Governor 401

Chapter 401

While Shang Yanwen was busy with the Imperial Tax, he did not forget that there was something he wanted to do.

It was during his time on Flying Wing Star that, combining what he had learned and his past experiences, he designed a number of industries that could be developed for his hometown, as well as the specific strategies for their development.

And now that he had returned, he saw that his hometown had undergone so many changes that many of his previous ideas, far from being 'designs,' were closer to 'wild guesses' and totally inconsistent with the current situation in the Green Bee Street District.

But he was not discouraged, nor was he in a hurry.

While he was busy with the Imperial Tax, he became even more familiar with the District, which had changed so dramatically, and he investigated many actual situations.

He continually overturned his own plans, using the current state of the District as a blueprint and combining it with reality, he made a fresh start.

…

Meanwhile, he did not neglect his own work.

When accounting for tax affairs, he found that his biggest worry had not come to pass. The Green Bee Street District had a population of 420,000, and in the past year, the total production value of various materials in the district was 390,000 Tax Currency. A large part of that was consumed by the local population.

The value produced, through money and exchange, had become housing, food, furniture appliances, textiles, medical expenses… and had tangibly improved the living standards of the people in the district.

The medical level was not high enough, there was not enough furniture and appliances, the variety of food was not rich enough, the textiles were not fashionable enough, and even the houses constructed in full swing were actually not enough in number, with many people who should have been assigned housing still queuing up.

But, without a doubt, it was much better than before.

And there was no need to worry about the part for the Imperial Tax.

The District government actually started to prepare for the Imperial Tax from the beginning of the year, reserving 40,000 Tax Currency. Its composition was mainly some raw materials that had undergone initial processing, textiles, and Alliance Government cash.

When the District government paid taxes to the higher level government, it could use Alliance Government cash. Correspondingly, the Alliance Government would use this Alliance currency to pay some key industrial zones, such as military factories and heavy industry plants; their output was the main force of the physical tax payment.

After all, when the Alliance Government was paying the Imperial Tax, the Imperial tax officials did not recognize any Alliance currency. In the eyes of the Empire, currency was just a worthless piece of paper; they only recognized proof of tax payment, which meant Tax Currency, or actual goods.

The Empire recognized a great many physical goods, but not every item. If you casually produced a kitchen knife or a table, the Empire would not even look at you. Not to mention, some service industries such as commerce within the planets, construction, transportation, medical industry, etc. They certainly created value within the planet, but they had nothing to pay to the Empire as taxes.

So, in fact, when the Planetary Government paid taxes, it mainly relied on heavy industry, military industry, textile industry, and agriculture—these industries produced the ‘hard currency’ recognized by the Empire for tax items.

But the workers in these production zones also need to live. Their living needs, such as transportation, medical care, service industry, food… come from the supply from other places. This is how the overall division of labor is formed: regions that can produce products listed in the Imperial Tax categories use

currency issued by the Alliance to purchase services from other regions, while they themselves produce most of the goods needed for the Imperial Tax. Non-producing regions prove their contribution through affiliated industries using Alliance currency.

This division of labor exists widely at various levels: between districts, between Nest Capitals, and even between planets.

The main pillar industries of the Green Bee Street District are construction, transportation, waste recycling, and raw material initial processing. Except for the processed material products that can serve as actual goods to pay the Imperial Tax, the rest are not quite up to the mark.

Yet they still created value.

The real Imperial Tax was not something they needed to worry about; the large industrial production areas would provide it, and the higher authorities would plan and coordinate; the district helped in transportation, also sent out construction teams to build houses for other industrial zones, earning Alliance currency. This was essentially the labor value they had given, and it was recognized by the Alliance Government.

This is the essence of why the Green Bee Street District, with a local population of 410,000, had a total production value of 390,000 Tax Currency, consumed 350,000, and used 40,000 for tax purposes.

The per capita consumption of Green Bee Street District was 0.85 Tax Currency, not a very high standard of living but definitely a survivable one.

Shang Yanwen had once seen an old report where, in the hundred years before the Plague War, the per capita consumption in Korolya was actually only about 0.3 Tax Currency. It was a level that barely kept people from starving; the per capita output of Korolya was about 0.5 Tax Currency, only half of the Empire’s minimum per capita standard.

This was also essentially why the Korolya people had to pay 0.05 Tax Currency per capita as the Imperial Tax and then face a 1% chance of being conscripted as a tax payer.

As for the difference of 0.15 Tax Currency per capita… that would be a question for the former bureaucratic echelons of Korolya, the rulers.

Now, with the per capita consumption level reaching 0.85, more than double, it's no wonder life has become bearable.

Moreover, this is the consumption level after setting aside 0.1 for the Imperial Tax, which means that Green Bee Street District will not need to pay personal taxes in the future.

Of course, these are just the results of Shang Yanwen's observation of his own Green Bee Street District.

Chapter 401, Now I Have Plenty of Money_2

But as far as we can see now, this seems to be the level all across Nuo Yan City. Even in the Middle and Upper Nest Districts of Nest Capital, the situation is much better than that in the Lower Nest District; the state of affairs may be a bit worse in the Bottom Nest District, but it should largely be similar overall.

From the perspective of Nuo Yan City, if each Nest Capital across Korolya were at this level, then it could be said that the whole of Korolya was on the right track. Korolya would no longer need to pay the human tax and could meet the Imperial Tax with its own production, no longer being a burden to the Alliance.

Given the current pace of development, in two more years, there could be a surplus; a few years later, with an increasing surplus, the standard of living for the Korolya people will keep improving, and they will become a major engine for the Alliance's development—after all, the population size speaks for itself.

Realizing all these things truly exhilarated Shang Yanwen.

He was excited to be personally involved in this great transformation of the era.

In his spare time at work, the development plan he had formulated would add another engine to the advancement of the Green Bee Street District.

…

After the busy period with Imperial Tax concluded, he found his immediate superior, the head of the district government, Moody, and presented his ideas.

What he wanted to do was to set up a recycling aquaculture system.

In the Green Bee Street District, there used to be a kind of small flying creature similar to a bat, with sturdy membranous wings and strong teeth. Its main requirements for survival were threefold: human garbage, industrial waste water, and a type of luminescent spore-producing fungus that grew in heavily polluted environments.

The locals called these critters ‘Fluorescent Bats,’ and in the past, they were considered harmful creatures in the Lower Nest District and Bottom Nest District of Nuo Yan City. They brought disease, pollution, and radiation into human populations, causing illness and sometimes death.

The district had put in effort to control them, and now there were fewer, but they still existed.

But Shang Yanwen saw the value in these strange little creatures.

A classmate of his, who was in a school of engineering on Flying Wing Star, had a research topic on bio-materials. Shang Yanwen thought the teeth and skin of these creatures from his hometown, which fed on highly polluted fungi and organic waste and drank waste water, were excellent raw materials.

Previously, he had managed to obtain some of these ‘specialties’ from the Lower Nest District of Nuo Yan City for the research group to analyze, and indeed, they found them to have some value.

If they could be mass-produced, then the collected wings and teeth of the creatures could serve as a fine bio-material, useful for making leather for machinery, inner linings for armor, and corrosion-resistant bio-materials to emit light and heat in some situations.

He had compiled the relevant technical materials and brought back a copy.

What he aimed to do was to designate a specific area to breed these pollution fungi, which would in turn cultivate these mutated creatures under heavy pollution, and then slaughter them en masse to collect the bio-materials for sale to some processing plants.

This was the initial project. Moving forward, it would be ideal if the relevant processing industries could be undertaken by the Green Bee Street District itself, establishing corresponding factories, and even developing a more comprehensive industrial chain on this basis.

If the whole setup could indeed be successful, there was no doubt that Green Bee Street District would gain a new industry. This signified higher productivity, more employment opportunities, and residents of Green Bee Street District would be able to rank up more easily. With more money, the public's standard of living could take a further leap forward, and they would be able to pay more taxes directly, contributing even more to the Alliance.

After listening to Shang Yanwen's plan, Moody slapped his thigh and said, "You are indeed a top graduate! You've already been a great help with the tax matter before, not to mention that now you've come up with a surprise!"

"Do you think this is feasible?" asked Shang Yanwen, who wasn't as confident as when he had been speaking so confidently just moments earlier.

Essentially, he was still a newcomer just starting out, with little experience in governance. He was afraid that what he had painstakingly developed was just pie in the sky. Although he had done his utmost to prevent this, and had conducted many investigations with numerous carefully considered, specific implementation steps in the plan, he was still somewhat uneasy.

He was afraid of letting his hometown down.

But Moody seemed much more reassured: "Stop worrying, we need that spirit! As long as the whole thing looks good, let's do it! What's the worst that could happen if we fail? The higher-ups aren't going to punish us for one failed attempt, the Alliance always encourages innovation!"

"However, we do indeed need to be cautious. If we invest too much, there will be an impact."

“Let’s start small with the aquaculture and work our way up slowly!”

“As long as it can be done, we’ll have solved a big problem! To tell you the truth, there are still a lot of labor forces in the district that haven’t been absorbed. This is a core indicator for our regional government, and I’ve been worried to the point of going gray. Your method sounds good, we definitely have to give it a try!”

“Even if we can only accommodate a few dozen or a few hundred people to start with, that’s very good. Don’t underestimate a few hundred job positions. With a few hundred stable output positions, we can support a new mall, more construction workers, more street vendors, and stalls… the affiliated industries can develop along with it.”

“Not to mention, there will be further opportunities to grow and strengthen later on!”

Encouraged, Shang Yanwen said, “Then let’s do it! I will apply for interstellar communication immediately and contact my classmates. Their research group will be interested in our area!”

…

The deeds of Shang Yanwen were condensed into a brief report, along with the achievements of several other commissioned young civil servants and new managers of state-owned enterprises, and were placed in front of Gu Hang.

At this moment, Gu Hang was on a starship, en route to Korolya. During the voyage, he finished reading these documents and gave his evaluation:

“Our young people have indeed done a good job.”

He was quite pleased.

The industry initiated by Shang Yanwen was thriving; a few months later, it achieved notable production value, had a stimulating effect on the local district, and even had the potential to be promoted throughout the Nest Capital, from Bottom Nest District to Lower Nest District.

Although, even if this industry were to develop further in the future, its production value is a small matter in the grand scheme of things. Its application scope is somewhat narrow; ground teeth and processed bat wings, turned into a basic material, can only play a certain role in the construction of industrial product components, nowhere near the scale of the metal smelting industry. The alliance had applications for this material in the past, but it mainly relied on imports.

However, the innovation reflected by the alliance system behind this matter, and the emerging talents of this new generation of administrative personnel, were all things that made Gu Hang even happier.

A single cycle breeding and processing industry might not count for much, but several linked together, even forming industrial chains, could have high value. Moreover, as long as the alliance system can prove its capacity for innovation and the new generation of officials is reliable, whether it's about establishing new industries or maintaining old ones, it's permissible to say that the future holds promise.

Setting this matter aside, Gu Hang started to look at another electronic tablet in his hand.

This contained something even more important.

The tax situation facing the alliance.

Currently, the Imperial Tax treats the alliance as a whole, collecting taxes in one go. For the Tax Fleet of the empire, this is also considered a convenient approach.

Now, the total annual tax amount for the alliance is 10.95 billion Tax Currency. Flying Wing Star 4 billion, Fatchess Tri-Star 3 billion, Korolya I and III combined at 3.5 billion, Rage Owl Star 100 million, Heijian Star 150 million, and Hongjian Star 200 million.

When the tax was set, Rage Owl Star had a population of 10 billion and Heijian Star had 15 billion, with the excess population having migrated from Korolya. As a result, the population of Korolya dropped from over 370 billion to around 350 billion, thereby setting the tax at 3.5 billion Tax Currency.

After deducting an exemption of 4 billion, the tax is paid every two years. In the past four years, in both tax seasons, the alliance had to pay 13.9 billion in Imperial Tax.

This was a huge figure that Gu Hang, who hadn't yet been prosperous a few years back, wouldn't even have dared to think about, but for the current alliance, it wasn't difficult.

Especially in this latest tax season, Flying Wing Star had completed a Musician-class cruiser, along with four destroyers, totaling over 10 billion.

After setting aside the Imperial Tax annually, the alliance's financial surplus could still be about 5 billion or so.

In one of Gu Hang's recent conversations with his mother, he had quite boldly stated:

"I've got plenty of money now."

Chapter 402, Is This What You Call the Planetary Defense Army?

A fiscal surplus exceeding five billion a year, this is certainly a number that Tianma Star Sector once could not imagine.

Relative to other surrounding Star Sectors, Tianma Star Sector was indeed wealthy, but precisely because of this, it was burdened with a significant amount of Imperial Tax. Like Korolya, which had to rely on a population tax to cover half of its four billion Imperial Tax last year; Fatchess Tri-Star would be at death's door just by raising its development level to 3; Flying Wing Star was not bad, but its highly developed shipbuilding industry had to hand over practically all the ships it produced just to bear the tax burden of a development level of 5…

However, after the Alliance Government took full control of all the planets in the Tianma Star Sector up to the present, four years have passed, and not only can it satisfy the Imperial Tax, but it can also have a surplus of five billion. The key aspect is that the living standards of the people in the entire Star Sector did not decline, but instead, there was an improvement.

There may not be much change in the living standards of people on planets like Fatchess Tri-Star, Flying Wing Star, and Hongjian Star; but in Korolya, on Rage Owl Star, and on Heijian Star, the changes were significant.

The reason for achieving this, on the one hand, was that the Imperial Tax, once set four years ago, would not change for ten years, and during this time, the planets under the Alliance's rule were rapidly developing.

Of course, just relying on the fruits of development was not enough.

…

The primary reason lies in the Alliance's system, which drastically reduced the existence of capitalists, bureaucrats, and other rent-seeking classes. They still existed within the Alliance's system and played a role, but the super profits they could take were greatly reduced, transitioning to a method of gaining rewards based on rank. They could improve ranks more easily than ordinary workers, but compared to their former identity as exploiters, it was much less.

Most of the value created by workers was consumed by the workers themselves, which is the fundamental reason for the significant improvement in the living standards of the people under the Alliance's rule; the Alliance Government took a direct part of the remaining proceeds; the rent-seeking classes still had a bit of income, after all, the Alliance had not yet abolished all private economies, but on the whole, it was definitely a significant reduction.

With both development and the elimination of the middle layer, the Alliance's management of society's middle and grassroots levels, and production became more direct, which under a dual effect, led to a fiscal surplus of five billion.

And these fiscal surpluses, of course, the Alliance would not hoard like misers.

They are to be used in the budget allocation, for reinvestment in production, which accounts for a large portion of the budget.

The second largest part is used for military expenses, including military expansion and maintenance.

The third largest, used for the expansion of government expenditure. Normal government expenditures are not included here but are accounted for as costs. This refers to the expenses needed to establish

more government agencies. Besides the costs of establishing more agencies, the corresponding maintenance costs naturally increase, but these expenses are included in the maintenance costs.

These three are economic development, military construction, and political construction.

The five billion will all be spent, nothing good is left to save.

Spending more money now is for the sake of having more income in the future.

And in two years' time, when Korolya starts paying taxes for the first time and loses its 4 billion tax exemption, Gu Hang hopes that at that time, the Alliance will still have a fiscal surplus of five billion.

This means that in the next two years, the Alliance's income surplus needs to increase by another 40 billion. On the condition of ensuring the growth of the people's consumption, the Alliance must increase from the current output value of 1123 billion to at least around 1300 billion, requiring a 20% economic growth rate over two years.

It's not very difficult.

The ones with the greatest potential are Rage Owl Star and Korolya.

Gu Hang hoped that in two years, Rage Owl Star would have a population of forty billion—mainly through migration from Korolya. With this scale, it would be able to better exert the power of Rage Owl Star's transformation into an industrial planet, as well as better utilize the value of the Rage Owl Star Shipyard.

As for Korolya itself, it is expected that after a total of six years of population migration up to two years in the future, in addition to boosting Rage Owl Star's population to 40 billion, it would also be able to boost Heijian Star's population to 30 billion—which would be the limit for Heijian Star. It is estimated that by then, including the new additions, Korolya will still have a population of around 31 billion.

With 9 billion fewer people, the pressure on Nest Capital will be greatly reduced; and as the reform deepens, the development potential brought by the population will also be realized.

Gu Hang is counting on these two planets as the strongest economic engines to really bring about two years of 20% growth.

That is also Gu Hang's demand of the Alliance Government.

Lady Ossina, who had been promoted to A4 rank, was so worried that she was pulling her hair out. She had thought that as the Alliance's situation improved, she would be able to catch her breath and have a bit more time to rest. However, the two-year plan targets set by the Governor left her no choice but to continue worrying.

It's not that the targets can't be reached—the Governor is not setting arbitrary targets. But the fact that it hinges on the prerequisite of hard effort compelled her to keep striving.

She had to take charge of her Premier's office staff, rally the governments of various planets, and rally the high officials of the Alliance's ministries and committees, to fight hard.

…

After finishing reviewing the tax-related documents and reports and signing her name, Gu Hang turned his attention to military construction.

Actually, his trip to Korolya was for this very purpose.

A big chunk of the Alliance's fiscal surplus was allocated to military construction.

Chapter 402, You Call This the Planetary Defense Army?_2

The Alliance Army won't be making any particularly significant moves at the moment, or rather, the major activities began four years ago and have only recently come to fruition.

Initially, the composition of the Alliance Army was quite straightforward. Later, when Korolya, Fatches, and Flying Wing Star gradually fell into Gu Hang's hands, things became more complicated.

The Planetary Defense Force of Korolya was already split into the Salvation Army and the Defense Army; Fatches and Flying Wing Star also had their own Planetary Defense Armies. On top of that, there was the sequence of the Alliance Army, as well as the combat troop sequences of the Rage Bear Legion and the Dragonhawk 3rd Corps.

Such a complicated military force structure is certainly not conducive to command.

The Rage Bear Legion and Dragonhawk 3rd Corps are not easy to mobilize; these two forces belong to the Star Realm Armed Forces sequence and theoretically have little to do with the Alliance or Star Sector Government. Logistics fall under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Military Department, and command of operations and the appointment and removal of officers are managed by the Star Realm Army Command.

However, just as the Fatches Family once had strong influence over the Dragonhawk 3rd Corps, now, this Star Realm Armed Forces unit of twenty million is actually supported by Gu Hang's Alliance. Although the costs are formally covered by the Military Affairs Department, the soldiers and officers are all from the Tianma Star Sector, previously under Alliance jurisdiction, making the Alliance's influence absolutely indispensable.

…

Not to mention the Rage Bear Legion, which is simply a direct conversion from the Alliance Army, from the command system down to the soldiers.

In the past, Gu Hang used to wonder how he could assimilate the Dragonhawk 3rd Corps into his own. Now, he's found that he doesn't need to do anything. When he became the ruler of the Tianma Star Sector, in both name and reality, the Dragonhawk 3rd Corps stationed there became his.

Especially since Gu Hang adopted some strategies.

Normally, the Star Realm Army doesn't entertain the concept of demobilization, as most of their personnel come from Imperial Tax and having been conscripted as such, there is no reason to send them back.

Moreover, the longer the service, the stronger the veterans become, certainly much more so than new recruits.

But that's assuming they aren't so old that they can't even lift a weapon.

People do age, and while they may be in their prime in their thirties and forties, once they reach fifty, the normal human body functions begin to decline significantly, the body can't keep up with the accumulation of experience. By the age of sixty or seventy, it's unreasonable to expect them to traverse mountains and rivers carrying heavy loads. At that point, unless promoted to officer rank, continuing to fight on the front lines is simply not suitable.

The Star Realm Army, constantly engaged in battle at the front, can have veterans who have survived for decades, let alone those assigned to rear-guard duties.

Typically, the Star Realm Army is quite generous to veterans who have been fighting on the front lines for a long time, accrued a distinguished service record, and survived. If a veteran has continued to live, they are either promoted to officer ranks or, if unsuitable for officer duty, are settled in place upon reaching retirement age. A substantial sum of money and a comfortable, well-paid position on a local or rear-guard planet are standard procedures.

Those left behind in the rear are a bit less fortunate.

However, Gu Hang does not intend to handle things this way.

In fact, the Star Realm Army does have a standard retirement process. Personnel of a certain age—not necessarily old—can be arranged for retirement, but if veterans retire as early as thirty or thirty-five, how will the military's combat power decline be addressed, and how will new personnel be replaced? The former is almost irreplaceable, and the latter would also require additional Imperial resources to draft new Imperial Tax recruits. It's a loss, and neither the Military Affairs Department nor the specific Star Realm Forces would do such a thing, rendering the standard retirement process virtually inoperative.

After numerous discussions with the Dragonhawk Legion, General Hans agreed to a large-scale retirement process for the old soldiers but also stipulated some conditions:

Within the Dragonhawk 3rd Corps, veterans, particularly those over 30 and especially over 35 years of age, would be retired in batches, and the Alliance would handle their resettlement;

The Alliance would be responsible for replacing the missing personnel, adhering to the standards of the Star Realm Army;

Gu Hang agreed to all these conditions.

Those over 30/35 years of age who retire are not dead; there are plenty of opportunities for them to be resettled locally after switching careers. Departments like the police force, anti-corruption, and intelligence services are all willing to take them; if there are excesses that can't be absorbed, there are many industries and industrial regions that need manpower.

Even, those who were locally adjusted to some Planetary Defense Army units essentially turned the old Star Realm soldiers into the backbone of their own Defense Forces, which is undeniably beneficial.

Members of the Star Realm Army, particularly those from the Dragonhawk 3rd Corps who have mostly remained in reserve duties and are not exceptionally distinguished, nor too old, don't need to be placed in especially comfortable and lucrative positions like retired heroes.

As for Gu Hang's gains, they lay in his ability to complete a 'Blood Exchange' of the Dragonhawk Legion.

The supplemental troops had to meet the standards of the Star Realm Army. Where would these people come from? Gu Hang would transfer them from the Alliance Army, which had completed the Army Badge training.

The Dragonhawk 3rd Corps had been stationed in Korolya for over eight years, and even the younger soldiers in the unit had, after these eight years, normally aged to over 30/35 years old.

Once the 'Blood Exchange' reached a certain extent, the Dragonhawk 3rd Corps would no longer be the same as before.

Of course, in essence, it was still the Star Realm Army. This was also true for the Rage Bear Legion. The Military Affairs Department and the Star Realm Army Command had the authority to transfer these two units to take on other tasks.

But it wasn't so easy to transfer them, not like before. Now, Gu Hang's voice was hard to ignore.

Moreover, if there were conflicts near the Star Sector, have them transferred to fight was not necessarily a bad thing.

So far, the Alliance had expanded to its limits through normal means. Without the support of Star Sector leaders or unexpected events, Gu Hang found it difficult to reach beyond the territories of the Star Sectors.

That is why Gu Hang indeed had thoughts of using the Star Realm Army to wage war abroad and further expand the Alliance. However, this idea was not yet mature, with many issues to resolve. Additionally, the Alliance's main task was still to digest internally, to solidify the current territories as core lands, with no energy left to focus outward.

But at the very least, Gu Hang had to keep this option open, ready to take advantage when an opportunity arose. Once the Star Realm Army moved out, the Alliance would follow and look for chances.

Even during these peaceful years, supporting the Star Realm Army was not a loss for the Alliance.

It could offset taxes.

The Dragonhawk 3rd Corps maintained a size of twenty million, while the Rage Bear Legion had expanded to about ten million over these years. The equipment standards remained high. Maintaining these thirty million troops alone cost over a billion Tax Currency a year.

That is, they could offset a billion in Imperial Tax for the Alliance annually.

Besides the thirty million soldiers of the Star Realm Army, the Alliance abolished the Salvation Army structure in Korolya and the whole Defense Forces system within the Alliance, replacing the Planetary Defense Army entirely with the Alliance Army structure.

The overall size of the Alliance Army was around four hundred million, with three hundred million stationed in Korolya.

Gu Hang could not and did not need to train these four hundred million using the Army Badge System to be qualified soldiers.

In fact, only one hundred million completed system training; the remaining three hundred million were trained using conventional methods.

But with 25% core members leading and supported by logistics that met Star Realm Army standards, reaching the combat strength of a standard Star Realm Army in four years of training was not a big problem. Currently, the proportion of Alliance Army soldiers who met the standards of the Star Realm Army could reach 85%, which was already better than many regular Star Realm Armed Forces units.

Not to mention, Gu Hang had established many elite divisions within them.

These elite divisions, internally called ‘Skeleton Divisions’, often had stronger equipment, such as rifles fully replaced with laser or Gauss rifles; equipped with more heavy explosive machine guns and various types of bombs; equipped with plasma weapons and thermite weapons; armored units with higher density of armored vehicles, equipped with Lion King Tanks; reconnaissance units even extravagantly equipped with Sentry Mecha.

Even more, there were higher-tier divisions with special numbers, which even had a large proportion of Exoskeleton Armor issued to the soldiers; some vanguard companies were even outfitted with a large number of ‘Servant God’ Feedback-Type Power Armor.

Let alone those special numbered elite units, even the Skeleton Divisions could make General Hans of the Dragonhawk Legion feel sour.

Damn it, even the Defense Army’s equipment outclassed our legitimate Star Realm Army’s!

Where’s the justice in that?

403

The Alliance Army, with four hundred million troops, had a total construction cost exceeding twenty billion and required nearly 2.1 billion in military expenditure each year for maintenance.

This expenditure was considerably larger than that required to maintain thirty million Star Realm Army troops, even on a per capita basis.

It meant that although the Alliance Army ranked lower in the empire’s order and was essentially a Planetary Defense Army, its actual combat effectiveness was likely much stronger than that of standard Star Realm forces like the Dragonhawk Legion.

Normally, the Alliance wouldn’t have been able to afford such an army. Besides personnel training, the production and maintenance costs of military equipment were prohibitively expensive.

But in reality, the Alliance hadn’t spent that much money.

Most of the equipment, especially the expensive items, were offered to the Alliance Army at least at half the reported price.

…

This was to make the military expenses seem reasonable. Otherwise, if the costs were really twenty billion for construction and two billion annually for maintenance, outsiders would start wondering how the Alliance could sustain such expenditure.

In fact, under normal circumstances, the Alliance truly couldn’t afford this expense. The reported prices could be manipulated to appear lower, but actual production costs couldn’t be falsified since the troops genuinely needed that much equipment and ammunition.

However, the Alliance had a unique advantage in this aspect.

The Black Box's direct output of some equipment was nearly free, costing only material expenses. The advantage was not obvious when producing relatively cheap items like firearms and armored vehicles; however, when it came to producing the Lion King Tanks, which cost about three hundred thousand each, getting one from the Black Box was like picking it up for free.

Direct production from the Black Box was only a small part; the main benefit was the production lines it could directly create, which were highly efficient and practically cost nothing.

When the cost of equipment excluded research and development and production line expenses, considering only the labor and material costs needed for manufacturing, the cost became very acceptable.

Moreover, the larger the scale of production, the lower the production cost. The Alliance would certainly keep building, and any surplus Land Forces equipment would be treated as payment for Imperial Tax. With over a hundred billion in Imperial Tax revenue each year, the production capacity would not be a concern.

Leaving aside the reality for a moment, officially, the Alliance spent only seven billion on the construction of the Land Forces, spread over the past six years, with annual maintenance costs of just six billion, which had been rising year by year.

However, another major portion of military expenses—the construction of the naval forces—was not so easy to manage.

For products that the Black Box couldn't produce, only blueprints were provided. It could output only key components to establish production lines.

Even though this significantly reduced manufacturing costs, due to the high unit price and fewer ships, naval accounting was difficult.

And there wasn't much need for detailed accounting, as the price difference wasn't particularly large.

In the past four years, the Alliance had invested approximately seven billion Tax Currency into naval construction.

The current Alliance Navy possessed three Crazy Shark-class Destroyers, five Escort Ships, of which three were ‘Silver Helmet’ and two were ‘Silver Sword.’

These were the main force of the Alliance Navy, along with twenty-one ‘Blackfish-class’ patrol ships, whose smaller role was not worth mentioning.

Du Shiliang of the Tianma Fleet had witnessed the Alliance Navy’s debut, and his expression was somewhat complex.

On one hand, the current combat capability of the Alliance Navy couldn’t compare with the Tianma Fleet, not even with its residual forces left behind. The entire Alliance Navy’s value was roughly equivalent to the cost of a single Musician-class Cruiser.

On the other hand, the Alliance Navy had become a force in the Star Sea that couldn’t be ignored, having built all this in just four years. By comparison, how many years had it taken for the Tianma Fleet, which was funded by Imperial Tax, to reach its current strength from its inception?

Three hundred years!

The Tianma Fleet started from scratch three hundred years ago, accumulating ships, engaging in warfare, losing ships, and continuing to build more.

The Alliance Navy, not part of the Imperial Navy, was nominally an internal escort team of the Alliance Star Sector. Neither the Military Affairs Department nor the Imperial Navy Command had jurisdiction over them.

Without the need to unconditionally obey imperial commands and go to dangerous battlefields to fight, they would only escort within their Star Sector, with a very low chance of losing ships.

Cumulating resources this way, coupled with the further growth of the Alliance's production capacity, especially that of the Rage Owl Star Shipyard, wouldn't they be able to accumulate a third of the Tianma Fleet in twenty or thirty years?

From this perspective, it was quite frightening.

But in fact, Gu Hang's vision might be even more ambitious than what Du Shiliang imagined.

It would be too few to accumulate a third of a Tianma Fleet in twenty or thirty years.

If given that much time, the growth of the Alliance's productivity could reach an exaggerated level. The speed at which Starships were produced would increase, and the general increase in production capacity would lift the restrictions on using Starships to pay Imperial Taxes on Flying Wing Star, allowing those ships to stay and join the Alliance Navy.

The speed at which the Alliance Navy was built would accelerate over time.

Forget a third of a Tianma Fleet, if the Alliance were to develop peacefully, Gu Hang was confident that in twenty years, they could accumulate naval power not inferior to the entire Tianma Fleet.

Chapter 403: The Iron Teeth War_2

…

Gu Hang's warship arrived at Korolya.

He inspected the recent restructuring effects of the Alliance Army and watched an elite legion parade before him.

Then, he made a circuitous visit to some officials in several Nest Capitals and stayed a few days at the governor's mansion, thus completing his itinerary in Korolya.

Currently, Gu Hang spent half of the year in the governor's mansions at Flying Wing Star or Rage Owl Star, and the other half flying around various planets in the Alliance, checking things out.

A Crazy Shark-class, two Silver Helmet-class, and seven or eight patrol ships were specially designated as his personal transports, ferrying him around the star sectors.

…

On the destroyer named 'Meditation Number,' a cabin had been specially modified for him, his headquarter office, and the Alliance staff group, to assist with his work. The star-language signals on Meditation Number were also enhanced to facilitate his execution of official duties and communication with Alliance officials, ministries, and planets.

Thinking about it, the life of such a supreme leader of the Alliance was indeed monotonous and dull.

However, there had recently been an event that required his attention.

The main force of the Tianma Fleet was returning.

And that also meant that Yelisia was coming back.

…

Yelisia had been away from Tianma Star Sector for over six years.

An engagement had been made, yet the wedding had not taken place in six years.

But this was an unavoidable matter.

In the beginning, no one expected the war against the Iron-Tooth Clan to last so long.

The Iron-Tooth Clan had been entrenched in the northeast of the Dragonhawk Star Domain for over seventy years. Not only had they not been dealt with, but they had also grown stronger over those seven decades.

What started as a minor hassle on a single planet in the Iron Pass Star Sector had escalated into the entire star sector being dragged into war; then the first Iron-Tooth War broke out, and humanity, despite having space superiority, was disastrously defeated in the ground war. A massive number of landing pods were launched from the planetary surface onto human warships in orbit, leading to the destruction of at least fifty naval vessels of various classes.

The Green Skins were fearless, launching manned rockets directly from the ground to orbit, handling both explosion damage and boarding in one go, something human troops couldn't manage; after capturing the naval ships, they would then pilot them straight to the planetary surface, not caring if the ships were damaged or destroyed upon impact.

After the failure of the first Iron-Tooth War, the star domains urgently mobilized more forces to fight back. However, before the second Iron-Tooth War could begin, the entire Iron Pass Star Sector had fallen. The Green Skins were no longer just ground combatants, as numerous rickety, weak, but plentiful Green Skin junk ships began to roam the Iron Pass Star Sector and spread outwards.

The second Iron-Tooth War erupted, a campaign primarily fought by naval forces.

The human military, underestimating the enemy's strength, was once again defeated.

This time, the consequence was the fall of the surrounding sectors: Silver Pass Sector, Kuoluo Sector, and Jiang Meiyu Sector.

The warlord who had unified all Green Skin tribes launched a massive waaagh, attacking vigorously around the Iron Pass Star Sector.

Humanity hastily engaged in battle, and then the third Iron-Tooth War broke out in the Golden Pass Star Sector.

In this battle, human forces finally achieved victory.

The death of a Green Skin Overlord pirate threw the vast Green Skin Fleet into chaos and led to its widespread annihilation; humans seized the opportunity to deploy the Extinction Order onto a planetary surface, killing most of the Green Skins there and causing the death of the commanding Green Skin overlord who had personally led the expedition.

The Beastman Empire across four star sectors plunged into civil war. With the loss of the warlord's leadership, many first-level Green Skin overlords began to fight amongst themselves.

This could also be considered a traditional skill of the Green Skin Orcs. Under the unified leadership of a warlord, the Green Skins would unleash formidable combat power; but once their leader fell, internal strife would immediately begin, continuing until they vied for a new chieftain.

In theory, this was the best opportunity to completely eradicate all Green Skins. However, in reality, after three consecutive Iron-Tooth battles, the first two were defeats, and the third at best could only be considered a Pyrrhic victory. After the battles, there simply wasn't enough strength left in the Star Domain to pursue a decisive strike.

The Green Skins were indeed in chaos, but the sheer number of them still posed a threat, and the infighting was between planets and even among overlords who occupied multiple planets.

Recovering lost territories and exterminating the Green Skins still required sufficient force.

And the Dragonhawk Star Domain no longer had the necessary strength. The aid they requested from nearby Star Sectors and the higher-level Space Domain Government was nowhere in sight.

In such circumstances, they could only attempt to recapture the Golden Pass Star Sector, clearing out the Green Skins within it and calling it a day, lacking the capability to carry out comprehensive extermination operations in the four Star Sectors that had completely fallen into Green Skin hands.

The third Iron-Tooth war had taken place twenty-six years ago. In the twenty-six years since, the Dragonhawk Star Domain had established a defensive line around the six directly accessible Star Sectors

surrounding the four occupied Star Sectors, effectively sealing them off. This defensive line came to be known as the ‘Iron-Tooth Defense Line’.

The human forces would often organize troops to attack the occupied areas, attempting to take back some planets, destroy Green Skin Fleets, and raze their shipyards.

At the same time, the Iron-Tooth Clan’s raiding fleets would often penetrate into the six Star Sectors that composed the Iron-Tooth Defense Line, attacking the human side.

The Green Skins would also fight amongst themselves, and the whole situation reached a dynamic equilibrium.

It wasn’t until six years ago that the Star Domain Government believed they had recovered sufficiently. Noticing the Green Skins had not yet unified and that the entire Star Domain had revitalized after twenty years of rest, the Star Domain Government planned to organize another war, intending to hit the Iron-Tooth Clan hard.

A problem that hadn’t been solved in seventy years could not be expected to be resolved all at once, but at least, some results needed to be produced.

Initiating this war led by the human side, the first step was to sever the Green Skins’ reach towards the Golden Pass, Copper Barrier, and the defensive Star Sectors, fully liberating those worlds embroiled in the Green Skin wars; following this, the next move would be to strike at the Silver Pass Sector, at least capturing and eliminating three to four Green Skin worlds and establishing a beachhead to prepare for subsequent actions.

Following this plan, the main force of the Tianma Fleet was dispatched.

At the same time, several main Army Groups from the Dragonhawk Legion and Dragonhawk Fleet were also put into action.

When the war first started, it was reportedly going smoothly. In just a little over a year, the Green Skins in the three Iron-Tooth Defense Line Star Sectors were dealt with by the human army. Then, the Fleet and Land Forces advanced into the Silver Pass Sector to begin the second phase of the campaign.

However, here they reached a stalemate with slow progress.

A task initially estimated to take three years dragged on for six.

But recently, at last, some good news had arrived.

Silver Pass 2, Silver Pass 3, Water Fog Star, and White Fog Star—the four predetermined targets within the Silver Pass Sector—had finally all been captured.

As a result, the human forces established a beachhead within the Silver Pass Sector.

Although the course of the war was quite strenuous, with the elimination of Green Skins within the ‘Iron-Tooth Defense Line’ and the capture of four worlds in the occupied territories, the achievements could be considered satisfactory.

What followed was waiting to accumulate another wave of power to slowly erode the occupied territories from within.

Even so, the Star Domain Government had drafted a timetable to completely eradicate the Green Skins, boldly stating they would resolve the Green Skin issue within the Star Domain definitively in the next fifteen years!

Under such premises, with the preliminary objectives of the war achieved, the Tianma Fleet also had an opportunity to return and recuperate.

Chapter 404, The Tall Pirate Crew

The United Forces of the Dragonhawk Star Domain achieved their war goals, but it didn’t mean the war was over.

Wars can be started at will, yet they cannot be ended so casually.

Would the Green Skins just accept their loss and give up?

In the Water Fog Star and Silver Pass 2 Star Systems, the war continued. The Green Skins had launched fierce attacks for two years, trying to recapture these two planets and then target Silver Pass 3 and White Fog Star behind them.

The human military gritted their teeth and held out for two years, finally driving the Green Skins back.

To this day, there are still sporadic small-scale wars going on. The large-scale battles have ended, otherwise, the Tianma Fleet wouldn't have been able to return.

…

According to the plan, the Tianma Fleet would return and rest for at least five years. The crew needed rest, and at the same time, the ships also needed repairs.

The departing Tianma Fleet, led by five cruisers, comprised over a hundred warships. After six years of war, one cruiser was destroyed, and the losses of other types of ships exceeded twenty. The rest could only undergo field repairs and were overall quite worn out.

It was estimated that after returning, it might take more than five years to repair all the ships. By then, the shipyards on Flying Wing Star would likely have to cut production, and many docks would have to be emptied, exclusively for ship repairs. Just the cost of repairs would probably break two hundred billion.

The related orders had already been sent.

Of course, the bill for the ship repairs would be footed by the Military Affairs Department and the Imperial Navy, with the amount being set off against taxes, twenty billion a year.

In terms of revenue, that wasn't too bad. At least a few docks were emptied out so other ships could be built.

Gu Hang and Yelisia had communicated several times during this period and planned to marry upon his return.

As for whether the war would continue thereafter and the two would have to face separation again within a few years, it sadly seemed unavoidable. Even for people of Gu Hang and Yelisia's status, they often had no control over their fate — perhaps even less control.

But at least they could enjoy a few years of peace, Gu Hang had to tell himself that much.

Calculating the time, Yelisia should have already set off.

Returning, she would have to pass through twelve Star Realm Tunnels. Generally speaking, the one-way journey from one star system to another takes about five to eight days at the speed of an average fleet. Among those, the time spent traversing the Star Realm Tunnels isn't long, typically just a day. The main part of the journey is the vast emptiness between the starport and the jump point, which requires the ships to travel for a long time.

However, this issue can be substantially overcome during long-distance travel. If the starship keeps accelerating without stopping, flying from one jump point to the next without slowing down, and initiating the jump upon arrival before accelerating again to the next jump point, the fleet's speed will keep increasing.

Since the physical speed of space travel does not affect the time it takes to jump, these twelve Star Realm Tunnel transits would indeed take about ten days and cannot be reduced, but the time for interstellar travel in space can be compressed to around twenty-five days. The entire voyage would be just over a month.

That is to say, in just over a month, Gu Hang would be able to see his fiancée.

It all felt so unfamiliar.

Originally, in order to solve the issue of political marriage, Gu Hang worked hard to close the gap between them before Yelisia left. Now, after a six-year separation, it's hard to say how much of that painstakingly fostered affection remained.

But no matter, this marriage had to proceed regardless of the state of their emotional foundation.

…

While the welcoming ceremony was being arranged on Flying Wing Star, a military operation currently being executed by the alliance also reached a conclusion.

After the internal trade routes of the Tianma Star Sector became busy, they attracted pirates.

Pirates are a nuisance; they appear and vanish unpredictably within the Star Sea. They might not cause any major incidents, but their constant harassment, hijacking a small ship one day, and playing cat and mouse with the navy the next, is extremely annoying.

Aside from those formidable Pirate Alliances not easily eradicated, typical Pirate Groups are nothing but trash in front of imperial authorities; as long as their lair can be located, snuffing them out is simple.

But the issue is, one has to find the lair.

Where the pirates' base is, where their ships come from, where they recruit their hands… for the officials, these are all mysteries.

And once this information is in their grasp, it's usually the moment when the pirate organization is doomed to be wiped out.

The Pirate Group that haunts the Tianma Star Sector is named the 'Red Eye Pirate Group'; it has been causing chaos for over a year now.

The damage they've caused is neither significant nor insignificant.

It's not significant because it doesn't seriously harm the alliance.

And it's not insignificant because losing even a small passenger ship like the ones used by travelers can cost several million in Tax Currency.

Not to mention an incident where a ship departing from Korolya, carrying over eight hundred young students delegated by the local government of Korolya heading to Flying Wing Star to study and change their fates, resulted in all of them being captured.

This was undoubtedly an open provocation to the alliance.

Gu Hang could not tolerate such an incident in his own Star Sector.

The pirates conveyed their ransom demands through secret channels to Gu Hang, asking for an outrageous sum. But they underestimated both Gu Hang's resolve and the power of the alliance; regardless of how much the pirates wanted, even if it was a mere dime, Gu Hang had never planned to pay.

He knew that to give in would set a precedent; tasting success, the pirates would become even more unbridled. If word got out that the alliance was weak and easy to bully, and big money could be made in the Tianma Star Sector, then it was likely that not just one 'Red Eye Pirate Group' would come knocking for a windfall, but perhaps a myriad of colorful-eyed brigands as well.

Chapter 404, The Tall Pirate Crew_2

He had to issue a hard-line response to let all potential pirates know that to challenge the Alliance was to court death.

Gu Hang did not hesitate to refuse the ransom demands, even though it meant hundreds of people would die.

At the same time, he also gave orders to the newly established Alliance Navy and Du Shiliang of the Tianma Fleet, demanding that they resolve the issue as soon as possible and prevent such incidents from happening again.

This was not easy, mainly because the pirates were hard to find.

The only measures they could take were somewhat clumsy.

Reduce flight frequency, assemble a group of ships, and then travel together, all the while escorted by the Alliance Navy.

…

The method was effective, but the key issue was that it was extremely disagreeable. The efficiency of interstellar shipping was greatly reduced, and the escort duty also consumed naval costs—fuel money, ship depreciation, all were additional losses.

There might be a thief for a thousand days, but can there be a defense against the theft for a thousand days?

The goal of the Alliance Navy and the Imperial Navy was still to eradicate the pirate group as quickly as possible.

In several battles that repelled pirate harassment, the Alliance's rapid vessels played a major role.

Thanks to the Alliance's technological accumulation in advanced engines, they had generously equipped almost all types of ships with excellent motors while designing them.

The Spirit Engine, a type of engine typically used for regular navigation, wouldn't be fitted in large numbers on normal ships. For example, even patrol ships might not be equipped with it. It's quite expensive, and most importantly, it consumes high-grade energy crystals, which are costly. For lower-grade ships, using it seems wasteful.

But the Alliance was not afraid of wastefulness.

Rage Owl Star had a large output of energy. Currently, Rage Owl Star had extensive experience in the collection and utilization of energy from Low Energy Storms. Energy compression technology was also derived from the Black Box output, and after many years of expanded production, it now had a pretty decent yield.

Especially after an abundant population was established, the other two uninhabited continents on Rage Owl Star have already been entered into the development process. The Planetary Government has built sizable energy collection factories on those two continents.

Moreover, the Alliance's Technological Center, in collaboration with the Storm Mage Corps and the Psychic Cultivator's Association, were already researching how to completely quell the Low Energy Storm worldwide. Once this project is overcome, it's expected that Spiritualized Gas Fields could reappear on Rage Owl Star. By then, just from energy production, Rage Owl Star could potentially reach a development level similar to Grade 4 or 5. Plus, with industrial production and shipbuilding stronger than the pre-war era, the entire planet's development potential would exceed any other world in the Tianma Star Sector!

Even at present, by only roughly collecting the energy from the Low Energy Storms, which couldn't compare to the efficiency of the Spiritualized Gas Fields, they still managed to reach about twenty percent efficiency, which was quite a decent output.

Benefiting from the convenient high-grade energy, and because the Spirit Engine produced by the Black Box could greatly reduce costs, Alliance ships were able to be massively equipped with such engines. Especially the 'Silver Sword' and 'Black Fish'—these two types of rapid vessels—once they bit into a pirate ship, there was no escaping.

Pirate ships, generally speaking, due to their combat characteristics, would not choose head-on confrontation, aiming for asymmetrical strikes instead. Being able to defeat transport ships and armed merchant ships was sufficient, and the rest of their points were allocated into speed.

However, under the ships of the Alliance Navy, they still couldn't escape.

After being hit by several annihilating blows, the Red Eye Pirate Group was significantly weakened; their frequency of appearances greatly decreased, and they never succeeded again.

For an average Star Sector, solving the pirate problem to this extent would be considered the end; even most places with active pirates can't achieve this much.

But the Alliance would clearly not let it go at that.

Without completely annihilating the Red Eye Pirate Group, the Alliance Navy would not cease their pursuit.

Through the severe torture of captives, psychic searches of the mind, plus the Star Language Hall of the Psychic Cultivator's Association monitoring all Star Language communications within the entire Star Sector, catching snippets of information about the pirates, they finally clarified the trail of this group of pirates.

They had established a hidden base on a satellite near a gas giant in the Hongjian Star System. There, they stored supplies needed by pirate ships, and thousands of slaves worked on ship repairs, locally sourced manufacturing of parts, and even managed a small underground plantation.

That satellite of the giant planet, of course, was not subjected to any habitability transformation, and humans normally could not survive there; the slaves could only exist inside the base, and stepping outside required the appropriate spacesuits.

“”””

Over a thousand Alliance captives were being held there.

After obtaining this intelligence, the Tianma Fleet dispatched some forces to join the Alliance Navy and carry out a surprise attack on the location.

Nine pirate ships were destroyed, and their base was demolished; thousands of slaves and Alliance hostages were somewhat injured, but most were rescued.

However, beneath the news of victory, there were losses.

One of the Alliance Navy's 'Blackfish' Rapid Patrol Vessels was lost.

It wasn't lost in a naval battle; with overwhelming power, the Alliance Navy, no matter how poor, shouldn't have lost ships. But after all the pirate vessels had been annihilated and the rebel forces at the base on the island were neutralized, as the Navy Marine Corps landed on the satellite's surface to liberate the slaves and hostages, they were fiercely attacked by a bizarre enemy squad.

The loss of personnel was very heavy in the ground combat. What's more, this strange enemy squad turned around and seized a landing craft, taking it to the skies.

Caught off guard, this landing craft demonstrated extremely agile piloting skills, slipped through the somewhat hesitant gunfire net, and crashed into a Blackfish patrol vessel. Subsequently, the pirate squad hijacked the 'Blackfish' and escaped pursuit.

When Gu Hang first saw this battle process, he was somewhat shocked.

The entire operation proceeded without unexpected events, and the performance of the Alliance Navy met expectations, and could even be considered excellent for a newly formed force.

But this debut was thoroughly messed up by that so-called pirate squad.

The ability displayed by that squad was just too fierce.

Before the action, the Alliance Military had considered the possibility of ground combat, since they needed to resolve the personnel without bombing everyone. Therefore, at the start of the operation, in addition to the Navy Marine Corps established with the Navy, they also requested to borrow some elite troops from the 10th Special Operations Brigade of the Alliance Army.

A hundred special operations elites participated in the battle, including three teams wearing 'Servant God' Feedback-Type Powered Armor.

Could such a force really be breached by a so-called pirate squad?

What the hell kind of pirate squad is this? Interstellar warrior pirates?!

Interstellar warriors?

Wait a minute.

Gu Hang immediately focused on the following line in the battle report, which mentioned the survivors' description of these enemies.

They were very tall, much taller than the average person, with an estimated average height of around 2.2 meters; they were wearing heavy powered armor, which was clearly different from the Feedback-Type Powered Armor; their armor seemed somewhat tattered, with pure red paint, but the parts that should have clear markings, such as the breastplate and shoulder armor, were all scratched and painted over.

In the back, there was a blurry photo.

The emblem on the shoulder that was painted over was not very clear, but Gu Hang guessed, after some deliberation, that beneath it there might be a phoenix in flight.

After pondering for a moment, he dialed a special number on Rage Owl Star.

"Commander Matins? It's me; the Alliance might need you and your warriors to provide some assistance. It could also be related to Phoenix itself."

After a pause, he added:

"Anyway, take a look at the report first."

Chapter 405, The Defector Interstellar Warrior

On Rage Owl Star, within the Warband Monastery.

Matins sat quietly and finished reading the battle report.

Throughout this period, the Star-language communication had never been disconnected. On the other end, Gu Hang also waited patiently — or he might have taken the opportunity to attend to other matters while maintaining the communication.

Realizing the time that had passed, Matins said, “Sorry, Governor, to have kept you waiting.”

“No problem. What do you plan to do next?”

“I will depart immediately with my team to take care of this issue personally. Thank you for your concern.” Matins was always very polite towards Gu Hang.

…

“Good, I’ll leave it to you. I’ll have the navy cooperate with you, whether it’s the Alliance Fleet or the Tianma Fleet.”

“Thank you.”

After the communication ended, Matins turned back around. From a secure safe behind him, he took out a thick notebook and placed it on the table.

He flipped through the pages, which recorded one name after another.

Those were the names of all the members of the Phoenix Battle Group since its inception to the present.

He turned to a page where his own name was listed. And just two lines above it was the name ‘Sydney Bravens’.

He remembered that Bravens had joined Phoenix with him. They trained together, encouraged each other, underwent implant surgery together, and fought side by side.

In the seventy-ninth year of Phoenix's penitent expedition, during a rebellion suppression mission, Phoenix deployed fifty warriors. Initially, the battle went rather smoothly, but later on, the front lines suddenly collapsed. The Planetary Defense Forces, acting as allies, were routed, and he and his comrades were trapped in a siege, forced to hold out in a fortress.

Fifty Phoenix warriors fought innumerable enemy soldiers equipped with heavy firepower. They eliminated a vast number of enemies, instilling such fear in the rebels that they dared not attack any further and had to circumvent their defenses.

Eventually, out of ammunition and supplies, the Phoenix warriors could not hold out any longer. Without any hope of reinforcement, they were forced to attempt a breakout. They charged through minefields, faced bullets and artillery fire, and endured air strikes before finally breaking out of the encirclement.

During this process, however, their ranks were scattered under repeated crises. When they regrouped behind the lines, there were only just over twenty of them left.

Among the lost personnel, some died in the defense of the fortress, others went missing during the breakout and never returned. His friend, Sydney Bravens, was among the latter.

Furious, he had the Planetary Defense Army commander who had ordered the retreat without notifying the Phoenix beforehand executed by firing squad. He decisively took over command and ultimately won the war.

But there were no rewards, only pain and censure from the empire.

There were no rewards because they were on a penitent expedition, and honor was not something they could claim. The censure was because, as convicts, they had dared to execute a commander on the battlefield and take control.

However, Matins had no regrets, and neither did the Battle Group punish him.

That incompetent and foolish commander directly caused the deaths of over twenty of their brothers, all in an ordinary rebellion suppression mission. This was something unforgivable.

Especially since among those killed was his good friend.

And at this moment, Matins recalled the images of those days, the times he had spent with Sydney Bravens.

The memory of his silhouette kept reappearing before his eyes, becoming more and more tangible.

He stared at the picture that was blurry and fleeting for a long, long time.

…

Extinct Soil Star is a desert world located in the Cultivating Horse Star Sector and connected to Hongjian Star on the star map.

It’s somewhat akin to an enlarged version of the Western Desert on Rage Owl Star; the entire planet is covered in desert, with a smaller ocean area and extremely harsh conditions.

Still, about two hundred million people manage to live here.

Most of them roam following the availability of water and grass. The rainfall on Extinct Soil Star is scarce and shows distinct seasonality and regionality. The inhabitants have developed the ability to chase the rainy seasons, creating nomadic groups that wander across the entire planet.

Additional minor populations inhabit valleys and oases, relying on underground water sources to establish stable residential areas and even cities.

The main exports of this planet are grains, meat products, furs, and leather goods. A yearly tax of twenty million can be scraped together; occasionally, in years of poor harvests or internal disturbances on the planet, a bit of head tax is taken to compensate.

The life of the planet's governor, therefore, isn't particularly great—he's like a mender.

And so, if life isn't going well, one always has to look for other solutions.

After a visit from Interstellar Pirates who raided Extinct Soil Star, Governor Ahzimuba came up with an idea.

Not only did he refrain from reporting the raid to the empire, he even offered the Pirate Group more supplies and entered into a long-term collaboration with them, a group called 'Red Eye'.

Extinct Soil Star provided the Pirate Group with some supplies, even goods, which they sold in the pirate black market. The returns from these sales were higher than the regular Imperial Tax and regular trade. The resources obtained were used to purchase other items difficult to sell on the black market, which were then traded within the empire's legitimate trade system for different goods.

Additionally, they provided cover for the Pirate Group's identities, so whenever some official naval forces hunted them down, they could hide on Extinct Soil Star and disguise themselves as locals.

Chapter 405, The Defector Interstellar Warrior_2

Over time, the Pirate Group went so far as to directly recruit manpower on Extinct Soil Star.

However, before this, Governor Ahzimuba and the individuals from the Red Eye Pirate Group at least understood the principle of not poaching near their den. Moreover, the interstellar trade in the neighboring Cultivating Horse Star Sector was not very developed, whereas the interstellar trade in the adjacent Tianma Star Sector was much better, but it was constantly guarded by the Tianma Fleet.

It was precisely for this reason that the Red Eye Pirate Group had never operated in these two Star Sectors.

They treated Extinct Soil Star as a secret base, a fallback point, a supply station, and an import location for goods. The actual raiding activities would take place far away.

It was only recently that this strategy began to change.

The neighbor's life had improved, trade was booming, and that was truly enticing. The key point was that there were many unprotected civilian merchant ships wandering around.

…

The main force of the Tianma Fleet had also left due to the Iron Tooth War, wasn't this the perfect opportunity to make a fortune?

Of course, if that was all, they would still hesitate.

But at this time, during an operation in a far-off Star Sector, they encountered eight warriors.

Their main ships were taken, but instead of killing them, these eight warriors joined their ranks and undoubtedly seized control. The leader of the Red Eye Pirate Group became a tall man known as 'Nides'.

Anyone who had heard of the legends of the Interstellar Warriors would have no doubt been able to identify them by their stature and their Powered Armor.

And looking at the way they conducted themselves, at the insignias that had been painted over on their armor, there was even more that could be guessed.

But no one dared to speak out.

Anyway, having a new boss wasn't such a bad thing. After all, the new boss was seriously fierce.

Subsequently, under the command of the new boss, they abandoned their past strategies and began to make moves on the Tianma Star Sector.

Initially, they had a few successful loots that indeed made them wealthy, which buoyed the morale of the Pirate Group.

But then it became more difficult, and losses ensued. But this was normal; when you're a pirate, who doesn't get rich without taking some hits?

However, it was about time to call it quits.

That's what Ahzimuba thought too.

Now in the Pirate Group, there were already quite a few people from Extinct Soil Star, many of whom were his trusted followers.

How easy is it to mess with Tianma Star Sector's Gu Hang? The more Ahzimuba heard about this man through official channels, the more terrified he became.

It was best to stop now.

They had made their fortune, some brothers had died, and it was time to pull back, go back, sell the looted ships, people, and materials, and with the survivors, each would get a big share. Extinct Soil Star could also breathe easier; the next Imperial Tax would no longer require a head tax.

In recent months, he had suggested this point to Nides three or four times.

But each time, he was rejected.

When he tried to contact Nides again, he found that he couldn't get through at all.

The Star Language Tower on Extinct Soil Star was not advanced, and the Spiritual Energy practitioner that maintained the Star Language Tower was also a local who achieved mastery through self-taught skills, so his strength was not very impressive. But it was only a matter of contacting the neighboring Star System, which should not have been difficult.

Several attempts to make contact were unsuccessful, and Ahzimuba was already feeling an ill omen.

But he still had a bit of wishful thinking.

Perhaps the Red Eye Pirate Group had just fled?

Even if they had been destroyed by that so-called alliance, it's not certain they all perished on the ship, and the alliance might not even know the relationship between Extinct Soil Star and this group of pirates.

He could only think this way.

What else could he do?

The alliance was right next door; one Star Realm traversal from Hongjian Star was all it took to reach him. Compared to Mr. Gu, whether in terms of force or political influence, he and his planet were as insignificant as a small village, without any power to resist.

What's more, there was no question that he had significantly violated the Imperial Law. Supporting piracy, harboring pirates, colluding with Mutinous Interstellar Warriors… any one of these charges was enough for him to die several times over, and it would also drag down his entire household register.

The key point was, he wasn't a pirate, and his planet couldn't move. Pirates could run, but he couldn't escape.

He lived in fear and anxiety for some time, but what was destined to come would always arrive.

His subordinate in charge of the Observation Star Station told him that a ship bearing the alliance's insignia had arrived in the orbit of Extinct Soil Star.

He thought it was the neighbors coming to exact punishment. On one hand, he hastily called his boss, the head of the Cultivating Horse Star Sector, omitted some information but shared the situation, while on the other hand, he also prepared to welcome them.

But who would have known that the person who came down was not from the Alliance, but a Nides.

However, the entire pirate fleet that went to the Tianma Star Sector with the Nides, as well as the numerous people from Extinct Soil Star, never made it back.

"Nides leader… where are my people?" Ahzimuba asked, his voice trembling slightly.

"They can't come back."

"Then what did you bring back?"

"We only brought back our own lives."

Ahzimuba was choked up.

After stammering for a moment, he asked again, "What about the Alliance? Does the Alliance know…"

The Nides interrupted him, "I don't know what the Alliance has grasped, but I don't plan to stay here much longer. Get ready the fuel, food supplies, and prepare some slaves; we will be leaving soon."

Ahzimuba became anxious, "If you leave, what about us?"

"What does that have to do with me?"

“No! You must stay, with us…” Ahzimuba wanted to say ‘fight alongside us,’ but somehow, he couldn’t say it.

Fight alongside us to do what?

Fight against the Alliance?

What could eight deserters possibly contribute?

In small-scale fights, these eight deserters were unparalleled; but in large-scale battles, under the rage of the Alliance, it didn’t matter if there were eight or eighty of them—they’d be useless.

It was said that the Alliance also received the assistance of a Starfighter Battle Group; that’s a legitimate battle group!

But Ahzimuba still couldn’t let these deserters leave.

If they didn’t leave, he could still think of a way to hand these fellows over, whether to pretend he was bewitched or coerced, or to think of a way to redeem himself with meritorious deeds. However small the chance, he had to find some way out. If they ran away, then he would truly be finished.

By now, who knows how many people from Extinct Soil Star had fallen into the hands of the Alliance? No matter how much he hoped for the best, he knew it couldn’t be hidden.

However, he couldn’t just tell the Nides that directly.

He had to think of something.

Ahzimuba said, “I understand; I will try my best to meet your demands.”

“Don’t play tricks; I’m only giving you three hours,” the Nides leader warned.

“I will definitely meet all your needs within three hours,” Ahzimuba assured him.

After the Nides leader left, Ahzimuba used the excuse of secretly preparing supplies and slaves to leave the planetary capital.

If he stayed, he feared being torn to pieces.

This was one of the few places on Extinct Soil Star that could pass for a city, nestled in a lush river valley.

Traveling by vehicle into the vast desert, Ahzimuba remotely directed his subordinates. He made a show of preparing the supplies but was dawdling.

Once the three hours had passed, of course, the supplies were not ready.

Ahzimuba had people apologize, saying he was making all-out preparations but because it needed to be done secretly and not to arouse suspicion, coupled with the large quantity of items requested, it was difficult to prepare everything all at once… In short, he used every excuse in the book, claiming it would be ready soon.

To put it plainly, he was just trying to buy time.

And at this moment, all he was doing was praying that the Alliance would arrive soon.

However, the Nides didn’t give him any more chances. They didn’t believe any of his stories, and as soon as the three hours were up, they started killing people.

Ahzimuba’s confidants were killed, followed quickly by the collapse of the personal guard team watching over the deserters. The Planetary Defense Army that guarded the capital had no clear understanding but also acted according to Ahzimuba’s orders.

The orders they received were that pirates were attacking. The Planetary Defense Force's warriors had to destroy the landing craft that the pirates used to come from the sky, implement martial law throughout the city, and stop the movement of all suspicious individuals.

Even though there were only eight deserters and the Planetary Defense Force stationed in the capital had at least fifty thousand troops, Ahzimuba felt utterly uncertain.

He traveled aimlessly through the desert in a vehicle, maintaining contact with the city through the vehicle, and remotely controlling his troops who were loyal to him to obstruct the Nides's actions.

Chapter 406, Phoenix Has No Secrets

Planetary Defense Force, can they stop interstellar warriors?

Obviously not.

Even though they are traitors, Nides—Or rather, Sydney Blaywins and his seven battle brothers, are veterans with at least two hundred years of combat experience.

Their combat experience is extremely rich.

Blaywins and his comrades, a total of eight men. One man did not come down from the patrol cruiser in the sky, leaving seven, with two following by Blaywins' side, the other four guarding their landing ship.

Upon realizing that something was wrong, they made a decisive decision to start killing people and forced the people of Extinct Soil Star to transport the prepared resources and slave labor to their landing ship.

…

Transport as much as they could.

As for those members of the Planetary Defense Force who dared to launch an attack against them, they did not hold back when killing them.

The Planetary Defense Force on Extinct Soil Star fully met the general impression of a Planetary Defense Force—they were truly weak. Perhaps even within the Defense Force, they were among those with poorer equipment, training, and morale.

They neither broke through the traitors' defense, nor did they manage to take out the coerced transport laborers or destroy the landing ships used by the traitors to touch down on the planet's surface.

The seven traitors, after spending about twenty minutes to kill over a thousand soldiers from Extinct Soil Star, left the surviving troops completely disheartened and afraid to engage further.

Orders urged on by Ahzimuba kept coming in, the high-ranking officers gritting their teeth issuing mortal orders to the lower echelons, insisting they attack or face execution if they survived by not doing so. Under such circumstances, they finally managed to regroup and launched a few attacks.

But one can imagine how poor the quality of such offensives was.

Extinct Soil Star soldiers, reluctantly driven forward, after firing a few shots and witnessing their comrades being precisely sniped off one after another, would quickly retreat back.

In such a situation, the traitors even launched a few offensives.

They first located a Defense Army command post, destroyed it, and killed the commander.

Although it was not the highest commander—the supreme commander was far in the rear—it still caused chaos among the frontline troops of the Planetary Defense Force.

Then, in the confusion, they also destroyed the artillery positions of the Planetary Defense Force, eliminating the heavy firepower threat to the transport team.

By the way, in this process, they also took down five aircraft with man-portable missiles.

After dissolving the Planetary Defense Force's capability to resist, the coerced slave laborers finally managed to load all the resources, and themselves, onto the landing ship.

The landing ship started its engines, with four Interstellar Warriors still guarding outside. They would jump onto the ship only once it had completed its launch sequence, and even when it was already about a meter off the ground.

It seemed that no one could stop them now.

The ship soared into the high skies.

Ahzimuba, in the distant desert, heard the report from his subordinates, both desperate and furious, he collapsed in rage, cursing the traitors with bitter words, calling them Imperial traitors who would not die well, then cursing the officers under his command as a bunch of useless garbage, later accusing the Alliance of constantly closing in and making life impossible—though the Alliance had not had the chance to do anything from the start.

However, at that moment, he heard another report from his officer.

"Those pirates… they've come back!"

"…What?"

"They have flown back!" The officer's voice contained not the slightest hint of joy, but was filled with fear.

Having thought that after so many deaths, they had finally dispatched the angel of death, Ahzimuba, even though he was cursing, let him curse as it seemed no one would die.

But now the killers had returned, and that could very possibly mean more deaths.

During the recent battle, they had already lost more than a thousand lives, with the only result being the death of fewer than a hundred kidnapped slave laborers, and those few ‘pirates’ weren’t even scratched, or at the very least, were untroubled.

Why had they come back?

Ahzimuba also pondered this question.

Could it be to kill me?

He had just been ranting about the pirates’ escape, but now that they had returned, Ahzimuba was so scared that he broke out in a cold sweat.

He quickly told his driver to go farther away, taking him to the nearest safe house.

But then, a few minutes later, new intelligence arrived.

It was a message from the Observatory, indicating that a navy fleet had entered the Extinct Soil Star System.

Some of these ships bore the insignia of the Tianma Fleet of the Empire; but the majority of them were clad in the blue of the Alliance.

Due to the backwardness of the observing means, the fleet had not only completed the Star Realm traversal by the time they were observed, but they had also arrived at a location not far from Extinct Soil Star.

In at most four hours, they could reach the planet’s orbit.

This fleet must have crossed the Star Realm Tunnel between Hongjian Star and Extinct Soil Star at least two days ago, and only now were they observed…

It also proved that the fleet from Hongjian Star had been closely following right behind the heels of ‘Nides’ and his crew. Nides and his team had arrived at Extinct Soil Star, and from the time they dispatched the landing ship until now, less than five hours had passed, yet the fleet from the Tianma Star Sector had arrived.

No wonder ‘Nides’ wanted him to prepare all the resources so urgently; any slight delay would have spelled their doom, right?

Combining this intelligence, Ahzimuba guessed the purpose of the traitors’ return: They knew they couldn’t outrun the Alliance Navy’s encirclement in the Star Sea, so they weren’t planning to run. Evidently, they didn’t seem to be in the mood to make a desperate last stand; instead, they planned to hide within Extinct Soil Star, playing a game of cat and mouse with the Alliance in the vast desert.

Chapter 406, Phoenix Has No Secrets_2

What should I do next?

Ahzimuba’s eyes whirled, his mind raced through idea after idea—he needed to find the right reason, explanation, excuse, to get himself out of this situation.

But what to say?

He crafted one explanation after another while also instructing his driver to head for the capital.

The pirates’ returning spacecraft didn’t land in the city but headed elsewhere; if he returned, he wouldn’t have to worry about being shot on sight.

The Alliance Navy arrived faster than the Observatory had predicted; they were expected in four hours, but in less than three, the massive ships were already descending into orbit around Extinct Soil Star.

…

The orbit was so close that the ships' silhouettes could be seen with the naked eye in clear weather from the surface.

Soon after, a message fell from the sky.

"This is a joint operation by the Tianma Fleet and the Alliance Escort Fleet, carrying out a mission to pursue pirates. We have conclusive evidence that a highly criminal Pirate Group has landed on the surface of Extinct Soil Star and suspect illegal relations between Extinct Soil Star and this Pirate Group."

"We request a meeting with the Governor of Extinct Soil Star, Ahzimuba, and hope for the cooperation of the Extinct Soil Star government with the investigation."

The words were polite—'request,' 'hope,' as if they truly needed Ahzimuba's approval.

But in reality, the Alliance didn't wait for a response from Extinct Soil Star; dozens of landing spacecraft descended from the sky and headed straight for the capital city of Extinct Soil Star.

Ahzimuba, still considering his response, didn't dare let out a peep. Forget responses; he promptly sent a message of 'agreement' and 'willingness to cooperate' to patch things up. Then he hurried to the suburban landing field.

More than thirty landing ships came down; too many for the suburban field to accommodate. But they weren't fussy, simply selecting several flat sandy areas nearby and setting down.

Immediately after, hundreds to thousands of soldiers disembarked from each ship. They bore the unified insignia of the Star Realm Army, as well as a Battle Group emblem. The former was a golden skull with wings, the latter a colossal bear embroiled in thunderstorms.

This Battle Group wasn't as well-known as some of the more famous ones echoing throughout the universe, but after the end of the Korolya campaign and the spread of war reports, at least those around the Tianma Star Sector knew that this 'Rage Bear' named legion was even more elite than the Dragonhawk Legion.

Along with them came the roaring self-propelled artillery, tanks, armored vehicles, Windfalcon Fighters, and Qilin Fighters…

The sight made Ahzimuba's heart pound with fear: Was this a force to capture pirates?

Descending from the ships, there was also a smaller but more elite group of individuals. Unlike the others, they bore no Star Realm insignia, only that of the Alliance—a five-pointed star nested between spread wings, encircled by a ring of steel stars. Each element had its meaning: the open wings were part of the Empire's Sky Eagle; the star represented the Alliance; the surrounding sturdy steel star ring symbolized a solid, indestructible union.

Each of them wore at least an Exoskeleton Armor; some donned Powered Armor.

Leading them off one of the ships were fifty towering Interstellar Warriors clad in Powered Armor!

At first glance, Ahzimuba thought it was Nides and his cohorts returning, nearly mistaking them due to his blurry vision. But upon closer inspection, he knew they were different.

In demeanor, these men held themselves more proudly, heads held high, lacking the weatheredness of Nides and his group;

In equipment, they were all brand new, with shining red paint gleaming brightly, unlike Nides's crew, who wore battle-scarred and somewhat battered Powered Armor.

In insignia, their chests bore the clear mark of the Empire's winged skull; on their shoulders, a red and white image of the proud Phoenix, heads held aloft.

All these represented that they were true Imperial Angels, Interstellar Warriors who were widely respected within the Empire.

But it was only upon seeing them that Ahzimuba truly confirmed that Nides's previous cohorts were likely traitorous Interstellar Warriors.

Moreover, he harbored an even deeper suspicion.

“`

The paint schemes of these Imperial Angels before me are… a bit too similar to those of Nides’s group from before, aren’t they?

Dominantly bright red, with white borders at the edges of different parts like the chest plate, shoulder guards, belt, and knees—Nides’s group seemed to sport the same look. Once the imperial emblem and battle group insignia were removed, the two were nearly identical.

Ahzimuba kept this suspicion in mind and quickly approached the leader, a figure in a Terminator Power Armor that stood taller than the average interstellar warrior.

“I am Ahzimuba, the Governor of Extinct Soil Star,” he introduced himself.

“Matins, Phoenix Battalion Leader. Where did those pirates go? I need their exact location,” the leader demanded.

“This… We don’t know either. They took off and then were driven back, disappearing into the horizon, possibly hiding in the desert…”

“Good, I got it. From now on, the Rage Bear Legion and Alliance Land Forces will temporarily take over all defense duties of Extinct Soil Star until all threats are eliminated. During this period, you must comply unconditionally with all our requests,” the leader declared.

“This…”

Ahzimuba found it hard to accept. This was his planet! Not Alliance turf!

Seeing his hesitation, Matins continued, “We now have evidence that suggests illicit cooperation between Extinct Soil Star and the Red Eye Pirate Group. Governor Ahzimuba, your suspicions have not been cleared.”

“That’s impossible!” Ahzimuba instinctively retorted, but he immediately realized that if Battalion Leader Matins made such a claim, there must be evidence, and no amount of sophistry would help.

He quickly softened his stance, “Commander Matins, there must be some misunderstanding. My family’s loyalty to the Empire has spanned eleven generations. We would never conspire with the Empire’s enemies! I will fully cooperate with your operations; I, too, wish to promptly exterminate those who once plundered Extinct Soil Star. But… after that, you should leave, right?”

“That depends on the investigation results,” Matins replied.

“Commander Matins, please forgive my bluntness, but… I’ve met Nides, the leader of those pirates. Perhaps there’s a secret within the Phoenix Battalion?”

His words carried a veiled threat.

It was a risky move, but he had to grasp at every opportunity, or if a crime was pinned on him, it would be too late.

Clearly, his words piqued Matins’s interest.

The Battle Group Leader, whose gaze had been wandering around, for the first time looked down and met Ahzimuba’s eyes.

It seemed promising; his words indeed had an effect…

Just as this thought occurred to him, his vision blurred suddenly, and he found it hard to breathe—he was being hoisted by the neck by Matins, held up like a little chick.

Matins stared into his eyes and stated, “The Phoenix has no secrets.”

Ahzimuba wanted to speak, but found he couldn’t. The pressure on his neck was increasing, and soon everything went black as he lost consciousness.

The loyal retainers of Governor Ahzimuba reacted as soon as their governor was hoisted up. They instinctively drew their weapons, aiming at Matins, but no one dared to fire.

How could they open fire? There were just a hundred or so armed personnel who had come to welcome these visitors from beyond the stars. But there were already tens of thousands debarking from the landing ships, with equipment a hundred times better, not to mention the interstellar warriors present.

All they could do was watch as their governor’s body was discarded to the side like a piece of torn fabric.

Matins paid no attention to these locals. He signaled to an officer on his side and ordered:

“Take full control of the city, isolate all Extinct Soil Star natives who participated in the battle or witnessed the ‘pirates.’”

Pausing, he added, “Don’t overlook any possible witnesses, and don’t let anyone leave the quarantine camps. This is for necessary screening; the Demon Hunters will be responsible for the interrogation and identification process.”

Chapter 407, Ashen Dead Squad

“`

“This place isn’t bad.”

Nides, or as he was called Sydney Bravens, looked at the sand cave his battle-brothers had found and expressed his satisfaction.

“Let’s settle here.”

“But we still need to be cautious, we must set up sentries, and rest in shifts.”

“I did want to meet Matins, but not by being ambushed by him. We’ve come a long way, over thirty years now. The decisions back then were made together by all of us, and I’ve never let down any one of you. Till now, we’ve only lost one warrior, and I hope that this time, none of us will die.”

…

The other seven men surrounding him didn’t respond immediately.

Everyone seemed to have fallen into a kind of silence.

One of them broke the silence: “I’m starting to doubt whether we really should continue like this. Perhaps, it wasn’t too bad living as we have for the past thirty-plus years, at least…”

He couldn’t even finish his own sentence.

It was a while before another person replied, “If all we want is to survive and don’t care for anything else, why not go to Zhong Jihua, that traitor? He would surely accept us. How is it like going to Matins, where we have to try every way to lure them out and still worry about whether he’ll slaughter all of us?”

Someone else said, “Indeed, I’d rather die than go to Zhong Jihua.”

“Enough with the façade of loyal servants of the Empire. If we were truly that loyal, we should have died 37 years ago or at least nine years ago, alongside Fan Haozhe.”

…

The brothers who had been through life and death together were on the verge of starting a quarrel.

In fact, such debates had not been uncommon in the past. Their situation was unique, lost and confused for over thirty years. Even as Interstellar Warriors, they could feel helpless and even inconsistent.

This was a very dangerous sign; don't assume venting some frustrations might lead to improvement. On the contrary, if the circumstances can't change, then the wanton venting would only weaken the bonds between them, make their seemingly strong relationships crack and someday in the unforeseeable future, completely erupt.

This was a problem Blaywins, as the team leader, always tried to avoid.

Whenever such a situation showed signs of arising, he would speak up strongly, nipping any potential disputes in the bud.

No matter what his battle-brothers thought in their hearts, whether they regretted past decisions or had new thoughts about the future, he expected them to keep their thoughts to themselves, without showing it outwardly.

Of course, he understood that this was only treating the symptoms, not the cause.

But as for a permanent solution… they had thought about going to Zhong Jihua.

However, most of the brothers felt it would be better to be dead.

They had betrayed, yes, in that battle back then, they had the chance to rejoin the ranks but believed that the penitential crusade had no end, that no one would live to see it through.

It was a journey of despair, tinged with resentment towards the Empire.

Why, after all? The glory accumulated over thousands of years by the Battle Group and the sacrifices made during decades of penitential crusades weren't enough to atone for a single mistake?

Clearly, the Empire didn't think so. They were not willing to die and be obliterated just yet. So, during the rebellion thirty years ago, they had a chance to join forces with Matins and others, but in the end, they chose to leave quietly, to live in anonymity, wandering everywhere.

Sometimes they would disguise themselves as regular Interstellar Warriors, get some subsidies, and save people along the way; but more often, they would erase their insignia and move amidst various grey groups. Sometimes as raiders, pirates, other times as mercenaries…

They would meticulously assess the danger of the battles.

Having lost the mission to fight to the death for any cause, they were even less likely to lose their lives for honorless actions, merely to survive.

Yet, they had no intention of harming their Mother Group, nor did they truly want to become enemies of the Emperor.

Also, due to some unspoken reason among themselves, they always kept an eye on the Phoenix Mother Group. Sometimes they would even move close to the Battle Group's combat zone and observe from a distance. There were even a few instances when they intervened at critical moments to save some warriors and then left without making contact.

About twenty-five years ago, after a successful raid for supplies, they once again heard news of the Mother Group, who were engaged in a war against the Chaotic Evildoers. The 'do-nothing' renegades, with a 'let's just see' attitude, rushed over.

In that battle, the Battle Group suffered significant losses.

Out of the Battle Group, which originally had only a little over two hundred people, half were stuck in a quagmire.

That was something they couldn't save.

With only eight men, they were incapable of altering the battle that over a hundred warriors could not escape from.

They could only sadly watch from afar.

In fact, this was mostly what they had seen while with the Mother Group in the past. The scenarios where they had a chance to save their brothers and then quietly withdraw were definitely rare.

However, this time a drastically different event occurred.

Those hundred plus men, faced with a dead end, made a shocking move: their leader, the Phoenix Squadron Leader, went out to negotiate with those Cult traitors.

Chapter 407, Ashen Dead Squad_2

The company commander, Blaywins, was also familiar with him, whose name was Zhong Jihua.

As for the specific content of their communication, those who were observing from a distance, like Blaywins, of course did not know.

But they could see the outcome.

The group of battle brothers led by Zhong Jihua no longer fought, even relinquishing their defensive lines, allowing the Cult traitors to pass through their defense zone. Meanwhile, they held their ground in their camp, not firing a single shot, offering no further resistance, nor making any more contact with the outside world.

Subsequently, scattered sounds of combat could still be heard within their camp.

That, of course, was not due to any external invasion, but rather an internal purge occurring among the Interstellar Warriors.

…

Clearly, not everyone was willing to accept Zhong Jihua's actions. Within the community of Interstellar Warriors, the majority were those willing to die for honor, for their beliefs, for the Empire.

In the end, after the cleansing was complete, the Phoenixes who walked out of that camp numbered only around sixty to seventy people.

Following that, Zhong Jihua led the remaining survivors deep into the territory occupied by the Cult traitors, disappearing there.

Ultimately, the issue of the Cult rebellion on that planet was resolved, but on the Empire's side, neither the planet's defending army nor the Phoenix Battle Group had any idea that Zhong Jihua's group had betrayed the Empire. From beginning to end, they all believed that Zhong Jihua's company had perished in the war.

And by the time the Cult rebellion had been quelled, Zhong Jihua's people had never reappeared.

The Phoenix lost a company, and in the Star Sea, a new Battle Squad called the 'Ashen Dead' emerged. They worshiped the tyrant, mutations appeared on their bodies, with most members growing a single horn, and their powered armor was painted in dark red with gray stripes.

Although the Ashen Dead were few in number and recently established, in these past twenty or so years, they had made quite a name for themselves.

They pirated Imperial ships, slaughtering entire crews, and afterward, in the found derelicts, blood smeared every hallway, every room, every wall; in the bridges, assemblies, and ship chapels, there were blood-red eight-pointed stars, along with small mountains of skulls. This was a typical sign of a sacrificial ritual to terror;

They had also assisted Cultists in massacring worlds of the Human Empire, with at least four such incidents of worlds being destroyed or Nest Capitals slaughtered, involving their presence in twenty-five years;

They even joined with several other squads and attacked an Imperial Fleet that was transporting Gene Seed tithes of the Starfighter Battle Group, seizing a batch of Gene Seeds for the purpose of corrupting and strengthening their own numbers.

They even merged with another squad, gaining dominance over it…

Blaywins and others had once run into their ‘old comrade’ Zhong Jihua at a Pirate Alliance base. Zhong Jihua had ‘graciously’ invited them to join, but they had painfully declined.

The only loss of a battle brother among them occurred while they were breaking out and making their escape.

They indeed had defected, even shamefully turning into deserters, not dying alongside their Battle Group. However, they might bear the name ‘traitors,’ but they certainly did not want to be associated with the likes of Zhong Jihua.

Turning to chaos, worshiping the tyrant of terror, purging their own battle brothers… those were acts Blaywins and his people simply could not commit, and they also felt dishonored to affiliate with them.

But sometimes they wondered, when their mother unit perished in the penitent crusade, perhaps only they and the Ashen Dead would remain in this universe.

No.

Zhong Jihua’s group had changed their names, beliefs, paints, and symbols; how could they still be called Phoenixes? The Phoenix is a symbol of the indomitable, a phoenix reborn from fire. The new name they had chosen, bearing the words ‘Ashen’ and ‘Dead,’ clearly signified a complete abandonment of the Battle Group’s traditions.

The Phoenix had finally fallen.

However, as they aimlessly wandered through the cosmos, uncertain of where to go, or even what meaning the future held for their lives, they heard that their mother group had actually ended their atonement expedition!

But with only seven battle brothers left, what was the point? Now the mother group's numbers were even smaller than those of the defectors!

However, by the time they received news about the Phoenix, they were already deeply integrated with a multi-star political entity known as 'the Alliance.'

The mother group now seemed to be fighting for a star sector leader named 'Gu Hang.'

They didn't know what had happened in the interim, but according to the latest intelligence, the situation of the battle group appeared to be unexpectedly good.

Far from being on its last legs, the entire battle group had recovered quite robustly. Especially since the news of the Korolya battle spread, under the leadership of Mr. Gu, they had eliminated a Great Demon, ending the invasion war it had personally orchestrated!

Despite that in that war, it was this person named Gu Hang who had seized the greatest degree of fame. Those who knew of the conflict extolled the wisdom and valor of this commander and governor, praising his powerful spiritual energy.

Yet beneath the reputation of Gu Hang, those who paid attention could still see the contributions of the Phoenix. This group of Interstellar Warriors, who should have perished, greatly aided Gu Hang and displayed a combat force of roughly a hundred or so during the fight.

Those who didn't understand the Phoenix or didn't pay attention might not think there was anything to this. But to people like Blaywins, who had been following the mother group for decades, this was nothing short of a miracle.

They knew that the battle group had lost their entire armory and gene seed banks in the final battle of the atonement expedition. Under such circumstances, how was it possible to grow from a size of seven individuals to over a hundred in less than ten years?

Not to mention the success rate of the gene seed implantation surgery, it was simply impossible to have so many seeds!

Could it be that Holy Terra or the Mars Cultivation Association had allocated some of the gene seed tax previously turned over by the Phoenix to support the battle group?

That would indeed be a curious thing!

Interstellar Warriors of battle groups are also subject to taxation, but they pay no Imperial Tax and don't provide material tax contributions. They can even ask the empire or some Foundry Worlds for equipment. However, they must submit one-tenth of all gene seeds produced during a certain cycle.

Officially, this is to allow the empire to inspect and monitor the purity of the battle group's gene seeds, ensuring they are not contaminated; it also serves as a kind of 'savings' for the battle group so that in the future, if the group suffers losses, the empire can provide the genes seeds previously given to help the group recover.

But in reality… the former might be a legitimate reason, however, the latter is almost akin to a farce. If a group is not facing the risk of annihilation, then why would they need gene seeds? If they are facing extinction, why would I use gene seeds to support an old group with a deep history that might not be obedient when I could create a new, compliant battle group instead?

The idea that the empire would regurgitate consumed gene seeds is a fool's dream. Perhaps, with certain battle groups of special status, this might happen, but the Phoenix clearly wasn't one of them.

Yet, did this unlikely event actually occur with the Phoenix?

No matter how incredulous the matter seemed, after all considerations, this was the only possibility.

Could Matins have pulled gene seeds out of thin air?

It was also because there were signs of revival within the mother group that these eight ‘lost souls’ began to entertain the idea of seeking out their mother group.

They said it was to warn the mother group of the existence of the ‘Ashen Dead.’

As for whether they harbored any unrealistic expectations,

that was something only they themselves would know.

Chapter 408, Who Will Judge? Mr. Gu!

There was one thing Blaywins and his comrades hadn’t grasped.

If Matins knew they had been wandering around for all these years, even becoming pirates, what would he think?

As for trusting the Alliance, that was even more out of the question for them.

Thus, there had been a series of activities lately.

Of course, Blaywins didn’t initially intend to escalate the situation into its current state. The best outcome would have been to sneak into Rage Owl Star quietly and visit Matins unnoticed.

But obviously, they didn’t have that opportunity.

…

Nowadays, Rage Owl Star is equipped with sophisticated observatories, guarded by specialized Spiritual Energy practitioners, and fortified with numerous armed space stations and firepower platforms centered around Fortress Starport. On the planet’s surface, there’s anti-orbital firepower capable of covering the entire world, and outside, the Alliance Fleet is patrolling…

With their current conditions, there really was no way to sneak in.

So they could only move around the periphery, and as they moved, the situation morphed into its present state.

It wasn't totally impossible, though.

…

Matins arrived much faster than expected.

And his movements were much more sharp.

Blaywins didn't want to be ambushed, didn't want to start fighting before they could even exchange a word. Seeing casualties on either side was a result he didn't wish to witness.

However, Matins clearly didn't plan to be courteous.

Blaywins and his group had left no clues. Ideally, they wouldn't be discovered and would instead initiate contact with Matins on their own terms.

But this plan quickly fell through.

Matins's skills were certainly no worse than theirs. Moreover, he had a large number of troops at his disposal. Not to mention the reliable soldiers of the Rage Bear Legion, there were also those from Extinct Soil Star. After the death of their governor, under the coercion of the Alliance Army's vanguard and driven by the true Angels of The Emperor, these locals were more familiar with the terrain.

Matins soon found the abandoned landing ship, and by deducing the time it was abandoned and the surrounding terrain, he quickly narrowed down some potential locations based on his knowledge of Blaywins.

There were actually quite a few possibilities, but that was not an issue; Matins had enough manpower to search and block off each area.

Until someone spotted the sentry Blaywins had set up.

The witness didn't engage in combat; the orders they had received were just to scout. They only had to report back upon sighting anything.

The turncoats didn't initiate an attack either, because it was pointless. What use was killing the witness? Any noise, death, or even just a disappearance would without a doubt reveal their hiding place.

They had to run, and run quickly!

The entire squad began to move swiftly.

However, they soon realized that they were enveloped in an encirclement.

The team's first decision was to break out and escape the siege, at all costs.

But this was far from easy.

Even by their standards, the Rage Bear Legion could be considered a formidable force within the Star Realm Armed Forces. Breaking out of their encirclement was more difficult than the operations they had previously conducted against the Planetary Defense Army of Extinct Soil Star.

In the conflicts in the Hongjian Star System, the reason they had been able to succeed was mainly that they caught the Alliance Troops off guard. At the time, the Navy Marine Corps had no idea what kind of enemies they were facing and still had the mindset of fighting conventional pirates.

Even though there were some elite mortals in Feedback-Type Power Armor, they lacked defensive positions and anti-armor weapons, making them easy to break through. With no way to open the "cans," it had been easy for Blaywins and his group to slip away.

But now, the Alliance Troops were quite clear about what they might be facing.

Those Rage Bear Legionnaires now definitely carried thermite weapons, plasma weapons, and heavy explosive rifles, and were broadly equipped with armored vehicles, with the most formidable being the Lion Tanks.

All of these weapons were threats to Interstellar Warriors. Any one of them could be lethal upon impact.

And the damage they could inflict was relatively limited. It wasn't much of an issue against ordinary infantry, but Lion Tanks weren't like the ordinary tanks produced on some worlds. Lacking weapons to counter such heavy Star Realm military armor, a Lion's armor couldn't be pierced by explosive guns or cut by chainsword blades, but the tanks could easily take out an Interstellar Warrior with a single shot.

Such adversaries, for the past thirty years, they had typically chosen to avoid.

Right now, if they really clashed head-on, breaking out wasn't entirely impossible, but they might well have to sacrifice some warriors' lives.

They were just eight people—who would be mad enough to fight to the death against such well-armed Imperial Regular Army forces?

As they observed the Star Realm forces not contracting their encirclement but rather reinforcing the blockade further, they roughly understood the foe's intentions.

They were just waiting for Matins to arrive.

Truth be told, they were very uneasy.

The initiative they once had was gone; now they were just lambs waiting for the slaughter.

It wasn't too bad now; they still had the choice to break out on their own, even if it meant half of them might die—a chance nonetheless. But once Matins arrived with a host of fresh Phoenixes, they wouldn't even have the opportunity to flee.

Chapter 408, Who Will Judge? Governor Gu!_2

However, after weighing their options, they gave up on that first reaction.

Forget it, just stay put and wait for Matins.

Even if they chose to break out now, with half of them dead, how could they escape Matins' pursuit in this desert?

Amidst uneasy waiting, Matins arrived.

Of course, he did not come alone. Accompanying him were fifty new Phoenix Warriors.

Moreover, aside from the Phoenixes, there were also a number of elite warriors. Although these people looked like normal humans in stature, not having the visual pressure of generally towering figures over two meters tall, they were certainly not to be dismissed lightly. Each one wore Feedback-Type Powered Armor, bearing the Alliance's insignia.

…

There were over a hundred such individuals.

When this group, led by Matins in Terminator Power Armor, began to tighten the encirclement and advance towards their hiding place, every traitor knew clearly that there was no need to fight.

Their subsequent orders depended entirely on the judgment's outcome.

Despite this, they still did not relax completely.

At the entrance of the sand cave where they were hiding, they set up a small defensive position.

As Matins approached with his men, a gun fired, launching a bomb onto the open ground before Matins and his group's route of advance, full of warning intent.

Matins did not halt even a moment.

His roaring voice, through the helmet's breath mask, pierced through the defenses.

"Blaywins! I know you're in there! Come out and see me!"

The eight defectors were taken aback.

It wasn't that the shout was so terrifying, it was just… man, there are so many outsiders right next to you, your yelling is letting everyone know, isn't it?

Blaywins himself was a bit caught off guard.

Aren't I the Phoenix's disgrace?

Why are you shouting so loudly?

Are you afraid others won't know?

Before they could recover from their shock, Matins spoke again, "You've betrayed the Empire, betrayed the Battle Group, betrayed all the brothers who sacrificed in the campaign of atonement! You traitors! Deserters! How dare you even show your faces before me! Get out here and face your deaths!"

…

A defector said to Blaywins beside him, “Why don’t you hurry up and go out? If he keeps shouting like this, the Battle Group’s face will be completely lost.”

Having said that, he himself felt somewhat embarrassed, as if it were Matins who had defected.

Even Blaywins had not anticipated this.

Until just now, his imagined scenario involved only Matins arriving at the cave entrance with the Phoenix’s Interstellar Warriors, and then just talking in hushed, private circles within the Battle Group. Whether the talk ended in life or death, at least the matter would be resolved internally.

How could he have expected that while he, the defector, was still thinking about not airing dirty laundry, Matins would be howling for all the world to hear?

Helpless, he had to walk out.

He did not carry a weapon, because there was no difference.

Under Matins’s gaze, he stepped forward, making a friendly gesture: “I want to talk to you…”

But what met him was Matins’s fist!

The Powered Armor deliberately stomped the ground loudly, and Matins quickly stepped in front of him, smashing a punch into his face.

The output force of the Terminator Power Armor was so immense, it sent him reeling, head spinning. By the time he came back to his senses, he was already lying on the ground, with Matins’s foot pressing on his chest.

He reached behind Blaywins’s head with both hands, pressing on the nape and side buckles, and with an upward pull, he removed Blaywins’s helmet, revealing the face underneath.

It was a face weathered by time.

Matins removed the mask of his Terminator armor, and the two finally looked each other in the eye.

In his eyes, there was a mixture of emotions, which was quickly replaced by rage:

“Blaywins, it’s really you…” Matins lowered his head, their faces drew closer, “Why didn’t you die at Karlo Cast?”

Blaywins, however, laughed: “Die? For what reason?”

“You, and those cowering traitors in the cave, your very existence is a disgrace to the Battle Group!”

“Yes, we are a disgrace. But are we truly the ones who should feel ashamed? The Redemption Expedition! The Redemption Expedition! It was meant for us to all die! Why? After all these countless years, hasn’t the Phoenix contributed enough?! Why should we all be tarred with the same brush just because of the Cercis rebellion?”

“Moreover, was Cercis wrong? Were we wrong? Is it not Iron Armor that is the true error?”

“Why are we the ones in error? Because we lost? Is losing synonymous with wrongdoing?”

Blaywins roared these words, making Matins even angrier.

He threw another punch.

Blaywins’ head burst open and blood flowed immediately.

But Matins had held back.

Otherwise, even the skull of an Interstellar Warrior, far more durable than normal, would be smashed like a rotten melon under the heavy fist of the Terminator.

After silencing Blaywins with a punch, Matins said, “There’s no point in making excuses, Blaywins. I didn’t come here to dredge up the past with you. I came to cleanse the Battle Group of disgrace, to bring judgment upon you damned traitors!”

“Say whatever you want, the victor is always right, and now you’ve won.”

Blaywins, with a blood-covered face, spoke these words, but moments later, his expression turned hesitant, even somewhat pleading: “Do what you want with me, judge me, and I will accept any verdict. Let all the blame fall upon me, but please… spare the others. They were misled by me at the beginning; now they can rejoin the Battle Group, they are all elite warriors…”

“When did you learn to daydream?” said Matins, “The Phoenix will forever remain the most loyal heroes. We accepted the Imperial decree, we have been through the Redemption Expedition, we endured every test given by The Emperor, and paid countless prices for it. Today we have cleansed everything, but you cowards, who turned deserter during the Redemption Expedition, who abandoned honor, who betrayed kindred, dare to fantasize about continuing to be counted among our ranks? Ridiculous!”

“Heh…” Blaywins scoffed, but there was nothing else he could say on the matter.

However, he hadn’t forgotten the most important reason for this meeting.

“But I still have to warn you, we are not the only ones who did not die.”

“What do you mean?”

Blaywins lowered his voice so that only the two of them could hear: “Zhong Jihua and his group, they’re also still alive. They have embraced chaos, merged with other traitors. Now, they call themselves ‘The Ashen Dead’…”

Upon hearing this, Matins was shaken.

“The Ashen Dead… Are they Zhong Jihua’s people?”

“Yes.”

It took Matins a while to digest this information.

He said to Blaywins with a touch of irony, “So it seems even among you traitors there’s a hierarchy, huh?”

Blaywins turned his head and spat out a mouthful of bloody spit: “Say whatever you want.”

Matins grabbed the edge of his breastplate, lifted him up, then turned his head and shouted towards the cave entrance: “The rest of you, come out! Drop your weapons, take off your armor, surrender unconditionally. I will take you all back to the Battle Group’s monastery.”

“There, you will be interrogated, you will have to truthfully confess every crime you committed after your shameful betrayal of the Empire and the Battle Group. Then, you will receive a fair verdict, pay the due price for your over thirty years of missed Redemption Expeditions, for your desertion, for all the sins you’ve committed since leaving the Battle Group.”

Blaywins spoke with difficulty, “Stop with the pretense. You are the Battle Group Leader now. Just say what you intend to do. After all, who else has the authority to judge all this?”

“Mr. Gu.”

“…Ah?”

Blaywins was confused.

Chapter 409, Atonement Expedition, Independent Kingdom

When Matins was escorting Blaywins and the other eight to Rage Owl Star, Gu Hang had already received intelligence sent back from the Phoenix.

In this intelligence report, Matins did not withhold any information from Gu Hang. The origins of Blaywins and his group, as well as a series of intelligence about the “Ashen Dead” Battle Group, were included in detail in the report.

After reading it, Gu Hang pretty much had a plan in mind for how to deal with Blaywins and the other eight.

Without a doubt, Matins hoped to save these people’s lives.

It may look as if the intelligence from the front line had recorded every single conversation between Matins and Blaywins, throwing words like “Empire traitors,” “disgrace to the Battle Group,” and “cowards” at Blaywins and his companions’ heads. Moreover, in Matins’s own report, he explicitly recorded their crimes, claiming that all rights to their trial were in the hands of the supporters, rulers, and saviors of the Battle Group, which is to say, in Gu Hang’s hands.

But if Matins really wanted to wash away the disgrace, why didn’t he just slaughter those eight turncoats on the spot?

Even if he were concerned about so-called procedural correctness or wanted to give them a ceremonial trial, he shouldn’t have said that their fate was for Gu Hang to judge.

It would have been more appropriate to report to the Empire, whether to the Imperial Inquisition or the Star Warrior Management Agency—of course, that might cause the Phoenix’s hard-won reputation to fall, and potentially bring about scrutiny, which would be more trouble than it’s worth.

But anyway, what does Gu Hang have to do with the Phoenix Battle Group, nominally? He’s merely a benefactor.

Indeed, Gu Hang is the actual controller of the Phoenix Battle Group, but when Matins set off, Gu Hang had already made it clear; he would leave the handling of these potential traitors of the Phoenix entirely to Matins.

In the end, Matins still brought them back alive.

It isn't about what he says he'll do; it's about what he actually does that matters.

As for whether these few people live or die, Gu Hang truly didn't care.

Just eight Interstellar Warriors.

Even if they're all century-old veterans, even if they're elite, so what?

Gu Hang can now mass-produce Interstellar Warriors. Including the Gene Seed and personnel selection, it costs only about a thousand grace points; MK4 Majestic Power Armor can be mass-produced by the alliance, and even the cost can be controlled under one hundred thousand Tax Currency.

To Gu Hang, Interstellar Warriors were no longer a scarce commodity.

Eight century-old veterans were indeed quite formidable, useful as a core force, but after all, Gu Hang's training system could turn a single Interstellar Warrior into an old soldier for just an extra two hundred points; even if Blaywins and his men all reached the grade of sergeant major, Gu Hang would just spend four hundred more points to get a new one.

This was precisely why Gu Hang let Matins handle it.

Picking up eight old soldiers and saving a few thousand grace points was indeed good; but if Matins was bent on eradicating these people, Gu Hang had no objection.

However, looking at the current situation, since Matins seemed to want these people to live, or at least was ambivalent, Gu Hang thought it was acceptable to take them in.

As for the risk, he saw none.

According to Blaywins's confession, their past actions were very cautious. It was only recently, when they came to the Tianma Star Sector and tried to lure out Matins, that they repainted their Powered Armor red. If they had carried out their normal operations before, they wouldn't even have had the red paint on, using all sorts of other colors instead; who knows who they were.

They could just claim that they had killed these 'pirates' back on Extinct Soil Star.

After all, those who truly knew the truth were in the minority, namely the elite of the 10th Regiment. The reliability of these individuals was quite high, and Gu Hang wasn't worried about them leaking any information.

Of course, they shouldn't get off too easily, either. After all, they were guilty.

They may escape death, but they won't escape punishment.

Gu Hang offered Matins a suggestion, or rather an instruction: under the Battle Group, establish a new squad, to be named "Penitence Squad." After Blaywins and the other eight had re-sworn their allegiance to The Emperor, their past actions would be kept secret by the Battle Group and the alliance. But the Penitence Squad they would be part of was to partake in the most difficult aspects of every battle of the Phoenix Battle Group in the future.

The alliance would not engage in penitential expeditions that provided no reinforcements, lacked supplies, and were plainly sent on death missions. Their treatment would be the same as that of normal Phoenix Warriors. They would not miss out on the necessary equipment supplies and support power they were entitled to, nor would they be sent on any guaranteed fatal missions.

However, they also had to undertake the tough tasks of assault and not shirk their duties. Under normal provisioned conditions, they had to perform excellently.

…

That was the resolution for Blaywins and the other eight individuals.

Compared to dealing with these eight, Gu Hang was more interested in the past of the Phoenix and the information about the ‘Ashen Dead’ mentioned by Blaywins and his group.

He had previously researched the ‘Cercis Flower Uprising’ that led to the Phoenix being sentenced to the penitential expedition.

Chapter 409, Atonement Expedition, Independent Kingdom_2

It was a highly classified piece of information, and initially Gu Hang could only garner a few bits and pieces, as well as some assertions regarding the Phoenix from Matins and Priest Rizzo.

But these were rather one-sided and scanty.

Later on, when Gu Hang’s ‘good brother’, Bochoya Galaraldo, made it big, it became much easier for Gu Hang to investigate these messages.

Galaraldo gave him an internal secret report.

The Bauhinia Uprising occurred within a star sector named ‘Cercis Flower’, which is located in the Spiderweb Domain, inside the Princess Star Domain.

The Spiderweb Domain is next to the Eastern Cosmos Domain, situated to the north on the star map.

Within the Cercis Flower Star Sector, there is a battle group named after the star sector, called the Bauhinia Battle Group. It’s a sub-group of the Phoenix Legion, sharing the same lineage as the Phoenix.

In the Spiderweb Domain, there’s also a battle group called ‘Iron Armor.’ Compared to Cercis Flower and Phoenix, the Iron Armor Battle Group had much more renown; they were directly in charge of the Princess Star Domain, along with several other star sectors, forming a defense network. Their primary adversaries were the Void Insect Species.

The Void Insect Species are terrifying alien creatures whose individuals lack self-will and are entirely commanded by higher-level node creatures.

Their bio-fleets roamed the Star Sea, with each vessel serving as a giant space organism. They were true destroyers; upon visiting a planet, they would swiftly devour all life on it, destroying the local ecosystem and laying down large swathes of 'flesh blankets.' These flesh blankets would drain the nutrients from the entire planet and efficiently absorb stellar energy while hatching more of the Void Insect beasts, even producing many parts and sending them into space to form new bio-starships.

A Hive Fleet traveled via conventional means to the Princess Star Domain, causing massive destruction. It wasn't until Iron Armor, along with several allied battle groups, arrived that the situation in the Princess Star Domain was controlled and the influence of the Void Insect Species was suppressed within a few star sectors.

Though the disaster was contained, the characteristics of the Void Insect Species meant endless vast numbers and an extremely rapid replenishment of forces. Moreover, the planets devoured by the Void Insect Species became their flesh blankets, and even if humans reclaimed them, they could hardly make further use of them.

Given this, considering the exorbitant cost necessary to reclaim these planets, the Human Empire commanded Iron Armor and several other battle groups to establish a defense belt around the multiple star sectors infested by the bug race. The goal of the Human Empire was to control the situation in that area and prevent the empire from investing more resources, as at that time, the Solar Expedition was in full swing, with a significant concentration of manpower and material resources in the southern parts of the empire; there simply weren't enough resources to address this significant disaster.

For this, the empire granted Iron Armor Battle Group a substantial degree of autonomy. They were able to collect taxes themselves and manage all the empire's forces within the Princess Star Domain, as long as they paid the Imperial Tax—everything else was up to Iron Armor to manage.

Even the various battle groups active within the Princess Star Domain let Iron Armor take the lead, facilitating unified and coordinated actions.

And so, the Iron Armor Battle Group became the de facto ruler of the Princess Star Domain.

Iron Armor Battle Group did indeed do a commendable job; they halted the Void Insect Species' continuous expansion and fully paid the Imperial Tax.

If matters only went this far, then without a doubt, the Iron Armor Battle Group would be a great loyal and meritorious vassal of the empire.

However, it didn't take long for some scandals to emerge.

The Iron Armor Battle Group had not paid nearly as much in taxes as it claimed, and the 'full' tax payment of the Princess Star Domain was in fact a doctored account. They exaggerated the losses brought by the Void Insect Species by more than tenfold and retained 80% of the taxes that should have been paid in the star domain by lowering the development index and hiding population checks, among other methods.

On top of that, they inflated the scale of battles with the bug race, continuously demanding money, personnel, and supplies from the empire, threatening that they couldn't hold back the insects otherwise. Then they would actually withdraw from part of their defensive lines, allowing the Void Insect Species to break out and wreak havoc in external star sectors, forcing the empire to really provide funds.

There were also problems with the tax they paid on Gene Seeds; they submitted a number appropriate for a battle group with about eight hundred or nine hundred warriors, but in reality, they 'overproduced' many. According to the report, on the eve of the Bauhinia Uprising, the Iron Armor Battle Group had at least the scale of six thousand Interstellar Warriors.

The empire had restrictions on the size of battle groups; they were not to exceed one thousand warriors. Six thousand Interstellar Warriors meant the scale of six battle groups.

What's more, they trained a large number of Mortal Auxiliary Armies loyal only to themselves.

This was classic behavior of nurturing one's own power to threaten authority.

And the one who revealed all this was the Bauhinia Battle Group.

The Bauhinia Battle Group was also within the Princess Star Domain, but they already had some longstanding grievances with the Iron Armor Battle Group, and now they were expected to follow Iron Armor's command, which was somewhat unacceptable.

If it were just this, for the greater good and for the empire's command, they might have reluctantly acquiesced. The problem was that Iron Armor Battle Group was not generous; they often withheld resources from Bauhinia and constantly sent them to fight the tough battles.

Chapter 409, Atonement Expedition, Independent Kingdom_3

The grudge just keeps getting bigger.

It had been some time since Cercis Flower was within the Princess Star Domain, and the Iron Armor Battle Group had been up to no good for a while, so some evidence had been collected against them, and it was eventually given straight to Holy Terra, leading to an armed conflict with the Iron Armor Battle Group.

Cercis Flower couldn't resist the far larger scale of the Iron Armor Battle Group, to say nothing of the fact that three other Battle Groups were standing with Iron Armor.

So, they began to shake people up. It was at this stage that Phoenix, who had good relations with them, was swayed to join their side.

But at this point, things were actually not too bad; if you turned a blind eye, the situation could perhaps be passed off as not amounting to civil war.

However, Holy Terra's subsequent actions exacerbated the situation.

The Empire Government certainly did not like what the Iron Armor Battle Group was doing.

It was one thing to be a little disruptive, looking at the fact that you could indeed stand on your own; but causing serious trouble, like siphoning off 80% of a Star Sector's taxes; overpopulation by a thousand or eighteen hundred could be tolerated under a wartime scenario, but when you exceed six thousand,

and add the solidarity of three other Battle Groups, resulting in nearly ten thousand interstellar warriors and a nearly independent kingdom in the making, that was truly improper.

Thus, the Empire designated the behavior of the Iron Armor Battle Group as rebellion, set a deadline for the restoration of Imperial Tax, and demanded that Iron Armor disband into six separate groups and accept deployment elsewhere by the Empire.

Cercis Flower, Phoenix, and another group that was swayed – the 'Starbreaker Blade' Battle Group – were assigned as supervisors.

Iron Armor refused to comply, declaring the whole situation a targeted act, an absurdity, with a traitor in Terra.

They opened their defenses, allowing some of the Void Insect Species to break out, while simultaneously implementing a complete blockade of the Princess Star Domain and several neighboring Star Domains, preventing any Empire ships from passing through the Princess Star Domain. Moreover, they launched a campaign of extermination against Cercis Flower, Phoenix, and the Starbreaker Blade within the Star Domain.

This really escalated the situation.

An incident affecting multiple Star Domains greatly impacted taxes, trade, and navigation in that part of the Empire. With the Void Insect Species rampaging, Iron Armor followed under the guise of pursuing and opposing the insect creatures, taking over — even plundering — many planets, and even conscripting supplies from many of the Empire's tax fleets.

Within the Princess Star Domain, Cercis Flower, Phoenix, and the Starbreaker Blade stood no chance against Iron Armor. Not only were they outnumbered, but Iron Armor had nurtured a vast and extremely elite Mortal Auxiliary Army over the years. The three Battle Groups, having lost the support of the Empire, could only mobilize some Planetary Defense Armies under their control, with a quality far inferior; they simply couldn't compete.

With the situation having deteriorated to this point, it seemed almost impossible to resolve.

Was there truly going to be a civil war within the Empire during the preparations for the Solar Expedition?

It wasn't about not being able to fight; it was about having to deploy nearly ten more loyal Battle Groups, along with countless Star Realm Armies and Imperial Navy Fleets, before this situation could be settled. After that, they'd still need to deal with the rampaging Void Insect Species and leave enough forces to block the Void creature tunnels that kept emerging within the Princess Star Domain.

Upon assessment, the expense was simply too great.

It was then that a Terra official took on a mission in the face of danger, sent to negotiate with the Iron Armor Battle Group. Relying on adept diplomatic skills, he persuaded the Iron Armor Battle Group to stand down.

The Empire no longer pursued disbanding them; the Imperial Tax in the Princess Star Domain was raised a bit higher, but not excessively; the territories they were meant to guard were still entrusted to them; the Empire continued to provide reinforcement supplies; and the Empire withdrew its decision of branding the Iron Armor Battle Group as rebels…

The Iron Armor Battle Group accepted these terms.

If Iron Armor was not the traitor, then who was?

Someone had to take responsibility.

Under the insistence of the Iron Armor Battle Group, Cercis Flower was blamed, and what was clearly a rebellion by Iron Armor officially went down in the records as the 'Great Cercis Flower Rebellion'.

They falsely accused the 'loyal' Iron Armor, initiated the attack themselves, resulting in a breach of the bugs' defenses, and caused a crisis spanning several Star Sectors, even dragging the Spiderweb Cosmos Domain into jeopardy.

Cercis Flower was thus completely eradicated under the ‘suppression’ campaign of the Iron Armor Battle Group.

Phoenix and the Starbreaker Blade were let off, but were sentenced to punitive expeditions. The Starbreaker Blade was wiped out during the sixty-year long punitive expedition; Phoenix survived a century-long expedition, but only seven of them were left until they encountered Gu Hang.

This was the entire process of the ‘Great Cercis Flower Rebellion’.

Now, the Iron Armor Battle Group remains one of the major powers in the Spiderweb Domain, strong and powerful, with their own independent small kingdom, still hailed as the heroic Battle Group fighting the Void Insect Species.

And the Battle Groups that opposed them, Phoenix being the only exception due to special circumstances, were all but wiped out.

Gu Hang had occasionally thought about this matter.

Originally, the Alliance had little to do with the Iron Armor Battle Group. Though the Eastern Cosmos Domain and the Spiderweb Domain were neighboring domains, they weren’t close on a Star Domain level. Dragonhawk and Princess were separated by at least three other Star Domains before they could make contact.

Unless the Alliance expanded to an absurd degree, they probably wouldn’t come into contact with the Princess Star Domain anytime soon;

However, another issue couldn’t be ignored: if the problem with the Void Insect Species inside the Princess Star Domain became explosive, whether Iron Armor couldn’t hold back, or if they were up to something troublesome again on a grand scale, then the Dragonhawk Star Domain might actually be affected.

Chapter 409, Atonement Expedition, Independent Kingdom_4

But the probability of that should not be considered high.

The incident that happened a century ago was already significant, having erupted over three Star Sectors, and it eventually took considerable effort to exterminate it.

Yet, its direction did not come this way toward the Dragonhawk Star Domain.

However, while that's the normal situation, if the Phoenix were to be resurrected, what would the Iron Armor Battle Group do then?

Gu Hang's understanding of this Battle Group all came from the reports of the Cercis Flower rebellion.

Based on what had happened in those years, Gu Hang felt that this Battle Group's methods were quite unscrupulous.

Moreover, they had a vengeful nature and were ruthless toward their enemies.

If the Cercis Flower were to rise again, then Gu Hang had no doubts that the Iron Armor Battle Group, even separated by three Star Sectors, would find a way to utterly destroy the Cercis Flower.

The Phoenix, on the other hand, was slightly better off.

After all, back then, the Phoenix had come to assist in the fight and didn't harbor as much enmity towards the Iron Armor.

But that was only slightly better than the situation with Cercis Flower, and Gu Hang still couldn't be certain how Iron Armor would react in the end.

This could be a threat that needed attention.

The Ashen Dead Squad was in the same vein, and perhaps even more pressing.

After all, the Iron Armor Battle Group was still part of the Imperial hierarchy.

No matter how reckless they were, they couldn't completely discard the rules.

But the Ashen Dead were a squad that had defected to Chaos; without any rules to bind them, they harbored full malice.

According to some information revealed when Blaywins was later interrogated on the ship, the Ashen Dead harbored an 'obsession' with all the past bloodlines of the Phoenix.

After breaking out of Zhong Jihua's encirclement, Blaywins and his group were continually tracked and intercepted by the Ashen Dead over the following years, but they always managed to escape.

Zhong Jihua really hoped they would 'join' them because they shared the same blood, and it would be best if all turned into tainted blood.

If any Phoenix remained loyal and even thrived, Zhong Jihua would be extremely displeased.

This was, of course, Blaywins's conjecture, and there might have been a bit of exaggeration on his part.

But Gu Hang believed it was highly likely that the Ashen Dead would consider the Phoenix an enemy, and consequently the Alliance as well.

The Phoenix's recent strike on Extinct Soil Star wasn't just about a minor issue with pirates, nor was it only about eight Phoenix members.

It also placed some future concerns before Gu Hang.

These were issues that needed to be guarded against.

How to guard against them?

It was nothing more than making oneself even stronger.

Confronting the Iron Armor might still be far off.

They were the overlords of a Star Sector, and a century ago, they had already exceeded an estimated six thousand Interstellar Warriors; a hundred years had passed, and although they had sustained losses in the ongoing resistance to the invasions of the Void Insect Species, their gradual development would likely mean they were no fewer than before.

In fact, the Empire now didn't know how many members Iron Armor had, and was very wary of them.

They were not just a few thousand, but potentially tens of thousands of Interstellar Warriors.

More importantly, they had consolidated the power of a whole Star Sector, and their strength level was comparable to the Star Realm Army's Mortal Auxiliary Army, which was undoubtedly counted in the billions.

The volume of the naval Fleet, based on the Dragonhawk Star Domain, would at least be three to four times the full strength of the Tianma Fleet.

The current capacity of the Alliance was incomparable.

But at least, that was a goal.

To be honest, Gu Hang did admire the Iron Armor Battle Group's rule over the Princess Star Domain.

However, Gu Hang would not adopt similar methods to theirs to execute his plans.

As for the Ashen Dead, they might be easier to handle in terms of strength.

The scale of this squad might be similar to that of the current Phoenix, around two to three hundred people.

Besides, Phoenix had the support of the Alliance behind them.

But the tricky part was that the renegade Battle Group's movements were more unpredictable, and without a base or stronghold, they couldn't be tracked.

Even Matins really wanted to find the Ashen Dead to eliminate these true disgraces of the Phoenix, but the conditions weren't there.

To deal with them, one could only passively defend.

Direct confrontation wasn't the issue, but the problem was that Gu Hang didn't know when their threat would come, from where, or in what manner they would strike, making it difficult to guard against.

In light of this situation, Gu Hang decided to invest a little more effort in the near future on strengthening the Phoenix Battle Group.

The best way to counter Chaos Starfield Warriors, of course, was with loyal Interstellar Warriors.

Since they wouldn't be foolish enough to confront the vast size of the Alliance head-on, they would likely resort to unconventional tactics and special operations, so the Alliance needed to have the corresponding strength to counter them.

…

After pondering for a while about two possible future threats, Gu Hang casually dealt with the affairs concerning Extinct Soil Star.

When Matins and others like Blaywins left Extinct Soil Star, the alliance left about twenty thousand members of the Rage Bear Legion from the Star Realm Army to control the capital of Extinct Soil Star.

But in fact, Gu Hang had no intention of directly ruling Extinct Soil Star under the alliance.

The influence of the alliance was not a major issue within the Tianma Star Sector; after all, Gu Hang himself was the head of the Tianma Star Sector.

However, expanding beyond the Tianma Star Sector would be a politically sensitive event, likely leading to some consequences Gu Hang was not eager to see.

He had contingency plans for such occasions, but perhaps they still lacked an opportunity to act.

The key was, if there were particularly significant benefits, Gu Hang would take the risk.

But clearly, the situation on Extinct Soil Star and the profits it could bring did not equate to the risks.

That planet hadn't been explored for minerals, but it likely didn't have much, or anything particularly valuable, otherwise, it wouldn't be in its current state; developing industry there also lacked some essential conditions.

It was neither close to any market nor had a particularly large population, nor was it rich in resources.

Merely relying on nomadic and agricultural practices to barely support two hundred million people, Gu Hang felt there was no need to make a big fuss over it.

The conditions on Extinct Soil Star might even be worse than those on Rage Owl Star initially.

Although Rage Owl Star had a small population and was a post-war wasteland at the beginning, at least it had areas like the Green Valley Region, where the natural environment was decent, and resources like the Low Energy Storm were treasured.

Moreover, when Gu Hang invested resources in building Rage Owl Star, he had no choice, since his beginnings were there.

Now that he had a choice, Gu Hang did not think that taking over Extinct Soil Star and then spending a lot on its development was a good choice.

However, not bringing it under the direct rule of the alliance didn't mean there were no other methods.

The governor was dead, and the charges were ready.

Take away the charge of betraying the interstellar warriors, and the rest was enough for Gu Hang to hang him.

Subsequently, he would support a new governor for Extinct Soil Star who would not join the alliance but could sign some cooperation agreements with planets under the alliance separately.

The food and biomaterials produced by the nomadic groups there had value, and the alliance could also export some inexpensive industrial products, such as daily necessities, furniture, and home appliancesthings that the Imperial Tax despisedin exchange.

It would be good to serve as a small grain-producing base.

Then, they could slightly leak some technology to better conduct the breeding and light processing industries, which would also stimulate the development of Extinct Soil Star.

Overall, it was a mutually beneficial arrangementthe alliance stood to benefit a little more, but it would not be like sucking blood.

At the same time, the alliance's control over Extinct Soil Star would be greatly strengthened.

Though not a member of the alliance, it would be practically equivalent to being one.

In the future, if the situation changed and Gu Hang needed Extinct Soil Star, he could at any time request its application to join the alliance.

Once approved, it would be done.

Chapter 410, Don’t Be Too Honest

The trip to Extinct Soil Star posed a challenge for Gu Hang, presenting a long-term risk (Iron Armor Battle Group) and an imminent threat that could erupt at any time (Ashen Dead).

Leaving the distant issue aside, the reason the Ashen Dead are considered an immediate threat is that, since Blaywins and his group could find us, so could Zhong Jihua and his.

Gu Hang was a bit annoyed.

However, since he had already decided to handle crises through development, that remained the focus.

And what is the biggest booster for development within the alliance?

That would, of course, be the Grace Points in Gu Hang’s hands.

The last time he spent a large number of Grace Points was four years ago.

At that time, he mainly boosted the alliance’s shipbuilding industry, which directly created the current industrial situation.

Now, after four years, although there hadn’t been any large-scale wars within the alliance during this period, Gu Hang’s control had stabilized over the entire Tianma Star Sector, with a total population reaching 61 billion.

novgo.co

Over these four years, the average lifespan under the alliance’s rule had improved, the birth rate hadn’t changed much, but what was key was the significant drop in the death rate.

All these reasons led to quite a high level of population growth.

The alliance's population increased by about one billion during this period.

Such high population growth scared some worlds.

More people means more money when the world population is next assessed for tax allocation.

But the alliance wasn't afraid.

Having a large population is a good thing.

Fatchess Tri-Star, Hongjian Star, and even larger population capacity spaces.

Korolya is expected to continue relocating people outward.

Beyond population, the alliance's productive forces had been improving these years.

The education system on Flying Wing Star opened up to the entire Star Sector, higher population quality, all of which drove the rise in the alliance's productive forces.

Together with the improvement in living standards…

All these factors, population size, population quality, average living standard and happiness, level of productive forces…

all are strongly and positively correlated with the monthly income of Grace Points that Gu Hang receives.

This also made Gu Hang's monthly income skyrocket.

Four years ago, before securing Flying Wing Star, Fatchess Tri-Star, and Hongjian Star, Gu Hang's income from Grace Points was 7,000 and that was after pulling up Korolya's situation by a lot to return to the levels when he only controlled Rage Owl Star and Heijian Star.

But now, this number has grown to 32,000.

An increase of 4.5 times.

Of course, this number gradually rose, not skyrocketing all at once, and also, the rate of increase has slowed down a lot recently.

But all in all, the cumulative monthly income Gu Hang obtained in these four years also exceeded one million.

However, although he hadn't made any big spending all at once, Gu Hang had also spent about 600,000 of it in bits and pieces over these four years.

The main uses were essentially in 'people' and 'construction.'

He activated more heroes, spent a large number of Grace Points on political commissar training at the Loyal Heir Academy, a fair amount on military training, occasionally exchanged Gene Seeds, and through basic training templates of the military badges, screened personnel to supplement new blood for the Interstellar Warriors…

He exchanged many academy templates, factory templates, and even church buildings, bestowing them upon corresponding real-world structures to take effect.

It was precisely these investments that led to high growth.

Whether it was the growth of the alliance's income or the increase in Grace Points income.

And now, it was time to use the remaining more than 400,000 Grace Points in batches.

First off, he planned 200,000 Points for use on Interstellar Warriors.

With the continuous increase in the past, the number of Phoenix Interstellar Warriors had already reached a scale of over two hundred people.

And with this expenditure of 200,000 Points, the number of Phoenixes shot up directly to 500.

Apart from the Gene Seeds that Gu Hang directly exchanged, the first batch of Phoenix newcomers from early years had already passed five years, their first Gene Seed has matured and been harvested.

Initially, Matins was thinking about whether to save some of these Gene Seeds to prepare for the Gene Seed taxation to be paid by Phoenix later on.

This idea, when brought to Gu Hang, left him speechless.

The Imperial Army's collection of Gene Seed taxes is calculated based on how many new seeds a Battle Group has produced in the last ten years.

It's an accountable number: how many new recruits have grown to the five-year mark in the past ten years, how many veteran warriors have fallen, this is the total number of Gene Seeds over ten years, and they just need one-tenth of them.

In regular circumstances, it's not too difficult for the Empire to grasp this information.

Generally speaking, the loyalty of the Interstellar Warriors is somewhat assured, they report a number themselves, and the Empire generally accepts it if it's not far off; for inspections, it's actually a bit difficult, though counting the dead is practicable since Interstellar Warriors usually don't fight alone and other Imperial Army forces may control some of the situations; monitoring the development of new blood is truly challenging.

But it doesn’t matter, the Empire won’t be so stringent.

The Sect of Mechanics and the Star Warrior Management Agency will check a Battle Group’s total manpower, calculate an average number, follow routine experience to estimate how many seeds you can pay for ten yearsa Battle Group with a thousand people usually gives five to ten seeds in ten years, unless there is a major event just about the right number will do.

Chapter 410, Don’t Be Too Honest_2 “`

Only if the numbers deviate greatly will the Empire intervene.

Now the question arises, how would the Empire know how many people are currently in the Phoenix?

The last time information was reported, the Phoenix only had seven members.

Logically, even years later, the Phoenix wouldn’t have grown much.

Under Gu Hang’s command, the common experience of the Mechanical God Cult and the Star Warrior Management Agency was of no use.

The Empire had scant information on the Phoenix.

As long as one kept their mouth shut, it would be hard for the Empire to know exactly how many people were in the Battle Group, how much tax was owed, and wasn’t it up to oneself to decide?

Now, with the ten-year period almost up, one could simply say they had a hundred people, exchange a Gene Seed as a token, and that would be it.

And you, Matins, really want to pay based on the actual situation?

That would be way too much to give, with four or five hundred new members in five years, requiring the exchange of forty to fifty Gene Seeds…

NovGo.co

Isn’t that just making trouble for oneself?

You are indeed very disciplined, true loyal subjects of the great Empire, still thinking of paying the full Gene Seed tax honestly at this point?

No wonder you can’t beat the Iron Armor.

But Gu Hang didn’t say this outright to Matins.

He responded by indicating that all the new Gene Seeds produced by the Battle Group’s new blood should be used for developing new warriors, and that he would continue the usual practice of selecting young, T1-grade prospects through the Soldier Badge Training System for implant surgery.

The success rate of the Phoenix Gene Seed implant surgery was remarkably high, nearly 98% over the years with only 9 failures out of 500 operations.

The main reasons for this high success rate were twofold:

First, the Phoenix Seed wasn’t too selective.

Second, and most crucially, every candidate was trained to T1 grade at the appropriate age.

Their physical condition, experience, skills, and mental willpower all met the standards, and as long as the individual’s condition and compatibility with the Phoenix Seed weren’t exceptionally poor, failure was unlikely.

Using the Gene Seeds produced by the new blood and those exchanged by Gu Hang, the number of people in the Phoenix had risen to five hundred, which could be considered a revival.

From now on, Gu Hang would not even have to exchange more Gene Seeds for the Phoenix.

The unique structure of the Battle Group's personnel, made entirely of new blood, meant that the amount of new Gene Seeds produced over five years was even greater than many full-strength Battle Groups.

Coupled with the high success rate of implant surgeries, Gu Hang wouldn't have to spend extra on Gene Seeds anymore, as their numbers would quickly increase through internal growth.

By this stage, the Phoenix couldn't be considered powerful, but at least it resembled a normal Battle Group.

Many Starfighter Battle Groups, long embroiled in war and not faring well, might only have this many members.

As for the missing elements like the Battle Group Fleet, Fleet servants, Mortal Auxiliary Army, and armed and aerial vehicles, Gu Hang could not provide all of those at once.

But undoubtedly, their next actions would not be as an independent Battle Group but would always include cooperation with the alliance army.

Requirements for war could be supplied and supplemented by the alliance army.

Though armored vehicles driven by mortals were not as effective as some exclusive ones that allowed special neural connections for the Interstellar Warriors, they at least temporarily solved the problem of not having any at all.

Even if Gu Hang now wanted to equip the Interstellar Warriors with exclusive armored vehicles, it would be quite tough.

While Rhino Troop Transporters could be manufactured, vehicles like the Raider Tanks were simply not producible, not to mention mechas like the Dreadnought or the Apocalypse.

To acquire them would rely solely on external procurement.

But external procurement…

that was too cost-ineffective.

If the alliance itself produced them, the actual cost would be materials, labor hours, food, and living supplies for the workers…

although the price listed in the alliance's accounts would still be calculated using the Empire's standard pricing, the budget would appear as so much, but in reality, it wouldn't cost nearly that much.

In the case of external procurement, however, it would genuinely consume the alliance's Tax Currency, without skimping a single cent, and with a good chance of a significant premium on such high-tech items.

They would have to make do for the time being.

…

Having invested 200,000 into the Phoenix, Gu Hang was no longer too worried about the problem of the Ashen Dead once their number reached five hundred.

"`

That Chaos Combat Group, at best, had a little over two hundred Interstellar Warriors.

With around 2.5 times that number prepared, even if the ashy remains of the dead immediately rushed to their faces causing mayhem, Gu Hang would have enough strength to cope with it.

If they took a bit longer to arrive, say a few more years, then they would have to face a standard, fully staffed Battle Group of a thousand soldiers.

By then, Gu Hang truly wanted to see what expression would appear on Zhong Jihua's face.

Are you coveting the bloodline of the Phoenix?

A thousand bloodlines are laid out right here, come and take them if you can.

Of course, those 200,000 points of grace that landed on Phoenix brought nearly twenty thousand T4-T2 grade elite soldiers.

Although these people were by-products, they weren't without value.

As usual, some were packed into the 10th Brigade; the rest were thrown into some specially numbered units, like the 1st Exhale Wind Brigade, the 2nd Beast-slaying Brigade, or into a few Skeleton Divisions.

The 10th Brigade had already grown to over ten thousand men, all elite, fully equipped with special gear, enough said; the other divisions and brigades siphoned off top soldiers and commanders, and even managed to assemble teams entirely of T4 grade, then fully equipped with Exoskeleton Armor and LR series, GHS series rifles, plus a higher ratio of armor and firepower.

Such a force, when pitted against ordinary Star Realm Army, could likely defeat an enemy twenty times their number.

But the key is that such forces aren't there to exchange blows with the enemy on the battlefield, but to be deployed to critical battles where they can play a decisive role with their cutting-edge capabilities.

In short, this also greatly strengthened the alliance's military construction capabilities.

As for the remaining two hundred thousand points of grace, Gu Hang thought about it and took out one hundred thousand to use for the technological lottery.

At the ten thousand grace points bracket, we're far from being drained.

However, after the earlier round of withdrawals, the odds of drawing something now are certainly lower than at the start.

Nonetheless, throwing down one hundred thousand points of grace was bound to make some waves.

Things like some advanced-grade engineering machinery and the likeupgraded types of technologyand some less important tech, we'll just pass over and not dwell on them too much.

Among these ten consecutive draws, one significant acquisition was the elite technology "Dynamic Weapons".

The power sword in Matins' hand belonged to this category of weapon.

This kind of thing, to put it a bit flamboyantly, can be called invincible.

In this universe, apart from a few materials that cannot be mass-produced, there's hardly anything in conventional armor that can withstand the assault of dynamic weapons.

And it's not just power swords; "Mjolnirs", "Force Staffs", and especially "Power Gauntlets" more commonly equipped on Terminator Armor…

these all fall within the category of dynamic weapons.

Dynamic weapons aren't exclusively for Interstellar Warriors to use either.

Just like how the elite warriors of the 10th Brigade of the alliance also make use of chainswords, dynamic weapons can be adapted and modified for Mortals to use; they just have to be made smaller and lighter.

And to further enhance the weapons' power, these dynamic weapons can also be crafted into fine-work versions.

Although the cost of production would greatly increase and mass production becomes difficult, it doesn't really matter.

They are meant to be equipped by the leading combat forces; the objective is to make them more useful when facing off against some powerful individuals.

With that, Gu Hang had concentratedly spent a total of three hundred thousand points of grace.

With the remaining one hundred thousand, he wanted to keep them as reserves for any unexpected needs.