

The Mech 6011

Chapter 6011 Sunk Costs

Although Alexa Streon had access to plenty of textbooks and articles that told her that it was a bad idea to pile too many modules onto a third-class mech design, she still needed a lot more convincing in order to stop herself from overloading her works.

This was a common bad habit of every first-class mech designer. They studied so hard to design first-class multipurpose mechs that they completely rejected the notion of specialized mechs.

Even if they understood that the latter still had reasons to exist, first-raters such as Alexa considered them to be primitive, outdated and even outright objectively inferior!

It was not their fault that these arrogant and elitist Terrans and so on developed such a strong bias against specialized mechs. They merely assimilated the stances propagated by their teachers and textbooks.

When they spent all of their time as a mech design student or working professional in an environment that denigrated specialized mechs, it would be a miracle if they held the opposite opinion!

Still, Ves actually found it rather funny that a woman as smart as Alexa struggled to understand the core principles of third- class mech design.

It showed that she was still fallible.

"Perhaps you have set your sights too low." Ves gently told her. "Going from first-class mech designs to third-class mech designs is too extreme of a jump. Maybe it is best if you start with designing second-class mechs first. You have already assisted in the design of several recent LMC products such as the Fey Fianna, so you should know how much more you can get away with at this tech level. Specialization is still the prevailing norm in the second-class mech market, but there is much more room for additional armaments depending on the design budget. The challenge is to maintain a good balance between extra features and strong foundations."

Although the blond mech designer understood that this was a logical alternative, she still shook her head in rejection.

"You are correct that it would require much less effort on my part to adapt to second-class mech design. That is exactly why I do not intend to follow this course of action. Having observed young and notable professionals such as Director Gloriana, Saint Tusa and most notably yourself, I have found that your Larkinson ethos is a common driver to your success. Journeymen are meant to explore what else can be done with mechs outside of what they have already learned. The further away from my comfort zone, the more lessons I will learn from the experience. I do not necessarily have to succeed in order to broaden my horizons, but I do not intend to fail in a task as simple as designing a commercially successful third-class mech."

She possessed a lot of ambition, at least. Ves approved of her desire to seek a greater challenge despite how much hardship she was piling onto her shoulders.

"Well, I won't discourage you if you think you are up to the task. I think you are right that you will reap greater rewards by mastering the art of designing third-class mechs without trying to familiarize yourself with second-class mech design first. However, you shouldn't try to work with third-class mechs with the mindset of transforming all of the paradigms surrounding them. You need to produce good results with the most basic third-class mechs first before you can even think about changing the formulas. It might not be apparent to you, but it is really difficult to design an excellent knight mech or rifleman mech when you aren't allowed to add any additional gimmicks or variations to their formulas. You need to get really good at squeezing the greatest amount of performance from the most inferior tech and materials. You can't cheat this process by resorting to advanced high technology or blowing through your design budget."

Alexa took his words seriously. She already started to feel intimidated by this seemingly simple sounding challenge.

Her limited experience with third-class mechs so far taught her that many of her skills and methodology no longer applied anymore. It actually became counterproductive to adopt the same methods that she took for granted. She found it profoundly disturbing to stop and break her routine.

However, it was instances like this that would ultimately turn her into a better and more versatile mech designer.

"I will never look down on third-class mech designers again." Alexa whispered as she started to fall deep into thought. "My peers and I used to think that they were not actually real mech designers. Their mechs are so simple that it looks as if even a first year mech design student can produce works of similar quality. Now I know that possessing a much greater grasp on theory alone is far from enough to produce a better third-class mech."

"You are not entirely right or wrong on that front, Alexa. It is true that third-class mech designers possess their own strengths, but many third-class products that have attained market leadership consist of mainstream mech models sold by huge first-class enterprises. Anyone can learn how to design a third-class as long as they put in enough honest work."

"I shall take that into account."

They talked a bit more about the unique intricacies of designing third-class mechs, but Ves believed that his student no longer needed any further advice to succeed in her venture.

He liked that about Alexa. She was so damn smart and independent that he only needed to point her in the right direction every now and then. Perhaps she would have been able to figure out how to design proper third-class mechs through her own realizations. His intervention merely saved her a bit of time.

After his meeting with Alexa, Ves decided to drop by a pair of mech designers that he hadn't paid too much attention to as of late.

Instead of visiting them at their respective workplaces, he decided to summon them to his own design lab.

"Meow."

"Ah, hello, Lucky. It has been a long time since I last greeted you. You look so much more powerful now that you have turned into an archemetal cat."

A pair of young and vigorous men smiled and petted Lucky's head and back for a few seconds.

Cats earned a special place in the Larkinson Clan. Hardly anyone could resist their charm, and it was not unusual to see them hanging around in workplaces.

Once the pair of Apprentice Mech Designers sat down in front of Ves' desk, they both looked at their patriarch with hope and apprehension.

"Maikel. Zanthar. It's been a while since I last checked on your progress." Ves straightforwardly began. "A lot has been on my mind as of late, and I have a lot of responsibilities that require my attention. However, I also chose to keep my distance from the two of you because I trust that you can manage your careers without needing anyone to hold your hands. Now let me ask you this. Am I right to put my trust in your capacity to work on an independent basis?"

Neither of the two looked comfortable after Ves asked this question.

"I think that I have done my best under the circumstances." Zanthar cautiously said. "I have continued to explore and study ranged weapon systems. I have invested much of my time on trying to increase my understanding of luminar crystal technology. I am still attempting to form a design philosophy centered around luminar crystal weapons, but it takes time for me to understand the alien tech and navigate through all of the gaps in known theory. I don't think I can break through in the short term if I continue to commit to luminar crystal technology, but knowing how much potential that you have drawn from it makes me convinced that it is worth it to specialize in it. Luminar crystal technology has excellent compatibility with hyper technology, so it has become even more valuable than before."

That was a courageous decision on the part of Zanthar. Not Apprentices possessed the guts and determination to base their most precious design philosophies around alien tech with unknown depth and potential.

"I cannot judge whether your decision is right or wrong." Ves replied. "In fact, I think that every earnest pursuit of tech that can improve the existing standard of mechs is a worthwhile or noble endeavor. The difficulty lies in knowing when your decision is a good investment of your time. How many years do you think it will take before you can advance to Journeyman?"

Zanthar slumped a bit. "I honestly do not know. I have learned that it is best if I do not set any expectations for myself on this. These days, I am continuing to study and experiment with luminar crystal tech with the hope that I will gain an epiphany one day that can form the basis of my design philosophy."

"That is a very unreliable approach." Ves pointed out. "It works best for geniuses who manage to become Journeymen before their thirties, but... I think it is abundantly clear that neither of you fall within this category."

That statement depressed the two Larkinsons even further.

"Sorry."

"There is no need to apologize." Ves said in a gentler tone. "You don't need to compare yourself to me, Gloriana, Ketis, Alexa or anyone else in the Design Department. Many of the high-ranking mech designers are young, talented and capable because I deliberately selected for these traits when I went on my hiring sprees. Do not make the mistake of assuming that every proper mech designer

has to be a prodigy who can produce results in much less time than others. It is not uncommon for Apprentice Mech Designers to form their design philosophies when they are in their fifties or sixties. Of course, much of the delays come from trying to pursue more ambitious design philosophies."

While that was true, these slowpokes usually made less achievements in their lives.

"We don't want to become mediocre mech designers." Maikel spoke up. "Maybe it is not possible for us to be as good as you, but we want to become brilliant in our own ways. Zanthar doesn't want to give up on luminar crystal technology, and I don't want to give up on designing living mechs. We would rather stay stuck as Apprentices for several more decades than to settle for less ambitious design philosophies."

To be honest, Ves believed that the two trueblood Larkinsons did not have what it takes to achieve success in their current paths. They were lacking in talent and qualifications, which was not surprising since they used to be a pair of average third-raters.

Then again, Ves was not much different from them. The biggest difference that set him apart from Maikel and Zanthar was that he had boosted his career by making use of the Mech Designer System.

That briefly injected another idea into his mind.

What if... he inducted them into the Mech Designer System?

Although their qualifications were admittedly poor, that became irrelevant as long as the two started to make proper use of the opportunities granted by the System.

Maikel and Zanthar's loyalty and commitment to the Larkinson Clan was beyond doubt. They also respected him and looked up to him to an insane degree due to witnessing his rise from the Bright Republic to the upper echelons of red humanity from the beginning.

Ves was also satisfied with their attitude and approach towards mech design. They would have been able to make a lot more achievements if they were smarter or more talented, but their poor backgrounds held them back.

The meeting dragged on for half an hour before Ves dismissed the two Apprentices.

Though Ves had yet to make a decision on this matter, he was definitely beginning to lean in this direction.

The more he thought about it, the less he thought it was a bad idea.

The only issue that made him more hesitant was whether it was cost-effective for him to pull them into the System.

He hadn't checked this particular function after the last update, but the System definitely charged a hefty price to bestow anyone with the status of a user.

If he had to invest 1000 AP or something to give Maikel or Zanthar access to the System, then he would be a lot more reluctant to make this investment!

Chapter 6012 Looser Criteria

Since Ves was no longer preoccupied with any immediate priorities, he decided that it was a good time to check out the System.

He had not forgotten that he carried the soul mark of a hostile alien God King. So long as he carried out this mark, he could no longer take his time to develop his strength and build his power base.

He needed to hurry up. He had to speed up his pace. He had to make sure he advanced to the rank of Master Mech Designer within a decade and Star Designer within half a century.

If he took too long, then he would lack the power to defend himself against the Subjugation King when the alien tyrant finally arrived in the Red Ocean!

This was also why Ves seriously thought about inducting Maikel and Zanthar into the Mech Designer System.

Were they the most suitable candidates that he could choose from? No.

They were trustworthy, though. He knew both of them well enough that they would not abuse the power of the System or try to turn against him anytime soon.

Even if their personalities started to change for the worse after they began to enjoy the benefits of the System, Ves would make sure to step in and smack them around to remind them who was in charge.

After Ves entered the System Space, he first received another radiant lottery ticket, which he earned by turning the Dark Zephyr into a masterwork mech.

A grin appeared on his face and he held the precious ticket. "Awesome."

Despite all of the cool prizes that he could obtain from this ticket, he was not in a hurry to make use of it right away. It was better to wait until he developed a strong need for a specific advantage.

Once his excitement faded, he stowed the ticket into the Vault of Eternity where 10 more golden lottery tickets remained unused.

He already had plenty of cool stuff on hand for the time being. He needed to work towards converting them into useful assets for his clan before he was ready to think about obtaining more rare goods.

He ascended the System Space and only briefly glanced at the Dimension Observatory.

If he was not able to reunite with Ketis soon, then Ves felt tempted to experiment with the Dimension Observatory himself.

Exposing himself or not, he could not let the advantage brought by the second System upgrade go to waste.

"I need to earn a lot more AP first, though."

Ves continued to ascend the steps before he reached the Sacred Temple.

He checked his Status as well as the states of his Divine Cores as usual.

The Iron Resonant Crucifix Crown did not show any abnormal behavior, and the soul mark had not changed the last time he inspected it. Nothing appeared to be amiss, but Ves did not dare to assume this would be the case forever.

Both of these foreign objects were dangerous. They may be dormant for now, but who knew what their creators had put into them. They were way too complicated for him to decipher, and that worried him a lot since they had latched onto him like parasites.

He could just feel that both of them would generate a huge amount of trouble down the line, but he couldn't do anything about it with his current capabilities.

"Oh well."

He left the Sacred Hearth and moved to the Pantheon. While this place was ordinarily the site where he could check his Status, it also presented Ves with the option of inducting other people into the System.

He checked how much it would cost to make this happen.

"10 AP...?"

That was... a very trivial cost to Ves. In fact, it was downright cheap as far as he was concerned!

It used to be a lot more expensive before the first upgrade of the Mech Designer System, but when Ves recalled the exchange rate between Design Points and Ascension Points, it started to make a lot more sense.

"10 AP is still really low, though."

His eyes narrowed in suspicion. The low cost was a clear signal.

The Mech Designer System obviously did not like it that Ves continued to monopolize it. The System had already shown many signs that it would prefer to be used by multiple people.

Since the price of inducting people in the System was so damn low compared to his current AP earning ability, then it made a lot more sense to start bringing in Larkinson mech designers that he could trust!

"I shouldn't go wild with this." Ves spoke as he tried to rein in any wild ideas. "A lot of higher ups already deduced that I possess a fragment of the Metal Scroll, but that doesn't mean I should flaunt it by recreating the Metal Shrine."

That would most definitely alarm a lot of old-timers! The First Flame and all of those other paranoid old geezers would probably think he was trying to revive the Five Scrolls Compact if he started to induct thousands of mech designers into the System!

It was safer to remain low-key on this matter for the time being. He should only select a handful of candidates at the start.

His main objective in inviting more people into the System was two-fold.

First, he wanted to deepen the foundation of the Larkinson and raise more qualified helpers that could assist in his work.

Second, he wanted to pull in productive mech designers who could contribute to the development of the Dimension Observatory by covering its demanding AP costs.

It made a lot more sense to invite talented and proven mech designers like Gloriana and Ketis rather than a pair of mediocre Apprentices such as Maikel and Zanthar.

However, talent and ability were not essential criteria when it came to an existence as powerful and subversive as the Mech Designer System.

Just as in the case of Ves, the System possessed the capacity to turn any mediocre mech designer into a once-in-a-century genius!

While a mech designer who was already brilliant would be able to accelerate their progress even further with access to all of the outrageous features of the System, they did not strictly need it in order to succeed.

Ves actually felt torn when he tried to think what sort of people he should be inducting into the System.

"Maybe I don't need to make a choice. I can just invite both kinds of people!"

It only cost 10 AP to induct a mech designer into the System. He still had enough AP in reserve to invite the names that immediately popped up in his mind.

The only reason why he did not do so right away was because he was not quite ready to break his psychological barrier.

Ves spent almost two decades while keeping the System as hidden as possible. He had never breathed a word of it to Gloriana for fear of further leaks.

More than that, he admitted to himself that he had developed a possessive mindset towards the System.

It belonged to him. He had used it for so long that it had turned into his exclusive advantage.

If he started to invite other Larkinson mech designers into the System, would their progress suddenly accelerate as they began to design one innovative mech after another?

What if they overtook Ves?

What if they wrestled control of the System from his grasp?

What if they kicked him out of the System that he had relied upon for so long?

Ves shook his head. "Wait. Why am I afraid of that? I am not supposed to be addicted to the System!"

So what if the people he invited into the System tried to take it away from him one day?

He had put a lot of effort into making sure he never became overly dependent on its features!

Since that was the case, there was no compelling reason why he should fear these outcomes.

Ves was not arrogant enough to admit that he could have made it this far without the benefit of the System, but now that he had grown to this extent... he didn't mind it if he let go of this crutch.

He had become confident enough in his own abilities that he could realize his design philosophy and advance to the rank of Star Designer by relying on himself!

At most, he could progress faster and broaden his knowledge base by making use of the Tree of Possibilities and other amenities.

Ves felt a bit more relaxed after he made all of these realizations. Since the Mech Designer System was not as indispensable to his journey as a mech designer as before, he saw no reason to fret about all of the potential problems that might incur.

That said, he did not intend to induct Maikel and Zanther into the System right away. He at least needed to perform his due diligence and test whether the two could handle the power of the System without getting corrupted by its power.

He did not want the two young men to end up like the Polymath, or worse, a Compact cultist one day!

Another consideration was whether he should introduce them to the System while they were still stuck in the Apprentice stage.

On the one hand, Ves believed that they could become much more brilliant Journeymen if they succeeded in overcoming their challenges by themselves.

On the other hand, it might take two or three decades before they could finally advance. So much time would have passed that the Red Ocean looked completely unrecognizable by that time!

Waiting for so long also gave the two trueblood Larkinsons much less time to grow and prepare for the arrival of the powerful native aliens of Messier 87.

"If that is the case, then I better address this priority sooner rather than later."

Perhaps he could wait until Ketis was finally able to travel to New Constantinople VIII and meet him in person.

Inducting all three of them at once might help make it easier for everyone.

Ves decided to go with this plan. It left him with enough time to contemplate his decision and expand his initial selection if necessary.

For example, he hadn't quite made up his mind whether he should include Gloriana on the list as well.

He could just tell that she was the sort of mech designer who would be able to navigate the rules of the Mech Designer System a lot better than himself.

"She's also the biggest security risk out of all of the possible candidates."

The System might not strictly be a secret to the higher ups of the Red Association anymore, but giving hints of its existence was different than blabbing about it! Perhaps Jovy Armalon and a bunch of other mechers might show up and 'request' for Ves to share his bounty.

"I don't mind giving this benefit to Jovy, but not every mecher is trustworthy..."

Ves almost cursed the absurdly low AP cost of inviting another mech designer into the System.

The threshold was so low that there was no need for him to show much restraint in extending invitations to other mech designers.

"I need to put my mind on other matters."

He left the Sacred Temple and descended down the steps until he reached the Mission Hall.

Now that he was no longer caught up in a crisis or immediate priority, he might as well accept a bunch of Missions that he could work on over the next couple of weeks and months.

"Even if I invite a bunch of other mech designers, I still need to earn more AP for myself."

He felt the urge to expand his knowledge base by swallowing another enlightenment fruit.

If he wanted to obtain the good ones, then he needed to invest a lot more time and effort to complete enough Missions!

"Let's see what is available..."

Chapter 6013 Ease of Completion

When Ves entered the Mission Hall, he inspected the available Missions with the intention to harvest as much AP as possible in the coming year.

Although many of the Missions imposed troublesome or time-consuming demands, he believed he was in a much better position to complete them than before. He could not keep ignoring them just because he did not like to add more inconveniences to his life.

Ves still did not understand why the System encouraged him to engage in so many strange and diverse activities. What was the point? Did it seek to broaden his horizons, or was it trying to mold him into a completely different person?

"Who cares. AP is AP. As long as I stick to my principles, it shouldn't matter what the System asks me to do. What matters is where I spend my AP on. That has a much greater influence on my future direction."

He couldn't afford to be picky when deciding when to accept Missions anymore. His demand for Ascension Points had skyrocketed. Not only did he wish to accelerate his knowledge accumulation with enlightenment fruits, he also wanted to stockpile a bunch of Qi Restoration Potions in case he confronted a strong opponent again.

On top of that, he also needed to get started on upgrading the Dimension Observatory. He could not rely completely on the contributions of the mech designers that he intended to induct in the System in the future.

With these considerations in mind, Ves forced himself to survey the dozens of available Missions and push himself into accepting them so long as their demands did not sound too unreasonable.

[Alien Relic Hunt]

Mission: Alien Relic Hunt

Difficulty: C-Rank

Description

The Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy is occupied by many alien races. Many of their relics and constructs hold considerable cultural and scientific value to the human race.

Retrieve 15 different items of alien origin from where they have been left by their former alien owners. These alien relics must be of significant value to humanity in order to qualify.

You will earn a higher valuation if you have obtained more items or sought out relics of greater value.

Reward: 40 Ascension Points

Time limit: 2 years.

Penalty for failure: Lower your Intelligence by 0.1.

"I've seen this one before." Ves remarked as he rubbed his hairless chin. "It's actually really easy to complete this Mission. Nowhere in the description states that I need to retrieve the artifacts in person. The forces that do all of the hard work don't even have to be a part of the expeditionary fleet."

What did this mean?

It meant that he could readily complete this Mission by purchasing the necessary alien artifacts!

In the last grand auction, Ves witnessed plenty of alien relics with notable origins and stories. This indicated that there was a thriving market for these exotic curiosities!

Was Ves short of money? No. His clan may have gone into debt as of late, but its cash flow had become so much stronger that he could borrow a lot more money if he wished.

"There are no quality criteria, so I don't have to buy the most expensive alien relics. I just have to make sure that they are genuine and good enough to meet the minimum threshold."

How much money would it cost to obtain 15 serviceable alien relics? 100,000 MTA credits? 1 million MTA credits?

"This is a worthwhile trade even if I have to pay 10 million MTA credits!"

There was no market price for 40 AP, so Ves could not say for certain whether it was a good deal to exchange so much money for Ascension Points.

However, the benefits provided by enlightenment fruits worth around 40 AP was definitely greater than a few million MTA credits as far as he was concerned!

It was still worthwhile for him to make this exchange!

"In effect, this Mission has effectively turned into a roundabout money-to-AP conversion!"

Ves no longer hesitated anymore and accepted it straight away. Even if his various assumptions turned out to be wrong, he still had two whole years to fulfill the requirements of the Mission, which gave him plenty of time to experiment and figure out the System's boundaries.

After that, he sought for other acceptable Missions.

[Mech Beauty Contest]

Mission: Mech Beauty Contest

Difficulty: D-Rank

Description

Mechs are primarily designed for battle, but that does not preclude them from becoming works of art. Design and submit a unique second-class mech to a legitimate contest that ranks mechs on their

aesthetic qualities. The mech must be fully functional while simultaneously earning the appreciation of the audience for its beauty and charm.

The rewards for completing this Mission is dependent on the scope of the contest and the rank your mech has obtained. This Mission does not recognize any outcomes produced by factors outside of the rules of a fairly organized competition.

Reward: Up to 25 Ascension Points

Time Limit: 1 Year

Penalty for failure: Lower your Endurance by 1

"This... should be doable." Ves judged after contemplating the requirements for a minute.

The Age of Mechs may have passed, but mechs and everything related to them were still as popular as always.

Despite the ongoing intensification of the Red War, there were still lots of people who cared more about the aesthetics of mechs as opposed to their pure combat power.

Although Ves never put the beauty of his products at the top of his list of priorities, he still tried to present his products in an attractive fashion whenever possible.

Mech design was both an art and a science. Unlike many other mech designers, Ves did not neglect the importance of art, and always tried to apply his unique style to all of his living mechs.

The question now was whether his artistry looked good enough to rank at the top of contests focused on the beauty of mechs.

As confident as he was in his ability to produce pretty art, there were mech designers who specialized in this field for many years. These were the sort of mech designers who fulfilled the demands of the rich and powerful who wanted to look good in the media or wished to customize their personal mechs with unique themes that strengthened their brands.

Although the mech industry never really gave these aesthetic mech designers a lot of respect, their skills should not be underestimated!

"However... I bet that none of them have submitted masterwork mechs to these contests." Ves smirked.

Of course, part of that was because the mechers always swooped in to confiscate the freshly made masterworks while awarding the creator with a cheap masterwork certificate and a sum of MTA merits.

As a tier 3 galactic citizen, Ves believed that the Red Association shouldn't take away his masterwork mechs without bothering to inquire whether he wanted to submit his work in the first place anymore.

"At least I can request the mechers to wait until I have won the contest before they claim my masterwork mech!"

Ves was not entirely confident whether his art could win a high ranking in any serious contest, but as long as he presented his work in the form of a masterwork mech, that would definitely sway the judges!

Of course, the premise to completing this Mission in the most effective way was to guarantee that his contest submission turned into a masterwork mech.

He could not take this job too lightly if that was the case. A lack of sincerity in the mech design project would not allow him to do his best when he finally fabricated his mech.

All of that meant that he needed to spend a serious amount of time to design his mech. Was it worth it for him to invest so much time just to win a single contest and win 25 AP at most?

"Wait a second." His eyes grew sharper as he fixated on a specific phrase. "A 'unique second-class mech' doesn't have to be derived from a completely original mech design. I can just take one of my existing mech designs such as the Fey Fianna and customize it so that it looks like a true work of art!"

If he could get away with this, then he could skip hundreds of tedious work hours. All of the time spent on fulfilling this Mission could be spent on beautifying his chosen mech design, which was a much more effective use of his limited productivity!

Of course, he still needed to invest a substantial amount of effort and passion into designing his variant in order to increase his chances of fabricating a masterwork mech.

"Let's try it. Even if I fail, I should still be able to rank in the top 10 by relying on my own merits."

Ves continued to look for other suitable Missions to accept. He soon stumbled onto one that was related to a priority that he never had time to address in the past.

[Developing the Locos organ]

Mission: Developing the Locos organ

Difficulty: B-Rank

Description

Similar to phase whales, the strength of phase lords is not entirely dependent on the quantity of phasewater circulating in their bodies. It is also dependent on how phase lords are able to utilize the power of phasewater to channel abilities that can produce useful effects. Phasewater organs are the primary tools responsible for granting phase lords an efficient and reliable means of activating abilities. A competent phase lord should never neglect the development of his phasewater organs.

Develop the Locos organ that is primarily responsible for enhancing sensitivity towards spatial and gravitic phenomena by any means possible. Increase its efficacy by at least 10 times, or modify it so that it gains a range of new capabilities that is useful in combat or in mech design.

Reward: 150 Ascension Points

Time Limit: 3 Years

Penalty for failure: Lower your Strength by 5

"Damn. 150 AP is not a trivial sum."

That was enough to induct 15 mech designers into the System!

Although Ves never really valued his transformation into a phase lord, he had to admit that it was starting to grow on him over time.

This was especially the case now that he had leeched off several lightning tribulations. His true body had become very powerful, and the various spatial abilities he gained from his phasewater organs had proven to be very useful.

Whether it was using his Locos organ to gain a better intuitive feel of transphasic mech parts, or using the Kelsis organs to project strong spatial barriers that could block just as many attacks as transphasic energy shields, Ves had gradually come to like the options provided by his phasewater organs.

The fact that they were internal and couldn't be taken away from him so easily was a definite advantage!

"My phasewater concentration has grown by a lot, but my phasewater organs are still in their starter configuration. That is really bad. I need to bring them back on the same level if I want to maximize my combat potential."

If he was a character of a virtual reality game, then Ves was the equivalent of a level 10 character that still equipped himself with level 1 gear!

His true body had grown large enough to support more powerful phasewater organs. It would be a monumental waste if he did not take advantage of his improved conditions!

"The only question now is who I should turn to in order to develop my Locos organ." Ves frowned.

If he had a choice, he wanted to entrust the Larkinson Biotech Institute to conduct research on how to upgrade his Locos organ. That would keep all of the R&D in-house and in the hands of trustworthy Larkinson biotech researchers.

However, Ves was not sure whether the LBI was up to the challenge. None of the scientists over there possessed any particular expertise in phase lords and phasewater organ development.

The Transhumanist Faction of the Red Association possessed a lot more expertise in this area!

Enough time had passed for the mechers to achieve at least initial success in raising their own phase lord. They had plenty of excellent first-class biotech researchers in their employ that had probably dissected plenty of alien phase lords and figured out how to upgrade phasewater organs.

If Ves turned to the Transhumanists for help, he would definitely obtain better results!

However, the Transhumanists would also know all of the strengths and weaknesses of his phase lord physique. They might even install a few hidden backdoors into his upgraded Locos organ!

"Damn... which one should I choose?"

Chapter 6014 A Quick Trip

After a long moment, Ves ultimately decided to entrust the responsibility of improving his Locos organ to the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

It was no longer as limited as before. Years of continued investment had allowed it to grow in size and scope.

With the establishment of the Premier Branch, the Larkinson Clan had already begun to hire first-class biotech researchers on a limited scale.

The new hires may not be the best in the first-class biotech industry, but they crushed all of their second-class counterparts when it came to intelligence, knowledge accumulation and scientific rigor!

Even if they did not possess any existing expertise in phase lord physiques and phasewater organs, they could still build it up by conducting a lot of examinations on Ves!

Of course, if Ves wanted the Larkinson Biotech Institute to raise an entirely new department specialized in phase lord biology, then he needed to subject his true body to regular examinations!

After all, there was no way the biotech researchers could obtain sufficient understanding of phase lords and phasewater organs if they did not have access to enough research material.

"This shouldn't be a major inconvenience." Ves determined. "I just have to let the researchers poke around my body once in a while. The more they understand how my body works, the greater their ability to successfully upgrade my Locos organ."

Upgrading his Locos organ was a serious matter to Ves. It was not like upgrading a mech where a botched attempt could easily be corrected due to the mechanical nature of the subject.

The Locos organ was one of the three most fundamental and important biological components of a phase lord.

One of the challenges that many phase leaders faced was that messing around with their own phasewater organs always came with an element of risk.

There were too many potential pitfalls. The phase lord trusted the wrong people. The phase lord attempted to integrate a phasewater organ that was too powerful for him to control. The phasewater organ accidentally mutated beyond recognition due to inadequate research and processing.

Ves only possessed a single Locos organ. It also happened to fit him perfectly as the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean had gifted his initial set of phasewater organs to him for free.

It would be a massive shame if the researchers of the LBI mishandled his Locos organ and either destroyed it or caused it to deteriorate.

The Transhumanists were better at biotech research in almost every way. They already possessed an enormous head-

start and could easily develop better and more optimal versions of his Locos organ.

His expression turned grave. "If I give them the responsibility of upgrading my Locos organ, then I will likely remain stuck with them going forward."

This sounded like a potential trap!

It was the same story as companies that depended on proprietary software or a powerful brand of production equipment from a large enterprise.

Once a smaller player got locked into the products of the large enterprise, the latter could easily abuse its control over its dependency relationships with the former to extort more fees or worse!

While Ves maintained a good relationship with the Transhumanist Faction for the time being, what if that changed in the future?

What if the Evolution Witch turned from an ally into an enemy?

What if he completely ruined his relationship with the Red Association?

If anything like that took place, then Ves would definitely lose access to the expertise he relied upon to upgrade his complicated phasewater organs!

Even if Ves turned to the LBI, the biotech researchers of the Larkinson Clan would probably struggle to decipher the advanced and obtuse bioprogramming and organic design of the Transhumanist Faction's proprietary biotechnologies.

Ves felt as if he had been on the verge of making a huge mistake that he would regret for the rest of his life.

"It is no wonder that the phase whales all prefer to spend hundreds of years researching their own improvements for their phasewater organs. It is simply too dangerous to entrust such a critical responsibility to others."

The unfortunate part about his own situation was that Ves could not upgrade his Locos organ by himself.

Intellectually, he was confident that he could study enough biotechnology and perform enough examinations on his true body to develop a few basic improvements.

However, he could meet the requirements of the Mission within just 3 years! He was not good enough of a biotech scientist to achieve such a result in such a short span of time!

Sure, he may have learned enough biotechnology in order to design a basic biomech or cyborg mech, but his understanding of this field was too shallow to conduct high-end research into phasewater organs!

"I don't necessarily have to complete this Mission by upgrading my existing Locos organ, though." Ves speculated. "I can also get away with replacing it with a more developed Locos organ taken from the corpse of another phase whale or phase lord."

Ves immediately became repulsed by this idea!

There was no way he wanted to stuff weird and foreign organs inside his body! The incompatibility problems alone would probably torment him for a long time!

"I am not going to imitate the methods of an unclean whale!"

Now that he became a phase lord himself, he understood much more why the general alien community treated the phenomenon of unclean whales as an enormous taboo.

None of the descendants of the Elder Gods and their imitators wanted to be hunted down, lose the phasewater organs that they had painstakingly developed over many decades and allow their murderers to enjoy the fruits of their labor!

Conducting honest research on developing new phasewater organs and upgrading existing ones was the proper way for phase leaders to advance their phase lord cultivation.

It might be slow, costly and troublesome, but it was the safest and most stable method of improving their extraordinary capabilities.

Ves chose to accept the Mission with the intent of giving the Larkinson Biotech Institute a chance to upgrade his Locos organ on his behalf.

He would give them 2 years to produce an adequate result. If the biotech researchers working for the Larkinson Clan failed to meet his requirements, he could always turn to the Transhumanist Faction as a backup option.

It shouldn't take more than a couple of months for the Transhumanists to upgrade his Locos organ, especially if it was based on an existing template.

"This is the advantage of a big organization."

That reminded him of the Red Collective. Its mandate meant that it would likely take over wholesale research and supervision of human phase lords. Perhaps he might have to knock on the doors of the Collective as opposed to the Transhumanists in a couple of years.

Ves did not get too hung up over this issue and went back to picking up other Missions that he could feasibly complete in the next few months and years.

[Design a high-acceleration light mech]

[Alien Heartcrusher]

[Spreading Faith]

[Consume 100 Mutated Beasts]

[Shadow Summoning Ritual]

"This should be doable." He affirmed after he accepted five more Missions.

Ves would have never accepted most of these Missions in the past. There were ones that weirded him out and ones that violated his personal principles.

Yet in the face of necessity, Ves found that he had suddenly become a lot more tolerant and flexible than before.

"AP is AP. Who cares how I earn them? Nobody has to know the extent of all of my actions. I don't need to explain myself anyway."

He should be able to earn hundreds more AP if he fulfilled all of the requirements.

Now that Ves accepted the additional Missions, it was already too late for him to reconsider. The penalties for failing the Missions was not unbearable, but he would definitely feel bad if he lost a bunch of Attributes all of a sudden!

Now that he was done with picking up his Mission, he made one more important stop before he departed from the System space.

He moved over to the Time Gate and observed it with mixed emotions.

"I can't let this facility go to waste either."

He already had a goal in mind for the Time Gate. He wanted to go on another Mastery experience by inhabiting the mind of a first-class mech pilot.

Ves had already spent a lot of time on studying first-class mech design, but that only increased his understanding of first-class multipurpose mechs from the perspective of a service provider.

He did not possess an in-depth understanding of what it was like to actually use a first-class multipurpose mech. He could massively boost his comprehension and become much more aware of what his future customers sought in a first-class mech if he spent a bit of time inside the mind of an active first-class mech pilot.

"I don't need to do anything else."

Ves was very wary towards the System. It had put him into several difficult situations during prior Mastery experiences that ultimately caused history to take different turns.

Although the changes were ultimately for the better for the most part, Ves did not want to work so hard and intervene so actively everytime he passed through the Time Gate!

This was why he made the effort to place his palms together and make an earnest plea.

"System, whatever you do, just put me in the mind of a completely average first-class mech pilot that is engaged in completely normal battles. Just let me be a passive and silent observer for once!"

Whether his plea made a difference or not, at least he made his intentions clear.

After making a few more prayers in his mind, Ves resolutely activated the Time Gate and passed through the active portal.

An instant later, Ves emerged right out the portal with both a relieved and satisfied expression.

"Finally, a normal Mastery experience!"

The trip did not last very long. The System had just dumped him in the mind of a mech pilot serving in the armed forces of one of the many first-rate states of the Milky Way a few hundred years ago.

First-class multipurpose mechs had already established themselves at that time. While the prevailing high technologies were much less advanced than today, Ves still gained a lot of understanding of the plight of the people responsible for piloting these multifaceted machines.

The pilot in question only lasted for three days before he ended up dying in a battle that was a part of a shadow war against a neighboring first-rate state. The man had participated in four skirmishes and one big battle that finally became his graveyard.

As Ves and Blinky discretely lurked inside the first-class pilot's mind, they both tried to record and memorize as much of their observations as possible.

The final decisive battle that determined the outcome of the shadow war had been the most hectic engagement. Both sides fielded thousands of expensive first-class multipurpose mechs onto the battlefield.

The large amount of features and weapon modules of every mech caused the battle lines to become very fluid and chaotic. There was no way to maintain any formations as what worked in one minute became a huge liability in the next minute!

There were several moments where Ves felt he could intervene and take measures to either save his host's life or give him a better chance of coming back intact. He could have changed the future even more by giving the pilot a companion spirit or sharing information about the future.

He ultimately did not do so, not just because he wanted to avoid unintended consequences, but also because he suspected that he would pay a much greater price for messing with time. That was how it always unfolded in all of the action dramas.

"If it is so easy to travel back into the past and change the future, then the Five Scrolls Compact would have become all-

powerful by now! Only those who have developed an actual time domain should be able to know what they are doing."

Developing a time domain was out of the question for Ves. He already had three different E energy attributes on his plate.

Perhaps others could delve into the mysteries of time one day.

Chapter 6015 The Plight of First-Class Mech Pilots

When Ves exited the System Space, he did not immediately make the arrangements to complete his new Missions.

Most of them had generous time limits, so Ves was not in a hurry to get to work right away.

His more immediate priority was to record his observations from his latest Mastery experience and form his conclusions about the challenges of piloting first-class multipurpose mechs.

"It is really hard to pilot those immensely complicated machines. The amount of variables that a pilot needs to take into account is so much that it requires a very special mind state in order to keep up with everything."

Baseline human mech pilots could never adequately track so many moving parts at once!

It took a lot of augmentation as well as harsh training in order to prepare a mech pilot for a proper first-class multipurpose mech.

Even then, the throughput of data was so enormous that mech pilots with inferior genetic aptitude had no chance of keeping up with all of the demands!

Perhaps high-ranking mech pilots might be able to pilot first-

class multipurpose mechs without relying on augments, but they could already move on to piloting customized high-

ranking mechs at that point.

Ordinary mech pilots could never control first-class multipurpose mechs by relying on ordinary training and education.

They needed to go above and beyond in order to properly control these potent mechanical war machines.

Heavy augmentation was therefore mandatory. Entire industries emerged that solely focused on developing the most effective implants and gene mod templates geared towards enhancing the capabilities of mech pilots.

A true first-class multipurpose mech pilot could easily master the controls and operation of a second-class mech with ease!

Their raw capabilities often surpassed third-class and second-class expert candidates, indicating that technology already had the power to exceed self-evolution to an extent!

There were even situations where first-class mech pilots could outperform expert pilots in a few specific areas!

However, for all of their impressive genetic aptitudes, their powerful artificial boosts and their intensive training, first-

class mech pilots were actually quite pitiful in a way.

"They have become so much more capable than other mech pilots, but they never have enough time to master everything about their first-class multipurpose mechs."

First-class mech pilots were always raised to become all-rounders. This meant that they were actively discouraged from investing a disproportionate amount of time on mastering swordsmanship or whatever.

Of course, their minimum skill levels was set at a remarkably high threshold, or else they wouldn't have been able to graduate from a mech academy, but they had to train with so many different weapon systems that they could never find too much enjoyment in their practice.

The reason why first-class multipurpose mechs dominated the battlefields so often was due to the high dedication of their pilots.

Every first-class mech pilot essentially became married to their jobs. Training, fighting and studying occupied so much of their time that they hardly had any hours left to do anything else.

It was not impossible for first-class mech pilots to take a break, retire from frontline service or switch to a less demanding employer.

However, doing so would deny them a chance of piloting the most powerful first-class multipurpose mechs and participating in the most meaningful battles.

The competition was too great!

There were always more first-class mech pilots than first-class multipurpose mechs!

The latter were expensive even to the Terrans and the Rubarthans, so there was always a limited number of them in use at any time.

Any first-class mech pilot that failed to keep up or slipped up permanently lost their chance to pilot these premier war machines.

At best, the disqualified soldiers could only pilot inferior first-class mechs that were much weaker and less versatile.

Most major powers never utilized ordinary first-class mechs for anything important.

When they fought against real first-class multipurpose mechs, the latter often used their versatility to exploit the weaknesses of the former!

This was why first-class space knights and rifleman mechs were usually relegated to menial jobs like base defense and traffic control.

Any first-class mech pilot that got 'demoted' to such duties usually never managed to break through for the remainder of their careers.

"This hierarchy is too perverse!"

The first-class mech community valued first-class multipurpose mechs to such an insane extreme that every other mech archetype practically became worthless in comparison!

This produced a distorted culture where even people as smart as Alexa found it difficult to show respect towards specialized mech.

This was despite the fact that her grandfather piloted a very famous ace hero mech!

Another point that stood out from Ves was how all of the stress and demands of first-class mech pilots made it a lot more difficult for them to break through.

First, they were augmented to such an extent that they deviated a lot further from their own humanity.

In fact, they were all born as designer babies from the beginning, so they were already inhuman from the moment they were conceived.

That was not necessarily detrimental to their breakthrough chances, but further modifications designed to increase their ability to control first-class multipurpose mechs often produced a lot of side effects.

Their thinking speeds, perception of reality and cognitive patterns changed so much as they grew up that they practically became alien when compared to baseline humans!

Compared to second-class and especially third-class mech pilots, first-class mech pilots truly existed in a category of their own! They had become so good at piloting the most complex standard mechs to exist, yet sacrificed so much of themselves in the process!

"Is it worth it?" Ves questioned with a frown.

He personally did not think so, but the first-class mech community thought differently. First-class multipurpose mechs were generally worth all of the hype. Their overall combat performance was so high under most circumstances that their poor showing against the Dark Zephyr Mark III was the exception rather than the rule.

Yet the demands of the job wore down first-class mech pilots remarkably quickly, especially when their genetic aptitudes were in the B-range.

Piloting first-class multipurpose mechs produced so much strain onto B-grade mech pilots that their brains actually deteriorated at an accelerated rate!

Under the best of circumstances, the peak performance period of B-grade mech pilots was only 60 percent as long as that of A-grade mech pilots!

"If mech pilots with A-grade genetic aptitudes weren't so damn rare, those with B-grade genetic aptitudes wouldn't even get a chance of piloting these crazy machines!"

This was considered as one of the shameful secrets of first-

class mech pilots. The demand for 'talent' was so high that many B-grade mech pilots willingly self-destructed themselves in order to fulfill their dream of piloting the most advanced and powerful standard mechs that humanity could produce.

Although the vast majority of these poor pilots only lasted for a decade or two before they were forced to give up first-class multipurpose mechs and switch to weaker but less damaging first-class machines, there was still a way for them to beat this game.

"Breaking through will solve their problems."

As long as B-grade mech pilots break through to expert candidate, then they had a high chance of advancing to expert pilot after receiving support from above.

Becoming an expert pilot resulted in a profound metamorphosis where the willpower but also the body of the individual in question surpassed mortal limitations.

The brain of an expert pilot was no longer as fragile and limited compared to before. It had surpassed the limitations of genetic aptitude for the most part. Even a mech pilot whose genetic aptitude was originally D could pilot a first-class multipurpose mech!

This meant that many first-class mech pilots with B-grade genetic aptitude trained and fought hard in order to race against time and break through.

Yet the harder they sought a breakthrough, the more excessive strain they placed on their brains.

In addition to this, the more time they spent on their jobs, the less time they had to live a more fulfilling life. Their personalities and their mentalities remained underdeveloped as they simply did not have enough time to be human.

This was one of the reasons why their breakthrough rates were so low.

Was the Red Association aware of this? Most definitely.

Yet knowing about a problem did not automatically mean they could solve it. The mechers and the other first-class powers definitely understood that they were placing an excessive amount of expectations onto first-class mech pilots, yet the fact that this extreme performance culture persisted meant that all of the other alternatives were worse.

Ves could already figure out a few reasons why the first-class mech community became so distorted.

There was a definite focus on quality over quantity. The first-

raters valued champions and heroes very much. Any first-

class mech pilot that managed to break through while being subjected to years worth of excessive strains was a powerful champion without a doubt!

The futures of the few first-raters that manage to become high-ranking mech pilots were usually bright. All of the pain and sacrifice became worth it as these lucky bastards turned into the new idols and standard bearers of their states or organizations.

"Another reason is loyalty."

First-raters depended heavily on the protection of expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots.

It would be absolutely devastating for a first-class power if their prized champions abandoned or outright betrayed their employers!

By making first-class mech pilots work harder than anyone else and limiting the amount of time they spent on other activities, it became a lot easier to control how they thought and how they felt.

Indoctrination became more effective as these first-class mech pilots knew little else outside of their immediate circle of friends and fellow soldiers.

Despite being a part of a greater human galactic community, most people never really took full advantage of the fact that they could easily connect to people located light-years away by making use of the galactic net.

At most, first-class mech pilots fought a lot of virtual battles against other people in various mech simulation virtual reality games.

"It is really easy to raise a lot of expert pilots who have nothing else but loyalty to their state or organization in their heads." Ves muttered.

As a clan leader himself, he fully understood this desire for control. He may have circumvented the problem to an extent by creating the Larkinson Network, but its restraint on high-ranking mech pilots was not effective anymore.

In fact, ever since Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson became an ace pilot, the Larkinson Clan had no effective way to force him to stay! It was only due to his own honor and affection towards the Larkinsons that he continued to fight for the clan!

If Ves or the clan ever pissed him off too much, there was nothing stopping Saint Tusa from defecting to the Red Association, which always opened their door to 'orphaned' high-ranking mech pilots.

Even if the original employer tried to lock their expert pilots or ace pilots into place with the help of strong contracts, the problem with this approach was that the mechers were the ones who were responsible for enforcing these kinds of agreements.

The MTA and RA's response to these situations was to always decide in favor of the disaffected pilot!

The rights of a high-ranking mech pilot superseded the rights of ordinary states and organizations!

Naturally, the fact that the mechers often welcomed powerful new champions in their midst was also a very nice outcome.

With the MTA and RA actively trying to poach expert pilots, ace pilots and even god pilots, first-rate states were definitely justified in their efforts to foster greater loyalty in their own champions!

"The mechers are just too shameless!"

At least they sincerely respected the opinions of high-ranking mech pilots. Since a former second-rater such as the Destroyer of Worlds eventually decided to serve and protect the Rubarthan people, the mechers evidently failed to sway her to their side.

"Maybe I should pay more attention to this as well." Ves thought with a frown. "The last thing I want to see is Saint Tusa drifting off the RA because I failed to address his desires."

Gaining an ace pilot was not all good news. Now that Tusa had become a powerful and respected ace pilot, the Larkinson Clan had the obligation to please him whenever possible!

Chapter 6016 The Spectrum of Ace Pilots

Tusa returned to the expeditionary fleet as a changed man.

After traveling to New Constantinople, sublimating his body and willpower before breaking through as an ace pilot, he was no longer comparable to the Larkinson who originally departed from the fleet!

His Dark Zephyr had undergone a profound metamorphosis as well. The poor living mech used to carry the unflattering reputation for being the oldest and weakest of the impressive line of Larkinson expert mechs.

Sure, his Unending alloy and range of proprietary Larkinson E-technology applications most definitely allowed him to fight on even grounds against stronger and more expensive machines, but there was a limit to how much he could support the growing needs of his battle partner.

Those concerns had faded away for the most part. Even though Tusa's semi-anticipated breakthrough meant that the Dark Zephyr could only keep up with most of the ace pilot's operations in the next two years or so, a future upgrade into a much more powerful first-class ace mech was already in the works!

It did not surprise anyone that Saint Tusa Billingsley-

Larkinson returned to the expeditionary fleet with the demeanor of a conquering hero.

This was because he was one of the few expert pilots who successfully managed to conquer the bottleneck that frustrated so many expert pilots!

Many heroes with greater reputation and much more combat experience than Tusa fought and toiled for the illusionary chance of attaining a breakthrough, yet far too many of them died or retired with regret.

Tusa on the other hand managed to overcome the invisible barriers that tested the limits of every expert pilot and managed to form a Saint Kingdom that forever changed the way he fought on the battlefield!

Many people cheered when the new and improved Dark Zephyr launched out of the RA destroyer that ferried the ace pilot and his living back to the expeditionary fleet!

"Saint Tusa! Saint Tusa! Saint Tusa!"

"The Larkinson Clan has risen even further!"

"With another ace pilot watching over us, we will definitely beat the aliens black and blue in our upcoming operation."

As the Dark Zephyr boarded the Spirit of Bentheim and was greeted with a grand reception, the Larkinsons celebrated Tusa's breakthrough yet again!

Unlike the more formal celebratory banquet that the Larkinson Clan organized for its higher ups, this time all of the Larkinsons and their allies in the expeditionary fleet began to hold a fleet-wide party!

They all needed this moment. Times had been good as the expeditionary fleet under the protection of two ace pilots had been faring well in the border regions up to this point.

The Red War had inflicted massive losses to the would-be linefighters that attempted to rise to greatness by proving their valor in battle.

Alas, only a minority of mech forces were properly equipped to participate in a long campaign against frequent alien incursions.

The expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance had managed to win all of its battles so far by being quite careful and thorough.

First, the expeditionary fleet was not a single collection of lots of mechs and starships. It was actually accompanied by a lot of scouting vessels, each of which conducted real-time surveillance and monitoring of every surrounding star system.

This was anything but a foolproof means of detecting any alien ambush force in advance, but it vastly reduced the probability of getting caught off-guard.

Second, the Golden Skull Alliance banded together multiple partners in order to achieve superiority through numbers. Many battles became a lot easier to win by throwing tens of thousands of mechs at a typical alien raiding fleet.

The enemy warships also found it hard to cope with dozens of expert mechs belonging to all 5 alliance partners, as many of them already gained the strength to occupy or defeat most alien warships by themselves!

Third, the presence of Saint Marissa Lewandowski and Saint Kalasandra Boojay provided an extra layer of insurance that made it exponentially more difficult to defeat the expeditionary fleet. Even if an accident or two happened every now and then, the two ace pilots easily crushed whatever hope the aliens relied upon to turn the tide of the battle!

In fact, the two ace pilots refrained from taking action during most ordinary engagements. Their intervention was overkill in those cases. It was better to let the rank-and-file depend on themselves and accrue much more actual combat experience.

Certainly, plenty of mech pilots died when their machines got struck by the overwhelming primary or secondary weapon batteries of alien warships, but every soldier knew what they were getting into when they agreed to serve in the expeditionary fleet.

The Larkinsons always had the option of transferring to one of the many branches located in star systems far from the frontlines if they wanted to stay away from danger.

Regardless, Tusa's fortuitous breakthrough substantially increased the fault tolerance of the expeditionary fleet!

If the aliens succeeded in ambushing the armed forces of the Golden Skull Alliance, then the presence of one more ace pilot could easily prevent the expeditionary fleet from suffering a catastrophic defeat!

What was even better was that Tusa's breakthrough also increased the risk tolerance of the expeditionary fleet. The Larkinsons and their allies became a lot more confident in their ability to confront stronger enemies!

After the celebrations had passed, several key leader figures gathered together in one of the most secure conference rooms aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

Commander Casella Ingvar of the Larkinson Clan, Master Benedict Cortez of the Cross Clan, Marshal Ariadne Wodin of the Glory Seekers, General Herman Foraine and Matriarch Rezzie Boojay all greeted each other in a familiar fashion before taking their seats.

None of them spoke any further. Instead, they conscientiously turned their gazes to a gathering of three ace pilots.

Even outside of their respective mechs, the Saints possessed auras that made it hard to deny their splendor!

Each of them seemed to radiate their conviction on the surface of their bodies. The closer anyone got to them, the more people became affected by the overbearingly strong willpower of warriors that managed to trigger apotheosis not once, but twice!

It immediately became obvious that a hierarchy had formed.

At 230 years old, Saint Kalasandra Boojay was already on the verge of becoming a senior ace pilot.

There was no real barrier between junior ace pilots and senior ace pilots. People just made this distinction in order to prevent people from gaining the mistaken impression that all ace pilots were equal in strength.

As far as ace pilots went, Saint Kalasandra's growth rate was actually fairly slow. This was reflective of her more reserved and conservative upbringing. She was not the sort of hero that charged straight into battle at the earliest opportunity.

However, her growth had always been highly stable as a result. Her foundation was extremely solid and difficult to shake by the other two ace pilots. She had spent a lot of time on introspection and self-discovery, which meant that her willpower had been refined into an unbreakable weapon.

This was a woman who would never break or falter in the face of difficulties!

Furthermore, she had familiarized and developed her domain to an impressive degree. She had already made a name for herself in the expeditionary fleet due to her ability to weaken even the strongest alien battleships by voicing one of her famous decrees!

Everyone gathered in this chamber could already figure out that Saint Kalasandra managed to reach the threshold to senior ace pilot faster than usual due to the expeditionary fleet's participation in the Red War.

Even if the fleet stuck to the less intensive conflict zones, the native aliens always unveiled a surprise every now and then that could give Saint Kalasandra a good exercise.

The increasing tension in human-occupied space also stimulated her growth. Ace pilots thrived during times of crisis, and red humanity's precarious situation obviously gave the Boojay Saint a greater sense of urgency!

Saint Marissa Lewandowski was a lot younger at only 154 years old. In fact, she carried herself as a woman who was at least a century younger than her actual age.

This was rather typical of a light mech specialist. Her focus on speed and misdirection caused her to come across as much more informal and relaxed, especially in contrast to the stiff and formal Boojay Saint.

During the times she went into action, Saint Marissa and her Jedda Sandivar had often proved effective at disrupting the operations of multiple warships!

Although the lethality of the Jedda Sandivar was inferior to the Royal Jeem, the ace light skirmisher's speed and ability to handle larger numbers was considerably better.

It was impossible for even the most organized alien fleets to maintain their cohesion after the Jedda Sandivar started to mess up their formations!

The ace mech did not even have to go in for the kill. Saint Marissa could already tip the balance in the favor of the Golden Skull Alliance by harassing her enemies.

The ace pilot gained enough experience during the battles in the past two years to further her growth and develop a few new tricks to cope against alien warships.

Her edge had hardened. Each time she moved, there was an illusion of mist surrounding her form. It made people question whether they were looking at a decoy rather than the actual ace pilot of the Adelaide Mercenary Company.

Right now, both female ace pilots greeted their newest and youngest peers in their own distinctive fashion.

The fairly restrained domains of both Saint Kalasandra and Saint Marissa pressed against Saint Tusa's much fresher and less developed domain.

The Larkinson ace pilot did not stand a chance.

All of the joy, confidence and touches of arrogance that he had gained from being recognized as the strongest mech pilot of the Larkinson Clan had shattered.

His extraordinary willpower that had undergone at least two qualitative transformations failed to hinder the encroachment from the other two ace pilots.

The difference in strength was too big!

This shouldn't have been a surprise as the range of power between the weakest ace pilot and the strongest ace pilot was vast!

In numerical terms, the resonance strength of ace pilots varied between 67 laveres and 1545 laveres.

Yet these numbers did not fully reflect the vast differences in combat power between ace pilots whose resonance strengths diverged considerably!

Saint Tusa had no cause to feel proud about himself. This single meeting had thoroughly smashed apart his delusions of grandeur and reminded him once again that he had only just begun his career as an ace pilot.

Both Kalasandra and Marissa relented in their power plays. After all, they would all be fighting alongside each other soon enough. There was no reason for them to sow resentment between each other.

The much older of the three ace pilots nodded towards Tusa in an imperious manner.

"You will do. Your willpower is remarkably tempered for a mech pilot of your age." Saint Kalasandra judged while crossing her arms. "You truly managed to earn your breakthrough. I was afraid that your upgraded mech had been giving you an inflated sense of confidence. Your domain field is much weaker than mine at the time of my own breakthrough. Your youth has not given you enough time to develop your own powerset. We will have to train you in that so that you can quickly begin to address this shortcoming. It is embarrassing for an ace pilot to fight without knowing how to use his Saint Kingdom."

Saint Marissa voiced her evaluation as well. "Your Dark Zephyr may still be a high-tier expert mech for the time being, but I have already heard that your machine cannot be compared to others of his kind. I want to experience the power of your upgraded mech as soon as possible. I can instruct you how the world of light skirmishers is much different at our level of strength."

"I don't need your help." Saint Tusa pushed back. "I may be young, but I already understand the role of light skirmishers on the battlefield."

"You don't understand. Not truly. The existence of Saint Kingdoms completely changes the game for us. The knives in the hands of our ace mechs are not our primary weapons anymore. It is our willpower and the true resonance that we generate with our mechs that gives us the capital to challenge the most powerful alien foes. You will need to learn how to combine the strengths of a light skirmisher with the advantages of your domain field quickly if you want to put up a better fight in the coming operation."

The mention of the coming operation caused everyone in the conference room to grow serious.

Chapter 6017 Target Set

The meeting lasted for two hours.

After Saint Tusa had acquainted himself with the other two ace pilots of the expeditionary fleet, he sat down and listened as the various leaders of the expeditionary fleet explained the current circumstances to the newcomer.

The leaders not only gave Tusa a greater understanding of the current and future state of the expeditionary fleet, but also gave him a very thorough briefing on the upcoming major operation.

This was privileged information that expert pilots usually never received in advance!

The fact that this gathering felt it was not only worthwhile, but necessary to clue Tusa in was a reflection of his profound change of status.

Ace pilots were no longer ordinary grunts anymore. They had truly risen to the upper echelons of the hierarchy. It could even be argued that their voice was greater than that of the nominal leaders!

Throughout the briefing, everyone paid close attention to Saint Tusa. They wanted to know what his personality was like now that he had become a powerhouse in his own right and whether he wanted to meddle into the affairs of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Fortunately for everyone involved, Tusa did not exhibit a strong desire to lead or even make his own requests. He was fine with letting others make all of the big decisions. He was only responsible for fighting at the highest level as far as he was concerned.

When Tusa finally learned about the ambitious goal that the expeditionary fleet had set, he couldn't help but grow skeptical.

"Are you sure we can finally pin down the Eminence of Torment?" He questioned. "We attempted to corner him and his elusive fleet multiple times, but he never managed to get caught by us and all of the other mech forces that were seeking to claim his bounty. That alien may be an incompetent phase lord, but he is first-class when it comes to avoiding confrontation."

General Herman Foraine responded with a confident smile. "You are correct that the Eminence of Torment has proven to be remarkably skilled at evading pursuit, but the Red Cabal is on the verge of launching a major offensive. The orven phase lord cannot keep shirking his responsibilities and set a bad example for all of the alien fleets that have been assigned to his command. According to intelligence gathered from numerous sources, the Red Cabal is dissatisfied with the Eminence of Torment due to the fact that the raiding fleets under his supervision have produced the least amount of results."

"Partially thanks to our efforts." Marshal Ariadne Wodin smugly spoke. "Our fleet is not alone to cover this particular border region, but we have crushed so many alien warships that we have saved many border colonies from destruction."

Saint Tusa still looked uncertain. "Be that as it may, I doubt the cowardly phase lord will change his habits all that much. How can you guarantee that we will corner him this time?"

"Ylvaine has shown us where the Torment Fleet and the phase lord may be found at different points in the future. The Eminence of Torment's movements have become much easier to grasp now that he is forced to travel to numerous alien strongholds on the other side of the border." Commander Casella Ingvar stated. "When we combine the Great Prophet's predictions with other sources of intelligence, we can roughly trace the approximate course of his Torment Fleet. We have at least 80 percent chance of intercepting our primary objective at numerous different locations."

The leaders of the expeditionary fleet might not pay much heed to Ylvaine alone, but as long as his predictions were backed up by a lot of supporting data from different sources, then they were willing to pay much more credence to the human design spirit!

This was the correct way to make use of a prophet whose predictive abilities had been proven.

It was never an idea to reply to a single source of information alone, but as long as the intelligence provided by other people did not contradict Ylvaine's claims, then that gave them greater certainty in grasping the trends of the future.

This was one of the reasons why the expeditionary fleet never fell into a catastrophic trap or ambush during the past years!

The native aliens weren't completely stupid. They occasionally 'cheated' by dispatching much more powerful punitive fleets that easily possessed the power to crush every second-class mech force operating in and around the Torald Middle Zone!

The losses inflicted by warships powerful enough to give the Red Two a run for their money were massive!

"What if the Eminence of Torment learns about our interception attempt in advance? He might prepare an ambush for our arrival."

The acting leader of the Larkinson Army smiled. "That is where you come in. Your breakthrough has given us a fairly hidden trump card that we can rely upon to respond to any unexpected emergencies. The Eminence of Torment is known as a defective phase lord, but he still commands a fleet that is more formidable than we have fought in the past. You have gained much greater offensive power as of late, is that correct?"

"Yes. Don't ask me how it works. I think it is better if I show you all what my Dark Zephyr and I can do during a live practice session. I can already tell you that it will take much less time for me to dismantle larger alien warships than before."

"That is good to hear." Commander Casella nodded with satisfaction. "With the departure of Patriarch Reginald Cross, we have lost a strong offensive top asset. Your breakthrough and the Dark Zephyr's technological upgrades will give us another sharp edge that we can use to eliminate the more powerful threats first."

Tusa felt the need to give them all a warning.

"I won't be staying here for long, commander. Ves wants me to join his Premier Branch once my Dark Zephyr has completed his conversion into a first-class ace mech. If the old rules still apply, then I am not allowed to fight alongside your forces anymore."

That caused several people to look upset.

Marshal Ariadne Wodin shook her head in disapproval. "The artificial division between third-class, second-class and first-

class is a relic of past ages. It is creating far more divisions than we need. We are at war against alien empires that do not strictly divide their forces in the same classes. We can do much better if we are able to field first-class mechs and equipment. We can afford it due to all of the earnings we have made."

"The class division doesn't exist to help humanity deal against the aliens. It exists to separate humans from each other." Matriarch Rezzie Boojay explained to everyone. "To be more specific, it protects weaker human powers from the stronger ones. Otherwise, the Terrans and the Rubarthans would have taken over many second-rate and third-rate states that they have taken a liking to. The first-raters have little choice but to compete against other first-raters."

"That is only the case in peacetime. Now that all of red humanity is being threatened by a strong external enemy, we need to unite with each other."

Master Benedict Cortez knocked his fist against the table. The discussion immediately halted.

"This is not the time and place to discuss politics. Are we still in agreement about commencing our operation? If we set off today, we have a large chance of intercepting the Torment Fleet. The tradeoff is that Saint Tusa will have less time to familiarize himself with his newfound strength."

"Do not delay this operation on account of me." Tusa spoke up. "It is true that I am still new to this all, but I can already pull my own weight in battle."

The leaders decided to proceed with the current plan. They had already arranged everything without taking Tusa's recent breakthrough into account. His massive increase in strength was a welcome bonus, but did not necessitate a change in strategy.

Now that the course of the expeditionary fleet was set, the meeting soon came to an end.

The two female ace pilots made their way out, but not before demanding that Saint Tusa participate in their training sessions.

Compared to expert pilots, ace pilots had a lot of new options at their disposal. It usually took years before the latter was able to get started with developing their new capabilities.

This lengthy interval could easily be shortened as long as the fresh ace pilot received targeted lessons on how to develop and use his new domain.

Tusa understood this quite well, so he did not reject this demand out of pride.

Ace pilot or not, he was uncomfortably reminded that he was the weakest out of the three!

Finally, only Tusa, Commander Casella and Master Benedict remained in the conference room.

"Now that the rest have left, let us discuss the state of the Dark Zephyr." The command-oriented expert pilot spoke. "I have received an information package on the general capabilities of the Dark Zephyr Mark III, but much of it is vague and not precise enough. What I need to know is how much the light skirmisher is limiting your ability to fight as an ace pilot."

"The Dark Zephyr has a large amount of high-performing archemetal components. I am more than satisfied with my living mech's base parameters such as thrust power, evasive ability and toughness. Ves and Gloriana told me that the biggest shortcoming is the continued use of old resonating materials, though I personally haven't felt that they are holding me back all that much. I am not entirely sure how much of a difference it makes if my Dark Zephyr has been upgraded with a batch of ace mech-grade resonating exotics."

Both Tusa and Casella turned to Master Benedict. As a Master Mech Designer, he possessed the qualifications to develop ace mechs. He had already done so for the Mars, so he should have a good understanding of this matter.

"Resonating exotics are the defining components of high-

ranking mechs for good reasons." The older man explained to the two Larkinsons. "The better they are, the easier it is for mech pilots to resonate with their respective machines. Expert pilots can stably generate true resonance with the help of weaker resonating exotics because the latter are easier to control. When expert pilots attempt to resonate with more powerful resonating exotics, they often suffer backlashes because their willpower cannot withstand the activity generated by more volatile and energetic resonating exotics. However, it is precisely because these dangerous resonating exotics hold more power that they are an excellent complement to ace pilots."

Understanding dawned on both of the faces of the Larkinsons.

"That sounds similar to the issues related to controlling high-tier Destroyer weapons." Saint Tusa observed. "Only a strong enough will and mech can tame these dangerous weapons by force. More powerful resonating exotics can easily produce accidents if they are not adequately controlled, but their downsides mean nothing to actual ace pilots."

Resonating exotics held far too much power to be safely controlled, but ace pilots could negate their greatest shortcoming and take full advantage of their more potent effects!

It was an excellent combination that produced a fantastic amount of synergy!

"There is another factor that you must pay attention to." Master Benedict said. "Ace mech-grade resonating exotics have a disproportionately high influence on the development of an ace pilot's Saint Kingdom. Selection must be done with great care as the properties of the replacement resonating exotics will directly affect how you will develop your powers and your domain in the future. It is not impossible for you to develop your Saint Kingdom without relying on resonating exotics, but your progress will slow down as a result."

"I see." Tusa frowned. "So this is also one of the reasons why it is not a good idea for me to pilot the current version of the Dark Zephyr for too long. His old resonating exotics will not help me shape my new powers."

"Correct. You will only truly be able to leverage your Saint Kingdom to the fullest when you have an ace mech that can fully channel it. Your current domain field is partially limited by the constraints of your high-tier expert mech."

If that was the case, then Tusa wanted his Dark Zephyr to convert into an ace mech as soon as possible!

Chapter 6018 A Revealing Spar

Although Master Benedict Cortez did a good job at explaining the differences between expert mechs and ace mechs, Saint Tusa only truly understood how far his Dark Zephyr was behind when he engaged in his first sparring session against another peer!

In order to avoid overwhelming Saint Tusa right away, his only opponent for the time being was Saint Marissa Lewandowski of the Adelaide Mercenary Corps.

As the expeditionary fleet was scheduled to depart soon enough, the two ace pilots only had time for a short comparison between each other.

Yet that was enough to open the horizons of Saint Tusa along with everyone else that was gleefully observing his 'debut' as an ace pilot!

At first glance, their mechs did not look all that different.

The Dark Zephyr was a black-coated light skirmisher, and so was the Jemma Sandivar. Their sizes and proportions did not differ all that much as they both stuck closely to the template of their mech type.

The designers of both machines had the option of adding other weapon systems to the ace mechs, but neither ace pilots chose to add too much additional bulk to their machines.

Saint Marissa had only opted to add a pair of very compact but potent laser pistols to her ace mech. The two weapons made it a lot more convenient for the Jemma Sandivar to pick off weaker ranged targets without compromising her ace mech's original configuration too much.

Tusa insisted on the removal of the grenade bandolier. He detested his previous reliance on transphasic grenades and did not want to base his combat approach on lobbing lots of powerful explosives at his opponents.

The removal of the grenades fulfilled one of his wishes and returned the Dark Zephyr closer to his original roots.

Of course, the Dark Zephyr gained an arguably even better offensive option in the form of the Dark Wind Module!

Not only was the new Ultimate Module a lot more economical, but its power and utility increased as Saint Tusa grew stronger and increased his comprehension of the shadow element!

In contrast, the Jemma Sandivar had taken a slightly different direction. Its thin, dark frame did not look as if it hid anything as outrageous as an Ultimate Module.

Instead, the ace mech exuded a much greater sense of power and cohesion. It had received many years of willpower baptism, and its design had received many different incremental upgrades, especially in the last two years.

The Adelaide Mercenary Company earned a lot more profit by participating in the expeditionary fleet, and it had spent much of it on accelerating the development of the Jemma Sandivar.

General Herman Foraine knew that the original Third Fleet of the Adelaide Mercenary Company would instantly collapse as soon as Saint Marissa Lewandowski decided to quit and join the Red Association.

In order to prevent this outcome from happening, he did not hesitate to reinvest a lot of money and materials into improving the Jemma Sandivar at a much faster rate than before.

The ace light skirmisher could not be underestimated for that reason! It was not as weak and limited as before.

Even though it was not an archmech, the Jemma Sandivar's continuous improvements and upgrades gave Tusa the impression that he was facing a very compact but threatening metal demon!

Right now, the Saint Kingdom surrounding the Jemma Sandivar already started to surround it in a slightly hazy white fog.

The fog was not thick enough to conceal the Jemma Sandivar, but it already started to make it a little harder to observe the ace light skirmisher.

There was an obvious discrepancy between the two Saint Kingdoms. The one radiated by the Dark Zephyr was not only a lot smaller, but also gave up ground far too easily.

It was only when the Dark Zephyr's Saint Kingdom had been pushed back to his mech frame that it barely managed to stand its ground.

This indicated that Saint Tusa had very little chance of taking control over the surrounding space. He could only preserve the sanctity of his mech and his own body under the circumstances.

After Tusa thoroughly understood how much worse his Saint Kingdom fared compared to that of Marissa, the two ace pilots decided to move on to the next phase.

"Are you ready?"

Tusa took a deep breath. "Go."

The two ace mechs simultaneously moved into action!

Both machines moved so quickly that it became difficult for baseline humans to keep track of their movements!

The Dark Zephyr and the Jemma Sandivar were both fairly small machines that had predominantly coated in black, so it became a nightmare to follow their blazingly fast maneuvers with the naked eye!

Fortunately, their glowing Saint Kingdoms made it a lot easier to track their rapid movements.

To most observers, it looked as if two glowing energy bubbles continually bounced against each other before separating to circle around each other.

Each time the two converged together, the Dark Zephyr's Saint Kingdom clearly deformed by a huge extent, thereby weakening Tusa's ability to weaken his current opponent.

In contrast, the Jemma Sandivar's hazy Saint Kingdom remained remarkably solid and stable despite its insubstantial appearance.

Each time the Adelaide ace mech encroached upon the Dark Zephyr's space, the Jemma Sandivar exposed a ruthless edge that enabled it to land much heavier blows!

Fortunately, the Dark Zephyr was not a fragile machine that easily crumbled apart after getting struck by so much force.

The living mech's archemetal construction along with the use of excellent first-class materials finally began to demonstrate their usefulness.

When empowered by Tusa's true resonance, the Dark Zephyr's stormblade knives still remained strong and intact even when they blocked the more powerful strikes from the Jemma Sandivar's own pair of weapons!

Tusa felt anything but comfortable, though.

He recognized the weapons wielded by the Jemma Sandivar.

Ves and Ketis had worked together to develop a set of 'blessed weapons' for the ace mech of the Adelaide Mercenary Company.

The transphasic kamas may have been developed just before the start of the Age of Dawn, but they could already be treated as pseudo-hyper weapons from the fact that they were 'blessed' by the Phase King!

The penetration and cutting power of these kamas were high!

Fortunately, Saint Marissa held back her strength and did not borrow the Phase King's power.

That still did not make it easy for Tusa to prevent his upgraded mech from getting scratched!

The two powerful mechs began to confront each other more directly. The two machines continually maneuvered around each other while launching rapid strikes or moving to defend against incoming attacks.

"You are fast, but I am faster!" Saint Marissa exclaimed as she was clearly on the offensive most of the time.

The Dark Zephyr's excellent base performance allowed him to keep up with the rapid attacks launched by the Jedda Sandivar, but it was clear that the latter was just toying with its prey.

After launching a lot of rapid but relatively mundane strikes, Saint Marissa decided to kick it up a notch and demonstrate why having a Saint Kingdom mattered.

"<nullb>Mirage."

The mist surrounding the Jedda Sandivar thickened. It became so much better at interfering with the perception of both people and machines that even Tusa momentarily lost track of his opponent!

Behind!

The Dark Zephyr rapidly turned around, yet when the machine raised his stormblade knives to block the twin kamas, the feedback from the charge attack turned out to be much less than expected!

"What...?"

The living mech felt as if he had only clashed with a mech that was ten times weaker than before.

"Pay attention!"

The small but powerful leg of the Jedda Sandivar emerged from the opposite direction and gave a firm kick onto the rear of the Dark Zephyr!

The expert light skirmisher embarrassingly lost control over his own trajectory and needed a moment to stabilize.

Soon, two different Jedda Sandivars attacks from the left and right of the Larkinson mech!

Tusa did not foolishly try to defend either or both attackers. Instead, he quickly activated the Combat Warp function, enabling the Dark Zephyr to quickly hop away from his precarious position!

Yet even as the Dark Zephyr managed to move away quickly enough to almost pass through the boundary of his opponent's Saint Kingdom, a third Jedda Sandivar appeared with blazing speed and kicked the Larkinson mech back into the opposite direction!

Multiple real and illusory versions of the Jedda Sandivar tormented the Dark Zephyr.

Tusa's newly improved senses and the Dark Zephyr's state-of-the-art sensor suites utterly failed to distinguish real and false.

Marissa's domain field was so much stronger and more developed that there was no comparison.

In addition, Saint Marissa honed her various powers and abilities for many decades. The two may be of the same rank on the surface, but the Adelaide ace pilot was almost four times as old as Tusa!

Even though the mirages of the Jedita Sandivar were not as strong and threatening as the real deal, Marissa was able to maintain at least a dozen of them and control them to a very fine degree.

The mirage mechs did not hesitate to push Tusa to his limits by launching crazy suicide attacks!

Even if Tusa knew that they were false, they still posed enough of a threat to force him to defend against them, which subsequently gave the real Jedita Sandivar free reign to launch attacks at the most inopportune moments!

All of this suppression steadily caused Tusa to lose more confidence, thereby causing his Saint Kingdom to buckle even further.

In contrast, Saint Marissa's domain field became even more oppressive than before! The female ace pilot continually gained more momentum.

"<nullb>False Becomes True!"

One of the Jedita Sandivars oddly swung its transphasic kamas into empty space.

Yet Tusa immediately became alarmed when the Dark Zephyr finally received his first pair of scratches!

Somehow, the missed attacks launched by the Jedita Sandivar actually managed to hit the Dark Zephyr while bypassing all of the defenses in the way!

Tusa was hardly the only ace pilot who possessed an offensive trick!

Due to the thick and almost impenetrable mist generated by Marissa's Saint Kingdom, Tusa completely lost the initiative as he could not escape this trap no matter where he flew or how much his Dark Zephyr sped up. The Jedita Sandivar constantly made sure to keep the living mech as close to the center of its Saint Kingdom as possible!

Tusa eventually couldn't hold it any longer. He wanted to be able to hold his ground against Saint Marissa without resorting to his trump card, but that was obviously an unrealistic dream from the beginning.

"Blackwing, it's time!"

"Chip!"

Shadow energy began to converge upon the Dark Zephyr's abdomen as the Dark Wind Module started to accumulate energy.

Tusa focused completely on defense and evasion as he tried his best to buy time for his expert light skirmisher to accumulate energy.

He did not dare to let the Dark Wind Module reach full charge!

Not only did it have a chance of inflicting severe harm on an important strategic asset, but he knew that Saint Marissa would never give him the time to accumulate power for so long!

The lengthy charge time of the Dark Wind Module was a very obvious weakness, but Tusa was confident that he could improve upon it over time.

For now, he only waited for half a dozen minutes before he dared to launch an unstoppable charge!

"<nullb>Dark Wind Passage!"

A powerful shadowy streak immediately ran through the hazy Saint Kingdom and breached the other side!

Every false Jemma Sandivar in the way got popped in an instant.

As for the real ace mech, the actual mech remained hidden and untouched by this costly move!

Saint Marissa sounded amused. "This has lots of potential. Even I am not entirely sure whether my Jemma Sandivar can remain unscathed if struck by your power move. It is clearly not designed to help you fight against fast and powerful opponents like myself. Its power is beyond doubt, but its flexibility leaves much to be desired as you can only channel it in a single direction. This is a siege attack more than anything else, but it doesn't have to remain that way."

Tusa wound down for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"Once you truly begin to take control over your Saint Kingdom, you can alter reality and force your mech to change direction. If you break down the special move you just pulled off and only execute some of its components, then you may be able to launch a weaker but much more controllable shadow attack. That would have allowed you to strike all of my mirages and my actual ace mech at once. Forget about resonance strength for the time being. You urgently need to expand your repertoire. Do not make use of your mech as is. No mech designer can fully prepare a set of features that will allow you to fight at your full potential. The only way to truly master your light skirmisher is to use your living mech as a collection of building blocks to form your own combat system!"

That was the point where ace pilots were finally able to live up to the expectations of the public!

Chapter 6019 Alien Adaptations

"We've found them, commander! We've found the aliens!"

"The Torment Fleet fell right into our trap, ma'am! Our new warp interdictors are working better than expected, ma'am."

"Don't let the enemy warships advance on our starships! The more vessels we lose, the weaker our suppression of space. We cannot allow them to reactivate their warp drives!"

"Commander, the Gorgoneion has just gotten hit by a massive strike! A large breach has emerged across her starboard side. The capital ship is falling out of formation! Half of her thrusters are gone and she has lost contact with hundreds of crew members."

"Identify the cause!" Commander Casella Ingvar barked as she interfaced with her trusty Minerva expert command mech.

"It's bad! The Eminence of Torment has just emerged, and the strength he has displayed is much higher than we predicted! The intelligence is wrong!"

That caused the battlefield commander of the Larkinson Army to feel bad. "Has he been rewarded with a PPS and promoted to a greater phase lord recently?!"

"No, but he is not a defective phase lord who failed to ascend into a phase lord. His body is tall and vigorous, and he does not appear to be in pain. His true body is as tall as a juggernaut, and he is able to launch spatial ripple attacks that can breach through any transphasic energy or transphasic hull

plating with ease. According to our observation and analysis, the Eminence of Torment's phasewater concentration is likely within the range of a mid-tier lesser phase lord."

A mid-tier lesser phase lord!

The Trampler of Stars that the expeditionary fleet fought against a long time ago used to hover around that strength.

However, just because the Larkinsons managed to handle such an opponent did not mean that all mid-tier lesser phase lords could be treated in the same fashion.

Just like there was a huge degree of variance between ace pilots, so did phase lords!

Some excelled at creating powerful spatial storms from a distance. Others excelled at brawling other powerful foes up close. Phase whales and phase lords had a long tradition in the Red Ocean, and they had managed to explore many different ways of leveraging the power of phasewater.

As the Minerva launched from the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim, the expert command mech immediately trained her sensors onto the Eminence of Torment in the distance.

Casella's eyes widened as she understood why the lesser phase lord managed to land such a powerful blow onto the Gorgoneion.

"Is that... a warship wrapped around his body?!"

"Yes, ma'am! When we managed to interdict the Torment Fleet, the Eminence of Torment appeared from his flagship, reached his true size and flew right towards one of the sub-

capital ships of the Torment Fleet. That ship subsequently split into several large pieces before molding onto the Eminence's humanoid body similar to a suit of combat armor. The ship raiment is most certainly designed for his use. It fits too well to his dimensions, and the fact that the Eminence can synergize many of his inherent abilities with the transphasic parts of his gigantic armor has multiplied his combat effectiveness by several times! Just his defenses alone are much harder to overcome!"

That became evident when the completely armored form of the giant juggernaut-sized phase lord was surrounded by both a spatial barrier and multiple layers of segmented transphasic energy shields!

Even though these were old-style transphasic energy shields, their combined defensive properties could not be underestimated!

It was through this protection that the Eminence of Torment managed to resist the piercing blows from the Royal Jeem!

"<nullb>I decree that your power generators have become exhausted."

Saint Kalasandra Boojay's powerful Saint Kingdom attempted to weaken the power supply of the Eminence's massive suit.

This was a clever decision as the enormous ship raiment immediately started to weaken in every aspect.

Not only did its transphasic energy shields lose a bit of strength, but the very odd cannons mounted on the orven phase lord's arms took longer to charge up and launch terrifying space ripple attacks.

However, the Boojay Saint was unable to eliminate the threat posed by the Eminence of Torment!

Unlike warships, the Eminence of Torment was a lot more flexible and capable of repelling enemies at closer ranges.

Even though the Royal Jeem was protected by its own Saint Kingdom, the Eminence constantly utilized his massive limbs to smash aside the ace mech and reduce its maneuvering space.

The Eminence also possessed a range of phasewater organs that granted him the ability to disturb the local space, create localized spatial storms and even tear space apart.

The orven phase lord was a far cry from the weak and almost disabled alien leader as described by all of the rumors!

The intelligence was completely wrong! Many aliens didn't know any better and had been completely fooled by the false rumors spread by the Eminence and his direct subordinates!

Although the Royal Jeem's powerful space suppressor and Saint Kingdom were able to work together to weaken the effects of all of these spatial attacks, they weren't able to make the ace mech immune.

Furthermore, the Eminence of Torment's embrace of technology went beyond using the hull of a homeship as his armor.

Some of the relatively compact but powerful gun batteries had been especially designed to maintain their operation even after they had been shifted to the phase lord's shoulders and other parts of his body!

Dozens of warship-grade cannons attempted to strike the Royal Jeem as the ace spearman mech constantly sought to wear down the armored phase lord's defenses.

"Graser cannons!"

The power and potency of graser weapons was much higher than ordinary laser cannons!

Both of them relied on concentrated electromagnetic radiation to inflict damage, but the former relied on very energetic and lethal gamma rays, while the latter mostly relied on a lot of visible light or infrared rays.

It was very clear which of the two was deadlier than the others!

The humans of the modern era had very little exposure to graser cannons as they were considered taboo by the Big Two and the Red Two.

However, the native aliens never agreed to adopt the same taboos, so they clearly had no qualms about mounting graser cannons onto their warships.

The only reasons why the aliens rarely made use of them was because they were much more demanding and expensive to build and mount onto their warships.

Only high-end alien warships tended to mount them in place of cheaper and less demanding laser cannons!

Although the Eminence of Torment never built up a good reputation in the alien galactic community, he had obviously hidden his strength much deeper than anyone realized!

Not only that, but he likely received enough support from the Red Cabal to be able to commission a powerful ship raiment equipped with graser cannons!

The mech designers and engineers serving on the expeditionary fleet could quickly determine that the tech and materials used to make the graser cannons originated from the puelmer race.

The ball-like aliens mastered the most advanced tech in the Red Ocean!

Not only that, but the puelmers were also good at miniaturizing their technologies. They were quite adept at mounting more compact weapon systems onto their relatively small homeships that could still pack a sizable punch!

Although the graser cannons mounted across the surface of the Eminence's armored suit were not particularly accurate, each hit or near-hit constantly consumed the Royal Jeem's energies and made it more difficult for the ace mech to wear down the segmented transphasic energy shields.

Even though the ace mech's blessed weapon was able to tear one of more segmented transphasic energy shields with every serious blow, the Eminence of Torment always adapted quickly and allowed his spatial barrier to tank follow-up attacks, thereby giving time for his transphasic energy shield generators to recover.

"The Eminence of Torment and the Royal Jeem are locked into a duel. Neither of them are able to breach each other's defenses, so they have fallen into a stalemate. However, the Eminence of Torment is still able to divert enough attention to launch space ripple attacks at our starships from time to time. We have already lost two combat carriers to the Eminence while one of our other fleet carriers has lost an entire hangar bay from his most powerful strikes."

"Can the Jemma Sandivar reinforce the Royal Jeem?"

"Saint Marissa Lewandowski is the only ace mech that is suppressing the most powerful alien hulls of the Torment Fleet. It has unexpectedly been reinforced by a squadron of modern battleships equipped with stolen human technologies! They even have hyper technology!"

Hyper technology!

As time went by, more and more alien warships came equipped with different versions of hyper technology.

Even though the aliens were not as good at technological innovation as the humans, the former possesses a lot of scientists. They were bound to be geniuses and innovators among them puelmers, orvens, nunsers and even the arche.

On top of that, multiple cells of the Cosmopolitan Movement continued to transfer many human technologies to the Red Cabal in a misguided attempt to force red humanity to abandon its human supremacy ideals.

Although the cosmopolitans had not managed to come close to attaining their goals so far, their acts of treason caused a lot of pain and misery to the soldiers responsible for fighting against the aliens.

This time, the expeditionary fleet had suffered major blows from these alien hyper battleships!

They absorbed E energy radiation from the environment and used that to empower their azure energy shields and fire considerably more lethal hyper transphasic attacks.

Their sensor systems, fire control systems, ECM systems and targeting systems had also been modernized to near-human standards. All of these technological improvements made the gun batteries of the alien hyper battleships considerably more accurate than was typical of orven vessels!

The consequence of all of this was that none of the starships of the expeditionary fleet could fend off their powerful attack salvos!

In order to prevent these powerful alien hyper battleships from crippling the expeditionary fleet from afar, the Jedda Sandivar had little choice but to spread its Saint Kingdom as far and wide as possible to engulf one of multiple threatening hulls in a highly disorienting mist.

While Saint Marissa Lewandowski was steadily able to grind down the defenses of the suppressed hyper battleships by joining forces with other friendly mech units, the expeditionary fleet would suffer a lot more damage as soon as the Jedda Sandivar left to reinforce the Royal Jeem!

The mech forces of the expeditionary fleet tried their best to assist the pilots, but most of them had little choice but to hold back the remainder of the fairly powerful Torment Fleet.

Many of the homeships of the Torment Fleet originally hailed from the orven race, so the vessels were much better constructed than the typical junk ships fielded by the more disposable alien raiding fleets.

As Legion Commander Casella Ingvar had already spread her Command Field and began to Commandeer thousands of Bright Warriors, Fey Fiannas and other ranged Larkinson mechs, her Commandeered mech troops urgently fired their resonance-empowered attacks at the hyper battleships.

Despite amplifying thousands of attacks with her true resonance, the Living Sentinels under her command were unable to produce immediate results.

The other mech units were working hard as well. The Transcendent Punisher Mark III's and the Zeal were making good progress in wearing down the mid-sized alien homeships.

The Avatars of Myth under the leadership of Legion Commander Melkor had advanced on the smaller and more mobile alien sub-capital ships. The space suppressors tacked onto the melee mechs of the Avatars made it much easier to overcome the defenses of the enemy ships than before, but they could not attack with impunity due to enemy interference.

"Phasefighters! Those unarmed alien cargo ships turned out to be makeshift carrier vessels. They are in the process of launching thousands of phasefighters!"

"How many?!"

"They have already launched 6000 of them, and we estimate that they have at least 1200 more in their cargo holds!"

Chapter 6020 Melkor's Resolve

Although the alien small craft were still inferior to human mechs in most aspects, the fact that each of them were protected by their own small transphasic energy shields still made it troublesome to eliminate them at a fast pace.

"Melee mechs, intercept the alien phasefighters!"

It was not efficient to eliminate the phasefighters by relying on ranged mech units.

Melee mechs equipped with space suppressors did a much better job at wiping them out so long as they could get within striking distance.

Commander Melkor gritted his teeth and quickly issued orders to redirect his faster and more mobile melee mech units to entangle the alien phasefighters.

"These phasefighters are getting faster, tougher and deadlier with each generation. We can't let them fly around with impunity!"

The Flagrant Vandals moved in to assist. Their light mechs were not that suitable to fight against alien warships, but they were much more effective when fighting against alien small craft!

The Ferocious Piranhas and the Stingrippers of the Flagrant Vandals moved to flank and contain the alien phasefighters. Their superior mobility and their glows enabled them to fare pretty well against the alien craft.

Although the Avatars of Myth and the Flagrant Vandals lacked the numbers to contain the alien phasefighters by themselves, they soon received help from the mech forces hailing from the other partners of the Golden Skull Alliance.

"Commander Melkor!"

Among the numerous quasi-first-class Fey Fiannas accompanying the Avatars of Myth, one of them looked more conspicuous than others.

The customized version of the Larkinson Edition of the Fey Fianna was paired with 6 living fey.

Two of them were fairly powerful communication fey. They amplified the mech's signals transmissions and made it easier for Melkor to remain connected with his troops across a busy and chaotic battlefield where lots of explosions and radiation spikes interfered with communications.

Another pair consisted of upgraded luminous fire fey, which was originally designed by Tristan Wesseling.

The fey model was already powerful from the beginning, but had been upgraded even further by the mech designers serving on the expeditionary fleet.

Equipped with both positive fire hyper gems and negative water hyper gems and enhanced by phasewater, the expensive fey fired dazzlingly hot and powerful transphasic hyper laser beams that successfully punched through the transphasic energy shields of the alien small craft in just one or two blows!

A second pair of fey consisted of transphasic versions of the infinite coil fey originally designed by Karl Steinbock-Bakhali.

Even though there only two of them that combined together to form a slightly longer barrel, the kinetic projectiles launched by the two fey never failed to punch through the transphasic energy shields of enemy phasefighters by relying on a combination of strong kinetic power and transphasic penetration!

Commander Melkor still had to maintain enough situational awareness to command the Avatars of Myth, but that did not mean he had given up on developing his piloting skills entirely!

He was growing older and more tired with each passing year, but there was a part of him that still yearned for the romance of becoming a high-ranking mech pilot.

He could never suppress his envy when he saw the Larkinsons of his generation such as Saint Tusa and Venerable Jannzi ascend towards godhood while he still remained a lowly mortal.

There had been times when his willpower wavered. Those were the times where he decided to leave the cockpit and command his Avatars of Myth behind a desk.

However, when Ves founded the Premier Branch and pretty much made it clear that it would become the central focus of the Larkinson Clan, Melkor began to realize that he only had a limited window of opportunity to rise alongside his cousins and other familiar Larkinsons.

The expeditionary fleet would probably continue to operate as a second-class fleet in the times to come, but it would no longer hold as much importance as before.

Melkor did not have the confidence that he could enter the Premier Branch by relying on his mediocre capabilities.

Perhaps he could apply to make use of an EdNet quota, but virtual reality training alone could never turn him into a first-

class mech pilot.

"My genetic aptitude isn't good enough anyway."

He was too proud and honorable to ask Ves to make an exception and pull him into the Premier Branch. Neither his piloting skills nor his command capabilities could justify a transfer to a first-class mech force.

If Melkor did not want to live the remainder of his life as an average second-class legion commander, then the only way for him to change his future was by breaking through!

With that thought, Commander Melkor resolutely piloted a demanding Fey Fianna and utilized 6 fey at once to push his limits and excel in both personal combat and battlefield command!

Ever since Melkor embraced the Fey Fianna, he became more and more proficient at multitasking and coordinating his own fey.

The fact that the mech more actively assisted in controlling the fey after evolving into a third order living mech also helped!

Yet it was exactly because of Melkor's notably strong performance that he attracted the attention of the orven phasefighter commanders.

"Careful, commander!"

Numerous defensive mechs attempted to cover Melkor's Fey Fianna as it became the target of over 60 phasefighters!

Even as the Avatars of Myths moved to block, divert and eliminate the aggressors, a squadron of elite phasefighters in red broke out and smashed aside the mechs in their way with absurdly powerful transphasic hyper weapons!

"Watch out for the elite phasefighters! They are much newer and more advanced!"

The stolen human technologies used to upgrade the elite phasefighters had not only made their weapons powerful enough to pierce the defenses of most Avatar mechs, but they were also a lot faster and more maneuverable even if they were unable to produce any warp bubbles!

The space suppressors attached onto every melee mech may have caused all of the nearby elite phasefighters lose the power of their phasewater technology, but their brand-new hyper technology still retained their full strength!

Though Melkor should have commanded his Fey Fianna to turn around and retreat to safety, he refused to show cowardice in the face of danger.

Retreating was a prudent choice to make for any mech officer that was in the crosshairs of the enemy.

It was not a choice that any aspiring expert pilot would make!

The squadron of elite phasefighters may be strong, but they were still within the range of tolerance of the Avatars of Myth!

How could Melkor possibly dream of becoming an expert pilot one day if his first response was to turn tail and run?

A fire lit in his heart as Melkor roared and focused the fire of all of his offensive fey on the incoming elite phasefighters!

"Avatars never back down! Let us teach these aliens that their phasefighters can never stand a chance against our living mechs! WE ARE LARGER THAN LIFE!"

"WE ARE LARGER THAN LIFE!" The remaining Avatars echoed the motto of their mech legion!

Several elite phasefighters quickly crumbled as their weakened azure energy shields got stripped by repeated attacks before their relatively thick fuselages only bought them a little more time.

The elite alien pilots quickly adapted, though. They dispersed their powerful phasefighters and began to overload their engines and thrusters, causing them to accelerate much faster than normal!

The alien phasefighters easily managed to outpace the Avatar mechs that attempted to intercept them. They also made it much harder for Melkor's Fey Fianna and other ranged mechs to land successive hits!

As the alien phasefighters came close enough, Melkor's living mech suddenly beeped in alarm.

"DETECTING MULTIPLE MISSILE LOCKS!"

The legion commander's eyes widened just as dozens of transphasic hyper missiles launched from the surviving elite phasefighters!

As the Red War dragged on, the native aliens discovered that their small craft were not yet able to defeat human mechs on even ground.

Since the latter was always much better controlled, plenty of alien starfighters and phasefighters got eliminated with so much ease that they failed to justify the resources invested into their development and production!

In order to give them a quick if somewhat costly short-term boost, the native aliens recently discovered the advantages of explosive munitions.

Equipping alien phasefighters with combat but powerful short-range missiles had proven to be a surprisingly effective countermeasure against human mechs!

Melkor had only heard brief mentions of their appearance in the battles involving first-raters. He never expected to encounter them himself on this battlefield!

Even as his Fey Fianna began to engage in evasive maneuvers, the accompanying offensive fey tried to pick off the incoming missiles as much as possible.

Other nearby ranged mechs managed to fell one or more transphasic hyper missiles with each passing second, but the distance was so short that over half-a-dozen managed to cross the distance and close in on Melkor's vulnerable machine!

"Camouflage!"

Before the missiles struck, all 6 living fey began to shimmer before creating lifelike physical projections that imitated the appearance of the original base mech!

The fey also overheated and began to output emissions that made it a lot harder to distinguish real from false!

BOOOM!

BOOOM!

BOOOM!

A damaged and partially ravaged Fey Fianna flew from the periphery from all of the powerful explosions.

The drone mech had lost all 6 living fey, but at least Melkor managed to preserve his machine and his life!

"Those missiles are too strong against mechs!"

Although the modern alien missiles clearly relied on sophisticated human tech to run their guidance systems, they weren't clever enough to break the living fey's camouflage.

The Avatar Commander did not have any time to celebrate. The missiles arrived so fast that his mech had been unable to put up enough distance from the short-lived decoys.

The Fey Fianna had lost every fey!

Even though there was a reserve of spare fey located further in the rear, it would take time for Melkor's barren mech to link up with another set.

In the meantime, the threat of the elite phasefighters still remained!

Three of them had succumbed from massed attacks, but three more alien craft decisively accelerated towards the damaged Fey Fiannas!

Melkor quickly experienced another sense of crisis!

"More transphasic hyper missiles? No. They cannot carry any more of them. Wait, their heat emissions are spiking! They are about to explode!"

He quickly figured out that the orven pilots of the remaining elite phasefighters had already made the determination to die!

"They are launching suicide charges!"

If any of those alien phasefighters crashed against his damaged and vulnerable Fey Fianna head-on, there was no way for him to survive!

Multiple Avatar mechs surrounded his damaged living mech in order to block the incoming elite phasefighters, but the enemy craft had already split up in an attempt to approach their target from three different angles!

It was relatively easy to defend against threats from one direction, but it became a lot harder when they came from multiple directions!

Combined with the attacks launched by other alien phasefighters, the Avatars of Myth struggled to defend their commander.

If the Avatars had more time, they could have intercepted the remaining elite phasefighters, but because the distance was so short, only one of the powerful craft got intercepted before it reached its target!

The remaining two elite phasefighters were just about to ram through whatever barriers were in the way and unleash explosions that could finish off the Fey Fianna when two fiery red resonance-empowered fire beams punched through the remaining defenses of the two craft and caused them to explode in advance!

Commander Melkor relaxed a bit as he realized that reinforcements had arrived.

The Star Dancer Mark II had approached from the ranks of the Glory Seekers and rapidly started to eliminate one alien phasefighter after another with single attacks from the expert rifleman mech's luminar crystal rifle.

"Commander Casella Ingvar guessed that you were about to engage in reckless stupidity during this battle." Venerable Brutus Wodin transmitted to Melkor in his insufferable clipped accent. "There is a time and place for bravery, but do not overestimate your abilities. The Torment Fleet is much stronger than the alien raiding fleets that we have vanquished in the past. Do us a favor and stay further in the rear. My brother-in-law would become terribly upset if he hears that we have managed to win a great battle, only for it to come at the cost of your needless death."

"..."