

The Mech Touch

#Chapter 7181: Enlightening Duel - Read The Mech Touch Chapter 7181: Enlightening Duel

Chapter 7181: Enlightening Duel

“Chief Councilor Ves Larkinson of the Upper Council has won the first of four duels of his ongoing leadership challenge! After a long and punishing fight, he has vanquished over the Unshakeable King of the Ur-Titan Phalanx by relying on excellent utilization of his superior equipment!”

“The Unshakeable King has proved he possessed an edge in terms of fighting skills, combat experience and endurance, but his inability to inflict enough damage to his well-armored opponent has led to his demise! The pressure of the duel proved the better of him. The more setbacks he suffered, the more he lost his composure, which proved to be a detriment when fighting against a high IQ opponent such as the renowned Devil Tongue. Trying to use your own companion spirit to kill the companion spirit who invented them in the first place is pure folly! In the end, the former strategos of the Ur-Titan Phalanx did not necessarily lose because he was the inferior fighter, but because he was arrogant and failed to respect his opponent’s depth of solutions.”

“The chief councilor has already gone off to a good start! The fact that a ‘mech designer’ has won a fair duel against a professional soldier and a recognized champion such as the Unshakeable King while keeping most of his raiment intact is a clear indication of his strength. His approach to combat may be very different, but it only proves that the Ascended Giants still have a long way to go before they can become omnipotent on the battlefield. This singular duel has exposed that the combat doctrines of the Ascended Giants, more specifically the ur-Titan Phalanx, are still far from reaching maturity. Equipment matters!”

The shocking outcome continued to spread among a restricted circle of people.

Not all of them had the authorization to watch the live view of the secret duels, so they could only obtain hearsay from other people.

This was why many of them grew shocked and surprised when they learned that a mech designer who may have been involved in many battles but always let his mech pilots fight on his behalf had won a personal victory!

The duel was clean and the mech designer won without suffering crippling injuries!

He not only defeated his opponent, but completely demolished the Unshakeable King until his head flew from the rest of his body!

Many soldiers and warriors knew how difficult it was to win a fight in such a convincing fashion.

Whatever the case, Ves Larkinson had unambiguously proved with this victory that he was already one of the strongest human phase lords in the Red Ocean,

Unless other major powers secretly cultivated their own army of human phase lords, Ves could take pride in his ability to kill what many Ascended Giants considered to be their second-strongest fighter!

This feat alone was enough to win over many Ascended Giants, especially the ones who harbored reluctance towards the current direction of the Phase Lord Department.

As brainwashed as they may be, not all of them had lost all of their old wits and common sense. They still retained the awareness of their human identity, and also understood how idiotic it would be for them to defect to the native aliens.

Even if they no longer identified themselves as human, they still recognized their ancestry to their old race!

To them, their desire to go independent was more benign. They simply considered themselves to be children who had grown old and self-sufficient enough to leave the home of their parents. They wanted to set off into the wilderness and build their own town and society that existed as a distinct pocket adjacent to red humanity.

Ves sought to win over this group of optimists first. It was not enough for him to kill ardent traitors such as the Unshakeable King. He knew he needed to obtain solid backing from a large enough group of Ascended Giants to truly assume control over the entire Phase Lord Department, so he and the Dark Apostle had taken great care to abide by their honor and fight without relying on excessive technology.

Of course, they couldn't help but take advantage of innovative and exotic solutions. It would be stupid of them if they threw away all of their advantages for the sake of vanity.

Their first victory vindicated their approach.

"Good work, chief councilor!" Eliza Mo Ragadan greeted the Dark Apostle as returned to the temporary base in order to rest and recuperate. "Our doctors are already waiting to receive you in the next hall. They have prepared stores of phasewater and special rations that should be able to promote cellular regrowth and fatigue recovery of a man of your exceptional physique."

The Dark Apostle did not deign to talk to the mortal. Blinky flew out instead and faced his chief of staff.

"How are the initial reactions from the people in the know?"

Eliza smiled back in a particularly satisfied manner. "You exceeded their expectations. Most of them expected you to lose your first match. They thought you chose to challenge the Unshakeable King first so that you can face him at your best and minimize the chance of accidents. They did not truly think that a mech designer of all people could defeat one of the stronger champions among the Ascended Giants, though you managed to do so by taking the Unshakeable King by surprise with your special exploding spear. The manner in which you turned the battle around has drawn critique. This was not an honorable move."

"Victory washes away all doubts." Ves huffed through Blinky's manifestation. "I stayed within the rules, and that is enough. If the Ascended Giants did not want my other self to toss out a weapon that just happens to be primed to explode, then they should have added in this clause. It is their negligence that they failed to account for all technological possibilities. Besides, this move came at a hefty cost. The Dark Apostle had to finish the rest of the fight without his main weapon."

"I am told that the reactor that sustained the plasma spear was already beginning to run out of energy."

"It was a considerable burden to carry it around during the duel. Unlike mechs, phase lords cannot implant a power reactor inside their body... not unless they still want to fold and unfold their bodies afterwards."

Phasewater organs functioned as the equivalent of powerful implants to phase lords. The two were matched together because the former still retained much of their health and functionality no matter how much the latter folded up their true bodies.

The same could not be said for any tech or conventional implants. Unless they were completely biological and had sufficiently blended with their phase lord constitution, the tech would not be able to properly scale up and down.

Power reactors the size of mech cockpits would simply get crushed or burst apart a phase lord's body if he attempted to shrink down to the size of a human!

This was the reason why Ves never thought about putting the reactor inside his body. Every phase lord had little choice but to mount their tech inside their raiments or turn them into external modules.

"You implanted the lesser Arcis organ inside your true body." Eliza pointed out an important variable. "You could still supply limited energy to your plasma spear or your raiment even if you have depleted your reactor module."

"That is technically true, but the output is... mediocre." Ves responded. "I also intended to keep it in reserve as another backup option. At worst, I intended to shock the Unshakeable King to paralysis with this organ."

“Regardless, you are correct for the most part. There are observers who grumble about the trickery that you have employed to secure your victory, but the important part is that you have remained standing while the Unshakeable King’s body and his head have been returned to the Ur-Titans. It would have been within your rights to claim the latter, though. The Secret Department is quite upset that you have not chosen to surrender it to the Secret Keepers so that they could extract as much intelligence from the giant-sized brain as possible.”

Blinky shook his head. “I truly considered this option, but I think we are putting the cart before the horse. Our overarching goal is to take control over the Phase Lord Department. We must do so as convincingly as possible so that no rogue Ascended Giant chooses to disregard his orders and run off into the embrace of the Red Cabal. Just one defector can do immense damage to us all. This is why I still need to increase my appeal towards my future subordinates.”

This was a logical answer, though it still left the Red Collective dissatisfied at throwing away such a golden intelligence gathering opportunity.

“My other self is about to undergo treatment and stuff. Is there anything else I should know before I join him and begin our preparations for the next duel?”

“There are... concerns from a growing number of people who have learned what you, or rather Blinky, has done to the Unshakeable King’s companion spirit.”

“What of it, Eliza?”

“They have multiple concerns. How strong is Blinky? How well is he able to fight against other companion spirits? What are the consequences to the humans who have lost their companion spirits in such a traumatic fashion? Are there any specific methods that can bolster their defenses?”

It sounded as if Blinky’s act of devouring the companion spirit of a powerful phase lord had truly spooked a lot of people!

Ves understood that he needed to offer reassurance if he wanted others to continue to make good use of his invention.

“Blinky is strong, but he is not the strongest companion spirit in existence. I know of dozens who can resist his methods and beat him up in a straight fight. He is not specialized in combat. He is an energy manipulator. The reason why he can bully weaker companion spirits around is because the latter has left the protection of their principals. If they just stayed inside the heads of their human counterparts, Blinky cannot easily intrude due to various reasons.”

“You claim that there are at least ‘dozens’ of companion spirits that can put up good resistance against Blinky. Who are they and what do they have in common?”

“Oh, they are almost always the companion spirits of our high-ranking mech pilots. The strength of a companion spirit is partially based on age, but also based on the strength of their principals. A strong swordmaster or high-ranking mech pilot has a powerful spirit as well as extraordinary willpower. These qualities can easily be shared with a companion spirit. A companion spirit with access to extraordinary willpower is an unbeatable existence to Blinky. My companion spirit cannot devour such an entity because the willpower of a swordmaster or expert pilot is simply too resistant against E energy manipulation.”

“I see. Thank you for your candor. The Red Collective shall work to verify your responses, but we already expect your descriptions to be accurate to the best of your abilities.”

This was a necessary interrogation. Nobody with a companion spirit would like to see it turned into another companion spirit's meal!

“You can also tell the bigshots of the RC that Blinky is fairly unique in many ways.” Ves spoke. “It is not possible to nurture a companion spirit of his qualities with an ordinary companion spirit fruit. I meticulously created him by repurposing the remains of a powerful energy-based life form that has been likened to a ‘dark god’. This is why Blinky is able to punch above his weight. He is also practicing a cultivation method that has been meticulously improved and customized by my mother. Yeah, the centuries-old survivor of the fall of the Five Scrolls Compact. I enjoyed the 5 star treatment when it comes to companion spirits.”

“Is it possible for others... to receive the same treatment?”

Blinky decisively shook his head. “Nope. I am willing to accept commissions to create a custom companion spirit so long as the price is right, but you have to solve the other problem yourself. Just getting the cooperation of a cultivator who is as good as my mother is a tall task. I think that she will only offer her services to the members of her bloodline, and that is only if I can't do a good enough job.”

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Chapter 7182: Dark and Fast

Three hours came and went faster than Ves desired.

Discussions continued to take place even as the challenger received treatment and prepared for the next duel.

More than a handful of people initially expected that a mech designer turned human phase lord would only put up a symbolic fight.

In fact, even the Ascended Giants themselves thought that there was no way a non-combatant could possibly put the Unshakeable King on the backfoot.

Suffice to say, all of their expectations broke as they heard or witnessed the dramatic downfall of the leader of the Ur-Titan Phalanx.

Whereas they previously assumed that Ves only accepted the leadership challenge so that he could somehow persuade the Ascending Giants to appoint him as their leader despite losing all 4 duels, they now thought he had a legitimate chance of winning 3 out of 4 duels!

The Ascended Giants agreed to the terms with the assumption that the 'Dark Apostle' was a less than competent fighter. Just possessing the right physique was not enough. He had to be able to know how to perform the right techniques and leverage the power of his muscles the right way in order to utilize his true body properly. He also had to gain enough fighting sense and fighting instincts in order to keep up with some of the best human fighters around.

While the Dark Apostle had indeed demonstrated shortcomings in these areas, the gap between him and the Unshakeable King was much smaller than anyone expected!

Combined with the obvious equipment advantage, it shouldn't have been a surprise that the Unshakeable King ultimately succumbed against the challenger.

The Ascended Giants fell into disarray. Their assumptions of superiority changed when they witnessed a new approach to fighting.

Instead of relying on factors such as skills, teamwork and phasewater organs to win their battles, they began to place greater importance on the quality and performance of their wargear.

Their current equipment was not up to standard!

Investment in the development of raiments and weapons suitable for phase lords had stalled in the last few months. That was not necessarily bad as their equipment was still fairly modern, but the problem was that technology advanced at a rapid pace throughout the Red Ocean.

New advances in phasewater technology, superdimensional technology, hyper technology, E-technology, materials science and so on kept pushing up the ceiling of what was possible with human technology.

Ves had fully tapped into these cutting-edge developments. He had received extensive support from the Red Collective. This was not a trivial declaration, but a game-changing condition that enabled the challenger to gain access to some of the best tech and materials available to the superorganization!

It was only now that the arrogant and conceited Ascended Giants recalled why the human race was able to dominate the Milky Way Galaxy despite their mortal frailties. Humans had a strong affinity for technology and always maintained a high pace of innovation, especially when they came in touch with novel alien tech or brand-new materials!

As the Dark Apostle began to get cladded in a lighter raiment that was clearly aspected towards the darkness element, Secret Keeper Zariel-775 began to brief him on the latest intelligence.

“So what are the Ascended Giants up to this time?” Ves asked as Blinky lazily circled above the Dark Apostle’s head.

The shifty dark-robed spy actually looked quite fitting to remain in the presence of the Dark Apostle in his current loadout.

Unlike the red and fiery Flame Lord Raiment, the new Dark Wing Raiment possessed a completely different look and feel.

It lacked the mass and protection of the previous raiment. It was also devoid of anything related to the fire element.

Just as its impromptu name suggested, the Dark Wing Raiment was a light raiment that possessed a disproportionately large and powerful flight system.

When Ves examined it in detail, he noted that the collies had probably borrowed an excellent flight system from a first-class mech design and hastily scaled it up to his true body’s current proportions.

It was an excellent design. Though it did not make inventive enough use of the darkness element, it was still an excellent flight system that possessed a good balance between instant acceleration and maximum output.

What Ves appreciated the most was its short response time. It was very difficult to ensure that it was able to change direction or generate a powerful impulse in a split second when it became a lot larger than before.

Excellent engineering.

Just because the Red Collective primarily invested in cultivation science did not mean it fell behind in other areas.

In fact, it was pretty accurate to describe the Dark Wing Raiment as a flight system that happened to be attached to an armored suit.

Ves wanted to allocate as little mass as possible to the raiment. Not because he wanted to reserve mass capacity for other equipment, but because he wanted to be as fast and nimble as possible.

His next adversary was an offensive powerhouse. Ves did not dare to rely on his raiment to tank her blows.

Paired with a high-penetration spear that he called the Dark Tooth, the total package should be able to match the Fiery Axe in terms of speed and lethality.

If the new D-arm was not enough to finish off the enemy phase lord, then the Dark Apostle could always fall back to the Murder Knife.

Ves briefly inspected the D-arm that had tasted the blood of an Ascended Giant shortly after its creation.

The Murder Knife had grown in ways that he did not expect. He had not been completely serious when he designed and made it in a hurry. It seemed to have embraced its name.

The Minor Demon that had been forced to inhabit the weapon also embraced its new purpose, at least for the time being.

It had a strong incentive to remain useful to its current wielders. The Murder Knife was able to grow by leaps and bounds so long as it was used in killing rituals. This was the best way for it to become powerful enough to escape its current owners and earn its freedom.

Of course, Ves would never let this happen.

He allowed the D-arm to indulge in its fantasies for the time being, but he would definitely crack down hard if the Murder Knife was about to launch its rebellion.

Now that Ves had gained the expertise of a competent demonologist, he knew exactly how to keep his demons in check!

"I think you will be happy to hear that the Ur-Titan Phalanx has appointed a much more sensible interim leader." Secret Keeper Zariel-775 responded to Ves' earlier question. "The elite members of the Ur-Titan Phalanx have rallied behind Friedrich Sefenka."

"The Grapple King." Ves recalled. "He's the champion who is a strong advocate to making the Ascended Giants independent. The biggest difference between him and the Unshakeable King is that the new guy is not so eager to defect to the Red Cabal."

"Correct. The Grapple King is only the interim strategos for the time being. If you have taken over the Phase Lord Department, it will be up to you to decide whether to confirm him as the new strategos or appoint a different phase lord to lead the Ur-Titans."

"What is your advice?"

"We will need to gather more intelligence before we can provide you with qualified advice. We can do that much easier if you have won the leadership challenge. We advise you to remain patient and wait before you attempt to make your mark on the Phase Lord Department. It is clear that we need to implement far-reaching reforms and personnel changes. This is the only way we can bring it back to order."

The man made a sensible comment, but Ves was not too sure if he was willing to let the RC implement so many changes.

He wanted to be sure that if he risked his life to take over the Ascended Giants, he actually remained in charge, and not a few shadowy bureaucrats from the Red Collective.

An important means of retaining effective control over the department was to gain the loyalty of its most important leaders.

If the Grapple King proved himself to be trustworthy enough, then Ves was willing to give him a chance.

If not, then Ves should be able to pick one of the other 360 or so Ascended Giants to take charge over the Ur-Titans.

Ideally, Ves would like to put his own Larkinsons in charge of the different Phalanxes, but that was not realistic for the time being. He had to make do with the current stock of phase lords, for better or worse.

"How has the Fiery Axe responded to the first duel?" Ves asked another important question.

"I think you will be happy to learn that she has completely changed her impression of you." The robed and hooded figure responded. "According to our scrying attempts, she has loudly praised your martial strength and has gained great confidence that you can

lead the Ascended Giants to success. Similar to the Grapple King, she is still a strong advocate to form an independent race, so I cannot imagine that she will remain happy if you insist on keeping them attached to red humanity.”

Blinky raised his paw and rubbed his furry chin in thought.

“If I follow the original plan and attempt to take her out, who will take her place?”

“The Plasma Axe. He is a different sort of Ascended Giant than the Fiery Axe. The latter is a firebrand. She is always able to excite her men and exhort them to fight harder. Her overabundant passion compensates for her lacking administrative capabilities. The Plasma Axe neatly fills in her shortcomings. He is a more calculating and methodical individual. You can expect him to rely much more on logic. The downside is that he is not an inspiring leader and he is not known to perform well under time pressure. We also know relatively little about his true political stances.”

“That sounds like he is better off if he remains the deputy of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx.”

“We are eager to gain access to the databases of the headquarters of the Phase Lord Department.” Zariel-775 vaguely said.

“So what special measures has the Fiery Axe taken to prepare for our duel?”

“We have been able to ascertain that she has made last-minute demands to her armorers. She has insisted on removing as much redundant armor plating from her raiment as possible. It appears that she is doubling down on her offensive strategy. The next duel will likely end much faster. Neither of you are carrying much armor into battle, so as long as one of you is able to breach the spatial barrier, you can quickly move on to inflicting heavy and crippling injuries.”

This kind of high-speed battle came with its own set of challenges. The Dark Apostle needed to rely a lot more on instincts and experience, neither of which he had in abundance. There was only so much an enlightenment fruit could do to impart these strengths.

However, the match could dramatically swing in the favor of the duelist who possessed a sufficient mobility advantage.

The Ascended Giant that was faster and more agile could dictate the engagements and completely reduce the other combatant into a target dummy.

This was why Ves did not like what he just heard. Removing armor plating was not wise under normal circumstances, but it could make a big difference in the upcoming confrontation.

“I see. I do not think that there is much she could throw away. She will still be weighed down by whatever armor she has left, her flight system and the energy needed to make it work and her formidable axes. Our gear should still be lighter, but the Fiery Axe likely has a phasewater organ or two that significantly increases her mobility.”

This meant that it was more likely for the female phase lord to possess an edge in speed!

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Chapter 7183: Firecracker

The center of the dueling ground had been cleaned up. This left the Dark Apostle and the Fiery Axe with nothing to look at aside from each other.

As both of them stepped onto the center plaza of the frozen planet, they both created a very different impression.

If the challenger had entered this duel with his previous gear, then he would have resembled the strategos of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx a lot more. His fire-aspected weapon and raiment would have blended in nicely with the Fiery Axe’s own fire hyper gear.

Unfortunately, the Dark Apostle chose to approach this fight in a completely different fashion. His raiment may be light, but it cast him in a darker and more ominous light.

The Dark Wing Raiment even exaggerated its moody look with a large flight system that on the surface resembled the partially folded wings of a bat.

Paired together with the Dark Tooth and the Murder Knife, the Dark Apostle finally looked worthy of his moniker.

Despite being steeped in negative energy, the Dark Apostle and his feline companion spirit looked completely comfortable at the moment.

Both had great resistance against the negative effects of exposure to the darkness element. They also placed a lot of confidence in their D-arms. The Minor Demons that had been cast into the weapons and raiments had no chance to rebel against their maker. They could only bow their metaphorical heads and obediently toil for their masters.

While the Dark Apostle made a strong impression with his exotic tech, the Fiery Axe managed to convey her own form of strength.

Her red raiment looked awfully thin and no longer provided complete coverage.

She had made the risky decision to remove a lot of the armor that previously covered her arms and legs. The female strategos only kept her bracers and a strong set of greaves which she could use to kick or maintain solid footing.

At least she possessed enough sense to leave her helmet untouched, but it was questionable how long it would last once the fighting grew more intense.

One curious feature about her helmet was that a flaming ponytail projected from the rear. This gave the Fiery Axe a more aggressive look and demeanor. The glowing red eye pieces further enhanced this effect.

At this moment, she held her iconic Fiery Axe against her shoulder pauldron.

Ves and the Dark Apostle distinctly noted that she had changed her mind about her weapon loadout. She had left the Plasma Axe behind, choosing to stake this entire fight on her axe... and her fists if necessary.

This was good news. The Fiery Axe was an impressive piece of hyper engineering, but it was not as lethal as the Plasma Axe when striking exposed flesh.

The absence of the Plasma Axe despite previously borrowing it from its owner and current wielder served as tangible proof that the strategos no longer aimed to take the challenger's life.

That said, no fight was truly safe. Giants swinging around large and dangerous weapons could still cause a lot of damage.

"Fiery Axe."

"Dark Apostle." The female giant greeted back with obvious respect in her voice. "It is an honor to meet you on the battlefield. You are not the progenitor that I constructed in my imagination. You are something better. More authentic. You are a worthy founder of our race."

The Dark Apostle smiled. No one disliked compliments. "Since you approve of me so much, how about you admit surrender the moment the duel commences?"

"I am sorry, but I cannot do that. A leadership challenge is meant to test your limits and showcase how well you perform under adverse conditions. It wouldn't be much of a test if you can breeze past us without putting in any genuine effort. Your duel against the Unshakeable King revealed much already. For one, we have taken note of your ability

to develop spears that explode with the force of a battleship-grade missile when thrown. I will not give you a chance to throw your spear again. I will do my best to test how you are able to hold your own when I am constantly in your face.”

She did not hide her outlook on the upcoming duel and what she intended to do. There was not much point in hiding it anyway. Anyone with decent tactical acumen could figure out these basic truths.

The Dark Apostle did not look too disappointed. “I see. I shall endeavor to show you that I can fend off high-speed opponents just as well as slow and more heavily armored ones. The Ascended Giants deserve to be led by a leader who can lead them from the front. Do not be misled by ‘my’ origin as a mech designer. Just as my student Ketis can outfight any person with a sword, I am confident I can lead our units to victory against the native aliens and the mutated voribugs.”

“When outfitted with the appropriate wargear, I might add.” Ves contributed to the side.

The Fiery Axe pointedly stared at Blinky’s manifestation.

“Your companion spirit... is unusually active when you are in a fight.”

“Blinky is the best companion spirit in existence.” The Dark Apostle shamelessly boasted. “He may not be the strongest, but his capabilities are unique and he has endless potential to tap into. As Ascended Giants, we should never imitate exobeasts and rely overwhelmingly on our physical dominance and our biological endowments to win our battles. If there is one lesson that we should imitate from the mortal humans, it is that technology and gear can serve as amazing force multipliers. On a real battlefield, no one cares about your ideas in terms of purity and honor. What I have shown to you all in the previous duel is just a taste of what you will encounter in a serious battle against our real enemies.”

The Fiery Axe lifted her weapon and held it in a more combat-ready stance. “Then I look forward to seeing how you will fare this time! Let us give the rest of the Ascended Giants a good show!”

The brief talk between the two duelists was a lot more harmonious than the previous one.

The Unshakeable King had to die. Ves had no doubt about this decision.

As for the Fiery Axe, he was a lot more ambivalent about it. Sure, she would have tried to take his life without any hesitation if he was weak, but now that he and his alter ego proved to be a lot more skilled and stronger than she initially expected, she had practically converted into becoming his fan.

It was a drastic change of opinion that did not really make sense to Ves. Only particularly emotional people such as Gloriana were capable of making such extreme swings.

It was exactly because Ves had experience with dealing with people like Gloriana that he was not able to place his full trust into the Fiery Axe.

Since she was able to swing from one extreme position to another extreme position, she could easily reverse this change later on! The Fiery Axe could never be truly relied upon if Ves and the Dark Apostle ever faltered and showed enough vulnerability!

Therefore, even if the Fiery Axe sounded cheerful, respectful and willing to subordinate herself to him, Ves was seriously thinking whether she should meet her end during this duel.

It may be better to remove an unstable factor from the board and put a more reliable and consistent Ascended Giant in her place.

“What do you think?” Ves privately communicated with his other self.

“I do not fear her.” The Dark Apostle confidently responded. “If I have grown weak enough that she decides to turn against me, then I deserve what is coming. I like her. I think I will keep her around, if only to motivate me to constantly improve my strength and make sure I will never make myself vulnerable to a leadership challenge from her. We all need a rival by our side in order to keep us on our toes.”

As his other personality, the Dark Apostle may possess completely different stances on many subjects, but he also inherited a lot of traits that were undeniably derived from Ves.

Blinky’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“I hope you aren’t thinking about what I am suspecting right now...”

“We made a deal, mortal. You have your own life, while I have mine. You have no right to meddle into my private affairs. Besides, it is far too soon to make a choice. There are 360 Ascended Giants excluding myself. Even if a minority of them are of the right stock, that still gives me plenty of choice. If that is not enough, then I expect your support in expanding our numbers. We need more Ascended Giants in order to create a viable enough population for our fledgling race.”

“That is assuming that Ascended Giants are even capable of biological procreation, which I very much doubt is the case.”

“Do not dismiss the possibility before we have conducted even a single experiment. There may be something special about us ‘human’ phase lords that sets us apart from

the weirder alien ones. It may even be that the native aliens always had this capacity. Most of them never chose to do so because of cultural reasons or excessive demands. Where do you think new phase whales come from? A gestation chamber?"

Nobody knew how the phase whales reproduced when they never really had any 'mortals' among them in the first place.

Perhaps a few of the native aliens managed to discover the secret, but they were doing a good job of hiding the truth.

However, if the phase whales were able to reproduce naturally, then human phase lords should be able to replicate the process, though that was not a guarantee.

As Ves continued to think about how the phase whales increased their population, a countdown appeared above the central plaza.

He immediately shoved aside all distractions and focused on the situation at hand.

[10]

This time, the Dark Apostle chose not to taunt his opponent. He merely stared at the Fiery Axe with a challenging gaze.

[9]

The female strategos met his eyes with her own confident stare.

[8]

Sparks seemed to fly between the two as they grew more and more excited about the fight to come.

[7]

Their light gear and their powerful arms would definitely cause the duel to start and end relatively quickly.

[6]

A single critical wound could decide the match already.

[5]

Ves would have to pay careful attention to his true body and make sure to admit surrender as soon as it suffered a serious enough injury.

[4]

In order to win the leadership challenge, it was already enough to win 2 out of 4 duels as far as Ves was concerned.

[3]

There was no need to take excessive risks at this point as the first duel had already proved the Dark Apostle's fighting qualifications.

[2]

It should still be easier for the Dark Apostle to secure a win for the third duel, but the fourth duel should still be hopeless.

[1]

Then again, winning 3 out of 4 duels would save them a lot of trouble.

[FIGHT!]

The two Ascended Giants immediately exploded into action!

Instead of charging straight at each other so that they could land the first blow onto each other, the Dark Apostle had made the sensible decision by turning around and trying to put as much distance between himself and his adversary!

He was not being a coward.

He was trying to be tactical.

He needed to know how fast he was relative to his opponent.

Who could move faster would determine the entire dynamics of this duel!

The Dark Apostle initially smiled when he saw he was able to slightly accelerate faster than the Fiery Axe on a linear trajectory.

While that did not necessarily mean he would retain his advantage when he started to maneuver around, this was already a good sign.

However, the Fiery Axe quickly disabused him of the notion that he was faster.

"It seems like I need to put in a little more effort, haha!"

The Fiery Axe activated a phasewater organ that surprisingly reduced her mass!

Even if she only became 10 or 20 percent lighter, that was a significant reduction in mass, which meant that she was able to accelerate notably faster!

She was catching up to the Dark Apostle!

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Chapter 7184 Enflamed Madness

The duel went off to a quick start as both human phase lords zipped across the cold airless environment of Jotunheim like racing shuttles.

At first, it appeared that the Dark Apostle held a decisive speed advantage. His more modern and optimized equipment granted him a distinct advantage in linear acceleration.

The bat wing-shaped flight system was able to produce greater thrust and push the challenger forward with slightly greater power than the competition.

Yet the Fiery Axe did not stay behind for long.

She started gaining progress by lowering her mess with the help of a special phasewater organ.

This was an unusual choice of organ.

Most phase lords developed an obsession for becoming the biggest, heaviest and strongest of their kind. They constantly sought to increase their phasewater concentration in order to grow bigger and achieve physical superiority over their peers.

Mass was everything to a phase lord.

Mass was responsible for increasing their dimensions.

Mass protected them from damage and injuries.

Mass conveyed greater physical might and endurance.

This was why the Marigal organ was such a popular choice among martial phase lords.

Although its inclusion increased the mass and density of a phase lord by a hefty margin, it was often worth it because the changes conformed to their obsession.

The Fiery Axe turned out to be a deviant who chose a less conventional development route.

Instead of trying to turn into meaty tanks that could withstand a lot of hits and dish out heavy attacks in return, she adopted a fighting paradigm that had a lot in common with light mechs.

She sacrificed brute force in exchange for mobility. Though her reduced mass and her weaker true body brought several disadvantages, she could still make it work so long as she made excellent use of her advantages.

Right now, she clearly gained the upper hand in the race due to her superior acceleration!

The acceleration of an object could be calculated in several ways, but one of them was by dividing the net force acting on the body with its mass.

In a situation where the thrust power of her flight system and her own inherent flight capabilities as a phase lord remained constant, lowering her mass by 10 to 20 percent actually yielded a slightly greater proportionate increase in acceleration rate!

For example, reducing the mass by 10 percent yielded an increase in acceleration rate by 11.11111 percent!

A reduction in mass by 20 percent resulted in a more exaggerated increase in acceleration rate by 25 percent!

If the Fiery Axe became powerful enough to reduce her mass by 50 percent in the future, she would effectively be able to improve her acceleration rate by 100 percent!

That meant that she was able to speed up twice as fast as before, which was a shocking advantage, especially when fighting against enemies that adopted a similar approach to combat!

This was when Ves realized that the Dark Apostle was in serious trouble at the moment.

Even if the differences were not too big due to the Fiery Axe's immature phasewater organ and lack of proficiency in its use, it was still enough for her to gain the initiative in this duel.

Of course, her hits would not strike as hard due to her reduced mass, but that did not matter too much when the Dark Apostle's raiment was fairly light on armor. The Dark Wing Raiment was much thinner and less robust than the Flame Lord Raiment.

The Fiery Axe also utilized a combination of high technology and hyper technology to activate a superheated blade that was practically on fire, enabling it to inflict burning wounds that generated greater pain and could not be regenerated as easily as wounds caused by cold alloy blades.

As the female phase lord came close enough to be able to chop down her axe onto the Dark Apostle's rear, the latter clearly could not sustain this race any longer.

The challenger turned and met the incoming Fiery Axe with the shaft of the Dark Tooth!

Fire and darkness collided at a single location, causing an eruption of energy that soon saw the two phase lords bounce away from each other!

The shaft of the Dark Tooth gained a shallow cut mark. It still lit up in heat before it cooled a few seconds later.

Upon the moment of impact, a small wave of fire energy had splashed across the Dark Apostle's lightly armored body.

Fortunately, the damage inflicted by this secondary effect was minimal. The dark miasma that cloyed sickly around the Dark Wing Raiment had successfully managed to neutralize the fire attack.

The two duelists only remained separated for a short amount of time before they converged again!

"Haha, again!"

The Fiery Axe became increasingly more affected by her lust for battle. She threw aside much of her complicated thoughts and fully dedicated herself towards high-speed martial struggle!

Her lighter mass gave her enough of an edge in acceleration to feel she could dictate the confrontations.

Right now, she wanted to stick to her adversary and never let go! Frenzy or not, she still remembered what her opponent could do if given a chance to throw his spear, so the Fiery Axe decided to defeat the progenitor before he could reproduce this technique!

This put the Dark Apostle at an immediate disadvantage. Knowing that there was not much point in running, he decided to be more proactive and launch as many counterattacks towards the Fiery Axe as possible.

This was not supposed to be difficult as he had designed the Dark Tooth for this kind of confrontation. Its shaft was thick and dense enough to resist plenty of axe blows and its length was shorter in order to improve its performance in intense close quarters combat.

For a short amount of time, their weapons repeatedly struck against each other.

The Dark Apostle found himself on the defensive more often than not. The Fiery Axe may not be the largest and most heaviest axe-type weapon that a phase lord could wield, but it still possessed enough mass and a chopping edge to be able to inflict a crippling injury with a single good strike.

What was more important was that the Fiery Axe was also capable of inflicting greater-than-average damage to spatial barriers!

The Dark Apostle's spatial barrier often bore the brunt of his failures to intercept and block the female phase lord's aggressive attacks.

In the few times that the Dark Apostle launched a counterattack, his Dark Tooth inflicted substantially less damage to his adversary's spatial barrier.

The good news was that the Fiery Axe apparently neglected to implant any phasewater organs that could strengthen her spatial barrier.

The bad news was that each time the Dark Apostle landed a sharp hit with his spear, the Fiery Axe was able to land her own counterblow in return!

This was an exchange that was not in the Dark Apostle's favor. He tried his best to compensate by leveraging the Minor Demons locked in his Dark Tooth, but all it did was to make the weapon spread more dark clouds that did not seem to affect the Fiery Axe all that much.

The fire energy released from her raiment and iconic weapon burned away much of the ambient darkness E energy.

Her raiment also protected her from the subtle influence of the Corruption Orb.

During the previous preparation time, Ves had arranged for the Corruption Orb to be taken out of the damaged but surviving Flame Lord Raiment and installed into its dedicated pocket of the Dark Wing Raiment.

The fit between the two artifacts was much higher.

The Dark Wing Raiment seemed to come alive with the integration of a small but potent source of darkness energy and other negative energies. It made the raiment so much more dangerous and intimidating that the technicians responsible for inspecting it and preparing it for deployment could not stand being in its presence for long.

Yet this time, Ves discovered that the Fiery Axe did not show any obvious signs of being affected by the corrupting aura of the Dark Wing Raiment!

One of the game plans that Ves and the Dark Apostle had devised was to repeat one of the gambits from the previous duel.

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They had achieved considerable success by using the Corrupting Orb to make the Unshakeable King more irrational and less able to control himself.

Yet this time, it didn't work in the slightest!

When Ves studied the leader of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx with greater attention, he could see that this was not a coincidence.

Aside from relying on the fire-themed raiment to burn away the ominous clouds of corruption that came close enough, she was also relying heavily on her companion spirit to keep her mind pure by metaphorically lighting it on fire!

It did not surprise Ves at all that the Fiery Axe had chosen to develop a companion spirit that had already attained notable success in practicing a fire qi cultivation method.

The companion spirit now served as one of the strongest defenders of her principal's mind. Spiritual flames continued to burn inside the woman's massive skull.

Though it practically rendered the companion spirit useless for other tasks, it didn't matter due to the importance of his current mission.

The companion spirit's job was not to keep the Fiery Axe sober. This was impossible because fire energy was filled with passion, fury and excitement.

So that was exactly what the companion spirit tried to promote. The spiritual flames not only served as a firewall against contamination, but also fired up the female phase lord and caused to become completely engrossed in the duel!

This alone served as a powerful form of protection against the negativity that the Corrupting Orb attempted to insert into the Fiery Axe!

Even if the touch of darkness was somehow able to bypass the protective flames, they could find no purchase in the Fiery Axe's mind because it was already dedicated to the fight!

In other words, there was no opportunity to drive the Fiery Axe irrational and insane because she had proactively embraced her own madness!

"Hahahaha! Again! Taste my fiery blows!"

The Fiery Axe grew more excited as she fought. Her axe blows repeatedly clanged against the shaft of the Dark Tooth. Her attacks did not show much variation. She didn't bother to pull off any fakes, which meant that her opponent could easily read her moves and block them in time.

However, her attack frequency was so high that the Dark Apostle was no longer able to launch any counterattacks!

If he dared to stop his blocking efforts, he would just get struck with a flaming axe, and that was quite a serious outcome!

Right now, the Dark Apostle had given up on trying to launch any counterattacks. He just wanted to survive the current sequence and wait for an opening to arise.

There was no way the Fiery Axe could sustain her offensive rhythm for too long. She was burning energy like mad in an effort to tear down her opponent in the fastest possible speed.

The Dark Apostle found that as long as he focused his all on defense, his energy consumption was not as high. He would be able to win the long game, but only if the Fiery Axe failed to land a hit and only if the Dark Tooth was able to withstand so many axe blows.

"The Dark Tooth won't last at this rate." Ves pessimistically informed his other self. "The power of her blows is weaker due to her reduced mass, but if she can't chop our spear in half with 20 blows, then 50 may be enough, especially if she strikes the same section of the spear shaft. You need to switch up your strategy because this is not a winning trajectory."

How was the Dark Apostle able to do that when he suffered a distinct mobility disadvantage?

So long as he was not able to outspeed his adversary, he would not be able to take the initiative!

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Chapter 7185 Fire Dancer

As much as Ves attempted to toughen up the Dark Tooth so that it could block as many axe strikes as possible, there was a limit to what he could do with the available tech and high-grade materials.

The Fiery Axe was still a custom developed weapon commissioned by one of the phalanx leaders of the Phase Lord Department.

It was a remarkable weapon that retained its edge under heavy abuse and could produce lots of heat and flames depending on the commands of its wielder.

Right now, the Fiery Axe channeled so much energy in her physical exertions as well as the high-tech systems of her main weapon that it was doubtful whether she could sustain her current intensity for an entire hour.

She was amazing in combat. Although she lacked the raw strength and endurance of the Unshakeable King, the Fiery Axe was probably the fastest Ascending Giant!

She not only moved fast, but intimately knew how to fight at this frenetic pace. Her fighting skills had been thoroughly ingrained in her instincts. She no longer needed to be conscious about every move or attack as her body naturally executed the appropriate attacks.

That was not the extent of her power.

Her companion spirit also played an important role.

Though it had not made an appearance out of fear of getting devoured by Blinky, her companion spirit had clearly developed in the direction of a qi cultivator who specialized in the manipulation of fire-attributed E energy.

Although its relative youth and lack of progression kept it fairly weak, it was already making significant contributions by augmenting her principal's performance.

The companion spirit attracted a lot of fire energy. It regulated the interaction between fire energy and her fire hyper equipment. It also kept the corrupting darkness emanating from the Dark Apostle at bay.

In short, the companion spirit might not play a flashy role during this duel, but its assistance complimented the Fiery Axe extremely well!

This caused the fight between the two to appear a lot more explosively than the previous duel.

If the battle between the Dark Apostle and the Unshakeable King could be characterized as a thoughtful and methodical chess match, then the clash between the Dark Apostle and the Fiery Axe could be equated to a dance contest!

The two 'dancers' did not remain stationary at all. They continually circled around each other in order to gain superior positioning or to confuse their opponent.

Those with poor eyesight could only catch glimpses of black and red auras spinning and dashing above the surface of Jotunheim like they were fireworks.

The power of darkness and fire continually collided against each other, seeking to gain the upper hand over the other.

During this clash, the power of darkness proved to be stronger, denser and higher in quality.

However, the power of fire nonetheless gained the upper hand because the Fiery Axe was much more invested in the fight!

The techniques employed by her and her companion spirit were not that complicated. They were lacking in depth and possessed very specific applications, many of which only served to amplify existing phenomena.

However, that was exactly what she needed to maximize her utilization of the fire element in the short term. By leveraging the power of fire to increase the damage of her axe, increase the output of her flight system and make her body move faster and more fluently, her techniques were just what she needed to gain an edge over her opponent!

More importantly than that was her overflowing enthusiasm.

Her passion was overflowing and her excitement at dueling a 'worthy' opponent grew by the second.

It was very clear that she was a momentum-based fighter. The more she became engrossed in the fight, the harder she struck and the faster she moved!

This perfectly resonated with the more volatile aspects of the fire element!

This meant that the fire element fueled the Ascended Giant and amplified her offensive to an increasingly stronger degree!

What a terrible opponent!

No wonder she had managed to earn her place as the strategos of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx!

The Dark Apostle on the other hand was not as prone to entering in this kind of mood. He was hardly able to enjoy his current situation at the moment. Since he was the slower among the two duelists, he had immediately been put in a passive situation where he could only block the continuous axe strikes.

The Dark Tooth had never been designed to withstand endless axe strikes.

Axes were actually the most suitable weapon type to use to break apart shields and weapons.

The challenger found himself at a terrible disadvantage, but he had no way of sparing his main weapon the abuse because he was not able to create any distance.

Ves had made a bet that adopting a high-mobility configuration was the best choice for the second duel.

If the Dark Apostle was able to match or exceed the Fiery Axe's speed, then he would have won the bet. His alter ego would have been able to fight against this flaming giant on even terms.

Unfortunately, it appeared that he had lost the bet. He underestimated how extreme the Fiery Axe dedicated herself towards increasing her mobility.

This speed disparity put the Dark Apostle on the backfoot as his responses were slower and his positioning was always worse.

As Ves observed the ongoing struggle from a slightly more detached perspective, he realized that there was only one way out of this undesirable situation.

"Your loadout this time is highly unsuited for defense. You need to go on the attack. I am reluctant to say this given that it is my true body as well, but you need to abandon any thoughts on defense. You need to go on the attack. If that means that you have to absorb a lot of hits, then so be it. Your spatial barrier can serve as a momentary buffer, but it will be a lot more dangerous for you if it pops. Try to redirect as many strikes towards your frontal armor as possible. The armor plating is thin but not negligible. It can probably block one solid attack, especially now that the Fiery Axe has exchanged power for speed."

The Dark Apostle slightly widened his giant eyes in realization.

That was an important reminder. The Fiery Axe artificially reduced her mass, which meant that she was able to attack more frequently, but couldn't put as much force and momentum behind her strikes.

This meant that her threat level was not as high as he feared!

He could take advantage of this situation. He just needed to inflict more damage than his adversary.

Several new options came to mind that he previously did not consider.

It was not enough to strike back with ordinary spear stabs.

He was unable to match the Fiery Axe in terms of attack frequency. This was a race that he had already lost.

The only way he could still outmatch her in terms of offense was to make 1 of his strikes inflict as much damage as 5 or even 10 of her axe chops!

It only took one good attack to change the entire outlook of this duel.

He needed to land a blow that was heavy enough to interrupt his adversary's momentum and weaken her ability to maintain her offensive rhythm.

Only the power moves of the newly acquired Demonic Possession Spearmanship Method could suffice.

The Dark Apostle could turn the battle around with a single well-aimed and well-executed technique.

He would have to make another gamble, but this time he intended to win.

The momentum of the high-speed duel shifted at this point.

The Fiery Axe remained quite sharp despite being so invested in her attack sequence.

A vicious grin appeared on her face.

Instead of backing off, she doubled down on her offensive!

"THAT'S THE SPIRIT! FIGHT ME! IT IS TOO BORING FOR ME TO HIT A TARGET DUMMY. I NEED A REAL CHALLENGE!"

She squeezed more potency out of her phasewater organs. She even chose to burn a part of her phasewater reserves in order to reduce her mass by a few more percentage points!

This caused her to burn hotter and speed up even further!

Despite her words, her increased attack frequency made it even more difficult for the Dark Apostle to abandon any thought of defense and launch a power move by force.

The challenger gritted his teeth and forcefully withdrew his weapon that was already scarred with marks along its length.

The Fiery Axe did not take long to capitalize on the opening. She darted forward with incredible speed and struck the Dark Apostle's spatial barrier with considerable force!

She did not retreat. Instead, she had adopted a different posture and began to wail on the flickering energy barrier with repeated strikes.

Each blow with her axe generated a burst of flames!

These flames did not flicker out immediately, but lingered and began to stick onto the spatial barrier.

"BURN! BURN! BURN!"

The more times she struck the spatial barrier, the more she stoked the flames.

This reminded Ves on how Saint Isobel Kotin liked to destroy her targets!

Although the specific methods were completely different, the overall approach was similar.

Ves suddenly made a profound realization.

The Fiery Axe's combat approach finally made sense.

Lowering her mass allowed her to attack faster at the cost of weakening the power of her blows.

This meant that her attacks might have difficulty overcoming the defenses of particularly tough opponents.

However, if she was able to combine her hyper technology and her fire manipulation to set fire on her target and continually feed it with every attack, then that would ensure that she could eventually fell against any tough opponent!

It was a brilliant approach that elevated her offensive prowess and turned her into a much more troublesome adversary.

Due to her amazing attack speed, the Fiery Axe was quickly able to turn the initial flames into a wildfire!

The Dark Apostle's spatial barrier suffered continuous damage and was rapidly losing its integrity!

It even threatened to break before the challenger was able to complete the process of accumulating energy and unleash his power move!

"MY AXE WILL TASTE YOUR FLESH SOON ENOUGH!"

The Dark Apostle did his best not to let the raging Ascended Giant affect his concentration.

Although the enlightenment fruit had imparted him with the right technique, he had never executed it under heavy pressure.

A lot was at stake. He keenly understood that the fate of his leadership challenge may depend on the outcome of his next move.

This was why he had chosen to pull off the offensive power move that he had the greatest confidence in pulling off successfully.

It was not the most powerful or the most destructive of extraordinary spear techniques, but it happened to suit him a lot better than the others. Its mechanics also happened to overlap with the knowledge and expertise imparted by another enlightenment fruit that Ves had swallowed in the past.

Due to this overlap, the Dark Apostle was able to complete all of the steps with greater understanding and familiarity.

Ves even helped out by letting Blinky release a large amount of darkness energy from the Blinkyverse.

The effects grew increasingly more obvious. The Dark Tooth became engulfed in a dark miasma that radiated a lot of threat.

Gravity and other forces seemed to stagnate and weaken in its vicinity.

As the spear grew increasingly darker and more ominous, the Dark Apostle felt he had almost become one with Blinky and the D-arm!

Together, they all worked to drive the cloying spear forward and strike at the Fiery Axe with extraordinary might and speed!

"WITHERING THRUST!"

No data found.

Chapter 7186 Sputtering Flames

The Withering Thrust was not a pure darkness spear technique.

It also involved concepts such as death, decay, wood and so on. It was a relatively more complicated technique to pull off for a pure wielder of darkness.

Fortunately, Ves had gained an artificial foundation in the withering curse from an enlightenment fruit, so he happened to be able to meet these troublesome requirements.

This was why the Withering Thrust was the most suitable technique for him and the Dark Apostle despite being way more complicated than many other techniques.

The Withering Thrust that the Dark Apostle just pulled off relied heavily on the Dark Tooth and Blinky to gain its power and structure.

Both of them constituted rather potent sources of power, so the threat posed by the Withering Thrust immediately caused alarm bells to ring in the Fiery Axe's mind!

Unfortunately, she was already fully committed to attacking. She had the opportunity to retreat sooner, but instead she chose to stay and wear down her opponent's spatial barrier as soon as possible.

Since this was the case, she may as well stick her chosen direction to the end!

"SHATTER!"

The burning spatial barrier finally couldn't withstand the abuse any longer and shattered after the Fiery Axe landed another blow!

However, the Dark Apostle could no longer be stopped!

Before the Fiery Axe could land another attack, the Dark Tooth shot forward like a predator pouncing on its prey.

The ominous dark spear first struck the spatial barrier!

It became very clear that defense was not the Fiery Axe's best trait. She had passed over the decision to integrate phasewater organs that could upgrade her first line of defense multiple times.

That said, that was normally not a terrible decision because the most basic spatial barriers were already fairly strong from the onset.

It should easily be able to resist a single blow, even if it came from a transphasic hyper weapon!

Yet this was not a normal weapon. The Dark Tooth was not only a D-arm, but its wielder executed a powerful technique that massively amplified its damage potential!

Although the spear did not collide against the spatial barrier with an overwhelming amount of force, its corrosive and destructive energies wore down the energy defense so much that it broke in less than a second!

"THAT SHOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE!"

The Fiery Axe became completely astonished by the fact that the Dark Tooth was able to puncture through her spatial barrier in a single blow!

Not only that, but it still had enough force left over to piece through her raiment and make a shallow cut into her chest cavity!

The Fiery Axe let out a bestial roar and immediately used her weapon to slap away the spear before it could be pushed any deeper!

"IT HURTS!"

The woman formerly known as Fasia Meledor had always prided herself on her toughness and her ability to endure hardships.

Yet the pain inflicted by a shallow puncture wound from a dark spear inflicted more pain than she had suffered in the past!

When the Fiery Axe briefly lowered her head to inspect the rather small and unassuming wound, she grew pensive when she saw that a high concentration of darkness energy had infected her injury.

Her companion spirit's flames were desperately trying to douse this dark infection.

While the fire was making limited progress in excising the darkness, it proved to be incredibly persistent.

It did not help that there was a clear gap between the two energies.

The darkness energy and other negative energies formed the structure of a modified withering curse.

It continually sapped the Fiery Axe's energy. The flesh around the stab wound aged at a rapid rate. The biological cells affected by this dark infection would not survive longer than two days.

The best way to prevent this from happening was to counter or neutralize the threat.

"My fire... shall cleanse my flesh!"

This was what the Fiery Axe had been doing on instinct already.

More and more fire energy concentrated on her wound, however none offered any salvation.

The compromised cells withered with every passing second. The power of darkness drained them of all of their vitality, strength and purpose. The cells that offered the weakest resistance succumbed first.

They did not die completely. They weakened until they lost almost all of their original functions.

In exchange, they gained the power to spread their withering corruption.

The affected cells turned black before turning against the body that spawned them in the first place!

A part of the Fiery Axe grew horrified when she discovered that she was being attacked by her own flesh!

The withering curse continued to spread like a slow-moving wildfire. Her injury would continue to expand and debilitate her further. It would be especially alarming if the corruption spread to one of her nearby phasewater organs!

She could not allow that to happen!

The Fiery Axe gritted her teeth. She immediately came up with a reckless and undoubtedly painful idea.

A normal person would have hemmed and hawed for a while before making the decision.

She did not waste any time! From the moment she thought it was viable, she instantly made her move!

She raised her axe before pressing its burning blade right against her wound at her chest!

The Fiery Axe screamed in pain as she forcibly burned away the withered and corrupted flesh!

Though her reckless move could not go deep enough to affect the blackened cells that were buried deeper in her body, she successfully neutralized the corruption that had settled closer to the exterior of her true body!

In an instant, she had burned away most of the infection, choosing to inflict immediate damage to her true body in order to spare herself from greater debilitation!

She let out another roar!

"I AM THE AXE THAT BRINGS FIRE! I AM THE CONFLAGRATION THAT BURNS PLANETS! I FEAR NO PAIN! FIRE IS MY ALLY! THE DARKNESS SHALL FLEE BEFORE THE HEAT!"

Her words centered her thoughts and enabled her to pull through her pain. She successfully dealt with her crisis before lifting her axe with slightly greater difficulty than before.

Her grin grew wider as she truly felt challenged by the Dark Apostle for the first time since they commenced this duel.

"THIS IS ROUND 2!"

The Fiery Axe renewed her offensive!

What was amazing was that she did not seem to have slowed down in any way!

Her attacks struck the Dark Apostle with almost the same force and frequency as before.

Though her rhythm had become a little more disordered, it didn't matter as her sheer grit and determination sustained her offensive and caused the challenger's raiment to suffer numerous armor breaches!

The Dark Apostle was taken aback. He assumed that his Withering Strike would have been powerful enough to not only punch through her spatial barrier in a single go, but also strike her flesh and spread a curse fueled by concentrated darkness.

He never expected her to deal with this tricky and troublesome curse by employing the braintead method of simply using her burning axe to cauterize her wound!

This was a serious oversight on Ves and the Dark Apostle's part, and now their true body suffered for their mistake!

Pulling off the previous power move sapped a lot of energy from them. Their true body was not used to executing such a burdensome move and could not perform another Demonic Possession Spearmanship technique in a short amount of time.

This meant that the Dark Apostle had no choice but to remain passive and do his best to block as many axe attacks as possible!

He made an immediate strategic decision.

He allowed the axe attacks that were likely to hit the undamaged portions of his raiment through.

At the same time, he resolutely blocked the attacks that targeted the sections that had already incurred serious damage.

At the same time, he continually shifted his grip on his spear while also rotating the shaft to change its surface orientation towards the Fiery Axe.

This allowed the Dark Apostle to endure significantly longer. His true body had yet to suffer a truly devastating axe strike while his Dark Tooth was able to hold out longer, though it gained scars at a terrifying speed.

The Fiery Axe did not seem to care!

Her mind was on fire and her axe burned hotter as her only solution to all of her problems was to attack!

Of course, every attack splashed fire onto the Dark Apostle. The dispersed distribution of every strike prevented the flames from overlapping and turning into a more serious threat for the time being, but who knew when it would last.

Blinky immediately took care of the threat. Unlike the Fiery Axe, the Star Cat was able to deal with the persistent flames with an easy solution.

He opened his maw and began to devour all of the fire energy that granted extraordinary traits to the fire and made them so dangerous and persistent!

The influx of fire energy had no time to burn Blinky before it all disappeared into the Blinkyverse, where it would harmlessly integrate into a vast imaginary universe!

In this way, the Dark Apostle neutralized one of the Fiery Axe's attack vectors and prevented her from gaining too much of an advantage during this fight!

Not that the female Ascended Giant minded all that much. She became more delighted when she realized that her current target dummy would be able to last longer!

"HAHAHAHA! MY PAIN IS NOTHING COMPARED TO THE PLEASURE OF SWINGING MY AXE! MORE! GIVE ME MORE!"

Her momentum seemed to grow even stronger out of the blue!

If she was not a mech pilot, then Ves might have mistaken her for an expert pilot due to how her will strengthened her combat performance!

Both Ves and the Dark Apostle understood that they were quickly running out of time.

If they wanted to squeeze out a victory from this duel, then they needed to make a more serious sacrifice in order to reverse victory and defeat.

If only the Dark Apostle could gain enough distance to throw his spear!

The Dark Tooth was not solely designed to function as a medium to channel darkness energy.

It was also capable of exploding with great force!

That was when the human phase lord came up with an inventive solution.

As long as he was willing to pay a real price and expose one of his trump cards, he was confident he could end this duel before it grew any worse!

He immediately conveyed his idea to Ves, whose cooperation was vital for this gambit.

Blinky immediately frowned.

"Your idea has merit, but are you sure you want to end this duel this way? It will feel like cheating."

"Pff. I don't care. We are merely making use of one of our inherent strengths, so we are still operating within the rules. It is already good enough that we have been able to put up a good showing in front of the Fiery Axe. The Ascended Giants should have developed a better impression of me. This can easily change if I start to suffer serious injuries due to my stubbornness. Let us end it now before it can grow any worse. Trump cards are meant to be used. The stakes are too high to leave it unused. Just make sure to invest enough energy to end this duel in the next attack."

"Hm, since you don't intend to perform a traditional power move, we won't be able to succeed unless we make a serious investment. Get ready."

Blinky secretly began to mobilize energy, but the Fiery Axe was sharp enough to sense the rapidly escalating threat from her adversary.

She became more frantic and began to land more blows onto the Dark Apostle's raiment!

In a few instances, she even managed to strike deep enough to cut and burn the surface of his true body!

Yet the Dark Apostle took these wounds in stride and began to grin back at the madwoman.

"You have fought well, woman, but the time has come to bring this duel to its inevitable conclusion. Have a taste of my true strength!"

The Dark Apostle no longer used his spear to defend himself, but instead thrust it out with such speed that the Fiery Axe could not avoid its tip!

Initially, the Fiery Axe did not feel too threatened, because the D-arm did not accumulate enough darkness energy to pull off a power move.

Yet she soon became alarmed when she saw that it glowed with a different and considerably more potent kind of energy!

This bright white glow contrasted sharply against the darkness that emanated from the Dark Tooth.

As soon as the tip of the spear struck her in her belly, it pierced through the raiment and sunk deeper into her tough phasewater-reinforced flesh as if it was a Saint Piercer arm!

When it had finally reached a respectable amount of depth, the remaining extraordinary energies exploded, causing the Fiery Axe to suffer a disastrous internal wound that affected multiple of her phasewater organs!

She roared in pain instead of excitement this time and fell back with all thoughts of attacking had finally disappeared!

Her true body grew heavier while her flames had dimmed.

She had already become half-crippled by a single attack from the Dark Apostle!

The challenger did not expect any other result. Blinky had invested a whopping 41 percent of his Worclaw energy reserves to empower his last attack. It would have been a surprise if the Fiery Axe had been able to withstand this move!

Although the Dark Apostle was only left with 50 percent of his Worclaw energy reserves, he did not regret this sacrifice.

Mostly.

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Chapter 7187 The Respect of the Strong

Although the Dark Apostle had demonstrated the capacity to channel Worclaw energy in the previous match, his latest attack still caught the Fiery Axe by surprise.

The injury inflicted by the Dark Tooth did not impart too much darkness energy this time. The female Ascended Giant immediately ignored the lingering corruption spread by this small amount of darkness.

What concerned her much more was the massive trauma inflicted by the explosion of Worclaw energy.

Its quantity was not too much, but its potency was fairly high. The Dark Tooth managed to punch deeply enough to unleash a destructive blast inside her internal cavity, causing serious tears and bruising to her phasewater organs!

Their vulnerability to damage was much greater than her flesh and bones. Moderate damage was already enough to impair their functionality and disrupt their usage.

One of the consequences of this singularly powerful blow was that the phasewater organ responsible for reducing her mass operated considerably less effectively than before!

The Fiery Axe was only able to lighten her mass by around 8 to 9 percent, which was much weaker than before!

Her other capabilities got affected as well. The wound debilitated her physical movements, making it harder for her to sustain her momentum if she wanted to regain her offensive rhythm.

Her eyes burned with unwillingness. She could still fight, but she was in a worse physical condition compared to her opponent.

There was an even greater issue at hand.

The Worclaw energy blast occupied her so much that the Dark Apostle had been able to retreat from her until he reached optimal throwing distance.

His next move became clear as everyone as he assumed a classical throwing stance.

The Dark Tooth — though chipped and damaged on the surface — was still intact enough to serve as an adequate throwing weapon.

Right now, the Dark Apostle held the spear near its butt where a familiar atlatl throwing mechanism had unfolded.

Darkness energy slowly got infused into the weapon, causing it to slowly prime itself for a lethal explosion.

Unlike the Unshakeable King, the Fiery Axe knew that she did not possess the defenses to withstand a direct or maybe even a glancing hit!

Trying to dodge the spear once thrown still gave her a chance to evade the deadly strike, but the problem was that she was unable to move as quickly as before.

Given how skilled the Dark Apostle managed to throw his weapon the last time, the Fiery Axe instinctively knew that it would have been a long shot to successfully evade the spear throw even if she was still in peak condition.

She could only draw one conclusion from this standoff.

For all intents and purposes, the Dark Apostle put the Fiery Axe into checkmate.

There was no other way to interpret this situation.

The Fiery Axe had run out of solutions. Her only way to avoid a massive explosion in her face was to stick close to her opponent and never let him get away.

She failed.

He got away long enough to achieve his win condition.

The only reason why she had not yet become overwhelmed by an exploding spear was because the Dark Apostle had yet to commit to the attack.

While he was technically priming his Dark Tooth, it had not yet reached the point of no return.

He could still retract the darkness energy and return the weapon to its dormant state.

The Fiery Axe couldn't help but calm down and relax. She stared across the void that separated her from the Dark Apostle and gazed at him with respect.

The first duel already convinced her that the challenger was a worthy fighter, but it was only now that she had locked weapons against him in person that she truly lost her will to resist.

She symbolically let go of her Fiery Axe, causing the weapon to gently float out of her reach.

Her stance grew less defiant and combatant. The fire energy that previously fueled her aggression went out as her companion spirit took the initiative to stop as well.

Her threat level dropped significantly. Even if she intended to deceive her current opponent, it would take precious seconds to relight her fire and pick up her weapon again.

This was more than enough time for the Dark Apostle to fully prime his exploding spear and throw it in her direction with great power!

By doing all of this, the Fiery Axe conveyed a silent message to her adversary.

The Dark Apostle remained frozen as he contemplated his next move.

Blinky hovered next to the human phase lord with concern.

"Are you sure you want to spare her this time?" Ves asked his other personality. "Do not forget that she was ready to condemn us to death before the duel."

The Dark Apostle minutely shook his head. "She voiced these intentions in private and before she knew a single thing about my real self. It makes sense for her to despise a

weak challenger. I would have harbored the same intentions if I was in her shoes. What matters is that I have proved her wrong in the most convincing fashion possible. There is no way she will betray my trust and turn against me now that I have given her a taste of my unfathomable might."

"Our might, not yours. You wouldn't have stood a chance against this maniac if you did not have access to my gear and other perks." Ves reminded his other personality.

"Whatever the case, I can see the advantages of sparing her and winning her over. If you can gain her allegiance, she will become your strongest cheerleader within the Ascended Giants. You will be able to retain her full support so long as you can still beat her in a fight. The moment this changes, I do not think she will hesitate to contest your leadership. Are you truly willing to subject yourself to this hidden danger?"

The Ascended Giant did not respond verbally to Ves, but he minutely nodded to convey his answers.

He instead directed his attention to the Fiery Axe. After staring in her dimming eyes for over a minute, he felt he had formed a silent accord with the female strategos.

The Dark Apostle slowly retracted his power from the Dark Tooth and aborted the effort to execute the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method.

The Minor Demon that resided in the D-arm felt incredibly glad that he and his current abode was not about to blow up. The deviant artifact spirit did everything in his power to wind down and release the darkness energy that was previously attempting to prime the weapon to explode.

Demons also wanted to live!

As the Dark Tooth returned to a more dormant state, both Ascended Giants relaxed.

They no longer saw each other as enemies anymore. Instead, the two gained a growing sense of kinship.

The earlier fight caused both of them to develop a good understanding of each other's true selves.

The Dark Apostle understood what drove the Fiery Axe, while the female strategos comprehended a part of his ambition.

They had no problem with each other's motivations. After confirming that neither of the two had any fundamental reason to reject coexistence and cooperation, they dropped their guard and accepted each other's presence.

This was how some fighters resolved their hostility and misunderstandings. As long as the conditions were right, it was not that difficult for enemies to become lifelong comrades!

While it was too early to tell whether the Dark Apostle and the Fiery Axe would develop such a bond, they were already off to a good start.

"You have convinced me with your strength." The Fiery Axe took the initiative to speak. "You have done well to withstand my attacks and find a way to turn the tables against me. I am glad that I have proven myself formidable enough to make you work for it. That last attack is certainly a doozy. I will not insult you by asking how you have come to master such a power. You have already won my approval even without taking this exotic means into account. If you are able to take over from the Oscillating fist, then it would be my pleasure to serve at your side."

It was a bit improper for the Fiery Axe to speak about this before the leadership challenge had come to an end.

After all, there were still two more duels to go, though their importance had diminished now that it had come to this point.

Still, if the Dark Apostle lost the next two duels, it was important for him to earn the vote of as many Ascended Giants as possible. He needed to appeal to the rank-and-file giants and ensure that he would not change too much about their lives if he assumed leadership over the Phase Lord Department.

The Dark Apostle lowered his spear and inclined his head.

"If I have won the leadership challenge, then I am not opposed to having you continue to lead the Flesh Chopper Phalanx. That said, I will not stop others from mounting reasonable challenges to you. If there are other Ascended Giants who think they have a better shot of leading your unit, then I will not stop them from following our new traditions."

The Fiery Axe grinned. "That is fair. I like it a lot. I have grown tired of obeying the stupid commands from rear echelon bastards who have never stared down the barrel of a gun in their entire careers. A true leader among our race must have the courage to lead from the front and face challenges from behind. Only this kind of leader is worthy to command our race. I truly hope that you will be able to take over the mantle from the Oscillating Fist. As strong as he may be, he is too indecisive outside of the battlefield."

That was a useful piece of information.

It also informed Ves and the Dark Apostle how they could win the leadership challenge even if they lost the next two duels.

So long as they were strong enough, they could make up for the remaining shortcomings by sounding more decisive than the department head of the Phase Lord Department.

While the Dark Apostle was ready to conclude this satisfying duel, Ves still had questions.

"If we ask you to remain aligned to red humanity and deploy in the frontlines to fight directly against the alien phase lords, will you and your men be willing to obey orders?"

The Fiery Axe shifted her gaze between the Dark Apostle and Blinky several times. Their separate personality business was so weird that she did not know how to handle such a situation. Were they even the same person?

She shrugged. "Our duty is clear. No matter what we think, so long as you outrank us, your word is law. If you become the polemarchos, no voice of authority can countermand your orders. We do not care about other red humans. We reject the authority of god pilots and Star Designers. Only the strongest among us can command our loyalty. I have instilled this rule in the heads of all of the Flesh Choppers. Those who disagree with this principle are not welcome within our ranks. You can rest assured that none of my subordinates will ever go rogue so long as I am in charge."

Ves was not sure how much stock he could put into her judgment, but she sounded confident enough, so he was willing to give her a chance.

"Very well. Our takeover is not yet complete, but we would like you to start on your first assignment. Please write a report on the internal situation of the Ascended Giants in your own words. We need to understand what we are dealing with, and your perspective may prove illuminating. I would like you to take special note of Ascended Giants who have shown leadership qualities and can be entrusted to lead independent units into battle."

"I shall do so. I look forward to turning in my report once you have won the challenge."

Chapter 7188 An Alternate Proposition

Two down, two to go.

Ves and the Dark Apostle both had many reasons to feel happy.

They had won two matches in a convincing if not entirely respectable fashion. Though people could quibble about the means that the challenger employed to achieve his victories, the fact that he won at all could not be disputed.

The Ascended Giants should definitely gain a better impression of their possible new leader.

The Dark Apostle had decisively proven that his performance in the first duel was not a fluke.

He had just shown them all that he was able to handle the most offense-oriented Ascended Giant without suffering too many setbacks.

So far, the leadership candidate showed that he possessed the strength to keep up with the best of their kind. That was already a good sign, especially since they knew that the Dark Apostle was not supposed to be good at fighting in the first place.

Few if any of the Ascended Giants bothered to think why a mech designer was able to fight so well with a spear. Perhaps they chalked it up to growing up among mech pilots or choosing to learn fighting skills ever since he became a phase lord.

Whatever the case, the Ascended Giants cared a lot more about being represented by a leader who possessed the strength to suppress his own kind.

It would also be nice if he happened to be a renowned innovator who developed good relations with the major powers of red humanity.

The Dark Apostle therefore presented a compelling package to these Ascended Giants. While he may sound a little too pro-red humanity for their tastes, they could still tolerate his leadership as long as he sought to put their own race first.

As the Dark Apostle returned to the recovery area, the doctors did not have to work as hard to treat his injuries. The Fiery Axe hadn't been able to last long enough to inflict deeper and more serious wounds. The shallow cuts and burns made by her Fiery Axe could easily be treated with giant-sized editions of proven human treatments.

What was more important was for Ves to replenish his energy and other reserves. He had exerted himself quite a bit during the last two matches, so he drank a standard cargo container's worth of diluted phasewater and took a bite out of a giant-sized nutrient bar.

Yes, the Red Collective already developed special nutrient bars and nutrient packs for human phase lords.

They were surprisingly filling and appetizing. The Dark Apostle could somehow feel his belly at work. He had confidence that he could return to peak condition as soon as he was able to fully digest this nutrient supplement.

Near the end of the recovery period, the Dark Apostle adorned his next set of equipment.

Against an Ascended Giant who earned his fame for being good at throwing harpoons, it sounded prudent to enter the dueling ground with a heavy defensive loadout this time.

The combination of a heavy oval shield that was able to cover the head and torso and a serviceable raiment that provided stronger protection at the front should be able to deal with the threat.

Of course, neither Ves nor the Dark Apostle thought the Divine Harpoon was that simple to counter.

He wouldn't have been able to become the strategos of the Faceless Giant Phalanx if that was the case.

The Dark Apostle's exploding spear trick was already strong enough to become known as his signature move as a phase lord.

This implied that the Divine Harpoon's throwing ability might be comparable in power.

That introduced a completely different dynamic in the third fight. The Dark Apostle could not afford to start the next fight assuming that he would get an easy ride.

Of course, just because the Dark Apostle currently enjoyed a lot of frontal protection did not mean his attack ability was weak.

Just before the bots handed over the shortened spear, Blinky commanded them to pause.

"What are you doing?"

"Arming you with the Dark Fang seems inadequate to me. We still have the Dark Tooth left over from the previous duel. Sure, it has gotten banged up, but it still works... mostly."

"Are you suggesting that we enter the dueling ground with two spears instead of one? That will cut into our mass allowance."

"Know, but we can still shave a bit of weight here and there. After witnessing the previous two duels, I have learned that it is better to stack lots of armor in places that need defending and much less protection in places that are less critical. Right now, there are armor sections that fall in between. In hindsight, I think it is better to slim them down as they do not offer worthwhile enough protection as strong enough attacks can always go through."

"Will that be enough?"

"Probably not, but you don't need to bring along the complete Dark Tooth. It is a good thing that I designed it in a segmented configuration, so it will be easy for us to shorten it to a more compact size."

Since the Dark Apostle spawned from Ves' true body, he had a pretty good understanding of what the mech designer was thinking.

"You want to give me an extra throwing option. Since I did not throw the Dark Tooth in the end, I may as well do it in the next duel. This way, I won't be forced to remain passive."

Blinky nodded.

"Yes, but in order to make it all fit within our mass budget, I need to slim down both the Dark Tooth and the Dark Bulwark. Hold on for a moment. I need to tell these technicians to make a few last-minute modifications."

Time was short, but Ves had long noticed that the techs had access to excellent equipment.

It took a bit of ingenuity and improvisation, but the techs successfully managed to shave off a few tons of armor here and there. Their workmanship was cruder than Ves would have liked, but the demonized heavy raiment successfully became a little slimmer than before.

This gave the Dark Apostle enough of a window to carry a second short spear.

The Dark Tooth was no longer as long and far-reaching as before. After removing multiple shaft segments, it had become even shorter than the Dark Fang, which was supposed to be the only main weapon.

However, it was still good enough to be thrown. It just wouldn't produce as big of an explosion as it could have due to its reduced mass and volume.

This would give the Dark Apostle a second opportunity to throw an exploding spear at the Divine Harpoon.

Soon enough, it was time to start the third duel.

As the Dark Apostle and the Divine Harpoon met each other in person for the first time, they calmly took each other's measure.

Unlike the Unshakeable King and the Fiery Axe, the Divine Harpoon did not appear too remarkable on the surface.

His raiment looked dull and lacked a powerful statement. It was as if he specifically commanded it to be as bland and devoid of any distinguishing marks.

Ves learned that this was one of the characteristics of the Faceless Giants. It imposed a high degree of uniformity in order to maximize teamwork and prevent enemies from identifying and targeting specific talents.

If not for the fact that the other phase lord attached multiple harpoons on his back, it would have been impossible to distinguish him from the other Faceless Giants!

Another aspect about the man that separated him from ordinary Ascended Giants was his unique aura or temperament.

The Divine Harpoon looked and carried himself like a man who had lived through half of the Age of Mechs and would not be fazed by any surprises anymore.

This was an extremely steady soldier and commander who had lived through so many events that he had lost his youthful vigor.

With age came experience. The man formerly known as Haroudi Molain had a well-deserved reputation for being a steady hand that could be entrusted to do his job well. Although he no longer possessed the energy and spontaneity of his younger peers, such qualities were not always desirable.

This made him the perfect leader for the Faceless Giants, a lower-quality phalanx that was larger and therefore filled with a greater quantity of powerful and unruly Ascended Giants.

Only a leader as steady as the Divine Harpoon would be able to turn them into proper soldiers in a very short amount of time.

Ves and the Dark Apostle experienced first-hand the aura of an old commander who was able to command respect and obedience just by being in his presence.

At this moment, it was clear that the Divine Harpoon was evaluating them both.

"Well met, Dark Apostle. What a concerning name you have chosen for yourself. Regardless, we abide by different rules now. No matter whether you wield the power of light or darkness, you are a qualified leader as long as you are strong enough to stand up for our interests and responsible enough to care for your men. In the previous two duels, you have unquestionably proven the former. It is not strictly necessary for you to prove your martial prowess any further as far as I am concerned. What I am concerned about is that you have yet to prove the latter."

Both Blinky and the Dark Apostle frowned.

"How do you propose to test us on whether we can be a responsible leader for the Ascended Giants?" Ves asked.

The Divine Harpoon responded with a mild smile under his helmet. "I have prepared a proposition for you. In my opinion, there is little value to be gained by fighting a third duel under the current rules. I would like to amend them and decide the outcome of the duel by holding a more limited competition. We should step away from each other and take turns throwing our weapons at each other. The Ascended Giant that has suffered the greatest physical injuries at the end of this exchange will concede without bothering to contest the duel any further than is necessary. What do you think?"

Ves and the Dark Apostle reacted with surprise.

This alternative was a much cleaner way to determine the victor of the third duel. While it was not safe for either side, the violence would be restricted, so the chance of suffering accidents should be low.

Now that Ves and the Dark Apostle were already halfway towards success, it became more crucial than ever to let the situation spin out of control!

"That is... a generous arrangement, strategos."

"I am not finished." The Divine Harpoon adopted a serious expression. "I will only agree to compete against you this way if you make a concession. I want you to impart the secrets on how to make those exploding spears and how to prime them to explode when wielding them in battle."

"What?!"

"If you want us to fight against the native aliens, our race needs powerful weapons that they can use to defeat alien gods on a reliable basis. Short of equipping us all with superdimensional arms and armor, we can slay many enemies of both red humanity and the Ascended Giants if we have access to the same means as you have employed to turn the previous two duels around. Think of how impressive it would be if all 240 Faceless Giants throw their exploding spears at the same time. No greater phase lord should be able to withstand the mass detonations."

That would be an impressive sight, Ves admitted.

However, was it truly wise to share one of his latest trump cards with the Phase Lord Department?

Both Ves and the Dark Apostle immediately felt conflicted.

On the one hand, there was no way they would voluntarily agree to share their trump card to the Phase Lord Department.

This was especially when the probability of leaks was high!

It shouldn't take too long for the Red Collective and maybe even the Red Cabal to master the secrets of throwing spears that could explode with the power of tactical weapons of mass destruction!

Chapter 7189: An Accidental Discovery

What the Divine Harpoon asked from him was a bit much.

It was like asking the Oscillating Fist to hand over the secret to how he was able to shake internal organs apart whenever he punched another phase lord!

Demanding to learn another person's trade secrets was taboo in both the mech industry and many other fields!

Yet... it was undeniable that letting the Ascended Giants master and make extensive use of the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method would undoubtedly benefit them a lot.

This was a special means for phase lords to inflict massive damage by throwing the cultivation equivalent of an explosive munition.

While Ves could argue that the Ascended Giants could attain similar effects by carrying missile launchers into battle, the damage potential of most missiles at this scale would not be able to match the potency of a good-quality sacrificial spear.

"Your request is problematic." Ves answered through Blinky as the silence dragged on for a bit. "You should be aware that the method to make this happen is anything but unusual. One of its traits is that it is hard to detect any object that is built to produce a powerful blast. If our secret method gets leaked... not only will random people be able to throw initially unassuming stuff around that can breach the hull of starships or cause a space station to rupture from the inside."

The Divine Harpoon acknowledged the potential for damage that this action could precipitate.

"The fact that you are concerned about such matters is proof that you care to a certain extent. What I am asking for you is indeed a serious demand, but that is the best way for us to ascertain whether you are sincere about assuming stewardship over the Ascended Giants. You should understand that sharing your remarkable method of throwing exploding spears can do much more good if you share it to all Ascended Giants. We will not force you to do so, but choosing to keep it to yourself will send a different message to the men and women you hope to lead."

That did not sound good.

It became clear to Ves that the shrewd strategos of the Faceless Giants intended to put the challenger on the spot.

Many Ascended Giants had indeed taken a liking for his 35-AP spear throwing method.

It might not be worth that much in absolute terms, but it was practically perfect for the Ascended Giants!

They were able to reach more and more exaggerated proportions as they made more attainments in phase lord body cultivation.

This would allow them to wield increasingly larger and more destructive spears.

Even if they were made out of cheaper alloys in order to save on costs, the spear could still produce a powerful enough explosion as long as its volume was large enough!

The potency of the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method would only grow higher in the future.

Lesser phase lords were only able to scale up so much.

Greater phase lords reached much more exaggerated proportions. They were already able to approach the size of small to medium-sized moons.

When they were large enough to generate their own gravity wells, what would happen if they launched massive sacrificial spears at a planet?

The globe would definitely suffer an extinction event!

Of course, the cost and effort needed to construct even a single massive spear was prohibitive.

Ves doubted that there was any production facility in the Red Ocean that could fully mass produce such an insane product.

He threw aside such unrealistic notions. There was no need to entertain such ridiculous thoughts to realize the greater value of the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method.

"What do you think?" Ves privately asked his alter ego.

"Do it." The Dark Apostle straightforwardly said. "I don't like to share my toys, but... if I have to choose between keeping the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method to myself and winning over the Ascended Giants, I would choose the latter every time. There is no comparison between the two. So what if others will be able to throw exploding spears? Hyper technology and E-technology is never exclusive to us. From the moment we showed off what was possible, the Red Cabal and all of the other powers have probably started their own research groups dedicated towards replicating what we have done. Sacrificial spears aren't as difficult to replicate as living mechs, so they will succeed sooner or later."

He made a good point. Ves also took into account that since the Mech Designer System was able to provide a copy of the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method, other copies may be available elsewhere. Ves was not stupid enough to believe that he obtained the only copy.

“Very well. Since this is the case, I will allow you to make the trade. It is a pity to give up exclusivity on this method so soon, but it may be for the best. Just think of how much more powerful the Ascended Giants will be once they all carry around the same exploding spears. This will be an expensive arms program, but the results will speak for themselves.”

The other Ascended Giants shouldn't be able to produce explosions as powerful as the one that trounced the Unshakeable King.

The spear that Ves sacrificed was not only comprised of lots of high-grade fire hypers and other expensive materials, but had also turned into a D-arm.

There was no feasible way for Ves to hand over such D-arms to his Ascended Giants en masse.

Fortunately, the scale of these weapons were fairly small. Most of the Ascended Giants had not made that much progress in their body cultivation, but that would change over time.

Once they became as tall as biological juggernauts, any spear they threw should be able to strip the spatial barriers of most lesser phase lords upon impact!

Not that this would be strictly necessary. Ves already formulated plans to equip the Ascended Giants with superdimensional arms.

This was a massive expenditure that the Larkinson Clan would have to cover, but the gains should be more than satisfactory.

A troop of Ascended Giants in full superdimensional gear should be able to defeat most native alien fleets, even the ones led by greater phase lords!

The Dark Apostle eventually voiced his response to the Divine Harpoon.

“I accept your proposition, but only if I assume leadership over the Oscillating Fist. I am confident in my ability to win this leadership challenge, but I will not tolerate any scams. I think that the rest of red humanity will not rest easily if you have gained the capacity to throw around these dangerous spears unless you answer to a man they can trust like myself. Do we have an understanding?”

The Divine Harpoon remained still for a moment before nodding.

“Yes. I would like to thank you in advance for making this contribution. The Ascending Giants are too new, and we have yet to fully flesh out our own unique martial traditions. Your contribution will accelerate this development and define our approach towards combat in the years to come.”

The mood between the two had eased. Neither Ves nor the Dark Apostle sensed any hostility from the Divine Harpoon. From the moment they struck the deal, the strategos of the Faceless Giants had effectively defected to his side.

That meant that this was the point where Ves and the Dark Apostle had ‘conquered’ the leaders of all three phalanxes of the Ascended Giants!

In other words, the Phase Lord Department was already in their pocket!

Of course, the ritual still had to run its course. The leadership challenge could not be aborted ahead of time unless Ves and the Dark Apostle abandoned their attempt.

The two human phase lords began to back off from each other.

They moved far away enough so that both of them still remained in comfortable throwing distance while still giving each other enough time to make split-second reactions after one of them threw their arms.

“Let me go first as I have brought more throwing weapons than you.” The Divine Harpoon said as he retrieved one of his bone-white harpoons from his back. “Do you know that my harpoons are made of fortified phase whale bones?”

“I already suspected that given their white exterior.”

“To be honest, I could have chosen to commission harpoons that are made out of stronger non-organic alloys.” The strategos said as he slowly began to adopt a thrower’s stance. “Do you know why I favor these bones even if they are arguably inferior in toughness, flexibility and other parameters?”

Neither Ves nor the Dark Apostle could come up with a good explanation.

“No...”

The Divine Harpoon finally displayed the first inkling of passion. “Well, you are in for a treat, because this is the first time I have taken the initiative to reveal this discovery. Since you have generously decided to share your exploding spear method, I shall make my own contribution. I originally commissioned these harpoons because I thought it is only fitting to hunt down phase whales with their own bones. It is only after I have practiced with them day and night that I have made an accidental discovery. If you have become so familiar with a weapon made out of the bones of a phase whale, you can form a deeper connection to it, if only briefly at first.”

That sounded interesting.

“You may be thinking why this is important. The more I have been able to connect with a phase whale bone harpoon, the more I am able to treat it as an extension of myself. Literally. Do you understand what this means?”

The Dark Apostle did not immediately get it, but Ves was different.

“Are you claiming that you can apply spatial abilities to it that normally limit themselves to affecting your true body?!”

“Yes. That is exactly right.” The Divine Harpoon smiled. “Think of the implications. Phasewater organs that grant us the power to increase our mass and density, allow us to warp or teleport elsewhere, make us tougher and generate a warp bubble around us can all be applied to my harpoons so long as I am able to ‘align’ with them if I may use my own terminology. In the past few months, I have quietly worked to develop and master the exploitation of this new phenomenon. While I do not think I have completed my work, I have made enough progress to demonstrate the power of Phase Whale Bone Alignment Technique in front of a wider audience for the first time.”

Great. That meant that the Dark Apostle would also be the first phase lord to enjoy the ‘privilege’ of serving as the target dummy for this demonstration!

Sure enough. The Divine Harpoon would not let Ves and the Dark Apostle take over the Phase Lord Department so easily.

At least this spectacle gave him the excuse to explain his new technique to the challenger beforehand.

It would have been a lot less pleasant to be subjected to his special attack without knowing anything in advance!

The Dark Apostle already shifted into a defensive stance. He took the Divine Harpoon’s impending attack extremely seriously, especially given what he heard.

“Ves.” He said over his private connection with the original occupant of his true body.

“I know. If these thrown harpoons threaten to pierce through all of your defenses and impale our true body, I will help you channel our Worclaw energy to prevent them from going any further.”

This might not be as effective as it sounded. Ves lacked practice in manipulating Worclaw energy, and he had a feeling that it was not supposed to be used this way.

At the very least, he would have to expend a significant amount of Worclaw energy to produce a positive result.

It shouldn't be necessary to resort to this emergency measure right away.

The Dark Apostle could rely on multiple layers of defense. His spatial barrier was fully active, and so was the relatively weak but serviceable azure energy shield produced by his raiment.

If these energy defenses were not enough to block an incoming harpoon, then the unimaginably named Dark Shield and Dark Bulwark should be able to withstand the remaining force.

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Chapter 7190: The Power of a Throw

Ves had never thought that phase whale bones possessed such potential.

It was amazing when he thought about it. Did the phenomenon described by the Divine Harpoon apply exclusively to phase whale bones? What about the bones of phase lords? Could they also be used to make weapons that could be turned into extensions of the wielder's true body?

He had a huge amount of technical questions, but this was not the time to engage in an academic exchange.

The third duel had commenced. Though Ves and the Divine Harpoon had just forged an agreement to limit this fight to a throwing contest, that did not necessarily mean it was safe!

Ves and the Dark Apostle had no references to the new technique that the Divine Harpoon was about to demonstrate.

It could be weak. It could be powerful. It could fall somewhere in between. The uncertainty about this new phenomenon gnawed at Ves.

Did the Dark Apostle enjoy enough protection to withstand at least three harpoon impacts?

If the Divine Harpoon simply tossed them over like normal, then Ves did not have much concern.

The spatial barrier and all of the physical armor were no joke. They could seriously resist enough attacks to stall a troop of mechs as well as a warship.

However, they were not that strong against enemies that got close enough to use a space suppressor of transphasic weapons with a high content of phasewater.

Each of the harpoons were inherently made out of bones that integrated phasewater from the very beginning. Subsequent processing added in reinforcements and supplements that strengthened it even further and added hyper materials to make them more remarkable.

Now, the Divine Harpoon held one such weapon in his arm.

A trail of chains made out of processed phase whale bones connected to the back of his raiment.

This was the chain that the Divine Harpoon might use to prevent the escape of an enemy he successfully managed to spear.

Right now, it wasn't necessary for the Divine Harpoon to hunt his enemy down, so he readily detached the chain so that the harpoon turned into a strangely shaped javelin.

Unlike Ves, the R&D team that worked for the other Ascended Giant did not decide to integrate an atlatl mechanism into the bone harpoon.

The Divine Harpoon preferred to throw his weapons in the most classical and primitive fashion.

He held the harpoon just behind a high-friction band that was wrapped around the center of the shaft.

He began to assume his stance.

His throwing posture was impeccable. He looked like the very model of an armored athlete as he bent his body back in an exaggerated fashion that spoke of bone surgery and augmentation.

He began to call upon the power of his phasewater organs one by one.

At the same time, he communed with his harpoon so that he was able to align it to him, or the other way around. Ves was not sure what was going on. He needed to gain access to the other man's experimental logs and research data to be absolutely certain.

Still, Ves and the Dark Apostle were easily able to sense how the fabric of space twisted and contorted itself to amplify the Dark Harpoon's mass, strength and other properties.

His weapon also enjoyed the same benefits, though some of the weirder effects only partially stick to the bone armament.

The more the Divine Harpoon gathered his strength, the more imposing he became.

He did not possess a large collection of phasewater organs, but each of them had been chosen to help him withstand punishment while also allowing him to throw incredibly powerful spears.

Even without his latest trick, he had already earned a reputation for being strong and unpleasant to duel against!

After all, few phase lords were in a mood to challenge a martial god who was able to spear your body from a distance!

Ripped formed in the space around the Divine Harpoon. Those ripples also emanated from the harpoon.

It was as if the weapon had come to life for a brief moment!

Ves tried his best to rely on his true body's spatial senses as well as the sensors and scanners of the Dark Bulwark to make sense of all of the effects.

The standard effects were easy to identify. The harpoon did not change in size, but became a lot denser. Its structure became reinforced. It gained a warp bubble that allowed it to soar through space faster. It also gained greater resistance against hostile spatial effects.

However, that was not the extent of the enhancements. There were anomalous data readings that Ves couldn't figure out because it overlapped with readings from other effects.

The tip of the harpoon shone in a menacing light. The space directly around the spear started to shake at a higher frequency. The hyper materials integrated into the harpoon absorbed more E energy radiation.

When the Divine Harpoon had completed his preparations, he helpfully issued a warning to his opponent.

"Get ready. I am about to launch my first harpoon."

The Dark Apostle nodded in acknowledgement and braced himself for the impact that was about to come.

Demonic Possession Spearmanship did not teach its practitioners how to build a physical shield that could reinforce its defensive power by channeling darkness energy.

Neither did it impart any techniques on how the wielder could actively strengthen this capability to the limit.

However, Ves was a mech designer who had become accustomed to adapting strange and alien solutions to his works.

He resorted to recycling common solutions, filling in the gaps, taking inspiration from other fields and making up for the remaining with pure guesswork.

The Dark Shield therefore began to harmonize with the darkness energy under the careful direction of Ves and the Dark Apostle.

Not all of it proceeded smoothly. Despite the abundance of darkness energy siphoned from the environment as well as the Blinkyverse, much of it spilled past or went to waste as the novel implementation of hyper technology remained crude.

The main reason why it was not a bigger waste of energy was because the Dark Shield's conversion into a D-arm solved some of its flaws!

With the active intervention of a Minor Demon that desperately wanted to live, the D-arm finally managed to produce an additional surface layer made of condensed darkness.

The Dark Apostle was ready to meet the incoming attack.

Both human phase lords remained still for a moment.

Then, the Divine Harpoon wound himself backwards a little bit further before instantly lunging forward as if to hurl the most important projectile in his life!

The leader of the Faceless Giants held nothing back as he anchored his foot onto the fabric of space and used it as the base to add more force and velocity to each limb connecting to the harpoon!

It was like watching a masterwork biomechanical construct in motion.

The Divine Harpoon executed a close to perfect throw by imparting his projectile with as much kinetic energy as he could squeeze out of his throwing form!

This near-perfect harpoon throw translated into a monstrously powerful attack when thrown by a phase lord.

The projectile instantly cuts through space with even greater force and momentum than the Dark Apostle's prior spear throws.

Although the harpoon lacked the blessing of a sacrificial spear, the augmentations imparted through the Phase Whale Bone Alignment Technique turned it into a different kind of deadly polearm!

Even with the benefit of plenty of forewarning, the Dark Apostle still experienced a spike of fear and panic as this harpoon soared straight in his direction!

Fortunately, the harpoon traveled way too quickly for him to succumb to his weaknesses.

Before he could even register the fact that an incredibly sharp and powerful harpoon was looking to impale him, it had already arrived and smashed through this energy defenses by relying on a combination of brute force and spatial shenanigans!

It was as if a needle shattered a mirror! Two mirrors even!

The Divine Harpoon had no need to get close and use his space suppressor to weaken the Dark Apostle's energy defenses because his harpoon already possessed the power to pierce through such protection!

Ves could not believe how easily the empowered harpoon had managed to breach both layers of defense!

The only consolation was that they had put up a good amount of resistance. The harpoon already expended much of its kinetic energy as well as other mixed energies.

By the time the tip of the harpoon closed in on the Dark Shield, the cloying layer of darkness immediately weakened and sapped its energies further.

The tip of the harpoon eventually went on to dig a shallow groove onto its surface.

Even this was a remarkable result given how tough the transphasic hyper shield had become after its conversion into a D-arm.

Everyone reacted with shock at this result.

Even his own Faceless Giants had no clue how extensively their own strategos managed to improve his harpoon throwing technique.

It made a certain amount of sense for the Dark Apostle's explosive spears to be able to produce such violent explosions. Ves' application of hyper technology and E-technology was grounded in familiar principles that just happened to be utilized in different ways.

What the Divine Harpoon managed to do was more impressive. He had discovered and weaponized a familiar class of organic materials. He infused them with strength and power that was normally reserved for the bones of his own true body!

If he chose to divulge his theories and his experimental logs to the rest of the Phase Lord Department, then he would make a massive contribution to red humanity.

This discovery could change the value of human phase lords on the battlefield. Although it sounded as if this method was not applicable to mechs, it was already amazing enough if all human phase lords harnessed this new capability.

What was even better was that there was a possibility it could be combined with the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method!

Though Ves knew that it would not be easy to convert phase whale bones into a hyper material that could absorb an excess amount of E energy, Ves saw no reason why it couldn't be done.

This was merely a difficult engineering problem rather than trying to realize a miracle.

Everyone's evaluation of the Divine Harpoon improved.

This took place even when it became clear that his extraordinary technique had taken a lot out of the Ascended Giant.

He clearly looked a little more fatigued than before.

This made it clear that he specialized in throwing harpoons. He probably went as far as sacrificing opportunities to strengthen his close quarters combat capabilities in order to be of greater use to his phalanx.

Ves belatedly realized that the Divine Harpoon managed to hoodwink him and his alter ego.

What a devious old man.

The altered dueling terms favored the Divine Harpoon a lot more than Ves thought.

The man was able to draw upon his advantages without any concern that Ves would run up and exploit his extensive period of vulnerability after making a large exertion.

The Dark Apostle grinned. "Impressive. My turn now."

Figures. Though Ves felt concerned about entering a contest that favored his opponent a lot more, the disparity between the two sides was not completely uneven.

Ves felt grateful that he made a suggestion to being along a shortened version of the Dark Tooth.

At this moment, the Dark Apostle retrieved the aforementioned weapon from his back.

The spear still bore the scars of the previous duel, but Ves personally confirmed it was sound enough to pull off the Sacrificial Spear Throwing Method.

“Be careful, old man. Just as you did not hold back, I will not hold back much either. You can rest assured that I will not draw upon my Worclaw energy to best your old butt. I will not make use of it because I am being stingy, but because I do not think I need to rely on it to win this throwing contest. Two exploding spears are enough.”

“Brave words, young giant. I hope you can back up your confidence with your mediocre throwing technique.”

Mediocre!

What the hell!?

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