

The Mech 6171

Chapter 6171 Different Editions of the Dark Zephyr

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson felt torn as he struggled to make up his mind on how he wanted to fight in the future.

The Base Edition and the Banisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr both presented him with very different options.

The former was more familiar to him. Tusa did not think he would make a wrong choice if he stuck to what worked in the past. The circumstances may have changed now that he and his enemies became stronger, but the ace pilot was confident he could become a powerful duelist while also gaining the ability to support his clan by disturbing powerful enemies.

The latter was different from what he was accustomed to. Giving up other key resonating materials for Erlemin represented a big turn in the Dark Zephyr's evolution. It would make it harder for Tusa to defeat powerful opponents upright, and it would also make it harder for his machine to evade incoming attacks.

What the Banisher Edition delivered in return was a much better ability to mess with his enemies.

As long as Tusa grew powerful enough to support the consumption of the resonating ability tied to Erlemin, he could temporarily banish any troublesome presence, ranging from deadly warships to other ace mechs!

This was not a version of the Dark Zephyr that was suited for solo combat. It was a full teamwork-oriented configuration that explicitly relegated the light ace skirmisher to a support role.

By embracing the Banisher Edition, Tusa would have to accept the reality that he would likely never be as good as other ace pilots in dueling. Yet by letting the Dark Zephyr fulfill a function that few other ace mechs could perform, his presence would provide a strong guarantee that the forces of the Larkinson Clan would be able to cope against exceptionally powerful enemies!

Besides, the Banisher Edition was not necessarily weak in terms of offense. By making Erlemin take a bite out of enemies, the Dark Zephyr could instantly cripple a phase lord or blow a huge hole in an enemy fortification!

Since Saint Tusa was able to make his Dark Zephyr jump past any energy barrier, utilizing the resonating ability associated with Erlemin right afterwards was the fastest and most effective way to cripple or kill a high-priority threat!

Inadequate offensive power had always been a source of pain to Tusa. Even now when he finally became an ace pilot, he still retained his sensitivity towards this problem.

That was not to say that B-30 Shattersteel was weak, but Tusa found it to be a little underwhelming.

It was not that effective against giant enemies, which meant that the Base Edition of the Dark Zephyr had no other option than to utilize the Dark Wind Module.

However, Ultimate Modules were called this way because they were designed to serve as explosive trump cards that could turn a desperate situation around.

The power of the Dark Wind Passage Ultimate Ability was without doubt, but the energy needed to execute it was not small!

Using Erlemin was also demanding, but only if Tusa used it at its fullest on enormous targets. It was much more versatile and could be employed in all kinds of ways as long as he took the time to master its capabilities.

The Banisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr was genuinely a good development route. Master Benedict Cortez had comprehensively taken every variable into account.

"One of the differences between the Base Edition and the Banisher Edition is their potential, and how much time it takes to realize it to the fullest." Master Benedict explained to Tusa. "The Base Edition's advantage is that you can reuse many of your old skills, so you will hit the ground running. It should only take a few months before you can comfortably use the resonating abilities associated with Turbulenta and B-30 Shattersteel. This does not apply to the Banisher Edition. You will have to learn how to use the resonating ability associated with Erlemin from scratch, and figure out how to combine it with your new combat system."

"How big is the learning curve of using Erlemin?"

"It is a fairly powerful resonating alloy, so a fresh ace pilot such as yourself will struggle to leverage it to the fullest for a long time. According to the available data, it may take five to ten years for you to gain enough resonance strength and proficiency to utilize Erlemin as fluently as the ace pilot in the previous footage."

"That is too long!" Tusa sputtered!

"It is not as bad as it sounds. You should barely be able to activate the resonating ability after a few months of exercise. It will only get better from there. Erlemin is originally designed for senior ace mechs, so its ceiling is extremely high. Once your resonance strength has developed up to a certain point, you no longer need to worry as much about consumption as before. By that time, you can turn any space battle into a guaranteed victory by racing to an enemy fleet before banishing half-a-dozen of their most powerful and damaging warships. Once you become a senior ace pilot, you can potentially banish an entire space fortress, thereby opening up a critical gap in the defensive sphere of a highly fortified planet."

Saint Tusa felt a bit better about the Banisher Edition after hearing that. This version of the Dark Zephyr should be difficult to master at first, but promised to deliver very powerful capabilities at the later stages of his growth as an ace pilot!

While the strongest uses for Erlemin was still supportive in nature, Tusa did not feel bad about playing a key role in a titanic battle where the fate of an entire contested region was at stake!

Now that Master Benedict provided additional clarification on ace mechs integrated with Erlemin, Tusa actually began to appreciate the charm of this resonating alloy.

Created by the Resonance Smith himself, Erlemin was a modern phasewater-infused material that gave red humanity hope of coping against overwhelmingly powerful alien forces.

The only question was whether Saint Tusa was willing to give up the advantages of other variants of the Dark Zephyr in order to go all-in on the Banisher Edition.

"What else is possible?" Tusa asked.

Master Benedict highlighted the third draft design. It displayed a version of the Dark Zephyr that appeared noticeably thicker and bulkier. The extra mass was needed to add enough capacity to incorporate a lot of miniaturized modules.

"This is the Multipurpose Edition of the Dark Zephyr. It is one of my more radical design concepts. It is an attempt to convert the Dark Zephyr from a light skirmisher to a first-class multipurpose mech. The latter is still fairly light and fast, but it sacrifices mobility in favor of a sizable expansion in weapon systems, defensive systems and utility systems. Due to capacity limitations, none of these modules are particularly large or powerful, but as long as your resonance strength is powerful enough, you can turn any toothpick into a shipkiller."

Saint Tusa had the illusion that he had entered into an alternate reality where he tread the path of godhood as a first-class mech pilot.

If he was born a Terran instead of a Brighter, perhaps Tusa would not question the fact that his ace mech would come in this form.

The Multipurpose Edition of the Dark Zephyr truly looked similar to all of the other slender first-class ace mechs!

Master Benedict briefly elaborated on what sort of high technologies the Multipurpose Edition could carry into battle. From energy weapons to a stealth field generator, the Dark Zephyr would gain an insane degree of versatility!

"Can these high-tech systems be swapped out for other ones?"

"Yes. They wouldn't be called modules if it was difficult and time-consuming to swap them out. First-class multipurpose mechs with high modularity can be loaded with a broad set of systems that can perform adequately well in any situation. The mechs can also be equipped with specialized modules that all excel at fulfilling specific missions. For example, your Dark Zephyr can be loaded with a full set of energy weapons if a battle is about to ensue where closing the distance is absolutely not an option. The other variants cannot beat the versatility of the Multipurpose Edition."

"What about the key resonating exotics?"

"There are multiple good choices available for this edition. I have chosen the classic combination of ChargeMate and HeatMate."

"ChargeMate? HeatMate? They don't sound like serious resonating materials."

"You would be surprised." Master Benedict smirked. "They are old but timeless classics because their functions have always remained useful to many first-class multipurpose ace mechs. ChargeMate can generate a large amount of electrical current when affected by true resonance. The greater the resonance strength, the more absurd the power generation. HeatMate is especially designed to work alongside ChargeMate, so there is no compatibility problem. As its name suggests, HeatMate can quickly drain excessive heat build up due to generating and expending a large amount of power. Together, ChargeMate and HeatMate have become a popular if somewhat generic combination for ace mechs that are heavily reliant on energy-hungry systems."

Although the effects of ChargeMate and HeatMate sounded awfully dull to Tusa, he could definitely see how they would be able to complement first-class multipurpose ace mechs!

The two resonating alloys were perfect for ace pilots who wanted to rely much more heavily on the conventional technologies of an ace mech as opposed to its more metaphysical qualities!

Saint Tusa had heard and read enough about first-class multipurpose mechs to understand many of their pros and cons. He could see the merits in the Multipurpose Edition, but...

It was too much.

He eventually shook his head. "If the Larkinson Clan needs a versatile ace mech, then it should look towards other ace pilots. Joshua for example is pretty versatile already, and I am sure that others will be able to fulfill this role much better than a light skirmisher specialist like myself. A light mech frame doesn't have enough space to fit all the impressive tech that a multipurpose mech is supposed to carry."

His rejection towards the notion of the Multipurpose Edition was so strong and unambiguous that Master Benjamin eliminated this option right away with a single swipe of his finger.

"That narrows down your selection somewhat. Let me introduce the next variant to you. This is the Demolisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr. It is all about enhancing your mech's offensive melee combat capabilities to the highest possible extent. The speed and maneuverability of your machine will not be as good, but he will gain a much more impressive capacity to inflict damage, especially on large targets."

"How?"

"With the help of Resoblast Alloy. This is a resonating alloy that has a very simple but powerful effect. It can convert strong kinetic energy as well as true resonance into shaped explosive force. The more energy you exert in the resonating ability, the more powerful and the greater the area of effect of the explosion. This resonating material will give your deceptively small light skirmisher the ability to punch far above his own weight class."

The projection played another footage where an ace mech approached a large alien battleship.

The ace mech first had to go through the transphasic energy shields, but it managed to get past them very quickly!

A rapid series of powerful explosions collapsed the energy barriers when the ace mech struck with a pair of hammers!

Once the ace mech reached the side of the enemy ship, the machine gain to strike the hull with its hammer.

A succession of large explosions wrecked the interior of the battleship as the resonance-empowered strikes released energies that could rival that of tactical weapons of mass destruction!

Though Tusa was not a fan of wielding hammers, he deeply became impressed by how this relatively small ace mech turned into the equivalent of a mighty siege engine with the help of Resoblast Alloy!

Chapter 6172 Official Titles

The Demolisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr sought to turn the living mech into a highly mobile but also highly destructive wrecking ball!

Although this development route lacked the grace and elusiveness of the Base Edition, the hammer-wielding light skirmisher possessed a destructive capacity that could easily crush any large warship!

It was an ace mech that was entirely geared towards inflicting mass destruction at close range. The destructive features of Resoblast Alloy neatly compensated for the Dark Zephyr's prior inability to inflict mass damage.

However, the capacity to inflict destruction at a large scale was not the only criteria that Tusa cared about.

"How good is the effect of Resoblast Alloy when used against powerful but compact enemies such as other ace mechs?" The ace pilot asked.

"The hammers can channel a large amount of force in any direction of your choosing upon impact." Master Benedict said. "As long as your willpower is strong enough, you can narrow the blast cone so that it resembles a rod. This approach will concentrate the kinetic forces of your resonance-empowered attacks and can overwhelm or penetrate many strong defenses. The most notable shortcoming is that it is impossible to concentrate the blast force any further. This will make it difficult for the Demolisher Edition to penetrate through particularly strong armor. If the enemy also possesses excellent shock-absorbing capabilities, then the explosive forces produced with the help of Resoblast Alloy will not be able to inflict effective damage against enemies with particularly powerful defenses."

That was a concern to Tusa. The Demolisher Edition excelled at damaging large-sized targets, but its ability to defeat smaller but much more powerful enemies was questionable.

This was especially the case when the configuration of this version sacrificed a bit of mobility in order to enhance its offensive power.

"Resoblast Alloy is powerful, but... it doesn't fit my style." Saint Tusa eventually declared as he crossed his arms. "Don't get me wrong. I like the hammers, but using them changes my combat approach so much that I won't be able to recognize myself anymore. Besides, with the breakthrough of Isobel Kotin, my clan doesn't have to worry about inflicting mass destruction once she has recovered from her heavy injuries."

The problem with that last statement was that Isobel required at least several years in order for the Larkinson Clan to regrow an entirely new body around her brain and spine!

A lot could happen during this time. The Larkinson Clan was bound to confront a lot of native aliens, whose massive resource and home ground advantages allowed them to accumulate a lot of big warships and defensive fortifications.

The Base Edition of the Dark Zephyr was not efficient at eliminating large quantities of massive enemy units!

This meant that forgoing a very convenient solution like the Demolisher Edition would impair Saint Tusa's ability to dominate the battles in the coming years.

Most of the other versions of the Dark Zephyr were much more suited for targeted strikes against high-value targets.

There was still value in taking out the flagship of a fleet, but such an act hardly affected the morale of the more disciplined and hardened aliens serving in the real warfleets of the major races of the Red Ocean!

"Very well." Master Benedict nodded. "I merely drafted the Demolisher Edition to present you with an alternative choice as well as a means to expand your horizons. Even if you reject the concept that I have presented, I hope that you will at least become more aware of the greater possibilities at your disposal. First-class ace mechs are exceptionally powerful. In the past, it was impossible to design a light skirmisher that can easily destroy entire battleships, but now that the Dark Zephyr is about to reach this new standard, you can break any rule you want."

Tusa had to admit that the Demolisher Edition truly broadened his horizons. He appreciated Master Benedict's effort, but he also wanted to stay true to himself.

"Are there any other variations of the Dark Zephyr?"

"There is one more. The Duelist Edition of the Dark Zephyr seeks to satisfy your craving for achieving supremacy in single combat. This configuration boasts slightly thicker armor while still retaining high mobility. On the premise of possessing a trump card in the form of the Dark Wind Module, I have sought out a resonating material that can bestow your ace mech with another means of inflicting strong attacks without draining too much energy."

"Can't we use B-30 Shattersteel?" Tusa questioned.

"B-30 Shattersteel has the potential to break through all defenses, but it has several major shortcomings. Its effectiveness against massive enemies is inconsistent, and it is entirely useless against smart metal and certain types of biological matter. This is why the Duelist Edition should ideally be paired with a resonating material that does not rely on repeated attacks in the same areas in order to breach particularly resilient defenses. I have also tried to find a better match with your E energy attributes."

The ace pilot grew intrigued when he heard that. The previous variations all sounded nice, but theft did not quite match with his domain.

"So what material did you find?"

"It is another recently-developed phasewater-infused resonating alloy. Different from Erlemin, Sunder Metal is a resonating material that does what its name suggests. When integrated into a bladed weapon, any contact with solid matter can produce a molecular dissociation effect. The effect is not too strong at low power, but when affected by much greater true resonance, it can easily split highly resistant materials in half. Channeling more true resonance into the weapon can also enlarge the molecular dissociation effect, allowing your ace mech to cut targets that are much larger than the blade itself. However, unless you have grown into a senior pilot, it is not advisable to make too many demands on Sunder Metal. You are not even close to utilizing it to its true potential."

The projection changed to show an ace swordsman mech with this resonating alloy in action.

The machine wielded a sword and confronted a variety of alien warships.

The sword infused with Sunder Metal was quite effective against transphasic energy shields due to the fact that it was also a transphasic product. The mech easily overcame the transphasic energy shields of the enemy vessels before beginning to cut apart the hulls with surprising effectiveness!

The ace mech fought as if it wielded a blade that was at least 5 times longer!

That was not all. When the ace mech in the projection sparred against another ace mech, the one that wielded the Sunder Metal blade continuously wore down the defenses of its opponent until it finally delivered its crippling blow!

The Sunder Metal sword glowed with concentrated power as it neatly managed to sever the enemy machine's left arm!

"Impressive!" Saint Tusa uttered.

Sunder Metal was a powerful offensive resonating exotic!

It was not bad when used against massive opponents, but it was even better when employed against particularly tough and damage-resistant enemies!

Tusa did not have to worry too much about lack of offensive power if he piloted the Duelist Edition.

He vastly preferred the effects of Sunder Metal over B-30 Shattersteel and Resoblast Alloy.

However, it was clear that the Duelist Edition was less versatile than the Base Edition. So much of the former hinged on the effectiveness of Sunder Metal that the Dark Zephyr would get in trouble if it was not effective.

"The Duelist Edition is designed to excel in attacking powerful individual combatants, but not much else." Master Benedict confirmed Tusa's thoughts. "Due to the infusion of phasewater, Sunder Metal is particularly domineering. It cannot be combined with Turbulenta that can increase the invasive capabilities of your living mech."

That was a disappointment. Turbulenta did not sound impressive, but Tusa was confident his Dark Zephyr would suffer much less attacks with the help of this resonating exotic.

"So these are the variants that you came up with, Master?"

"I am not limited to drafting 5 different development routes of the Dark Zephyr. There are many other resonating materials that I have left out of consideration. I do not believe it is necessary to overwhelm you with too many choices. These are the strongest and most compatible mech configurations that I can produce with the information that I have on hand. If you are dissatisfied with all 5 of them, then I can take your feedback and use it to develop a more fitting mech configuration."

"That won't be necessary, Master. I am already pleased with these options. I do not see much point in exploring other options."

Saint Tusa furrowed his brows as he continued to contemplate the different variations. He knew that as long as he did not change his mind later on, the development route he chose today would define his career for the rest of his life!

The powerful resonating materials integrated into the Dark Zephyr would allow it to excel in specific areas. Tusa may become famous for banishing powerful opponents or cutting through the toughest armor with a single strike.

As long as he performed well enough to make an unforgettable impression, the people around him would eventually bestow him with a title related to his greatest strength or feat!

Obtaining a title that was recognized by the public was an important turning point to the career of any mech pilot.

It was not too unusual for mech pilots to gain a variety of titles, handles, call signs and other pseudonyms from various different sources.

Mech pilots or other people that possessed officially recognized titles could use them as their primary legal names, thereby reducing their former human names to relics of their mortal past.

However, as long as the public acceptance and recognition of these messy titles remained low, they didn't count according to the official institutions of human civilization.

Only a big institution such as the Red Association had the power to officially approve and register a title.

Once that happened, the mech pilot completed a life-changing transformation from mortal to transcendent!

Mech pilots or other people that possessed officially recognized titles could use them as their primary legal names, thereby reducing their former human names to relics of their mortal past.

This was why people always referred to the Destroyer of Worlds by her imposing title rather than her distinctly less impressive human name or Irene Mox!

In any case, it was a bit of a stretch for Tusa to obtain an officially recognized title when he was a mere expert pilot. There were just so many demigods that it was difficult for any of them to earn widespread fame.

The story was different for ace pilots. They were much more powerful and much less numerous. Their combat feats were also so much more impressive that they could easily capture the imagination of billions if not trillions of people!

Saint Tusa did not consider himself to be as vain as Vincent Ricklin, but he was still human enough to crave validation. Who didn't want to become a hero?

Therefore, earning an official title was one of his most desired goals after becoming an ace pilot.

He was still aiming to become a god pilot, but this was such an enormous goal that it was impossible for him to succeed in the foreseeable future!

It was much easier for Tusa to settle on a more attainable goal. The upcoming alien offensive granted him the perfect opportunity to climb up to the galactic stage!

Many heroes would rise in the coming years. A lot of ace pilots that previously went under the radar were bound to become famous and inspire red humanity to resist the native aliens.

Saint Tusa was the first ace pilot among his clansmen, but that was not the extent of his ambitions.

He wanted to become the first true war hero of the Larkinson Clan.

Now that more dazzling clansmen such as General Ark Larkinson had yet to trigger their second apotheosis, Tusa felt an obligation to stand up and prove that his clan was not weak in terms of martial might!

With this goal in mind, Tusa quickly narrowed down his selection to just two options.

Chapter 6173 Solo or Team Player

As much as Saint Tusa wanted to have it all, it was impossible for his Dark Zephyr to excel in every area.

The closest the living mech could come to performing like a mythical omnimech was the distinctly boring Multipurpose Edition.

Compared to a theoretical omnimech that possessed all of the advantages of every mech archetype with none of the associated weaknesses, the Multipurpose Edition was too lacking in hard power!

Tusa hated the indecisive nature of a multipurpose mech. Every machine that carried 20 different miniaturized modules could seemingly do everything, but never managed to excel in anything.

This was why he rejected the Multipurpose Edition despite how tempting it sounded to possess very little weaknesses. He believed he could do more for his clan if he became overwhelmingly strong in a single function.

He already ruled out the Demolisher Edition as well because it tried too hard in forcing him to become a different ace pilot. As much as he didn't like it, Tusa already accepted the fact that his piloting style would never be good at inflicting mass destruction.

The more concentrated and surgical nature of the Duelist Edition appealed to him a lot more, but the overreliance on Sunder Metal made him hesitate.

It was a powerful resonating alloy for certain. He preferred it over B-30 Shattersteel as Sunder Metal could breach enemy defenses in an instant.

However, he also recognized that the effectiveness of Sunder Metal was heavily reliant on his resonance strength. As a material designed for use by senior ace pilots, Saint Tusa would struggle to use it to its full effect for many years. Activating the associated resonating ability to the fullest extent several times in quick succession would quickly drive him to exhaustion!

"Hmm..."

While Tusa was still attracted by the powerful long-term prospects of Sunder Metal, he did not consider it appropriate to sacrifice so much immediate combat power to fully make use of its power.

Certainly, Tusa fully believed that as long as he continued to practice and familiarize himself with Sunder Metal over the span over decades, he could one day become so powerful at freeing parts and limbs from his most formidable enemies that even phase whales would run away in terror after encountering his Dark Zephyr on the battlefield!

However, Tusa couldn't wait that long. The Larkinson Clan's position in society was still too precarious. If his Dark Zephyr remained underpowered in the coming years, he wouldn't be able to protect his fellow clansmen during a period where they were lacking in high-end combat power!

"What will happen if I pick the Duelist Edition?" The ace pilot asked.

"The Premier Branch of your clan will depend heavily on your mech to protect its forces against phase leaders and particularly powerful warships in the coming years." Master Benedict answered.

"So I need to be ready to fight as hard as I must, is that what you are saying?"

"First-class mechs are expected to take part in a higher level of warfare than you are accustomed to. The Premier Branch will not be fighting against the rabble that our expeditionary fleet is accustomed to thrashing. The warfleets of the 13 major alien races of the Red Ocean are truly formidable to the point where they can give the Red Two a run for their money. These are the enemies that the first-class mech pilots of your clan are expected to fight. Aside from your Dark Zephyr, the most your clansmen can count upon are the handful of warships your clan is permitted to field."

Tusa frowned. Once his Dark Zephyr got upgraded to a first-class ace mech, he would no longer be allowed to fight alongside the soldiers of the expeditionary fleet.

He didn't like it. These were his brothers and sisters in arms. They could never enjoy enough protection, especially now that the Red War was about to escalate.

Then again, Tusa understood the Larkinson Clan's desire to build up a first-class mech force.

There were too many powerful threats that could destroy the clan if it lost the protection of the Red Association. The Larkinsons suffered betrayal too many times to let others become responsible for their safety.

Only a true first-class mech force was powerful enough to allow the Larkinson Clan to maintain a true foothold in the new frontier!

In addition, Saint Tusa recognized that a powerful ace pilot like himself also served as an additional form of deterrent against the enemies of the clan.

The thing about deterrence was that it should never be based on falsehoods. Tusa needed to possess a degree of combat effectiveness that was high enough to truly make the enemies of the clan back off. If his ace mech struggled to launch powerful attacks, then that would obviously not be enough to scare away the most powerful of adversaries!

"I originally wanted to pick the Duelist Edition, but... if I can't keep up with the likes of the Mars in the following decade, then forget it." Tusa sighed.

Benedict actually looked a bit surprised after he heard this resolute rejection.

"I calculated that there is a high probability that you would have settled for the Duelist Edition. I specifically designed it to address several of your greatest grievances at once. It not only possesses high offensive power, but its growth ceiling is very high. It may take an extended amount of time for your Dark Zephyr to come to power, but your utilization of Sunder Metal will never reach a hard limit until you have become a peak ace pilot. Even if your living mech has not been updated for several decades, you can still rely on your growing resonance strength and your increasing mastery of Sunder Metal to keep up with newer and much more updated ace mechs."

Tusa would be lying if he said he was not interested in this benefit. The Larkinson Clan did not adopt an incremental update strategy like the Cross Clan.

Who knew how long it would take for the busy Ves and Gloriana to finally turn their attention to the Dark Zephyr once again.

The ace pilot understood that barring special circumstances, the upcoming upgrade would be the only one that the Dark Zephyr would enjoy for at least decade if not longer!

This meant that Tusa had to make sure he would remain satisfied for an extended period of time with this upgrade.

He still shook his head. "Be that as it may, I don't think that is enough of a reason to pick the Duelist Edition. It is not as if the other variants are much less useful in the long run."

"That is true. Which one do you prefer, then?"

"I have narrowed down my choices to the Base Edition and the Banisher Edition." The ace pilot answered. "I understand their pros and cons well enough, but I cannot make up my mind on the combat system that I should specialize in. The Base Edition is familiar ground to me, but the Banisher Edition allows me to make a greater impact in large battles."

The Base Edition's combination of Turbulenta and B-30 Shattersteel promised guaranteed performance, yet did not introduce anything drastically new or powerful.

The Banisher Edition's reliance on the new and powerful Erlemin would allow the Dark Zephyr to become a fearsome saboteur and disruptor, but also became a less powerful duelist due to a reduction in offensive and evasion capabilities.

Tusa closed his eyes as he struggled to make a choice that would define his entire career. It was too difficult to commit to a single development route!

Seeing that the ace pilot could not make up his mind, Master Benedict made a suggestion.

Tusa looked relieved. "That... is a good suggestion. I will spend a few days exploring my options."

"Do not be in a hurry to decide right away. Time is of the essence, but it would be terrible if you make a decision that you will eventually come to regret. Perhaps it would help you clarify your opinions if you listen to your friends and family. Ask your fellow Larkinsons what they think. Whether you agree with their standpoints or not, you should eventually gain a clearer idea on which version of the Dark Zephyr fits you best."

Tusa looked relieved. "That... is a good suggestion. I will spend a few days exploring my options."

He truly needed the break. Once he left the Cyclical Engine, he began to contact numerous Larkinsons in person or by remote order to hear what they had to say.

"There are merits to both the Base Edition and the Banisher Edition." Venerable Jannzi Larkinson thoughtfully said. "From the perspective of our clan, the Banisher Edition is much more useful to us. It is not necessarily a configuration that will earn you a lot of personal glory, but it is easier to tip the balance in our favor during pitched battles. We have other high-tier expert pilots that can do frontal combat much better as long as they break through."

Saint Tusa should have known that he would hear this kind of answer from Jannzi.

"What if I go for the Base Edition instead?"

"I would respect your choice, Tusa. You should always choose what is best for you. I am simply telling you what is best for our clan if you care about that. If you want to manipulate the battlefield and ruin the plans of our enemies, then pick the Banisher Edition. If you want to become a versatile high-mobility troubleshooter, then go for the Base Edition. I know what I want, but my goals do not necessarily align with yours."

Jannzi gave Tusa a more measured response than he expected. He felt glad that she would not condemn him if he ended up picking the Base Edition.

Tusa decided he needed to hear an opinion from the opposite side of the spectrum. He knew exactly who to approach.

Venerable Vincent Ricklin scratched his head in confusion.

"I didn't expect that a bigshot ace pilot like yourself can be so indecisive. If you want my honest opinion, I think you are overthinking this issue way too much. Why don't you listen to your heart? Neither the Base Edition nor the Banisher Edition appeals to me, but if I had to make a choice, I would pick the former. You can't go wrong by sticking to the classics. Besides, I know you well enough that you love to duel against powerhouses. The Banisher Edition is much more useful to a team player."

"You think I am unable to be a team player?" Tusa doubtfully asked.

Vincent chuckled. "Tusa, Tusa, Tusa. I am not saying you don't care about the rest of us, but... you're a man. It is in your nature to pursue glory and defeat powerful enemies. Picking the Banisher Edition will only make you suppress your aggression and turn you into a meek pilot that thinks about retreat at the first sign of serious resistance. A real ace pilot shouldn't be like that! A real ace pilot needs to possess the unflinching confidence that they can defeat any enemy no matter how much the odds are stacked against them! Don't be a coward. Be a hero. Make the right choice."

Despite the fact that Vincent was still a 'mere' expert pilot, he had an uncanny ability to inspire Tusa's sense of manhood.

The ace pilot couldn't help but become affected by Vincent's emotional appeal.

What was Tusa's true nature?

Was he a trickster, or was he a saboteur?

Did he prefer to dance on the edge of the knife by dancing around powerful opponents, or would he rather spoil their plans by banishing them or their key war assets into another dimension?

The more Tusa thought about it, the more he came closer to an answer.

He only wanted to seek out one more opinion before he locked in his choice.

"Yes. I need your advice."

The physical projection of the mech designer smiled. "I have heard about your little inquiry. You are indeed facing a big decision. Let's explore what is holding you back."

Chapter 6174 No Turning Back

"Ask away, Tusa. What do you want to hear from me? I haven't studied the draft designs too closely, but I can share my own views on the technical and conceptual traits of the two variants of your Dark Zephyr."

As the creator and one of the lead developers of the Dark Zephyr, Ves knew a lot about the powerful light skirmisher. The current iteration of the living mech was one of his best works!

Although Ves had little involvement in Master Benedict's plans to upgrade the Dark Zephyr into a first-class ace mech, he still had access to all of the reports that Gloriana received.

Even if Ves was busy with other matters, he always made sure to devote enough time to stay up to date on the developments of the first ace mech of the Larkinson Clan.

He had a strong personal stake in this matter. The strengths and weaknesses of the future version of the Dark Zephyr had a very large impact on the first-class mech force that he was planning to form in the near future.

Ves did not have a personal preference on which version of the Dark Zephyr that Tusa should choose. He only cared about whether the ace pilot would be able to fight at his best when he obtained his desired ace mech.

Saint Tusa spent a few minutes sharing his thoughts on the subject. He then proceeded to ask a question.

"How easy would it be for the Design Department to upgrade or modify either versions of my battle partner? The reason why I am asking this is because the Red War is developing quickly. New technologies are coming out every year. If possible, I would like my mech to be kept up to date more frequently than before."

That was a reasonable request. Ace mechs deserved better treatment than expert mechs due to their much greater strategic value.

Ves thought for a moment. "Gloriana should be able to give you a better answer on this. From what I know, the technical demands of the Banisher Edition are not as high. This variant is primarily designed to move faster on the battlefield so that you can quickly exile high-priority threats into other dimensions with as little delay as possible. It only relies on a single key resonating material to perform its primary role, so it is much easier to augment the more basic capabilities of your mech with lesser resonating materials. Master Benedict has already taken the initiative to augment the mobility of the Banisher Edition through this method, but we can also change that to boosting the Dark Zephyr's defenses or attack power."

That was an informative answer. Tusa nodded in gratitude.

"What about the Base Edition?"

"Well... I am not an authority in high-level materials science, but putting two powerful ace mech-grade resonating materials in a single ace mech is bound to create a lot of... strain, shall we say. When your resonance strength is still on the low end of an ace pilot, it will be more difficult to keep the Base Edition stable when your living mech is operating at high intensity. It is like piloting a volatile explosive. There should be enough safeguards to prevent your mech from exploding, but there is very little leeway to push the limits further when you are still a rookie ace pilot. The situation will improve once you have grown stronger and subjected your Dark Zephyr to a lot of willpower baptism. The metaphysical strengthening of the mech frame will give Gloriana greater leeway in applying additional resonating materials."

These were technical considerations that Tusa was not previously aware of! It was interesting to learn about these differences.

"I have another question, Ves. Are you working on new tech now or in the future that could make the Base Edition or the Banisher Edition a lot more powerful? Which one has the best chance to become a lot more effective when our society has managed to make a lot more progress in advancing new technologies?"

That was a rather difficult question, but Tusa happened to present it to the right person.

"I cannot say too much about other fields of technology, but I know a thing or two when it comes to phasewater technology, hyper technology and E-technology. In my opinion, it is harder to apply innovations to the Base Edition. There is not much room for improvement to weapons that have integrated B-30 Shattersteel because its effect is so simple and direct. Turbulenta presents more possibilities, but they won't be game changers."

"Are you saying that it will be different for the Banisher Edition?"

The physical projection of Ves nodded. "The Banisher Edition is like a soft reset of your Dark Zephyr. It is a new configuration that has yet to undergo years of refinement and optimization. Its signature resonating ability is also very new and flexible, which means that there are many ways to improve its performance by making targeted modifications to your living mech."

That was an interesting difference. The Banisher Edition should receive more dramatic upgrades in the medium and long-term.

"Which of the two variants plays better with phasewater?"

"The Base Edition is not too dependent on phasewater." Ves answered. "Sure, it can be used to strengthen and speed up the relatively thin mech frame, but these are standard applications. The use of B-30 Shattersteel makes it less important for the knives of this variant to possess strong penetrating capabilities."

"I see. I suppose it is very different for the Banisher Edition?"

"Correct, Tusa. I suspect that your recent... exposure... to phasewater may allow you to unlock the hidden potential of Erlemin, if it even exists. It is one of the few phasewater-infused resonating alloys available so far. The mech industry knows too little about how this extra detail affects the performance of resonating materials in real-world scenarios. I won't lie to you, Tusa. I think that part of the reason why the Red Association has put Erlemin on the War Exchange is so that people like you can field test this new material."

That caused the ace pilot to frown. He did not exactly wish to turn himself into a test subject, especially without making it clear from the start.

Then again, the Resonance Smith personally invented Erlemin. He would never deign to release anything too unstable that could pose a real danger against ace pilots. His reputation for excellence made it impossible to consider Erlemin an unstable experimental material!

"It is an honor to help the Resonance Smith collect more data." Tusa said in a neutral tone. "I haven't thought about my connection to phasewater. I myself don't really know what exactly I gained out of completing that stupid challenge of yours. All I've noticed is that I am getting along a little better with phasewater technology. Maybe this is one of the reasons why I have become drawn to the Banisher Edition."

"Don't let this single factor dictate your choice. There is more to the Banisher Edition than phasewater. There are also the design spirits to consider."

"I have been meaning to ask about that, Ves. From what I can see, the Base Edition plays well with both Trisk and Arnold. The Banisher Edition on the other hand doesn't have a strong connection to Arnold anymore. I am also not very certain whether this variant is compatible with Trisk."

Ves chuckled. "Your thinking is too limited. It is true that Trisk embodies the concept of freedom, but the act of banishing an enemy does not necessarily contradict it. Instead, you can treat it as an opportunity to 'liberate' your enemies from the prison that is called the material realm and send them to one of the many other dimensions that exist! With the power that the Banisher Edition commands, you practically gain a key that may lead you to a lot of different dimensions."

Saint Tusa was sharp enough to hear the elevated interest in the patriarch's tone.

"You sound like you favor the Banisher Edition over the Base Edition."

"Sort of." Ves answered. "Let me be honest. From the perspective of the Larkinson Clan, you are more useful as an asset if you pick the Banisher Edition. It is also in my own best interest that you pick this development route. However, I do not want to force you to take on a role that you are truly not interested in. Any short to medium term benefits pale in comparison to our ultimate long term goal, which is to help you transcend into a god pilot. If the Base Edition makes you more comfortable and grants you greater confidence in overcoming your challenges, then by all means go for it. What is best for you is also best for our clan."

Tusa's expression softened a bit after he heard that. He was grateful for Ves for not trying to pressure him into selecting one variant over another.

The Base Edition represented a continuation of his existing fighting style and allowed him to pilot what may ultimately become the strongest light skirmisher to ever exist.

It was important for him to make the final decision himself.

There was a lot of promise in either development route.

The Base Edition represented a continuation of his existing fighting style and allowed him to pilot what may ultimately become the strongest light skirmisher to ever exist.

The Banisher Edition took a very different turn by granting his Dark Zephyr a powerful new gimmick that could become his defining ability due to how great of an impact it could have.

Tusa truly felt torn between choosing a configuration that allowed him to earn more personal glory and a configuration that enabled him to become a more useful helper to the Larkinson Clan.

Of course, making progress until he successfully became a god pilot was the best possible way for him to do well in both areas!

"Tusa."

"What is it, Ves?"

"Let me guess. The reason why you are struggling so much is due to a conflict between your selfish desires and your sense of duty to the clan."

Tusa plainly admitted it by nodding. "That is one of the reasons why I have been postponing my decision so far. I think my domain is pushing me to choose the Base Edition, but I don't know if I will be able to forgive myself if that makes me unable to save our clan from a catastrophic defeat."

Ves shook his head. "I think you are approaching this the wrong way. You are the master of your domain, not the other way around. The reason why your domain is tied to the concept of freedom is because you yearn to be free and unrestrained. However, you are still a human. You still have the freedom to choose, to act illogically and to contradict yourself. Don't make a decision just because

it is what your domain prefers. Settle on a variant that you look forward to piloting the most, even if you cannot list out all of the reasons why. Even if your choice conflicts with your domain, then impose your will onto it until it conforms to you again."

This final piece of advice cut through all of the fog and confusion that filled Tusa's mind ever since Master Benedict presented him with so many options.

The ace pilot once again radiated clarity and certainty as he decided on his future course as an ace pilot!

"If that is the case... then I want to take a chance on the Banisher Edition. I think I am ready to try something new and different."

Ves grinned. "Good choice. Our clan will support your decision all the way. I will pass on your preference to Gloriana and Master Benedict so that they can quickly get to work. Make sure to get ready to redeem the necessary quantity of Erlemin from the War Exchange. It is really expensive and has limited availability, so it is better to acquire it sooner rather than later."

Saint Tusa did not know whether he made the wrong choice at this junction, but once he spent almost all of his accumulated war merits on Erlemin, there was no turning back anymore.

Chapter 6175 Tusa's Value

After Ves ended his call with Saint Tusa, he tried his best not to grin like an unhinged madman.

He felt ecstatic!

Out of all of the draft designs that Master Benedict Cortez whipped up as possible evolutions of the Dark Zephyr, Tusa picked the one that provided the greatest benefit to Ves and the Larkinson Clan!

"Hehehehe..."

Although Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was the first member of the clan to advance to the rank of ace pilot, he would soon be joined by others.

Isobel Kotin had already broken through, and there were many high-tier expert pilots that just needed to take one step further in order to reach the same rank.

Although not even Ylvaine could predict the timing of pilot breakthroughs, the Larkinson Clan nurtured enough peak ace candidates to be able to 'win the jackpot' at least once or twice in the upcoming campaign.

This was not a certain bet, but Ves did not think that Tusa and Isobel were the only pilots in the Larkinson Clan that could undergo apotheosis for a second time.

The other high-tier expert pilots possessed their own strengths!

They just needed a single powerful opportunity to push themselves past the threshold. Whether that was receiving an updated high-tier expert mech or fighting an extremely intensive battle during the imminent alien offensive, Ves had already formulated a few plans based on the assumption of specific individual breakthroughs.

If the future matched his predictions, Saint Tusa's role in the Larkinson Clan would automatically change from a frontline leader to a flanking supporter.

This was what fit Tusa best. His Dark Zephyr functioned best when the light skirmisher was not the most ostentatious presence on the battlefield.

"It would have been great if Ark broke through and came back to the clan." Ves sighed.

Ark was by far the best candidate to take a leading position in any large mech force. His domain and his combat system all hinged on becoming the brightest star in the field.

Still, Ves could work with others if necessary. Jannzi Larkinson, Joshua Larkinson and Casella Ingvar all possessed good leadership or inspirational qualities. Each of them had the potential to elevate the Larkinson Clan's premier fighting forces in different ways.

As harsh as it sounded, Ves did not include Tusa on that very short list.

It was not that Ves had no faith in Tusa's leadership abilities. He could certainly step up if there was no better alternative. He was just not suitable for this prominent role.

If not for the fact that Saint Isobel Kotin's distorted breakthrough and traumatic injuries caused her mental stability to drop off a cliff, Ves would have already prepared a plan to turn her into the standard bearer of the Larkinson Clan!

In any case, Tusa's decision to adopt the Banisher Edition was fantastic news to Ves!

The Dark Zephyr with the power to exile troublesome enemies to another dimension had many useful applications, but Ves mainly prized one use in particular.

"Loss mitigation!"

Yes!

Ves did not naively assume that his forces would be able to win every battle in the future.

The Larkinson Clan became stronger, but the enemies his forces were expected to confront were growing stronger as well.

Part of that is due to the technological and organizational improvements made by his opponents.

The rabble that the Larkinsons previously looked down on in the past was slowly getting better and better. All of the trash had already been wiped out, but that meant that the second echelon forces that remained were much better. The expeditionary fleet should no longer have it as easy as before.

Another part of the increasing difficulties was that the first-class mech force that Ves intended to raise in the near future had to fight against the 'real' enemies of red humanity.

The Torment Fleet only gave the Larkinsons a small preview of what it was like to fight the main warfleets of the major alien races.

Against a real orven, nunser or puelmer warfleet, the Larkinsons were bound to suffer a lot of casualties in battle!

After all, if not even the well-equipped RA and RF warfleets could win their own battles without losing valuable soldiers and assets, how could the Larkinson Clan possibly do any better?

Even if the first-class mech force of the Larkinson Clan actively tried to avoid any alien warfleets that posed too great of a threat, there was no guarantee that a confrontation could be avoided forever.

The price of losing was far too great to Ves. This was why before he thought about the benefits of winning a battle against such powerful opposition, he needed to think about what must be done if his forces lost a battle!

This was where the Banisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr came into play. If the living mech truly incorporated Erlemin as a key resonating material, then the machine should be able to buy the Larkinson forces enough time to retreat.

Saint Tusa did not even need to kill the winning enemies. As long as he used his ace mech to banish a handful of extremely powerful warships or units that possessed the greatest lethality, the remaining alien enemies had a much smaller chance of wiping out the fleeing Larkinson troops.

Perhaps the pursuers may even decide to interrupt their chase for fear of getting defeated in detail!

This was a role that only Saint Tusa and the Dark Zephyr could perform.

Theoretically, any other ace pilot that was compatible with Erlemin could fulfill the same purpose, but the situation was not so simple.

Out of all of the high-ranking mech pilots in the Larkinson Clan, a light mech specialist such as Tusa possessed the highest agency on the battlefield!

His Dark Zephyr was the fastest and most evasive mech of the Larkinson Clan. The light skirmisher could visit any corner of the battlefield and get away without suffering any significant consequences.

Only Saint Tusa was able to execute a mission as dangerous as flying in the middle of the formation of an enemy warfleet and banishing the well-protected flagship before slipping away!

"There is absolutely no way that Jannzi and her Bastion can pull off the same feat!"

The Bastion possessed the lowest mobility out of all of the Larkinson expert mechs, and that was fine. She was fully geared towards functions that did not require her to maneuver around a lot.

There were still many medium expert mechs that possessed decently high mobility such as the First Sword and the Everchanger, but it would be a waste to integrate Erlemin into them. It was better to play to their strengths and let them excel in different areas.

"In any case, once Gloriana and Master Benedict are done with upgrading the Dark Zephyr, I have much greater confidence in the success of our upcoming deep strike expeditions."

It was only when the Larkinsons finally jumped deep behind enemy lines and fought against the native aliens in their home turf that the threat of annihilation was the greatest!

The addition of a mech like the Banisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr served as a powerful guarantee against any unexpected surprises that the aliens may spring.

After all, as competent as the Red Two's intelligence gathering efforts may be, it was impossible for their spies to discover every phase whale enclave.

Any manner of threats could hide inside those secretive pocket spaces. What happened in Davute back then was just the mildest form of ambush as the ones inside merely consisted of a miniscule defeated remnant of the original race that occupied the planet.

Other planets might be hiding much more terrible enemies, from adult phase whales to secret armadas!

"Well, the Dark Zephyr can't take care of any enemy." Ves briefly frowned.

There was not much he could do about that. The only way to increase the chances of survival was to team up with other powerful deep strike fleets. Perhaps he should think about fighting alongside a friendly Terran or Rubarthan mech force.

In any case, there was an entirely different reason why Ves was happy about the Banisher Edition, and it did not have anything to do with combat.

Ves saw a potential synergy between the Banisher Edition and the latest upgrade of the Mech Designer System!

One of the issues that troubled him when he chose the upgrade track corresponding to Dimension Breach Creation was the insanely high AP cost to get the Dimension Observatory up and running.

While Ves expected to make a bit of progress on that in the near future, he was still on the lookout for cheaper alternatives.

The Banisher Edition may be able to serve as that cheaper alternative!

What he did not mention to Tusa was that the Dark Zephyr did not necessarily have to use the resonating ability associated with Erlemin on enemy units.

What if the Banisher Edition of the ace mech exiled a friendly probe into a random dimension?

That probe would enter into a completely different facet of reality, record a lot of useful data before subsequently coming back to the material realm!

As long as the probe survived the abnormal environment of another dimension, it might be able to provide enough data to skip the need to employ the Dimension Telescope!

In fact... as long as the Banisher Edition gained more power and control over the banishing process, Ves could even render the Dimension Telescope redundant!

Forget about investing thousands of AP into this expensive device.

As long as the Dark Zephyr was able to produce the same results without spending a single Ascension Point, only a fool would commit to the more expensive option!

As Ves continued to daydream about how the Banisher Edition might be able to facilitate his dream of plundering lots of unique and valuable resources from other dimensions, he soon reminded himself that this was not the time to think about expansion.

Instead, he needed to spend more time on making sure his clan was able to weather the incoming storm.

"What is taking the aliens so long?" Ves briefly frowned.

The big offensive that everyone was afraid of had yet to kick off. This should be good news to red humanity as it gave everyone more time to prepare.

However, the Red Cabal was not stupid. The phase whales may possess alien thinking that caused them to make decisions that did not make immediate sense to humans, but they had all proven to be rational and self-interested enough when their core interests came under threat.

This suggested that the native aliens needed to wait until they completed their own preparations. Whatever schemes they had in mind were bound to deal a nasty blow to red humanity.

"There's nothing I can do." Ves sighed.

He had grown faster and more powerful than any mech designer of his generation in the Red Ocean.

He was the model of a successful pioneer that had managed to rise up by taking advantage of the opportunities of the new frontier.

He even became the catalyst to the formation of a new hegemonic organization that had the potential to stand equal with the Red Association and the Red Fleet!

However, Ves did not let these accomplishments go over his head. He knew quite well that he firmly remained in the palm of the hands of the true bigshots of red humanity.

Ves was quite sober in his realization that he was still a chess piece as opposed to a chess player.

He only managed to promote himself from a pawn into a bishop or something.

Regardless, a chess piece remained a chess piece. Ves had little actual agency in his ability to influence the strategic direction of human civilization.

At most, he could use his most radical inventions to slightly nudge red humanity in one direction or another.

This was why he quickly put the matter of the Red Cabal's schemes aside. It was not his responsibility to foil the plans of the native aliens.

He had better ways to spend his time. One of them was to contact Ketis to discuss the withdrawal of some of the combat forces in the Reticula Corein System.