorated a long time ago!

Perhaps... power and responsibility did not mix together as well as Ark thought.

He began to look back at his life with a much more critical perspective after he internalized Tusa's advice.

## Chapter 6009 Upgrade Arrangements

The celebratory banquet lasted for several hours.

Everyone filled their stomachs with exotic and high-quality meals.

Many of the invited Larkinsons had also managed to speak with Saint Tusa and Madame Gloriana.

Although the status of these two rising Larkinsons had exceeded that of many other clansmen, the two still made an effort to be approachable.

After all, the Larkinsons who got to attend this party were all promising or highly placed. These were the movers and shakers of the Larkinson Clan.

From the chief ministers to the legion commanders, each of them wielded a considerable amount of influence in the future growth and direction of the clan.

Everyone got what they wanted from their chats with the two rising stars.

The mood among the invited guests remained harmonious. Although the clan had grown so quickly that multiple factions had already started to come into power, none of the Larkinsons had strong reasons to conflict with each other.

With the Golden Cat continuing to bind them all together, every clansman still regarded each other as brothers and sisters that they could trust on a nearly unconditional basis.

Whether that would last remained to be seen, but Ves was quite happy to see that his clan still retained a high degree of cohesion despite its rapid growth.

In any case, life had to go on after the celebration. Many Larkinsons still had work to get back to. The double breakthroughs most definitely had a lot of implications for the clan, but it would take time for them to come into fruition.

The day after the celebration, Ves and Gloriana descended down to the workshop yet again.

Saint Tusa was already by the Dark Zephyr's side. The living mech had grown considerably. E energies continued to pour into the machine, fueling his cultivation and allowing him to catch up to his powerful pilot over time.

"...IF I BECOME AN ACE MECH, THEN MAKE SURE TO INCREASE MY MAXIMUM ACCELERATION RATE. THE COMBAT WARP SYSTEM IS EXCELLENT AT MAKING ME MORE MANEUVERABLE AT SHORT RANGES, BUT MANY BATTLES IN SPACE ARE FOUGHT ACROSS HUNDREDS IF NOT THOUSANDS OF KILOMETERS. EACH SECOND IT TAKES TO INTERCEPT OUR ENEMY WILL RESULT IN MORE CASUALTIES FOR OUR CLAN."

The ace pilot shrugged. "I have asked the mech designers to look into it, but you shouldn't get your hopes up. We can't just replace your transphasic flight system with another one. I think we need to wait until the Design Department or one of the new R&D institutions managed to develop an improved version of the Combat Warp System."

"THAT WILL TAKE YEARS. I CAN'T WAIT THAT LONG. I DON'T WANT TO END UP AS THE SLOWEST ACE MECH OF MY WEIGHT CLASS. DO YOU KNOW HOW EMBARRASSING THAT SOUNDS?"

"I don't think you have to worry about your enemies overtaking you. We aren't competing against human mech forces anymore. The only enemies we need to worry about are alien warships, and none of them accelerate faster than you. The only enemies that can give you a run for your money are phasefighters, but they are so weak that there is no point in taking them seriously."

Both Tusa and the Dark Zephyr had noticed the approach of the two mech designers a while ago, but they only suspended their conversation when the newcomers got close enough.

"Good morning, Tusa."

"Good morning, Ves. Good morning Gloriana."

"GOOD MORNING, MY PROGENITORS."

Ves smiled as he gazed up at the Dark Zephyr. "I have great news for you. My wife and I have just signed a contract with Master Benedict Cortez of the Cross Clan. He will be the mech designer responsible for converting you into an ace mech. This is the most convenient choice for us as Master Benedict still resides in the expeditionary fleet. The two of you will be able to return and fight alongside the Larkinson Army for several months before our old friend has completed his design work. Gloriana will work together with Master Benedict by remote, but she will not be able to help as much in this case. There are still aspects about ace mechs that surpass the realm of expert mechs."

"MASTER BENEDICT... HE IS NOT LIKE THE OTHER MASTER MECH DESIGNERS. I LIKE IT. A MECH DESIGNER WHO IS COURAGEOUS ENOUGH TO BET HIS LIFE ON HIS OWN WORKS IS MORE TRUSTWORTHY THAN A COWARDS WHO HIDES IN THE REAR."

Unlike his battle partner, Tusa looked a bit more reluctant about this choice. "I can understand how convenient it is to let Master Benedict do the work, but he has only become a Master Mech Designer relatively recently. Aside from that, his specialization doesn't have a lot to do with light mechs. There ought to be many older, more experienced and knowledgeable Master Mech Designers among your friends circle, right?"

"There are, but I don't trust many of them to treat the Dark Zephyr right." Ves responded. "He is a third order living mech and a masterwork mech. It takes a respectful and restrained approach for a third-party mech designer to properly upgrade your machine into an ace mech. On top of that, your battle partner is also an archemech, which means that there are very few mech designers who possess the expertise to work with this tech base. Master Benedict is not too familiar with archetech, but he is willing to defer to Gloriana on this matter, which takes a lot of humility. Out of all of the candidates that we have explored, Master Benedict has shown the greatest amount of sincerity."

Gloriana snorted and crossed her arms. "He is far too curious about our latest work, Ves. The Master is familiar enough with living mechs to understand your rules, but he is also greedy for inspiration."



The Ultimate Module that you have recently invented is a much more advanced application of hyper technology than what can be found on the mech market. When Master Benedict learned about it, he did not even bother to hide his overwhelming desire to study your innovation. I think he will try to copy some of your solutions and use them to improve his Endex System."

"Hehehe. He is welcome to do so." Ves grinned. "I am not selfish. This is part of the trade. In exchange for getting access to the Dark Zephyr Mark III, he will do his utmost to upgrade our quasi-first-class expert light skirmisher into a first-class ace mech. Even if we have already laid much of the groundwork in advance, it will still take a lot of effort for Master Benedict to complete such a significant upgrade. The strength of the next iteration of the Dark Zephyr will reach a whole other level after this. I bet that not even the Mars can compete anymore."

That was an optimistic statement. The Mars may still be stuck with a second-class ace mech, but Master Benedict regularly updated the machine from time to time.

The Master Mech Designer mastered more advanced technologies over time. The rich plunder and profits earned from all of battles in the border region also enriched the Cross Clan, allowing it to afford more expensive materials that could be used to fabricate more expensive mech parts.

Compared to its initial form, the latest version of the Mars had become several times stronger and many times more expensive, and this was without factoring years worth of willpower baptism!

In addition, Patriarch Reginald Cross grew vigorously after he first piloted the Mars and turned it into his second skin. His Saint Kingdom was not only stronger, but the ace pilot definitely managed to deepen his control over his domain field.

Yet despite all of these factors, Ves possessed a great amount of confidence that Saint Tusa and the Dark Zephyr could already hold their own against Patriarch Reginald and the Mars.

The Larkinson Clan of today had much greater financial strength than the current Cross Clan!

The high-quality alloys that made up the mech frame of the Dark Zephyr alone was worth several hundred million MTA credits!

Combined with all of the technological innovations, the much newer and more modern ace mech should definitely be able to compete against his older counterpart!

Of course, this was just a very loose prediction. Ves did not dare to claim with absolute certainty that Tusa would win a duel against Patriarch Reginald.

"Saint Tusa, now that you have broken through, you have entered a period of rapid development." Gloriana said in a more neutral tone. "You may have gained an enormous boost in strength, but your utilization of your newfound capabilities has dropped. You need to spend time exploring and familiarizing with your Saint Kingdom. Much of the power of an ace pilot comes from exploiting the vast power of his domain field. At this moment, you have not even begun to leverage it properly. Aside from that, you also need to relearn how to pilot the Dark Zephyr himself. The transition from a low-tier expert mech to a high-tier expert mech is already an enormous leap. You need to refamiliarize yourself with your battle partner as soon as possible."

That was prudent advice. The Larkinson ace pilot nodded with a serious expression.

"I know how powerful other ace pilots are. I already recognize that I am not as good as the likes of Saint Marissa Lewandowski in terms of control. I will work on this first as it is unacceptable for me to lose my fluency in controlling my machine."

Ves was quite satisfied with Tusa as an ace pilot. His second breakthrough had not inflated his arrogance or altered his personality to the point he became unrecognizable.

Tusa was probably one of the most ideal candidates of the Larkinson Clan to break through first.

He respected Ves.

He loved the Larkinson Clan.

He was willing to risk his life to protect the Larkinsons.

He was not greedy for authority.

He maintained a relatively subdued and grounded perspective on reality.

He possessed a friendly personality.

He treated his living mech with utmost trust and affection.

All of these reasons and more caused Ves to feel lucky that it had been Tusa who had broken through the invisible barrier first!

If a guest pilot such as Venerable Davia Stark or an absolute idiot such as Venerable Vincent Ricklin broke through first, then Ves would probably gain an enormous new headache.

Ace pilots couldn't be restrained!

Even now, Ves no longer possessed the confidence that he could stop Tusa from doing whatever he wanted.

If Ves and Tusa ever had a falling out, then there was a considerable chance that a lot of Larkinsons decided to follow the latter instead of the former!

It couldn't be helped. Modern human society had been conditioned to worship high-ranking mech pilots.

Many people already treated god pilots as literal deities. Ace pilots were much more accessible but attracted an insane amount of hero worship.

Even now, many clansmen had already turned into dedicated fans! They were practically ready to worship Tusa as a literal patron saint of the Larkinson Clan!

Fortunately, it did not appear that Tusa was the sort of person that paid attention to that kind of stuff. His strengthened willpower exuded a sense of calm and inner peace. It was as if nothing in reality could affect his mood. This was a manifestation of his freedom domain.

After they finished their discussion on the circumstances of the Dark Zephyr's future ace mech conversion, Ves also mentioned a more immediate requirement.

"Tusa, Gloriana, both of you have broken through. This means that the two of you need to make another pilgrimage to a sector headquarters of the Red Association. Both of you will be gone for a week or so. I am not entirely sure what the mechers will tell you, but I am confident that the both of

you will at least become aware of a very important pillar of the mech industry. Once you have completed this obligation, you will doubtlessly learn a couple of essential new techniques."

Gloriana eagerly nodded. "I have always wanted to learn how to design expert mechs on an independent basis. I can finally end my dependence on your contribution!"

#### Chapter 6010 Pauper's Perspective

Diandi Base became a lot quieter now that Tusa and Gloriana departed.

Both of them boarded one of the destroyers of the Bluejay Fleet in order to make their way to one of the larger strongholds of the Red Association.

The mechers clearly wanted to put greater effort into deepening their relationship with the two young stars, so they prepared a grander reception for the newly ascended ace pilot and Senior Mech Designer.

Ves did not really mind this. Better treatment translated into greater power and influence. He was not afraid that his cousin and his wife would put the cart before the horse and put the interests of the Red Association above the interests of the Larkinson Clan.

From a strategic perspective, it was better if other Larkinsons helped to prop up the clan aside from their patriarch.

Due to his rise in status, Ves had become way too busy these days. He may have removed a lot of tasks from his to-do list, but it still contained way more stuff than he could handle by himself.

He needed to delegate more. He also had to give up on a few goals and focus on the ones that mattered.

"At least I can settle down for a few years." He smiled.

He experienced enough excitement for a while. He had attracted way too much heat over the span of a few months. There was no need to burnish his reputation further. His greatest priorities was to develop the Premier Branch, modernize all of his second-class mech designs to the Hyper Generation, upgrade the remaining expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan to the same level as the Dark Zephyr Mark III, promote to a first-class mech designer and prepare for the public rollout of Carmine mechs.

This was anything but an exhaustive list. Ves also had to take care of other matters, such as raising his children, attending the virtual sessions of the Interim Leadership Council, gathering enough first-class starships to form a capable first-class fleet and preparing for the establishment of at least 1 'sect' aligned with the Larkinson Clan.

"That is way too much." Ves rubbed his face with his palm. "I really wish I could split myself into multiple partitions of myself."

There were actually people who managed to do that, but they tended to be first-raters who employed exotic alien tech or other high tech solutions.

Ves could already split himself to an extent. He merely had to remove his cyborg leg and allow it to make decisions on his behalf.

Usually, he kept it behind in the design lab so that it continued to design mechs while the rest of his body took care of other affairs.

There were also times where he reunited with his cyborg leg and used the combined brainpower to increase his productivity during difficult design sessions.

As his mech designs became increasingly more technologically advanced, the demand for processing power and highly developed analytical skills increased.

The E-computers accumulated in the Blinkyverse helped a lot to boost his effective processing power, but mech design had never been a purely mathematical exercise where rote calculations could solve every design problem.

The intersection of so much advanced technology imposed a greater demand on creativity, ingenuity and high-level problem solving.

It was easy for Ves to design a serviceable second-class mech. He could do so a lot more effectively in half the time compared to a few years ago. He had improved too much since the start of the Age of Dawn.

Of course, that did not necessarily mean he could design bestseller mechs at will. Trying to elevate the performance of a second-class mech beyond market standard still required a lot of ingenuity and hard work. The law of diminishing returns struck hard, forcing him to spend months of design work just to improve the overall performance of a mech design by 5 percent or less.

The competition still had a chance of pushing back against the market dominance of LMC mechs, especially now that more and more mech designers started to develop more advanced applications of hyper technology.

Ves did not think that their inventions could compete against his newly developed Ultimate Modules, but the latter was a bit too high-end to be integrated into his mass production models for the time being.

Ultimate Modules were powerful beyond a doubt, but they were heavily dependent on high-grade hyper materials to produce extraordinary results.

It took a huge amount of money to grant the Dark Zephyr Mark III the ability to cripple first-class multipurpose mechs in an instant with a single activation of his Dark Wind Module!

Although Ves had not conducted enough tests to be certain about this, he estimated that Ultimate Modules made out of weaker and more affordable hyper materials were not worth the effort to include in his mass production models.

Not only did his ordinary products have to wait until they evolved into third order living mechs, the estimated power of an Ultimate Module was probably so low that it became hard to justify their inclusion.

Ultimate Modules took up valuable space that could easily be used to add extra energy cells, thicker armor or other handy modules.

"Maybe I can figure out a way to make them useful for mass production models." Ves mused.

That required additional research, which demanded a hefty time investment. As he reviewed his to-do list once again, he found it difficult to squeeze in additional time.

"That's fine. It is best if I focus on consolidation anyway."

He harvested many gains during his last business trip. He was not even close to processing all of his insights and new ideas.

Ves returned to his usual routine, though he had less mech design projects to worry about than before.

Gloriana's temporary absence changed the dynamic in the Design Department. No other woman in the Design Department could match her intensity.

Although Alexa Streon and Kelsey Ampatoch attempted to fill in her shoes, their leadership and management approaches were much milder in comparison. The deputy directors kept everything simple and only made sure that every design team continued to remain on schedule with their assigned projects.

This was not necessarily bad. The people working in the Design Department gained a lot more room to breathe now that Gloriana wasn't hovering over their shoulders as much. Everyone treated this period as a partial vacation more or less.

The recent completion of the Dark Zephyr Mark III Project had removed a large burden from Ves' shoulders.

Although Gloriana would soon be keen on designing the next iteration on a bunch of other expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan, Ves could work on that later.

Ves was contemplating whether he should restart one of the whimsical personal design projects that got stalled due to lack of time. He had a lot of ambitious ideas, but he was not sure whether this was the right time to realize them. Perhaps it might be better to wait until he became a first-class mech designer. That would allow him to expand his possibilities by 11:03

working with much more powerful tech.

"Let's check up on the progress of my students."

The growth of Gloriana, Ketis, Alexa and so on reminded Ves that the rise of other mech designers could relieve his burden to an extent. The more mech designers stood out from the crowd and started to demonstrate a lot of value, the less Ves had to do in order to prop up the Larkinson Clan by himself.

Ketis and Alexa were already doing fine by themselves. They had found their direction and still made a lot of progress every day.

The swordmaster had made a lot of strides in developing the commercialized version of the Stormblade Samurai. It shouldn't take too long for her to complete the first iteration. After that, it should probably take a few more months to test the prototype and optimize the design before Ketis decided to publish her work.

Ves had high hopes that the Stormblade Samurai Mark II could turn into a bestseller. It had already won a lot of praise from the Swordmaidens assigned to the expeditionary fleet.

Of course, the recently completed Storm Sword model won even more praise due to its much higher performance levels!

Alexa had broken through to Journeyman a lot more recently, so she was still at an earlier stage of her journey.

Despite her relative youth, Alexa mastered a lot more knowledge. She possessed vastly more book knowledge on high technologies than Ves and Gloriana!

However, she still had a lot to go before she could combine all of that knowledge of advanced tech into attractive mech designs. She was hardly the only scion of a Terran ancient clan who enjoyed the best learning resources.

Even then, these young elites never really had a chance of carving out a place in the first-class mech market. The competition was simply too fierce, and customers were way too discerning to waste their time on products that hadn't been designed by Master Mech Designers or Star Designers.

However, Alexa planned to circumvent this by designing mechs for third-raters.

Ves grew curious at whether she was able to adapt to the much more constricting and rudimentary standards of the third-class mech market.

As a former third-class mech designer himself, he knew exactly how poor and limiting it was to design mechs with so few possibilities.

"It is difficult." Alexa admitted to Ves in private after he had entered her personal design lab.

"Theoretically, a third-class mech still shares the same fundamentals as a first-class mech. In practice, I have found that I require an entirely different attitude and skill set in order to design a good third-class mech."

Ves smiled in amusement. "You need to think like a pauper if you want to sell your products to third-raters. Every third-

class customer always prioritizes price above everything else. If your mech isn't cost-effective enough, it has no chance of getting sold. Let me see your work so far. I am sure that you have already attempted to design a few basic third-class mechs for practice. It doesn't take as much time to design a working mech at this tech level, but it takes real understanding and ingenuity to develop one that is both powerful and cheap."

From the look on the young Journeyman's face, Alexa clearly learned this lesson the hard way.

Although she was ashamed to show any works that were not good enough to be presented to the public, Ves was her mentor, so there was not as much shame in showing her practice results. She reluctantly pulled up a few of her recent design files and projected them into the air.

The designs were indeed much sloppier than a proper work. A few of them were incomplete as Alexa did not find it worthwhile to do a lot of detailing work.

It didn't matter. Ves easily figured out where Alexa stood when it came to designing third-class mechs.

"There are a couple of issues that you need to work on." He said. "First, you are trying to put too much stuff into your designs. It is not viable to design multipurpose mechs at the third-class level. Miniaturization on a budget always leads to bad results. You need to suppress your urge to add extra modules and weapon systems when they aren't strictly necessary. The classical mech archetypes may seem incredibly limiting to you, but they have all withstood the test of time. Before you even think about deviating from these standard templates, you should at least put in the effort to master them and understand how they work in their most basic forms."

Alexa nodded. "I have already started to make this realization myself, but... it is difficult for me to break my old habits. I do not understand why so many of these melee mechs do not reserve any room for at least a basic ranged weapon system. They are so vulnerable to enemies that can threaten them from a distance that it seems stupid that swordsman mechs and knight mechs are unable to retaliate in the slightest. How are they supposed to deter enemy ranged units?"

"They don't." Ves flatly replied. "Third-class mech forces don't have the luxury to kit out all of their mechs with so many solutions. What they do instead is rely on specialization. Any adequate mech force will have a mix of ranged and melee mechs. The former is usually responsible for covering the latter. This is how it is supposed to work. Is that so difficult to understand?"

"I find it difficult to believe that third-class mechs cannot carry any secondary armaments while still retaining their overall combat effectiveness..."