Governor 491

Chapter 491, Identification

"Naldo Kero? What Naldo Kero, I don't know this person."

At the Supreme Council, Norberto said with a sneer:

"When speaking, one must have evidence. Don't blame everything on Gu Hang, who knows if he has offended some people?"

Ou Juren felt somewhat helpless.

He had brought the matter of Norberto illegally instructing the Assassin Court to assassinate Gu Hang to the Supreme Council.

As expected, Norberto denied all the accusations.

Moreover, there really wasn't sufficient, concrete evidence to prove that Norberto was the culprit.

This was anticipated. Norberto had covered his tracks very well; the key person who could incriminate him, the assassin tutor Naldo Kero, had already disappeared without a trace, likely vanishing soon after issuing the mission. Other evidence was either not crucial or had not been collected.

Overall, nailing him down was fraught with difficulties.

However, since this was an expected outcome, Ou Juren was not disappointed.

Everyone knew it was Norberto's doing, which to some extent, was enough.

Assassination is a transgression of the rules, a destruction of the political baseline. The resulting outrage not only fueled the anger of factions already against him but also dissatisfied some of the original neutral parties and even those who were vaguely on Norberto's side.

He didn't pay any price—although Gu Hang was assassinated, he didn't die!

And the enemy had paid a huge price, exposed a massive flaw, and gained nothing!

This was an excellent opportunity!

Ou Juren had already prepared a whole basket of proposals, from reducing the permissions of the Military Affairs Department, to legitimizing the alliance with Gu Hang, to deciding on the vacant deputy prime minister position of the Military Affairs Department that had yet to be filled, to finding a way to eliminate a few key figures within Norberto's faction…

And the most important measure was to initiate an investigation into Norberto based on this incident. Regardless of whether enough evidence could be found to bring down Norberto, at least entering into the investigative procedure would surely hinder his ability to exercise his power smoothly.

Of course, Norberto would not so easily comply.

"Prime Minister Ou Juren's proposal is so preposterous! To initiate such a disgraceful investigation against me, a High Lord, without any evidence! This is simply an insult!"

"I can't help but ask: if I now suspect that you, Ou Juren, orchestrated all this, assassinated Gu Hang, and framed me, can I also request an investigation of Ou Juren?"

Norberto rebutted, arguing by reason or, rather, being unreasonably stubborn.

His opposition indeed had some effect.

The entire council was in an uproar.

'Tap, tap, tap'…

Heavy footsteps came from the doorway.

It quickly quieted down within the Supreme Council chamber.

That was the sound of powered armor.

Inside the venue, the representative of the Interstellar Warriors unconsciously reached for his waist and felt nothing.

It’s prohibited to carry weapons into the meeting.

They could only watch helplessly as the great doors of the meeting hall were pushed open.

Leading the way were two golden-armored warriors.

Seeing them, the High Lords breathed a sigh of relief.

The Imperial Guard, no worries then.

In the history of the Empire, the Imperial Guard had never been involved in any palace coups.

On the contrary, in many court coups, the Imperial Guard sometimes passively played the role of bringing them to an end.

For those who prided themselves as the true guards of the Emperor, though the Emperor had ascended to godhood, wasn’t the Imperial Palace still there? Although guarding the Emperor remained their primary task, which was not needed; next, guarding the Imperial Palace became their most important duty. You carry on with your coups; the Imperial Guard cares not for these mortal squabbles. But causing chaos in the Imperial Court, that will not be tolerated, whoever does it will be dealt with.

Inside the Imperial Palace, truly, none could stand against the Imperial Guard.

Now that it was the Imperial Guard entering, no worries about a group of the Rebel Army coming in with bombardment guns to mow down all the High Lords.

But what was the purpose of these Imperial Guards, usually indifferent to the Empire's politics, suddenly showing up?

Following the two Imperial Guards were a whole column, led by a Centurion.

Shielded by the guards was a group of four people.

Among them, three stood side by side, while another was bound and brought in.

The three standing, everyone was familiar with.

Bochoya Galaraldo, the executive director of the Military Affairs Department, Clement, the Great Mentor of the Assassin Court, and Gu Hang, the leader of the Alliance.

The person dragged in by the Imperial Guard behind them was unfamiliar.

The crowd couldn't help but look towards Ou Juren. Both Galaraldo and Gu Hang could now be considered part of Ou Juren's faction.

But at this moment, Ou Juren's expression was also one of surprise, seemingly not expecting this.

At the same time, the High Lords immediately noticed that one person's reaction was the greatest: Norberto.

He still endeavored to appear calm, but his face began to pale, and a fine sweat broke out on his forehead in the comfortable temperature of the assembly hall, witnessed by many.

Those present were all clever.

From the unusual actions of the Imperial Guard, the appearance of the Great Mentor of the Assassin Court, and the state of the bound person, they could roughly guess what had happened.

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Some people closed their eyes, some glanced with amusement, and some laughed openly without hiding their mockery.

The High Lords each had different expressions.

During the silence, the Imperial Guard spoke first.

The Centurion stated that they had concluded their investigation on Gu Hang, whose Psychic identity had been recognized by the Psychic Cultivator's Association, and already updated him as a Grade S Psychic.

However, they were now there to arrest those causing disturbances at the Imperial Palace.

During the conversation, the Centurion's gaze was consistently on Norberto.

"No, no… you misunderstood…"

The head of the Military Affairs Department opened his mouth, trying to defend himself palely.

But the Centurion cut him off.

"I would like Clement, Gu Hang, and Galaraldo, the three parties involved, as well as the criminal Naldo Kero, to first explain the situation."

Clement nodded slightly and began, “Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to the man behind me, Naldo Kero. He is an assassin trainer. After the assassination incident, I immediately checked the Assassin Court’s action records. The Assassin Court never received any orders from the Supreme Council, this command was an illicit directive issued directly by Kero.”

Galaraldo took over the conversation, “I invited Great Master Clement to visit the residence of the Imperial Guard, to see Gu Hang and discuss the entire event. After learning of Kero’s escape, Mr. Gu Hang expressed that as a victim, he hoped he could be of some help.”

Gu Hang took the opportunity to speak, “Merely by chance I have some capabilities; using my Psychic power, I discovered the way Naldo Kero fled. The Imperial Forbidden Army moved out personally and captured the disguised Naldo at Tera No. 46 Star Harbor, outside the Imperial Palace.”

“Impossible, how did you…” Naldo Kero couldn’t help but interrupt.

He genuinely couldn’t figure it out.

He thought his departure was seamless.

However, no one answered his question, and just as he was about to ask again, he was kicked in the back by one of the Imperial Guards.

“Shut up, you have the right to answer questions. Who instructed you to illegally issue the action command?”

Naldo Kero, frustrated as he might be, had no choice but to tell the truth, “It was Minister Norberto.”

“You lie!”

Norberto roared, but it was already pointless.

…

After the meeting, Ou Juren, Galaraldo, and Gu Hang gathered again in a secret chamber.

They had emerged completely victorious in the recently concluded meeting.

Though removing a High Lord's position and firing a head of the Military Affairs Department wasn't simple, the Imperial Guard didn't care much about the process.

They respect the authority of the Empire Government, letting them follow whatever procedure necessary.

But they took away the person first.

Norberto, falling into the hands of the Imperial Guard, likely wouldn't be able to come out.

His downfall would trigger a chain of reactions.

The most direct was Galaraldo being ignited with further ambitions.

Previously, he thought about competing for the position of deputy head of the Military Affairs Department, contemplating the position left by Wang Suan's retirement.

But now, he really had a chance to seize the position of head of the Military Affairs Department!

He was already the highest-ranking executive minister, with only three people above him: the minister and two deputy ministers.

One, Wang Suan, had retired; one, Norberto, was under investigation; the remaining deputy minister, being a close associate of Norberto, would be the next one purged once his backing fell.

That left no one above him!

Of course, the new head of the Military Affairs Department didn't necessarily have to arise from within the department. Choosing someone from the high ranks of other departments was also possible.

But as all the influential figures had their positions, Galaraldo believed he still had a competitive edge against other department's deputy ministers.

Although the challenge was still high, other factions within the Supreme Council wouldn't likely sit by watching their people seizing two seats directly. But that was the struggle, the exchange of interests, the political compromises.

However, despite their victory, the atmosphere among the three in the secret meeting was not cheerfully jubilant.

Especially for Ou Juren, the Minister of Justice, whose demeanor was somewhat ominous.

"Your actions were too sudden! Even I didn't know! Do you know how much trouble this will bring?"

Ou Juren rebuked Galaraldo.

Gu Hang spoke from the side: "This can't be blamed on him, and of course, it can't be blamed on me either…"

Subsequently, Gu Hang explained the whole situation to Ou Juren.

When Galaraldo came to the Imperial Guard's quarters with Clement, the Great Mentor of the Assassin Court, he had offered to help find the whereabouts of Naldo Kero.

The method to find Naldo wasn't what Gu Hang had described as Spiritual Energy techniques.

That guy ran very swiftly, evidently premeditated, and even Clement, the Great Mentor who could mobilize the entire Assassin Court, couldn't locate Naldo, let alone relying solely on the power of Spiritual Energy.

The headquarters of the Psychic Cultivator's Association is also in Holy Terra, and although Grade S Psychics are rare, there are still definitely a few here.

If it had been possible to find Naldo just by using Spiritual Energy techniques, Gu Hang wouldn't have needed to take action.

But who lets Gu Hang have connections?

After the assassination, an activatable event named [Vengeance] popped up on Gu Hang's [Event] panel. It only required one thousand Grace Points to activate.

Gu Hang believed that this was a blessing from the Emperor.

After activation, Gu Hang directly obtained Naldo's whereabouts.

It was even updated with real-time coordinates.

With this, capturing him posed no problem.

However, the problem arose elsewhere.

Catching a Naldo, once his location was known, anyone could do it. Especially Clement, he is the leader of the Assassin Court, and having a traitor who conspired with external forces and acted independently caused him a lot of trouble, he was eager to clean house.

His assassins were also suited for this job. Whether it was killing on the spot or, according to Gu Hang and Galaraldo's demands, bringing back a live capture, both could be easily accomplished.

But they overlooked the existence of the Imperial Guard.

No wonder, the Imperial Guard has always stayed out of politics. They are aware of the countless dirty deeds secretly transpiring within the Imperial Palace but have always refrained from intervening—as long as you keep it out of the public eye.

Various forces also always maintained this baseline.

However, this time the unexpected breach startled many, including the reaction of the Imperial Guard.

After Gu Hang completed the review by the Psychic Cultivator's Association (after giving a heads up), the Imperial Guard requested to join the manhunt for Naldo.

Someone had to be responsible for dirtying the floor of the Imperial Palace.

Who can resist the Imperial Guard? Not even Clement!

They didn't even give Clement, Gu Hang, or Galaraldo a chance to discuss.

No one was willing to confront these formidable opponents head-on.

So, the Imperial Guard led the team, and with Gu Hang guiding the way, Naldo was captured. Coincidentally, the Supreme Council was in session, and that Imperial Guard Centurion, after consulting with the Forbidden Army Marshal, led his men directly to the site.

"…in this process, there really was no chance to report the situation to you," Galaraldo concluded with a final explanatory remark.

"Hmm…" after listening, Ou Juren's expression softened slightly.

Indeed, throughout this whole process, there really was no opportunity to report.

But still, he couldn’t help but feel a headache: “Ah… it’s still very troublesome… all the High Lords saw that you came in with the Imperial Guard. No one will think that the Imperial Guard has sided with us, but everyone will murmur that we broke the rules by actively using the Imperial Guard, introducing this uncontrollable force into the fray. This has been an unspoken rule that everyone has followed all along.”

Chapter 492: Never Worry About Gu Hang's Loyalty!

Ou Juren’s concerns are justified.

In the entire Holy Terra, which faction holds the most powerful military force?

Without a doubt, it is the Imperial Forbidden Army.

The ‘Ten Thousand Man Team’ is no joke; at least tens of thousands of Imperial Guards are stationed here, each of them possessing extraordinary combat abilities. In their presence, the Interstellar Warriors are almost no match.

Among the Interstellar Warriors, only some top warriors can barely compare to the unnamed Imperial Guards.

Moreover, these Imperial Guards are not only powerful as individuals, their equipment is also among the most formidable throughout the Empire.

Nobody knows how many black technologies are guarded inside the numerous imperial secret laboratories they protect. Their powered armor, the weapons they carry, and the vehicles they use are all custom-made precision products, not mass-produced.

Apart from their combat capabilities, their influence is also unparalleled.

Which faction loyal to the Empire would dare point their guns at the Imperial Guards, the spokespersons for the Emperor?

These Imperial Guards in Holy Terra can mobilize almost all military forces.

This power is not explicitly stated in any law or decree, nor do they have a specific command grade, but likewise, no one doubts their ability to do so.

Even the Golden Knight Legion, one of the initial Battle Groups based in Holy Terra, also maintains a very good relationship with the Imperial Guard. Should a conflict arise, they would surely stand by the Imperial Guard.

Under such circumstances, who would dare provoke the Imperial Guards in Holy Terra?

Fortunately, the Imperial Guard does not interfere in politics and they have never had the intention to overthrow the Empire Government.

They are even the maintainers of the current political framework.

Because the framework of the Supreme Council, the political structure of the Human Empire Government, was established by The Emperor, securing this framework means upholding The Emperor's will, an undeniable duty of the Imperial Guard.

But this does not mean they can't act!

We don't care about your internal conflicts, but no one should escalate it publicly, otherwise, even the High Lords have no say in it, I command!

In this context, even though the High Lords have significant power, they are still cautious not to overstep due to the looming presence of the Imperial Guard above them.

The presence of the Imperial Guard also objectively serves as a check on these High Lords—though that is not their original intention.

No one can ignore the presence of the Imperial Guard, everyone fears them, and naturally, no one wants such an Imperial Guard to become an adversary's weapon.

The Imperial Guard does not meddle in politics, and no one should provoke the Imperial Guard, which is an unspoken rule among the High Lords when engaging in political struggles.

Norberto breached this rule and paid a heavy price.

Now, Ou Juren worries that he too has violated the rules and will also pay the price.

The Supreme Council is in session, who dares to push the door open without permission?

Whichever party commits such an act will bear the wrath of the High Lords! Such disloyal and disrespectful actions will surely be punished by the highest authorities of the Empire!

It's the Imperial Guard… all is well.

Is everything really fine?

Thirteen High Lords, each of them was taken aback.

Someone has to be responsible for this matter. They dare not direct their anger at the Imperial Guard, but someone must be the target for the High Lords to vent their anger.

Ou Juren does not hope that he will be that person.

However, Galaraldo has a different opinion about Ou Juren's concerns.

"This is not our problem, it is Norberto's problem. We never intended to involve the Imperial Guard, it was Norberto's overstepping actions that caught the attention of the Imperial Guard. We need to emphasize to the other factions that it was the Imperial Guard who took us to capture Naldo, it was the Imperial Guard who led us into the council, not our proactive actions. I believe that the other High Lords will understand this."

After Galaraldo finished speaking, Gu Hang added, “The actions of the Imperial Guard are a clear warning, indeed stemming from Norberto, not us. No need to worry that we will be hated for this.”

Ou Juren nodded slightly.

Indeed, blaming Norberto is not a problem.

It really was Norberto’s doing, we are the victims.

Yet, even so, Ou Juren’s mood has not completely improved.

“Let’s leave this matter aside, another very crucial issue is that… alas, Norberto fell too quickly.”

At this point, Gu Hang and Galaraldo also fell silent.

The downfall of Norberto was indeed their goal, but it shouldn’t have happened so quickly.

Such haste will disrupt many of their original plans.

Originally planning to devour step by step, now suddenly, a huge cake is exposed. Other surrounding forces, like hungry wolves, quickly encircled, creating chaos. Many who originally had no chance to benefit from this matter now suddenly see an opportunity.

This would affect the political gains of Ou Juren’s faction.

Moreover, another major downside is: how will Tie Nu Shi react?

Norberto was a protective umbrella for Tie Nu Shi, allowing Tie Nu Shi's influence and development to expand locally. Objectively, he also bridged the communication between Tie Nu Shi and the Central Empire, acting as a buffer between both.

Before Norberto's fall, Tie Nu Shi still somewhat listened to the words from Holy Terra; now that Norberto has fallen, can Tie Nu Shi still heed any advice?

Chapter 492, Never Worry About Gu Hang's Loyalty!_2

Iron Fury Stone certainly understood that they had become a thorn in the side of Holy Terra. They too had made political efforts, with Norberto trying his best to mediate the relationship between the two parties. But now, with the mediator gone, would Iron Fury Stone take this as a sign that the Empire was about to move against them? Would they believe that the option for peace had completely vanished and that war was the only choice left?

This was the biggest reason why they couldn't just swiftly eliminate Norberto: they feared it would directly push Iron Fury Stone to rebel!

The Empire wasn't yet fully prepared for a rebellion!

Troops, supplies, personnel, propaganda, policies… everything was still in the planning stages.

If Iron Fury Stone were to rebel first, the entire Eastern Frontier of the Empire might well face a major crisis!

Thinking of this, not just the High Lords who were shocked during the previous council, but even ordinary politicians understood that the situation had slipped further toward an uncontrollable abyss.

Everyone was cursing internally; these golden corn spirits were really of no help at all, completely lacking in political wisdom, knowing only how to create chaos!

If you have the ability to create chaos, why not break out from Terra and personally subdue Iron Armor in the Empire's Eastern Frontier?

Staying in the Imperial Palace every day, even The Emperor ascended and still not knowing what they are protecting!

But as much as they complained internally and bore resentment, they dared not voice these to the Imperial Guard.

Different departments of the Central Empire could only race against time, trying to get the bloated system moving, in order to respond to the crisis that might break out much sooner than expected.

…

After the assassination incident, Gu Hang stayed at Holy Terra for about another month.

During this period, his previously interrupted honours ceremony due to the incident was held again. This time, there were no accidents, and he received the golden scepter that symbolized his status as the Empire Marshal.

He became the highest ranked individual in the entire Dragonhawk Star Domain.

Although in reality, the only forces he had direct command over were the ones that originally belonged to him, the Rage Bear Legion, and his title was ‘Marshal of the Rage Bear Legion’. He did not have command over other corps of the Star Realm Army.

However, the Star Realm Army was, after all, a unified military force with a nation-wide character, unlike the defense armies under different planets which really had no jurisdiction over each other.

According to the unified regulations of the Star Realm Army, within a warzone, unless there were special orders, the highest-ranking officer would automatically obtain wartime command over the Star Realm Army in that region.

This meant that Gu Hang indeed could not exercise his power in places outside of the Rage Bear Legion. He could not decide on the organization of other legions, personnel appointments, or military movements.

But if a war broke out and there were no higher commands from a level above Gu Hang establishing an alternative command system, then all Star Realm Army forces within that battlefield region would have to follow the orders of this Marshal.

In practice, for the Dragonhawk Star Domain, this would include not only his own Dragonhawk 3rd Corps but also the eight additional army groups of the Dragonhawk Legion, which were currently under the jurisdiction of the Dragonhawk Star Domain Government. They would all have to listen to him.

Although there was a Legion Commander of the entire Dragonhawk Legion in the Dragonhawk Star Domain, Michelle Oliqi, the Legion Commander, only held the rank of Admiral, still a rank below Gu Hang.

If the Alliance and Fury Flame Battle Group went to war, the Dragonhawk Legion fighting under the Fury Flame Battle Group would find itself in a very awkward position—everyone was part of the Star Realm Army; would they listen to commands from a Marshal?

Thinking of treason, are you?

Similarly, Yelisia had been somewhat troubled before, as her Tianma Fleet kept receiving orders from the Yunluo Fleet's Fleet Commander, who was also the highest Imperial Navy official in the Dragonhawk Star Domain.

But now, being associated with Gu Hang, she had been promoted to Admiral of the Imperial Navy.

Now that their ranks were the same, Yelisia could rightly ignore the other side.

Of course, just as Yelisia had previously evaded orders from that Admiral, technically Legion Commander Oliqi could also ignore Gu Hang's commands.

The difference, however, lies in the fact that Yelisia had firmly decided to follow Gu Hang, with their relationship being clear.

Was Oliqi firmly determined to follow the Fury Flame Battle Group's command, at the risk of being labeled a traitor?

Probably not.

At the same time, Gu Hang also gained another benefit.

This one came with more complications.

It was about the proposal for him to become the highest administrative officer of the Dragonhawk Star Domain—the Star Domain Head.

The appointment process for the Star Domain Head is proposed by the higher-level government, namely the Space Domain Government, reported to Holy Terra, and sanctioned by the Imperial Executive Yuan, thereby coming into effect.

Regarding the proposal to appoint Gu Hang as the leader of Dragonhawk, it followed the most normal and reasonable process. At Galaraldo's suggestion, Zuo Zhaofeng submitted the nomination.

Generally speaking, the Imperial Executive Yuan rarely rejects proposals from the Space Domain Government.

But with Gu Hang, things are a bit different.

He is now the Marshal of the Imperial Star Realm Army, his daughter-in-law is an Imperial Navy Admiral, and he has an Interstellar Warrior Battle Group at his command; now to give him the title of leader of the Dragonhawk Star Domain Government… amassing military and political power in one hand, right?

The Empire had just been contemplating how to eliminate 'Iron Fury Stone', and now they're fostering another local independent warlord themselves?

Indeed, there were concerns about this.

The Chief of the Administration Bureau was opposing it.

Everyone knows he is Zebert's man, which to some extent, represents Zebert's thoughts.

In this matter, Ou Juren played his role.

The appointment of a Star Domain Head doesn't need to go to the Supreme Council for a vote. Ou Juren worked his connections, especially with a personal visit to Zebert, giving assurances that persuaded the Prime Minister.

Although not explicitly stated, Gu Hang could more or less guess the thoughts of these heavyweights.

They were of course afraid of nurturing another Iron Armor.

But on the one hand, although Gu Hang had the allegiance of Interstellar Warriors, unlike the situation in the Princess Star Domain, the Iron Armor Battle Group acted autonomously, while Phoenix did not. The Supreme Council believed they had ways to separate Gu Hang and Phoenix later.

They were more wary of Interstellar Warriors than a human political leader.

In the history of the Empire, Interstellar Warriors have caused turmoil time and again; a mortal rising from the local ranks to become too powerful to control?

That had never happened.

'Turmoil' caused by mortal political leaders did exist, but these occurred within the Central Government. Including the Sun Lord era that ended only a decade or so ago, Solakium first became the Supreme Marshal of the Star Realm Army, stepped into the ranks of the Thirteen High Lords, and then launched the Solar Expedition, seizing control.

Moreover, compared with the numerous misdeeds of Iron Armor, Gu Hang was dutifully paying taxes. Whenever he didn't pay taxes, it was due to explicit tax exemption policies given to him, which were not even sought by him but proactively provided for various reasons. With these exemptions, he did more work than the taxes he saved.

Such as saving a Nest Capital, such as winning the Iron Teeth War.

Gu Hang's reputation in this regard was much better.

Letting Gu Hang hold great power was also because of the presence of the formidable enemy, Iron Armor.

Having an enemy that even the Central Empire found troubling,

let them bite each other first. Once the battle was over, Gu Hang's coalition would likely suffer heavy losses. By then, it would become much easier to dismantle it.

To this, Gu Hang just smiled, repeatedly reassuring everyone he met how honest he was. His lifelong wish was to achieve some merit locally, and then to move to Holy Terra to work together with everyone.

His words indeed made many believe him.

Because this really fit the notion most Imperial officials had at heart: Holy Terra is the best, superior to any other place. Better to have a bed on Terra than a palace in a Garden World.

Being transferred to Holy Terra to serve a term as a high official would make one willing to give up all local accomplishments.

Many Imperial high officials came about this way.

Once the battle with Iron Armor is settled and Gu Hang has achieved fame and success, finding an official position for him on Terra would naturally lead him to let go of the so-called coalition and come over eagerly, right?

No need to fear that Gu Hang will become too strong and troublesome at the local level!

You never need to worry about Gu Hang's loyalty!

Chapter 493, The Enemy is in Terra!

One banquet after another, one meeting after another, one social gathering after another under the guise of art and music…

In the last month on Holy Terra, Gu Hang was diligently expanding his network of contacts.

To be honest, he didn't enjoy these things.

But he was trying hard to integrate himself into them and use their methods to secure everything possible for his Alliance.

The more he did so, the more disillusioned he became with the highest echelons of the Human Empire.

On this trip to Terra, Gu Hang had come to an in-depth understanding of the heart of the Human Empire. From the High Lords at the very top to the rank-and-file executive officers, he had dealt with them all.

Among them, were there any with glorious ideals or grand visions?

Yes, there were.

But they were a minority.

Instead, what Gu Hang mostly saw was interest exchange, sordid dealings, and lives steeped in debauchery…

Even when discussing serious matters, in Gu Hang's view, they were quite impractical, dissociated from reality, and of no benefit to the nation or the people.

It was fortunate that it hadn't yet come to a point of total negligence in civil administration and military recreation. The former might be present, but the 'military' had not yet become 'recreational', which was the only consolation.

Before Gu Hang left, the struggle for the head of the Military Affairs Department had concluded.

Galaraldo had won but hadn't won completely.

He had succeeded in becoming the Minister of Military Affairs, the highest administrative office within one of the four major departments of the Empire.

Under the Empire Government structure, in theory, the only person above him was the Imperial Prime Minister.

But that was only in theory. In reality, not to mention that he hadn't yet secured his position, within the Empire there were too many independent power factions outside the government structure.

Moreover, the reason he hadn't won completely was due to not having secured a seat in the Supreme Council.

It was quite rare in Empire history for the Military Affairs Department to lose the position of a High Lord. After all, if there was a hierarchy among the four major departments, Military Affairs would be second, possibly vying for first. While it's true that not every term within the four departments guarantees the seat of a High Lord and sometimes none have it, typically the Minister of Military Affairs would be among them. It was rare to see the ministers of the three other departments included while the Military Affairs was excluded.

To be honest, this had a substantial impact on Galaraldo's control over the Military Affairs Department, as the people below might become dissatisfied and uneasy.

But he didn't actually care about these anymore.

In his words: "I've risen through the ranks at breakneck speed in recent years, unavoidably offending a great many people, especially those whose positions I've taken, whose paths I've blocked. However, after my promotion to Minister, many of these issues will subside. If I am not high enough, they will envy me, resent me; but once I rise to a level they can only look up to, they will instead flatter me."

"I'm not lacking in grudges; if I feared this, I would have kept a low profile long ago."

"It's you who should be careful when you return. Whether it's dealing with the Fury Flame Battle Group or possibly Iron Armor that may soon make big moves, neither is easy to handle. Don't let us down, but don't overextend yourself either. If it really comes to the worst and there's no way out, always remember to stay alive at all costs. With me here, no matter the difficulty, I assure you a chance for a comeback!"

These were Galaraldo's final words of advice to Gu Hang before he left.

…

Gazing at Holy Terra growing smaller and more distant within his sight, Gu Hang withdrew his gaze and turned towards the boundless Star Sea ahead.

The matters on Terra had concluded, and he was on his journey home.

It had been one year since he left the Alliance, and the return trip would take nearly another year. Together, two years were quite an extended period.

As a leader, being away from the core of your dominion for a long time is certainly not beneficial.

However, as a part of the Empire, and a power grown under the wings of the Empire, Gu Hang had to make this trip to Terra by all means.

Putting aside the benefits acquired and the troubles resolved on this trip, he had to let these old masters on Terra clearly recognize what kind of person he was, in the way he wanted to be recognized.

This way, when they thought of the Alliance, they wouldn't just see it as a rising power in the Empire's Eastern Frontier grasping both military and political power. Instead, they would associate it with the identity of Gu Hang, the leader, think of him in the context of the Imperial Political Arena, realize his connection to Holy Terra, as part of an emerging political faction.

'One of their own.'

Should things come to some dangerous yet inevitable juncture later on, the contacts established on Terra might prove to be useful.

And, for the past twenty years, the Alliance system that he had crafted should still be trustworthy, not wholly reliant on his presence, capable of operating smoothly on its own. The biggest problem with his absence from the center was not the governance, but the morale.

Two years, was nearly at the limit. And for this reason, he didn't dare to waste any more time on Holy Terra. Once matters were settled, he promptly embarked on his return journey.

Hoping that all would still be well when he returned.

…

In the Eastern Cosmos Domain, within the Dragonhawk Star Domain and the Snoweagle Starfield.

Fury Flame Battle Group Leader Kazimir Ersu was in communication with his ally, Humphrey Paolo, the Iron Armor Battle Group Leader located far away in the Princess Star Domain.

But Erso's current expression could hardly be considered happy.

Because Paul had ordered him to retreat, to give up the Dragonhawk Star Domain, and with his Battle Group, which had now actually grown to around sixteen hundred men, to circle back to the Meng River Star Domain, located north of the Dragonhawk Star Domain, and then return to the Princess Star Domain.

The reason for doing so was also clearly explained by Paul.

Erso knew about the events that had transpired on Holy Terra. After this information was relayed to Erso by him, Erso could understand why it was necessary to consolidate their forces.

Because war was upon them.

Because the Empire could no longer accommodate them.

To be honest, upon realizing this, Erso felt somewhat bewildered, to the extent that he was initially unable to accept it.

He had led the Fury Flame Battle Group, and for the past century or so, had always stood together with the Iron Armor Battle Group, committing many heinous acts.

However, every single act was done in the name of loyalty to the Emperor and patriotism.

Deceiving others is certainly important, but perhaps deceiving oneself is even more so.

From birth, he believed in The Emperor; after becoming an Interstellar Warrior, that belief was further reinforced with the genes of The Emperor. Aside from training, the most common aspect of his daily life was prayer; in the midst of war, the most frequently heard battle cry was 'For the Emperor!'.

Who would have thought that one day they would become traitors?

“No, we aren’t traitors,” Paul said, as if he could see right into his heart, “How much have we sacrificed for this Empire? Our Battle Groups fought in the Princess Star Domain’s ‘Abyss of Nothingness’ for a hundred years, countless Iron Armors and Fury Flames have given their lives; in recent years, your Battle Group has battled the Green Skin Orcs in the Dragonhawk Star Domain, with innumerable sacrifices. Everyone says that Gu Hang was the one who killed Titus in the end, but who can deny the contributions of the Fury Flame on the frontlines? Without your steadfast defense on the frontlines, the entire Dragonhawk Star Domain would have fallen long ago; how could it have been Gu Hang’s turn to steal the final fruits of victory?”

“But how does the Empire treat us? Distrust, vigilance, oppression… Has it ever lessened over the past century? The blood we’ve shed appears rightful in the eyes of those on Holy Terra; but the resources we should receive for the war effort are seen by them as if we were cutting flesh from their bodies!”

“In the past, we might have harbored illusions, but now Norberto has been finished, and the Central Empire can no longer hear a single word from us, nor do we have anything left to discuss with those bureaucrats idling on Holy Terra. We have bent over backward for the Empire, and that will not change in the future. Only now, we’ve come to realize that the greatest crisis facing the Empire doesn’t come from external enemies, be they Aliens or Demons. Instead, we must awaken to the fact that the greatest crisis of the Empire comes from within! From Holy Terra itself!”

“The enemy lies at the heart, and as Angels of The Emperor and loyal guardians of the Empire, it’s our duty to eradicate this greatest of foes!”

Paul’s words were so resolute and compelling that they stirred Erso’s blood!

This resolved a major worry for him: becoming a traitor.

But according to this, they were not traitors!

Although he could vaguely feel that this argument wasn’t entirely solid, he was very much willing to believe it.

Whether a claim is believable hinges greatly on whether the listener is willing to believe.

If one is willing to believe, then even the most absurd lies can deceive.

And Erso was someone who was very willing to believe this argument.

Moreover, he had figured out many of the implications behind these words himself without Paul needing to say anything.

The ultimate goal to save the Empire was to ascend to Terra and usurp the throne, but that wasn't something that could be immediately achieved overnight. What they needed to do now was to hold their base, strike at the forces that have been misled by Holy Terra, and continue to expand their foundation in the midst of the war, eventually amassing enough strength to conquer Holy Terra.

It was not something that could happen overnight.

However, after believing in this, and dispelling the psychological resistance to the upcoming war, he naturally developed another concern that mattered greatly to him:

"Then, why retreat from the Dragonhawk Star Domain? Why can't we make the Southern front, the Dragonhawk Star Domain, or even the entire Eastern Cosmos Domain, our primary or at least a secondary target?"

"Because we don't have enough power," Paul patiently persuaded, "I understand your feelings, Fury Flame has invested a lot in the Dragonhawk Star Domain, and it's hard to pull back without reluctance."

Erso didn't speak because it was indeed true.

"But we have to think about the overall situation. The Void Black Hole still needs forces to defend, and if we're the main offensive, our discussions have concluded that we would have an advantage operating within the entire Spiderweb Starfield, which we have managed for many years. Yet there are many challenges, and we need as much military force as possible. Before Holy Terra's preparations are complete, we need to strike first and expand our power as much as possible. Inside the Spiderweb Starfield, right by our bed, there are six Battle Groups with unclear attitudes, and many forces that may not necessarily be willing to stand with us."

“We must achieve an undisputed, overwhelming, heart-shaking victory, like a whirlwind sweeping away fallen leaves, to cover as much ground as possible. A powerful, irresistible victory is essential as a great start. Compared to the forces controlled by Holy Terra, we are ultimately at a disadvantage; our strength lies in having significant superiority in localized areas.”

“We must leverage these advantages, using such a victory to deter all the waverers, and sweep as many of them as possible under our banner.”

“Our time window is short. To create that kind of earth-shattering momentum, we must employ every power we can. So, I need you, more than ever before.”

“Do you understand?”

Paul’s persuasion was akin to heartfelt advice.

After listening, Erso sighed deeply.

“Alright, Paul, I understand your point, and I agree with your plan. I will withdraw my Battle Group as soon as possible. I still have a hundred warrior brothers in the hands of that Alliance, waiting for me to negotiate a prisoner exchange plan, to get them back before withdrawal.”

“Good, the sooner, the better.”

…

At this moment, the Alliance had also learned of the changes in Holy Terra’s political situation.

It was Gu Hang who informed them.

If the many changes that occurred on Terra were still somewhat distant news to the Alliance officials, in reality, they had a very direct impact on the layout of the Dragonhawk Star Domain, and they could feel it very clearly.

The most direct manifestation was the withdrawal of the Silver Tribunal.

They had been in the control area of the Alliance for a full year.

During this year, they had caused not a few troubles for the Alliance.

The Alliance's various intelligence agencies had exhausted all sorts of means, entangling with these Judges.

The opposition was roughly divided into overt and covert fronts.

The covert aspect was actually easier to handle.

The Silver Tribunal had dispatched many spies to quietly infiltrate the areas controlled by the Alliance, especially in the core ruling worlds of the Tianma Star Sector, to collect intelligence and even fabricate charges.

These spies would of course not notify the Alliance; otherwise, they wouldn't be able to find anything out.

But this played right into the hands of the Alliance.

If you don't say anything, that's just fine.

All with illegal identities, the intelligence agencies of the Alliance would directly take extreme measures.

They were all treated as enemy spies, subversive elements; caught one, processed one, and had to be quick and strict.

The Judges of the Silver Tribunal often couldn't react in time, couldn't rescue their people, and those spies were either executed or disappeared before they had the chance.

Chapter 494, Seeking Death by Coming to the Door?

For such disrespectful behavior from the Alliance, the judges at the Silver Tribunal were very annoyed.

In their work experience, they had seldom encountered such a situation.

They were the Tribunal! Their word was law, holding great power! All high officials were insignificant in their eyes, calling you a traitor meant just that!

Wherever they went, weren't they treated with caution? Local powers in any empire were like facing the Grim Reaper, kneeling on the ground in fear, anxiously waiting for their verdict. During this process, it was very common to see them flattering and groveling.

Clearing out spies sent by the Tribunal?

Who would dare!

Although sent secretly, those local powers could certainly recognize that the spies were from the Tribunal. Pampering and supporting them was hardly enough; at most, they would try every means to hide evidence, only daring to take drastic measures when absolutely necessary.

But often at these times, it was when the judges would become furious and then sentence the rulers to severe punishment.

But the Alliance did not behave this way at all.

They maintained necessary courtesies, but in many areas, there were conflicts. For instance, regarding spies, the Alliance didn't care whether you had gathered any intelligence or not; if the spies were not dispatched after notifying them officially, they were treated as illegal infiltrators and eliminated.

Furious?

Well, just be angry then.

Yet the Silver Judges dared not do anything.

Did the Silver Judges dare to pass judgments without decisive evidence just because of this?

Obviously not.

Even though, over the past year, they had received numerous urgings from the Fury Flame Battle Group.

But still, they dared not.

Declaring the Alliance as traitors sounds easy, just a flip of the tongue. But look at those Alliance Intelligence Officers always following them, and the 'Glory Guards' these officers could call upon at any time – the Silver Judges had no intention of making any move.

Once judged, do you think Furyflame would directly wage a war? Obviously not. In the past, the tribunal or its allied forces had absolute overwhelming power over local powers, and the ultimate goal of judging rebellion was to find an excuse to start a war.

But this is not the case at the moment!

Even if the Furyflame compelled the Silver Tribunal to make a judgment, they would not go to war unless their strength was sufficiently accumulated. Their judgments were more often used by the Furyflame Battle Group as a way to suppress the Alliance.

In fact, right after their judgment would come, the Flash Judgement Court following them might well overturn their decision; their judgments could not be enforced, and even if Furyflame decided to act, they might not necessarily be stronger than the Alliance.

If retreating ten thousand steps, even if they could defeat them, that would be a matter for the future. At the moment, these Silver Judges situated deep within Alliance territory would definitely be doomed!

The Alliance Intelligence Officers following them might not be able to slaughter them, but those so-called 'Glory Guards' made the Silver Judges somewhat shudder. These elite Alliance forces, although not as majestic and mighty as the Interstellar Warriors, still should not be underestimated with their bodies covered in Powered Armor. What was key was the spirit they displayed, which was unsettling.

The Silver Judges couldn't help but compare privately; on their Tribunal's black ship, they also had an elite force of Stormtroopers, composed of the finest veteran elites from the Star Realm Army equipped with Exoskeleton Armor and Hellfire Laser Guns, and each tactical squad could also choose bombs, plasma, thermomelt, and other more powerful weapons depending on mission objectives.

Although the Stormtroopers were said to be from the Star Realm Army Sequence, in fact, it was more common for them to work for the Tribunal, being one of the Tribunal's most reliable elite armed forces.

However, compared to these Glory Guards of the Alliance, perhaps similar in training level and mental will, the equipment still felt slightly inferior.

The Silver Judges often lamented: How rich is the Alliance?

Even if their Stormtroopers could contend with these Glory Guards, the other side could always call upon the Empire's Interstellar Warriors at any time, whereas the Furyflame Battle Group was far away.

Even if they just wanted to escape, the Tribunal's black ship had excellent performance, but next to their black ships were always several times the number of Alliance Warships.

This method called 'escort', in reality, was for surveillance, making them dare not make any rash moves, nor hope to unearth any results.

Neither from covert nor overt sources could they gather any solid intelligence; wanting to use the Alliance's poor attitude to declare them as trying to 'obstruct the investigation', they dared not. These reasons left the Silver Judges feeling extremely frustrated.

Yet, they still always wandered around in various places deep within Alliance territory.

They also understood their role: if not to kill you, then to annoy you to death.

As long as they existed, the Alliance had to divert a significant amount of attention to them.

Truth be told, their role was indeed being played out. Otherwise, so many intelligence officers, so many Glory Guard warriors, and a considerable part of the Alliance Warships, could totally be doing something else instead of just following these judges, preventing them from causing unpredictable problems.

Chapter 494, Courting Death by Showing Up?_2

However, they are leaving now.

They are leaving without reaching any conclusions.

Honestly, this is quite unusual for the judges. They came with great fanfare, deploying an entire black ship, hundreds of judges from all levels, tens of thousands of elite tempest soldiers, and countless spies to investigate a faction's territory, only to leave without any results.

What if they concluded that the Alliance hadn't committed treason?

That wouldn't work either.

Wouldn't that be tantamount to endorsing the Alliance?

But to conclude treason?

That would be even worse.

Not only would this entire team currently in the heartland of the Alliance be doomed, but they also wouldn't be able to enforce their judgments. Moreover, they wouldn't even dare to make a judgment after leaving Alliance territory because the changes in Holy Terra have even scared the Silver Tribunal.

In the past, they had covered up many actions of the Iron Armor Battle Group, but that was because Holy Terra had not yet defined the conduct of the Iron Armor Battle Group. Now, do they really want to be tied completely to the Iron Armor Battle Group?

The Silver Tribunal has not yet made a final decision, and there is still fierce debate within, with some purges already occurring among them. The Iron Armor faction is reluctant to give up the unrestrained power it enjoys with the support of a strong battle group in the Empire's Eastern Frontier and the substantial benefits provided by the Iron Armor Battle Group; the Imperial faction thinks that following the Iron Armor is a dead end.

Within these two major factions, there are many disagreements.

It's total chaos.

But in any case, the investigation of the Alliance cannot proceed.

The Imperial faction opposes it, and within the Iron Armor faction, information from the Iron Armor Battle Group has been received; Dragonhawk Star Domain, located two star domains south of the Princess Star Domain, is not the core direction for the Iron Armor Battle Group's next move.

The Silver Tribunal disgracefully withdrew.

Meanwhile, the Fury Flame Battle Group is also withdrawing.

But before leaving, the Fury Flame Battle Group made a demand to the Alliance.

Several years ago, the Fury Flame Squad, consisting of a hundred men sent by Kazimir Ersu to convey tasks to the Alliance, has been detained by the Alliance for a long time. The Alliance needs to return these people.

Whether to return them or not is, of course, for the Alliance to decide. If the Alliance insists on not returning them, what can the Fury Flame Battle Group do?

A battle not worth fighting now also cannot be started over these hundred Fury Flame captives.

However, the Alliance is still seriously considering this matter.

Whether or not to return the captives, the Fury Flame Battle Group can only withdraw. But the manner of withdrawal could be different.

Would they withdraw honestly and obediently, returning their currently occupied areas to the Dragonhawk Star Domain Government in full, and finally wait for Gu Hang, who has been clearly appointed as the leader of Dragonhawk, to take over, or would they go on a spree of looting before leaving?

They would definitely engage in looting, which goes without saying. They would likely take their currently controlled warships and leave with a large amount of material.

But the difference lies in whether their looting is relatively mild or destructive.

If it's the latter, that is actually very troublesome. They would leave a huge mess for the Alliance.

Of course, this would provoke tremendous resistance and would greatly tarnish the reputation of the Fury Flame Battle Group. But since they are withdrawing and are going to confront the Empire anyway, they obviously wouldn't care about these consequences.

Even though they can't possibly wreak havoc in every area of their control, even just causing trouble on Yunluo Star would be very distressing. Before the war, Yunluo Star was a developed world with a production value comparable to Flying Wing Star. With a level 4 development degree and a population of 12 billion, just looking at these figures means nearly fifty billion in output. Many areas controlled by the Alliance put together might only amount to half this figure.

What's more, after breaking the pot, they wouldn't just be taking away wealth; the Alliance would have to spend money to pacify and rebuild these areas afterward.

In fact, upon learning of the political changes in Holy Terra and anticipating the possible withdrawal of the Fury Flame Battle Group, the Alliance Government had already prepared for this scenario.

As soon as there's any sign of Fury Flame's intention to leave, the plan is to strike on all fronts, seizing the time and opportunity to force the Fury Flame Battle Group not to go too far and to drive them away.

Even if it triggers a certain degree of warfare between the two sides, it's a sacrifice worth making.

And the negotiators from the Fury Flame Battle Group subtly implied: return the prisoners to me, and I'll commit fewer atrocities.

To this end, the Alliance is actually willing.

A hundred stripped Fury Flames might be valuable, but to the Alliance, preserving a more intact world is more valuable.

Even if the Fury Flames might not fully adhere to the agreement, and will still loot and destroy as they intended, saving as much as possible is still better.

However, when they had in principle agreed to the conditions for exchanging the prisoners, the Phoenix Battle Group came up with a new idea.

And this idea still requires Gu Hang's approval.

Gu Hang, who was still on his way back, heard the report and the request, and sent back a signal:

Agreed.

…

Snow Eagle Star Sector, Upper Plateau Star.

This world, which was once a critical battleground where humans and Iron-teeth Greenskins clashed, has been devastated by the war. The extensive orbital bombings, along with the brutal ground battles, have nearly destroyed this world.

Chapter 494, Coming to Find Death?

The majority of the original city clusters on the ground had already turned into ruins. Perhaps there were still civilians who had survived the war, but their numbers would not be too many.

It would likely take an extremely long time to restore it to its former state—if there were no external interference.

Yet today, this planet once again became the focal point of the entire Star Domain.

For the Fury Flame Battle Group and the Alliance were to hold the handover ceremony of the Dragonhawk Star Domain here.

From today, the Fury Flame Battle Group would withdraw from the Dragonhawk Star Domain, allowing the Alliance to take over smoothly.

Originally, the Alliance wanted to sign a detailed handover list with the Fury Flame Battle Group, specifying what could be taken, what could not, and what must be obligatorily left intact… But the Fury Flame Battle Group refused.

So far, no explicit written agreement has been signed between the two parties. All arrangements reached were oral, or even based on tacit understanding.

This was very unreliable.

However, there was one thing that was very clear and certain: today, on Upper Plateau Star, the Alliance would hand over 100 previously captured Fury Flame Warriors.

Representing the Alliance was the Phoenix Battle Group, who were fully responsible for this exchange ceremony.

And the method of exchange was a blood duel to the death.

The rules are very simple: Phoenix would put forward one hundred warriors, to be challenged by Fury Flame on the platform, where both victory and life or death would be decided.

For every win by Fury Flame, a captive would be returned.

If they had the capacity to kill all one hundred Phoenix, then all one hundred captives would be released.

The arena had already been built—it was just a big open field. Any means were unrestricted; all equipment that a single soldier could bring in could be used, but interference from outside the arena was forbidden.

Fair and just, everything depended on skill. After each bout, both parties could choose to change players or not, but as soon as Phoenix accumulates one hundred losses, the duel would be declared over, and how many rounds Fury Flame would need to win these matches depended on their own abilities.

If Fury Flame could win every round, breaking through the one hundred Phoenix warriors, then it would be as if they had slaughtered one hundred Phoenix at no cost and gotten back their captives; if they could not break through these one hundred at all, that was their own problem to deal with.

Without a doubt, this was a significant provocation. It was not only a duel between warriors, but essentially a battle between Battle Groups.

There was not a trace of friendliness, just two Battle Groups filled with deep-seated resentment towards each other, engaging in a life-or-death blood battle when open warfare was not an option.

In the outer orbit of Upper Plateau Star, the ships of both parties gathered densely. Naturally taking the lead for the Alliance was the ‘Firebath Nova’, while on the other side, the flagship Combat Shuttle ‘Spiritfire’ of the Fury Flame Battle Group also glared menacingly.

The distance between the ships of both parties from the planetary orbit was quite considerable. Their mutual distrust almost seemed palpable; neither was willing to let the other's vessels idle in orbit, lest the people who went down to the ground suddenly get hit by an orbital cannon.

There was a cruiser-grade warship from the Sect of Mechanics present as well, belonging to the Mingyang Sect. They were the first to come as 'spectators', and to some extent, witnesses.

The venue, cleaned up in advance, was a wide-open space amidst the ruins of a post-war city. From both parties, a large number of personnel had already landed, standing in clear-cut divisions on either side.

The most conspicuous between the two sides were two clusters of steel bodies with different colors.

One side had red armor with white edges, the other predominantly orange with black shoulder pads and knee guards.

Both parties numbered eight hundred people. Neither had dispatched all their warriors, keeping some in reserve.

But as the most important individuals of their respective Battle Groups, the Battle Group Leaders of both parties were present at the scene.

Kazimir Ersu gazed intently at the front, where he could see Matins in his Terminator Power Armor.

When he first received the challenge of a duel personally from Matins, rage surged within him.

A newly-revived Battle Group dared to challenge them?

Utterly presumptuous!

At the same time, he also saw it as an excellent chance to address the pent-up anger felt throughout his entire Battle Group.

Just like when Humphrey Paul begrudgingly ordered him to retreat, his subordinates harbored similar sentiments.

How could proud Interstellar Warriors tolerate surrendering without firing a shot?

Although retreat was not a surrender but a strategic move, the inherently impulsive warriors of the Fury Flame Battle Group still found it suffocating.

They did not wish it so; they were merely compelled by orders.

Now, the challenge proposed by Phoenix was precisely what they desired!

They didn't want to retreat, and now the enemy was delivering themselves to their doorstep!

Coupled with the loss of the Beastman Tribal Chief Titus's head, and a century of enmity… The entire Battle Group would absolutely have to accept Phoenix's challenge.

Otherwise, the whole Battle Group would be shamed!

Even if Kazimir Ersu was the Battle Group Leader, he could not go against the wishes of countless individuals and flat-out reject this duel that related to the honor of the Battle Group. To do so would destroy his credibility, and countless combat brothers would question whether he still qualified to lead the entire Battle Group.

Moreover, he himself had no intention of refusing at all!

Even though he had heard that the Phoenix Battle Group, since its resurgence, had recruits whose strength was nothing to scoff at, that they should not be treated merely as rookies, so what? Were all of Fury Flame recruits? The entire rank and file, with years of service and far deeper combat experience than those green Phoenix recruits, if they were scared to duel the opposition, that would truly be suspicious!

Even if taking down these Phoenix proved to be extremely challenging, costing one hundred of their own, or even two hundred, for one hundred Phoenix, the duel must be fought!

Especially since the opposition had chosen their own turf; the entire Snow Eagle Star Sector used to be within the Fury Flame Battle Group's control area. Under such conditions, Fury Flame could not back down.

Chapter 495, Fight to the Death with No Blood Spared

"We're meeting for the first time, aren't we?"

As the two Battle Group Leaders walked forward to engage in a deadly duel, Erso seemed quite relaxed.

Matins, standing opposite him, did not appear so composed.

It was evident that he was trying hard to remain calm. But the fury in his eyes could not be concealed.

Hearing Erso's greeting, Matins slowly pulled a cold smile at the corner of his mouth: "Not exactly, on Leviathan 9, I fired a bomb at you."

"Hahaha!" Matins' words seemed to amuse Erso, who, after a moment, reined in his smile and mocked, "I remember that battle, it was a great victory indeed. I personally slaughtered six Cercis Flowers and four Phoenixes. But I don't recall your bomb, it seems to have been entirely ineffective."

Matins vividly remembered that battle. His company and the Cercis Flower company were ordered to garrison on the planet named Leviathan 9 and were fiercely attacked by the Fury Flame Battle Group, suffering heavy losses. Many of his close warrior brothers died in that battle.

"I truly regret not having killed you that day."

"Oh? Now you have your chance." Erso was still laughing, not taking Matins seriously, "How about we two fight the opening round, and see if that bomb you fired a hundred years ago can hit me today."

He was trying to provoke Matins into making an irrational choice. The Battle Group Leaders leading the duel would certainly push the duel to a climax immediately, but likewise, the risks would become enormous.

Erso had absolute confidence in victory; he wanted to slash Matins with his sword in this first battle, gaining the upper hand.

Matins was nearly about to agree.

But at the last moment, he exhaled deeply.

“Let’s compare our warriors first. Later you may become so desperate that you’ll want to join the fight yourself, and then I will take your life.”

“Heh,” Erso stared at Matins, “Then I’m afraid my warriors won’t give me that opportunity. They’ll quickly kill off your hundred green recruits. But even if that happens, I will mercifully grant you the 101st chance, as long as you dare to join the fight, I’ll play along.”

“Wait and see.”

…

Returning to his own formation, Matins still hadn’t calmed down.

He felt that he hadn’t performed well in the argument, indeed losing to Erso in terms of verbal sparring.

This made him very frustrated.

But the conversation was over, and he couldn’t possibly drag Erso back for another round.

He could only bottle up his frustration.

However, he quickly came around.

What was the point of tongue-lashing anyway?

In the end, everything still hinged on gunfire and blades.

He asked Rizzo, “Are our warriors ready?”

“They are always ready. The hundred men named by the Governor are all eager for battle.”

Matins was somewhat moved as he said, “How did the Governor know that these hundred men are our best warriors? Moreover, after some training following the announcement, their already powerful capabilities have further improved!”

Rizzo revealed a mysterious smile: “Perhaps this is the Governor’s blessing.”

Matins paused, without replying.

He always felt that old Rizzo was becoming more and more cryptic.

Ignoring him, Matins turned his gaze to another person standing beside him:

“Brother Kalduce, according to the plan, you’ll be the first one to fight, any problem with that?”

Kalduce was the Company Commander of Phoenix First Company and one of the survivors of the hundred-year-long expedition who first came to Rage Owl Star with Matins. He was almost the strongest in Phoenix, second only to Matins.

It was most appropriate for him to fight this battle.

“No problem.” Kalduce replied absentmindedly, his gaze fixed on someone in the midst of the Fury Flame Battle Group’s ranks.

“Are you looking at Cao Boyang?”

“Hmm.” Kalduce came back to his senses and nodded, “I heard he’s now a Company Commander of the Furyflame. I wonder if we’ll have a chance to meet later.”

Matins knew why Kalduce wanted to meet this guy named Cao Boyang.

Just as he loathed Erso, Kalduce also had close brothers who died at the hands of Cao Boyang.

These four centenarians who had survived a hundred years, who among them didn’t hold a deep-seated grudge against Furyflame?

Matins thought for a moment and said, “You can call him out; maybe he will come down.”

“Good idea.”

Kalduce took off his helmet, which he was just about to put on, and tucked it under his arm.

He stepped out of the formation and shouted towards the opposite side:

“Cao Boyang! Come out and face your death!”

…

“Old Cao, he’s calling you out.”

“Let other brothers wait a bit, I’ll go first. It won’t take long; I can slaughter him in a few minutes.” Wrapped in the heavy Terminator Power Armor, Cao Boyang nonchalantly twisted his neck, “A hundred years ago, that guy slipped away, and a hundred years later, he still has to die by my hand.”

With that, he too stepped into the arena.

The gap in equipment between the two was significant.

Cao Boyang was fully armed, in addition to his ‘Indomitable’ Terminator Power Armor, he had two rocket launchers perched on his shoulders; under his left arm hung a Heavy Bomb Machine Gun. If this had been a war, his weapon of choice would usually be a Thunder God Hammer. But today, seeing Kalduce on the opposite side, he put down the Thunder God Hammer and took up a Powered Sword.

Chapter 495, Deadly Blood Fight_2

This isn’t holding back or deliberately not using the most familiar weapons; rather, it’s about strategically choosing the right gear.

Because the opponent Kalduce isn’t wearing Terminator Armor, just a set of regular Tactical Powered Armor—although the model is a bit rare, the ‘Majestic’ Powered Armor is something many Battle Groups would be envious of.

Using a Thunder God Hammer, which is more than enough to take down heavy units, against an opponent in Regular Powered Armor isn’t suitable. Something more flexible like a Powered Sword would be much more appropriate.

To be honest, the gear Cao Boyang is wearing is far more expensive than what Kalduce has on. If this were a war, Cao Boyang, in such attire, could play a much stronger role than Kalduce by many folds. Suppressing firepower, charging into the fray… he could do it all.

But a duel is another matter.

Terminator Armor is heavy, allowing for equipment that regular Tactical Powered Armor can’t accommodate. However, its bulkiness and lack of agility are simply irremediable.

If both users are of low skill, then without a doubt, the person outfitted with the Terminator set could simply crush the opponent with superior equipment; however, if both are experts, then it's not so clear-cut.

The Alliance isn't poor, and Kalduce isn't someone of insufficient status within the Battle Group to be denied access to good gear. It's a confrontation with an archenemy; there's no holding back or underestimating the opponent. Whatever Cao Boyang has equipped, Kalduce could have it too if he wanted.

If he didn't bring it, it's surely for victory.

Agility and skill are crucial for Kalduce to seize victory today.

Yet at the onset of the battle, Kalduce was immediately met with a grave crisis.

The arena for the duel is vast, encompassing about two kilometers in diameter of city ruins. However, for Interstellar Warriors who can sprint at full speed, even complex terrains can be crossed in mere minutes.

If the distance is closed, many of Cao Boyang's long-range heavy weapons would lose their effectiveness.

Almost the moment the broadcast announcing the start of the battle sounded, he crouched with legs apart, assuming a horse stance. The built-in scanner had roughly locked onto Kalduce's location, and the two Rocket Nests mounted on his shoulders began launching rockets.

One after another, the rocket, trailing long plumes of flame, shot forth. They drew beautiful arcs in mid-air, flew over numerous ruins, and precisely targeted the area where Kalduce was.

He didn't launch all the rockets in one go, but fired them in a controlled rhythm. He precisely calculated Kalduce's position and potential movements, sealing off many of his paths. The main objective was to prevent the Phoenix Veteran from taking shelter in the building ruins to avoid the blast damage.

No way! He would be blasted to bits en route!

And Kalduce could only keep moving nimbly amid the bombardment.

Of course, his speed was not enough to completely avoid the blast range, but Tactical Powered Armor is still Powered Armor. As long as he could evade the explosive core of the precise rocket hits, the threat from the outskirts of the blasts was relatively low.

However, during this process, he could hardly close the distance between them and couldn't afford any mistake whatsoever. Otherwise, a direct hit from the rocket would mean severe injury, if not death.

Kalduce's disadvantage from not choosing heavy equipment manifested just as expected.

Although he was still unscathed thus far, the problem was that Cao Boyang's means of attack were almost risk-free, whereas Kalduce could only passively take the hits.

A mistake meant defeat; without any slip-ups, it was merely a matter of Cao Boyang running out of rockets. He surely had more than twenty rockets in his two Rocket Nests—how much energy would Kalduce have to expend to dodge all of them?

While pondering this, all the spectators witnessed a blue beam shoot across the dueling ground, striking right at Cao Boyang's left shoulder-mounted Rocket Nest!

The audience were all elite Interstellar Warriors; they immediately recognized that this shot came from a Plasma Gun, and it was a charged shot at that.

But when did Kalduce draw the gun to charge it? Wasn't he scrambling to avoid the rockets just moments ago? How did he find the time to do this?

And with nearly two kilometers separating them, not to mention countless obstructing ruins, how did Kalduce manage to hit the target?

Watching from a distance, Kazimir Ersu's face had gone completely grim.

There was no magic to it; the man was simply capable of charging the Plasma Gun while distracted, all the while analyzing and adjusting his position as he dodged, finding a gap free of obstacles between them.

The gap was extremely narrow, even more terrifying, Kalduce was constantly under bombardment, dodging explosions while adjusting his position, which was extremely difficult, let alone seizing the fleeting moment in that instant to make an accurate shot, surpassing a distance of two kilometers.

Erso could only say, this was nothing short of divine skill.

Erso asked himself, within the entire Fury Flame Battle Group, was there anyone who could do this?

A few top-notch experts who had gone through specialized training and drills might be able to pull off this 'performance'.

But unfortunately, this was not a performance, it was a real combat, a matter of life and death.

Even in this real combat, Phoenix was at a disadvantage. This territory was under Furyflame's control, even the duel location was their choice, they were able to come in advance to observe and study the terrain, but Phoenix didn't have that condition.

To fire such a shot in the nick of time during real combat, Erso didn't even have confidence in himself.

But this man, whose name had not stood out in the wars a hundred years ago, actually did it!

Just an old soldier?

Impossible.

Even Company Commander Champion didn't have this ability!

Yet the Company Commander of the first Company of Phoenix could actually demonstrate such strength!

He couldn't help but look worriedly at Cao Boyang.

From the beginning of the battle to now, Old Cao's firepower suppression had shown extremely outstanding tactics, but Kalduce's godlike shot directly overtook him in terms of performance.

However, Old Cao's actions were actually quite decisive.

The moment his Rocket Nest was pierced by the plasma, he violently detached the Rocket Nest from its connection to his body and flung it far away.

The Rocket Nest exploded in mid-air.

Had Old Cao's decision been just a bit slower, he would have suffered severely from the sympathetic explosion of the Rocket Nest.

Kalduce also took this opportunity to swiftly advance by using the cover of the urban ruins.

Clearly, he intended to close the distance between them, even wanting to enter close-quarters combat.

Old Cao was not afraid either.

This Company Commander of the Fury Flame Battle Group, taking heavy steps, also delved deep into the urban ruins.

However, the watching Erso couldn't relax his tense anxiety.

Kalduce's performance was too frightening; now he could only hope that this Phoenix Veteran was a master specialized in long-range shooting, with his close combat swordsmanship not being outstanding, at least not that harsh.

It was possible; otherwise, Kalduce's capability wouldn't be just that of a Company Commander.

But seeing Kalduce's eagerness for close combat, Erso didn't dare to fully trust his own judgment.

He could only watch as the distance between the two sides got closer and closer…

Chapter 496, How to Win a Battle?

Kalduce managed to get up close and personal with Cao Boyang.

Despite the lack of rocket launcher suppression, Cao Boyang still had the heavy bomb rotary machine gun mounted underneath his left arm, which possessed far more destructive power than ordinary bombs, as well as a much higher rate of fire, providing an immensely strong suppressing effect.

With it, he could even frontally blast a Lion Tank to pieces in less than ten seconds!

This kind of weapon, in the hands of mortals, could only be used as a fixed turret. Even armored vehicles couldn't carry it and still move because the recoil when firing was too much to handle; if it were mounted on a Lion Tank, they'd have to remove the main gun, which was a loss not worth the trade; when used by Interstellar Warriors, it required a two-man operation.

Only Interstellar Warriors wearing Terminator Power Armor could normally operate it alone, and it could be mounted under one arm, shifting the muzzle as the arm moved.

However, it was still unavoidably cumbersome.

When Cao Boyang realized that they were getting very close, he swiveled the muzzle towards the direction Kalduce would appear and began firing furiously.

The consecutive firing of the heavy bomb could demolish even collapsing building walls, exposing Kalduce, who had wanted to use these building ruins for cover as he advanced, to the line of fire.

In this way, he suppressed with fire, attempting to stop Kalduce from approaching and hoping to deliver a powerful strike. A single hit from a heavy bomb could also inflict significant damage on Kalduce, who was only wearing Regular Powered Armor.

Indeed, Kalduce was hit, taking three bullets.

It was impossible for him not to make any mistakes; during his erratic maneuvering, he took a bullet that grazed past his abdomen.

It wasn't a direct hit, not enough to injure him. However, as a Company Commander of the Fury Flame Battle Group, known as one of the top warriors of the entire Battle Group, Cao Boyang could not miss such an opportunity.

He himself was a master in the use of heavy weapons, having already demonstrated his skill with the rocket launcher bombardment; it wasn't that he was unskilled, but rather that Kalduce's performance was simply too good.

Now, a bullet hit, causing Kalduce to slightly lose balance, and Cao Boyang quickly followed with the muzzle. Being able to control a heavy bomb rotary machine gun, maintaining such sensitive tracking of the target even at full rate of fire, he was truly adept.

But Cao Boyang's outstanding performance simply served to highlight Kalduce.

The next two bullets that hit, one was deflected aside by Kalduce's Powered Sword, while the third, intentionally so, struck his shoulder armor and detonated.

Admittedly, the explosion from the heavy bomb caused his shoulder to throb with pain, but the huge shoulder armor, akin to a shield, was not pierced through; it was painful, but did not affect his bodily functions.

And with the force of the explosion, Kalduce's body quickly darted to the side, dodging the subsequent attacks.

At the same time, Kalduce's fully charged High-Efficiency Plasma Pistol fired again.

Cao Boyang's soul nearly left his body when he saw the gun drawn.

Its power was obviously great, and although it required a longer time to charge for a single shot, it definitely packed a punch that was much heavier than the heavy bomb.

What's more terrifying was its accuracy.

Just moments ago, Kalduce had demonstrated his ability to hit his target from such a distance, through so many obstacles. Now, at a much closer range, he had no doubt that a shot from the other party would surely land on a vital spot.

For example, the visor on his helmet.

The visor on the Terminator Armor, of course, had been specially reinforced and was not that easy to penetrate. But it was still not as thick or as strong as other parts of the armor. One shot from the high-efficiency plasma ray would certainly penetrate, and the brain behind the visor wouldn't be spared.

He could only jerk his head to the side, turn his body, and even raise his Powered Sword to try to block.

He succeeded, the ray hit the Powered Sword squarely.

Though unharmed, the powerful force contained in the plasma ray reacted with the Powered Sword, the tremendous force it produced throwing his body into sudden imbalance.

And in that instant, it was Kalduce's opportunity.

Without hesitation, he continued to charge forward, rapidly closing the distance so that his Power Axe could pose a threat.

By this time, Cao Boyang had also readjusted his previously unbalanced body. Seeing Kalduce's proximity, he swung his Powered Sword horizontally.

The strike was powerful and swift!

Kalduce blocked with his battle axe, but there was a sizable gap in strength between the two of them.

It wasn't a difference in the individuals, but mainly in the Powered Armor. The output power of the Terminator was certainly much greater than that of Regular Powered Armor.

But Kalduce seemed to always flow with Cao Boyang's powerful force, either twisting his body or deftly dissipating the energy. In the close-quarter combat, Kalduce appeared like a small boat sailing through raging waves, seemingly adrift, but in reality, he always maintained the initiative in the fight.

All Cao Boyang's attacks were, in fact, more of a passive drive rather than active acts. Yet, he never succeeded, as Kalduce, like a tenacious ghost, continuously hovered at his side.

Chapter 496, How to Win a Match? _2

His Powered Sword in hand actually wasn't as fast as Kalduce. That meant every time he slashed, Kalduce could either dodge or block, still with enough strength left to counter Cao Boyang.

Kalduce also had to hold back, not using his full strength against the enemy, since the Terminator Power Armor was solid enough that if he failed to deliver a fatal blow, he would lose his agility advantage and couldn't block or evade Cao Boyang's next attack. Such a powerful and heavy strike from the Terminator would immediately cost him dearly.

Despite this, every shallow attack from the Power Axe was terrifying when accumulated.

The spectating Erso clenched his fists tightly.

No matter how much he didn't want to admit it, Erso believed that in this duel, the Fury Flame Battle Group had lost.

Within the Battle Group, Cao Boyang, one of the best warriors and the Company Commander, had been defeated. If this were a normal duel, it would be at the point where conceding would be acceptable.

However, this was not a normal duel, but a blood fight to the death.

What does a blood fight to the death mean? It doesn't end until the blood runs dry, and the person dies.

There has to be a complete death for it to end.

Even if he was reluctant to accept the death of his old comrade and brother, there was nothing he could do now. In a duel observed by all, he couldn't interfere without trampling the honor of the Battle Group underfoot.

He could only watch helplessly as his brother sustained more and more injuries, growing increasingly immobile and sluggish, much like a wounded, bleeding bull in a bullfight that becomes more enraged yet weaker.

Eventually, the defeat Erso had foreseen came.

But the slight hope he harbored never materialized, as Kalduce, feeling it was about time, stopped 'playing.' Cao Boyang's movements had slowed significantly, especially after a heavy blow where his Powered Axe pierced through the back of his left knee, causing a limp; another axe blow slid during a clashing and cut at the junction of his wrist guard and iron glove, making it harder for Cao Boyang to wield his Powered Sword.

Additionally, his left hand's heavy bomb rotating machine gun was almost useless in such close-quarters combat, at most serving to block and provide a slight threatening effect with the heavy bomb, which was better than nothing.

Now, three out of Cao Boyang's four limbs were either disabled or had very limited effectiveness.

At this point, Kalduce finally felt it was secure enough to go for the kill.

This time, it was Kalduce's attack that led.

In fact, after his knee and wrist suffered heavy blows, Cao Boyang hardly launched any attacks, not even trying passive movements, just waiting for Kalduce to come forward.

Then let it come.

Kalduce brought his axe down towards Cao Boyang's head.

Cao Boyang of course tried to block it.

However, just a moment before the axe struck, Kalduce simply changed direction and Cao Boyang could no longer keep up.

Or rather, his eyes, his consciousness could keep up, but his body, his damaged Terminator Power Armor could not.

With this, Kalduce's Power Axe solidly, with utmost force, chopped into the inner side of Cao Boyang's elbow.

Amputation!

The highly durable outer armor of the Terminator's elbow wasn't so easily shattered, but the axe cutting from the inside undoubtedly severed Cao Boyang's arm.

Agonizing pain, but Cao Boyang, as a top-notch warrior himself, simple pain couldn't rob him of his combat ability. With his other arm, he threw a fierce punch at Kalduce while also firing the hanging heavy bomb.

It seemed to be his prepared counterattack for a desperate situation; he no longer cared if the heavy bomb would also injure himself. He wanted to fire at close range while Kalduce was fully committed to cutting off his arm, even if it meant perishing together!

Kalduce was slightly surprised internally; Cao Boyang's resolution indeed exceeded his expectations.

But it was meaningless.

He quickly kicked out, causing Cao Boyang to stagger back two steps, while Kalduce used the momentum to retreat five or six steps away.

He dodged, and though a step slower, Cao Boyang didn't give up. He tried to shift the gun barrel to fire at Kalduce. But in the next moment, Kalduce charged back in, his axe severing Cao Boyang's left arm as well.

With both arms lost, Cao Boyang had no remaining final moves.

In desperation, he lunged forward with his head, appearing to attempt a headbutt as a final resistance. But it looked more like he was presenting his head under Kalduce's axe.

One axe split the helmet, and another split his head in two.

The Company Commander of the First Company of the Fury Flame Warband, arguably the second most important figure in the Battle Group next to the Battle Group Leader, died like that.

The 800 warriors of the Fury Flame Battle Group — now 799 — watched as Kalduce, clad in Red Armor, stood with his foot on the respected old Company Commander's corpse, raising his axe and roaring towards the sky.

Chapter 496, How to Win a Battle?_3

Under this serious provocation, the warriors of Furyflame first were astonished and shocked, but then they roared ferociously as if insulted, cursing at Kalduce.

Kalduce took off his helmet, sneered disdainfully, and turned to leave.

The first battle, Phoenix wins.

And the second battle quickly began.

The combatant that appeared looked like a very young warrior.

He introduced himself, claiming to be the first new blood of Phoenix, with a military career of 20 years.

20 years, for mortals, of course, is quite a long military career, all veterans among veterans.

But for Interstellar Warriors, 20 years is just the beginning. Most Interstellar Warriors at this stage are roughly considered to be out of the rookie period. It is not until they reach 50 years of service and are awarded a silver stud on their forehead that they can be called veterans.

Those who had just been cursing at Kalduce from Furyflame Battle Group now quieted down a little.

Although they cursed Kalduce, regardless, Kalduce was a real veteran with more than two hundred years of combat experience, having survived the redemptive expedition. His strength was formidable, sent to spearhead the battle and having won, killing Company Commander Cao Boyang, albeit difficult to accept, but not inconceivable.

But to send a 20-year rookie?

Looking down on us?

But they soon reacted again.

Aside from the four veterans who had survived a century of expeditions in Phoenix, the rest were all recruits from the past 20 years.

Among the recruits, this young warrior who called himself Peleites Anatole was actually one of the oldest in terms of service.

With this in mind, some members of Furyflame couldn't help but sneer.

Erso also calmed his emotions from the recent loss of his comrades.

Having lost the first battle, there was absolutely no room for loss in the second.

Erso sent out the most outstanding 'new recruit' in the Battle Group.

Although called a new recruit, he had actually been in service for 48 years and was about to reach the customary status of a veteran.

And sending him wasn't Erso trying to save face. This warrior was a rare genius within the Fury Flame Battle Group, a natural-born warrior showing extraordinary talent after becoming an Interstellar Warrior, surpassing the level of average veterans.

In the internal duels within the Battle Group, he had won countless victories, even if not quite at the level of the Company Champion, but not far off, stronger than many of the sergeants.

Defeating a Phoenix recruit should surely be easy.

At the call of Erso, the genius warrior of Furyflame went down to the field.

The two combatants of the second battle both wore Terminator armor, the difference being that Furyflame used the 'Unyielding Type', while Phoenix used the 'Iron Cavalry Type'.

The Unyielding Type was the most common Terminator Armor of the current era, while the Iron Cavalry Type was much more precious and performed somewhat better.

Erso really didn't know where Phoenix got so many Iron Cavalry Types.

Kalduce previously wore the 'Majestic Type', which was also more rare and better than the most common 'Sky Eagle Type' equipment used by Furyflame.

He glanced over and saw that every Terminator was 'Iron Cavalry', and every tactical power armor was 'Majestic'… Where did Phoenix get all this good gear?

Jealousy and confusion put aside momentarily, he focused on the battlefield at hand.

Although the Unyielding Type fell somewhat short in performance compared to the Iron Cavalry Type, both were still Terminator Powered Armors, and there wasn't an ultimately decisive gap in quality. Victory or defeat hinged mainly on the difference between individuals.

He had full confidence in his warrior.

However, his confidence was soon shattered.

Watching that Phoenix named Anat step on the body of the Battle Group genius and roar like his predecessor, Erso's face darkened to the point of dripping water.

Defeated again!

And what made it even more embarrassing was that in the battle just now, the highly anticipated genius of Furyflame had hardly posed any real threat. Anat was clearly stronger, having gained the upper hand in the long-distance fight and inflicted severe damage.

In the end, Anat appeared in front of him, knocked him to the ground, stepped on his chest, and executed him with the Heavy Bomber Gun to the head. This was a clear sign of a symbolic execution; if not for that, Anat could have killed him from a distance earlier.

This was clearly a crushing disparity.

And even more humiliating was that after the battle, Anat did not leave.

He stood there, calling for the next Furyflame to come out.

Wanting to continue fighting.

The clear implication was that he hadn't enjoyed the previous fight enough and hadn't exerted much effort!

Erso was willing to go all out, not caring for face anymore, and sent down a Company Champion from Furyflame Squad.

However… the third battle was another defeat.

This Company Champion was wearing normal tactical power armor, seemingly trying to replicate Kalduce's previous victory.

He did manage with his exquisite skill to break through the long-range fire blockade and brought the fight into close-quarters combat. But in hand-to-hand combat, tactical power armor didn't necessarily have the advantage. The Terminator's armor thickness and equipped weapons were not for nothing. Anat's Power Fist, in dozens of rounds of close combat, eventually struck the Furyflame Company Champion on the head, killing him with one blow.

Although Anat was wounded all over, he won.

Still removing his helmet, Anat provocatively flashed a smile and turned to leave.

The whole Fury Flame Battle Group was about to explode!

Three consecutive losses!

Two were beaten by one person!

And a recruit at that!

Son of a…

Erso didn't care anymore, the fourth battle had to be won!

The fourth to enter was a Battle Group Champion from Furyflame.

His strength was on a par with the first Company Commander Cao Boyang who had opened the match.

But the Phoenix entering this time was the battle group's Priest with a skull helmet, Rizzo.

When the Gravity Scepter shattered the skull of that Furyflame Champion, Erso went numb.

How to win a battle?

Chapter 497, In the Name of the Battle Group

Lost four matches, and in an utterly humiliating manner.

The first match involved using Terminators against standard Powered Armor, lost; the second match was a duel between Terminators, lost; the third match was his own Powered Armor against the opponent's Terminator, still lost.

The fourth match, infuriated, he sent out the Battle Group Champion, yet still lost.

The humiliation is actually secondary, the most terrifying aspect is the substantial actual losses.

The four who perished were all the backbone, the core of the Battle Group!

A Company Commander could almost be considered the second or third most important person in the Battle Group. Should anything unfortunate happen to Erso, a Company Commander could almost directly take over the work of the Battle Group Leader temporarily; the Battle Group Champion, unit champions are all absolutely the elite backbone of a battle group, and there are hardly many of them. Even the most easily perished, the worst-performing new recruit of ’48, represented the future of the Battle Group.

In a single battle, the loss of any one of these four would deeply pain Erso.

Not to mention now that four had died.

What is more terrifying is that Erso now had no more confidence. Before this duel between Battle Groups began, he had thought it would go smoothly, but now, he had no idea how many more would die before securing these one hundred victories.

But could it be stopped?

Not to mention there were a hundred hostages in the enemy’s hands, to stop after losing four matches in a row would be akin to admitting defeat directly. If word got out, Fury Flame Battle Group would seem as though they had lost all face!

Winning was best, losing was acceptable, but to lose in such a manner not only showed weakness but most critically, it would indisputably earn the label of coward.

No Battle Group could endure such humiliation.

Interstellar Warriors could admit to being less skilled or underpowered, resorting to the saying ‘know shame, then be brave’.

But coward? Shying away from battle? Retreating without a fight?

This would be the subject of everyone’s ridicule.

During the process of being transformed by the Gene Seed, due to physiological changes, many of their mundane desires greatly diminished. They could tolerate bad food, had very low sexual interest, and their desires for power and luxuries also diminished. In contrast, their pursuit of honor, prestige, and loyalty became particularly obsessive.

Interstellar Warriors regarded honor as their life. Although every Battle Group, and indeed each Interstellar Warrior, had a slightly different definition of honor and loyalty, almost none could ignore the damage brought by the label of ‘coward’.

This was almost the most intolerable slander for Interstellar Warriors; they would rather die than bear such a reputation.

Erso felt the same way, especially since the battle-driven culture of Fury Flame made them even less able to tolerate the infamy of fleeing a duel.

With gritted teeth, he would continue to fight this battle.

Erso once again sent out a Battle Group Champion, determined to claim this fifth match.

This time, he finally got his wish.

Although victory was not easy, the opponent seemed to be a ‘new recruit,’ not more than twenty years old.

In the past, they might have disliked not winning beautifully enough. But now… regardless, this was a victory.

To win was already very good.

On the field, that Fury Flame Champion seemed to hesitate, but ultimately, he asked Erso through the communicator if he could fight another match.

Erso also hesitated.

This champion's strength, of course, was beyond question, but he had spent quite some energy in the last duel. Could he really win another match?

Losing another champion was truly something they couldn't afford. All over the Battle Group, there were only three warriors who could bear this title.

Nonetheless, Erso eventually agreed.

The strong will of that Fury Flame Champion was one factor; another was that he thought, probably Phoenix could not produce another who could compete with the Fury Flame Champion, right?

Earlier, Kalduce definitely had the strength, but he was severely injured when he killed Cao Boyang and couldn't come out to fight another match; Phoenix's Battle Group Priest Rizzo unexpectedly demonstrated considerable combat effectiveness, even killing the first Fury Flame Champion who appeared, but was also worn out from the tough battle and not capable of fighting a second match.

Of course, if Matins personally entered the fight, it might be risky, but if that was the case, he would personally fight.

But, this sixth match, they lost again.

Inside the Phoenix Battle Group, a veteran claiming to have been through a century-long Penitential Expedition, the Phoenix Second Company Commander named Reginaldo, when he entered the field, Erso faintly sensed something ominous.

But ultimately, he chose to trust his own people.

And then, he died.

Although Reginaldo was also severely injured, losing a limb, it was better than being alive, wasn't it?

With clenched teeth, Erso, and everyone in Fury Flame was silent as if they were in a library, and the duel continued for 67 matches.

In these 67 matches, they only won 11.

In the matches they won, they almost always sent the strongest warriors in the Battle Group. Besides the two who died earlier, the third Battle Group Champion also went down. This time, Phoenix really couldn't produce another warrior of equivalent level.

Three continuous 'new recruits' fought, the first two matches the Fury Flame Champion won. Those two from Phoenix, to be fair, performed quite well, but there was a definite qualitative difference compared to the Battle Group Champion; they were relatively easily defeated, and though this Fury Flame Champion was injured, the wear and tear, although present, seemed manageable enough to fight another new recruit.

Chapter 497, In the Name of the Battle Group_2

The rare string of victories greatly boosted the morale of the Furyflames. It was with great difficulty that some shouts of encouragement came forth as they proceeded to fight their third consecutive battle.

But they capsized in a ditch.

This time, the one Phoenix sent into battle was still a 'rookie,' but this individual displayed strength greater than any of the previous newcomers. More crucially, he was a member of the Think Tank, wielding powerful Psychic Powers.

This Phoenix named Henrik Larson used the power of Spiritual Energy to kill the last Furyflame Champion who had fought two battles in a row.

And in other battles, the Furyflames were utterly defeated more often than not.

They sent out their core forces, with almost every company's champion entering the fray. These company champions, when fighting against the 'rookies' sent by Phoenix, had a winning rate of about forty percent.

But that was just it—forty percent!

Before this duel began, who the fuck could have imagined that the company champions of the Fury Flame Battle Group would only have a forty percent chance of defeating these Phoenix 'rookies' who had at most twenty years of service!

Who would believe that if you told them!

But this was the reality they were facing.

What to do when all the company champions had fought?

Then it was the company commanders' turn to fight.

The combat strength of the company commanders was generally on this level as well, usually only slightly better than that of the company champions.

But what when all of those were exhausted?

How many in the Fury Flame Battle Group could truly be called 'champions'?

It wasn't feasible to send everyone out into such brutal combat, especially when the success rate was so low.

So, they had no choice but to send the veteran sergeants from each company into battle.

But when they fought, forget about winning rates, they only won two battles.

It was clear to see that the two Phoenixes who had fallen had mainly done so because of critical blunders. Their actual displayed strength far surpassed that of their opponents.

Excluding the two lucky victories, all the rest of the veteran sergeants were defeated and killed in battle.

For the Fury Flame Battle Group, the loss of fifty-six lives should not have been a serious problem for a battle group that was actually much larger than the scripture-defined scale.

But if among these fifty-six fallen, there were the battle group's only 3 champions, 6 of the 10 company commanders known to the public, including one company commander considered the second-in-command of the battle group; over 20 company champions; 27 sergeants equivalent to the backbone of junior officers…

Then this loss was catastrophic.

The entire battle group's higher echelon combat power was swept away, a large number of command-level personnel were eliminated, and what was more severe, the task of promoting talents from the lower ranks became extremely difficult.

From this perspective, it was undoubtedly a heavy blow to the Fury Flame Battle Group, meaning their spine was broken in half, almost as bad as the most severe losses in the battle group's wartime history.

"Enough!" Kazimir Erso roared furiously.

“Battle Group Leader!” The Chief Priest beside him grabbed him, trying to dissuade him from the dangers of entering the battle himself.

But now, Erso could no longer heed any advice.

He was red-eyed, like a gambler who had lost everything, ready to push all his remaining chips onto the table, betting it all on one last desperate attempt to turn the tables.

And this last, biggest bet was himself. He was the Battle Group Leader of the Fury Flame Battle Group and also its most powerful warrior.

What he hoped to win with this bet was none other than the Battle Group Leader of the Phoenix.

“Come! The rest of the battles are meaningless, let’s set aside all that preamble, Matins, let’s battle in the name of both battle group leaders, to the death!”

He issued his challenge.

Matins accepted the challenge.

He could have declined. He could allow the elite warriors of Phoenix to continue fighting and wear down Erso. Even though Phoenix’s warriors, no matter how strong, were far inferior to top experts like Erso, it would not be easy for Erso to win, at least he couldn’t go unbeaten.

As long as it took him effort, he would accumulate injuries in battle, spending more energy, and after several more bouts, Erso’s condition would deteriorate.

By then, Matins could easily decide whether to let his warriors slowly wear Erso down or force him to retreat; or choose to enter the fray himself when Erso’s condition had worsened enough, to ensure a greater chance of defeating Kazimir Erso.

This would cast a slight imperfection over Phoenix's victory in this battle group duel, but it was the safest approach.

However, Matins did not choose this option.

Although it would be smart, it just wasn't the warrior's way.

He didn't want to waste so many warriors' lives in vain; at the same time, he had a strong sense of honor about defeating Erso in a fair duel.

Of course, Phoenix also valued honor!

Matins stepped onto the dueling ground.

This time, he did not exchange many words with Erso.

Verbal sparring was somewhat ineffective; it was time to show one's true capabilities through action.

Neither of them engaged in the long-distance probing that was very common in the dozens of previous duels, as neither of them were masters of long-range firepower control; such probing was unnecessary.

The two simultaneously arrived at the most open area in the center of the battlefield.

This area had almost been leveled by previous duels.

Upon encountering each other, they charged towards one another.

In the midst of the charge, their sword blades crossed, clashing hard against each other.

Neither gained the upper hand; neither could execute a killing blow on the first strike.

Immediately after, both sides' powered swords began to clash at an extremely fast, high-frequency pace.

Within this pure contest of swordsmanship and strength, Matins felt tremendous pressure.

Now, after engaging in personal combat, he had to admit that Erso, as an old warrior with four to five hundred years of combat experience, was possibly only a step away from becoming a legend. In terms of swordsmanship, although Matins had made significant progress recently, he was still no match for Erso.

Erso's techniques were more exquisite than he had imagined.

As for Matins… while his swordsmanship was certainly not poor, coming from Phoenix Legion's heritage, though not as exquisite and flamboyant as the mother legion, it became more straightforward and focused on pragmatism, but that did not mean it was weaker.

However, swordsmanship inherited from the mother legion, Punisher Legion, by Furyflame Battle Group, was not particularly renowned.

The inheritance of Genetic Seed characteristics is one aspect; personal training, experience, and accumulation are another matter entirely, explaining the individual level of disparity.

Lesser is just lesser, but at least not by a whole tier, still within the range that Matins could contend with.

…

While Matins was being suppressed by Erso's exquisite swordsmanship, Erso actually had his own unspeakable difficulties.

Matins' strikes were too powerful; every clash left Erso feeling a strong vibration.

This was not because Matins himself was stronger, but rather a disparity in equipment.

Both were fully equipped with Terminator Power Armor, both immensely strong and heavy. However, the key difference lay in the 'Indomitable Model' versus the 'Iron Knight Model,' with the latter possessing significantly greater strength, more powerful exertion, and stronger defense.

The advantage of the Indomitable Model mainly lay in its… affordability and low cost of production.

That was one of the reasons why it became widespread; not just because much of the Iron Knight's technology had been lost.

But in this duel, that advantage was meaningless.

Erso, at least a Battle Group Leader, couldn't get the Iron Knight and had to settle for the Indomitable Model, but at least he could obtain a finely crafted version.

Finely crafted usually refers to pieces personally forged by high-grade craftsmen or even masters of the Sect of Mechanics, enhancing performance in all aspects compared to the mass-produced version. How much it is enhanced depends on the skill level of the craftsmen.

In theory, this finely crafted version should narrow the gap with the Iron Knight Model Matins wore.

But in practice, it felt even further apart.

Could it be… the Iron Knight worn by Matins is also a finely crafted version?

An expensive Iron Knight, plus fine craftsmanship… the cost of this set of powered armor could well be double that of Erso's!

The disparity in equipment performance was blatantly evident at this moment.

Erso hated this deeply!

If I were rich, I would have slaughtered you already!

Several potentially fatal attacks that he could have executed were all nullified by the stronger force of his opponent's strikes!

The few attacks he managed to barely initiate were also blocked by the ridiculously thick armor of the finely crafted Iron Knight.

Erso could only calm himself down and look for more and better opportunities.

Chapter 498, Death of Erso, Restoration of the Entire Territory

Matins's battle with Erso was the longest of all 68 battles.

Two giants in their different Terminator Power Armors fought furiously with their exquisite swordsmanship.

As time passed, Matins gradually found the key to countering Erso.

There was no point in competing in swordsmanship where there was a gap that had to be acknowledged. He had to make good use of his equipment advantage.

And indeed, he did quite well.

Again and again, he used the 'cheap shot' tactic when he was at a disadvantage in swordsmanship, often abandoning his defense to launch fierce counterattacks. It was an obvious statement: you might land a blow on my armor, causing me injury, but with the resilient defensive capacity of my armor, the wound I inflict on you will be more severe.

Erso definitely wouldn't go for this trade, so he could only defend.

But sometimes he couldn't help it.

Maybe he felt that this exchange would be profitable.

In reality, after several exchanges, both sides had their fair share of advantages. You would leave a gash on my abdomen; I would strike your arm hard in return.

Often, Matins, thanks to his armor's thickness, suffered lighter injuries; but because of the gap in swordsmanship, he would receive more attacks than Erso.

Both of them were badly scarred at this stage, and it was hard to say whose condition was worse.

But as fatigue and injuries accumulated, neither fought as flawlessly as at the beginning. Inevitably, they started making mistakes, which in turn led to more openings for being hit by the opponent.

The onlooking warriors from both battle groups were increasingly tense. They could see that this duel was nearing its end, approaching the decisive moment. With both sides making more mistakes, the likelihood that the next strike would determine the victor was growing ever larger.

And that moment finally came.

Erso found another chance through his superb swordsmanship, better than any before. Under his maneuver, Matins was wide open, and Erso's sword strike aimed straight at Matins's head.

Earlier, he had already struck Matins's head once. However, that blow was off-target, and Matins's quick reaction had prevented the end of the fight, only leaving a crack in Matins's helmet.

Now, he had the opportunity to follow that crack with another strike. He was certain that this blow would claim Matins's life.

Matins couldn’t block Erso’s sword. He adopted a similar strategy as before, giving up defense to thrust his powered sword forward. The target was the juncture between Erso’s chest plate and abdomen, which had also been hit by him before.

This time, Erso chose not to defend.

Facing a sword strike or beheading Matins, he made his choice.

Even if Matins’s strike might pierce upward into his heart, Erso was willing to take the risk.

Interstellar Warriors have two hearts; destroying one would cause severe damage but wouldn’t result in instant death, and they could be saved later.

The attacks of both men hit almost simultaneously.

Erso’s sword clearly cut into Matins’s head, right into the existing crack.

The crack suddenly widened under his heavy blow. He felt resistance, but his sword edge continued to cleave downward. That was until a sharp pain erupted from his abdomen.

His powered armor had been pierced.

Moreover, Matins’s technique was indeed as bad as he had anticipated: angled upward, piercing his heart.

To achieve this, Matins’s body leaned forward to the utmost, pressing his head against Erso’s sword edge to facilitate the upward thrust.

This certainly made Erso’s cutting easier, but what he found terrifying was that it seemed he had not fully penetrated the helmet, as if his powered sword was being stuck.

The helmet was hard enough, and perhaps so was Matins's skull.

He continued to exert strength, trying to completely break through, even as his body was pierced and one of his hearts impaled, not letting it affect his power output.

Of course, it hurt a lot, and the injury was severe. But as an Extraordinary Soldier genetically modified, the Interstellar Warriors could be regarded as powerful war machines. Especially for a top expert like Erso, unless he was completely dead or had incurable wounds like limb loss, his combat strength would hardly be affected.

Even if he lost a heart, the other one would beat even more fiercely, giving him power not less than at his peak.

This of course couldn't last and posed a significant recovery burden in the future. But in life-and-death struggle, there was no need to consider this; his body would automatically and instinctively react with such response.

However, before he could completely open Matins's helmet, he was struck by a terrifying electric shock inside his body, piercing through his second heart.

At the same time, Erso's sword finally cut deep into the entire helmet.

The bodies of the two warriors froze there.

…

"Who won?" Kalduce couldn't help asking Priest Rizzo beside him.

At this moment, one powered sword was stuck in Matins's head, cutting halfway through; another powered sword pierced into Erso's abdomen, most of the way in.

After their powered swords connected them as one, the two Battle Group Leaders stood still like wax statues, not moving an inch.

Even with Kalduce's keen vision, he could not discern the final outcome.

On one hand, it was somewhat distant, but most importantly, the two men's battle was too intense, the differences in the last moments too subtle, making the possibility of victory or defeat, life or death, all plausible.

There was even a considerable chance that both men might perish together in this duel.

Even Priest Rizzo, at this moment, furrowed his brows. What Kalduce couldn't see, he couldn't see either.

Despite his strong convictions, he remained silent at this time, just like everyone else, nervously watching the situation in the arena.

The brief wait seemed very long at this moment.

Finally, movement came from the two still figures.

Matins slowly withdrew the powered sword that had pierced Erso's body.

Erso's body lost support and fell backward with a crash, his heavy Terminator Power Armor kicking up a cloud of dust.

Matins stumbled a few steps backward, the powered sword still embedded in his helmet. He let go of his own sword, grasped Erso's sword, pulled it out, and then took off his helmet.

A fierce bloodstain was on his face, starting from the forehead, slicing open his left brow bone, bursting one of his eyes, and completely tearing open his left cheek…

Erso really came close to splitting Matins' head open.

But in the end, it was Matins who survived.

After the silence, came the jubilant shouts of the Phoenix warriors.

In stark contrast, the Fury Flame was as silent as a library.

Amidst the cheers of his battling brothers, Matins raised his damaged helmet, not caring about the blood on his face, and shouted triumphantly!

…

The duel between Matins and Erso was also the last of all the Battle Group duels.

Not even a hundred rounds had been completed, let alone the one hundred victories required by Fury Flame.

Up to now, they had only won 11 rounds.

For these 11 victories, Fury Flame Battle Group sacrificed from Battle Group Leader, to Company Commander, to three Battle Group Champions, a series of squad champions, and veteran sergeants.

The eleven captives they exchanged fell to their knees, not even feeling their lives were worth that much.

And those remaining eighty-nine, under Phoenix's watch, had absolutely no desire to continue the fight.

It was not possible to continue.

The still-living high-ranking members of the Fury Flame Battle Group—three company commanders and the Chaplain—stepped forward.

No matter how bitter they felt inside, they could only negotiate with the Phoenix as they dragged back the body of Kazimir Erso:

“Let’s stop here, the duel is over.”

“You’re surrendering?” speaking for the Phoenix, it was Kalduce, with Priest Rizzo standing beside him.

Matins was also very severely injured. After returning to the ranks, he actually fell into a coma and was urgently treated by the Pharmacist.

Faced with Kalduce’s contemptuous inquiry, Adler Politos, representing the Fury Flame Battle Group, bowed his head: “Yes, we surrender. You have won.”

“But there are still 89 prisoners, and according to the rules, they won’t be released.”

Giving up comrades.

Even though Politos stepped forward to surrender, having anticipated and accepted all the consequences, when he actually had to verbalize it, he still felt as if he were being cut with a knife.

He even thought, why wasn’t he the one to go down during the earlier battles?

He would rather die in the dueling arena than bear such humiliation.

However, the humiliation had already arrived.

With only 11 wins in 68 battles, with the Battle Group Leader killed, and probably all 800 men dying here without achieving even a hundred victories, the honor of Fury Flame had been utterly lost.

Humiliation was inevitably going to fall on Fury Flame Battle Group, and it would ‘spread far and wide’ throughout the universe with this duel.

Politos truly wished he could just die.

But he couldn’t.

The Battle Group had to persist, as living required even more courage than dying.

He could only take a deep breath and say, “Do as you see fit.”

Having spoken, he left without looking back.

Accompanied by the silent members of Fury Flame, before boarding the ship leaving the planet, they heard gunfire.

It seemed intentional; the distant gunshots happened one after the other.

No one counted, but every Interstellar Warrior from Fury Flame heard exactly 89 shots in the distance.

Right before he boarded the ship, as the last person to do so, Politos couldn’t help but turn back for a glance.

Actually, it was too far, even for the enhanced vision of an Interstellar Warrior, to see clearly.

But in his mind’s eye, he vividly saw the site where 68 core fighters of the Battle Group had bled and the execution of 89 Fury Flame captives, deeply etched into his heart.

…

The backbone of the Fury Flame Battle Group was shattered.

Perhaps, with the resilience of the Interstellar Warriors, they could recover from such a blow in the future.

But not now.

They fled the Dragonhawk Star Domain like bereaved dogs, not lingering any further.

The effect of crushed morale was unavoidable, even for Interstellar Warriors.

They tried to take all the naval ships under their control with them, but it wasn't just they who had lost morale.

The outcome of this duel spread quickly, causing many of the ship commanders who had followed Fury Flame to doubt: Was following Fury Flame really a good choice?

The direct fleets brought by Fury Flame themselves, their Battle Group Fleet, didn't have this issue. Although morale was low, they were all their own people, and Fury Flame could still lead them away.

However, in the Dragonhawk Star Domain, many of the ships that had stood with them were not from their direct fleet. Over half of the ships were actually from the Imperial Navy.

Among them, the Yunluo Fleet was the main force. Additionally, some support ships gathered from various parts of the Space Domain by the Eastern Cosmic Realm Government during the previous Iron Teeth War also came under the command of Fury Flame.

When Fury Flame was about to retreat, these ships didn't have any obligation to go with them. After this duel, they were even less inclined to leave.

Many ships ended up ‘falling behind’ during the retreat; particularly at several jump points in the Star Realm Tunnels, some ships appeared to activate their Jump Engines, but after the jump, a few, perhaps as many as a dozen, stayed behind as if their Jump Engines had malfunctioned.

From afar, the command center of the Alliance Navy smoothly ‘incorporated’ these ships.

It wasn’t exactly an incorporation, since that wouldn’t be proper, as these ships all had their own fleet alignments.

However, Yelisia, now an Imperial Navy Admiral, ordered these ships to temporarily obey the command, which wasn’t a problem.

Until Fury Flame Battle Group left the Dragonhawk Star Domain, only the direct fleet they had brought with them remained by their side.

Even fewer than when they had entered, as many had been lost in the war.

As for the evacuation plan prepared by the command structure of the Fury Flame Battle Group before the duel, all plans failed to keep up with the changes and were thus discarded.

They simply didn’t have the time, nor the mindset, to conduct plundering raids on various planets.

Even if they had forcefully executed this evacuation plan, it wasn’t realistic.

The main fleet of the Alliance, as well as the formidable Phoenix, were following them.

They had considered such a scenario before; if the Alliance dared to do this, they would turn around and fight a battle with the Alliance, creating a localized conflict. Who would be afraid?

But now, having admitted defeat, there was no point in fighting.

Could they have won?

The spine-broken dogs had no will to fight, only wanting to quickly leave this nightmarish Star Domain.

And thus, the Alliance reclaimed the entire Dragonhawk Star Domain.

Chapter 499, I Have Returned

Dragonhawk Star Domain, Yunluo Star.

Eight months have passed since that brutal duel in which Phoenix emerged victorious.

Even as they ensured the departure of the Fury Flame Battle Group from the Dragonhawk Star Domain, the Alliance was also hastening to dispatch various officials to each planet within the Dragonhawk Star Domain to take over these worlds.

Governance was secondary; especially the military needed to be held firmly in their own hands.

Particularly for some key planets.

Yunluo Star, of course, was of the utmost importance. Here lied not only the core of economic development but also the political core of the Dragonhawk Star Domain, where the Star Domain Government was located.

But the current Dragonhawk government was incomparable to its most prosperous days in the past. The arrival of the Fury Flame Battle Group had almost treated the Dragonhawk Star Domain as a subordinate entity. The decision-making power of military and political affairs was controlled by the Battle Group under the guise of wartime, turning the Star Domain Government into an executive body.

However, being an executive body was still okay; after all, there was work to be done.

But after the arrival of the Alliance, the situation was completely different.

The Alliance was not just the Fury Flame Battle Group with just a battle group framework. They had a complete governmental structure, fully capable of replacing the function of the Star Domain Government.

Of course, the Alliance did not actually do so, or at least not entirely. The decision-makers, for sure, were all replaced, or rather, temporarily sidelined. But some of the middle and lower-level bureaucrats responsible for execution within the Star Domain Government were retained.

These people who did the actual work couldn't all be dismissed.

It's not that the Alliance didn't have enough officials.

Although suddenly having to manage almost two hundred worlds and with such a vast increase in the controlled territory, the Alliance would certainly find it overwhelming. But for the time being, they could leave other planets as is, allow local Planetary Governments to govern autonomously—this was originally the structure of the Empire anyway. When they were free in the future, they would strengthen their management.

But for a key world like Yunluo Star, no matter how scarce the number of officials was, they had to squeeze out some to properly govern Yunluo.

Officials who graduated from various academies of the Alliance and had been fully trained in the Alliance system were not inferior in ability to those from the Star Domain Government. Although the latter's personnel were all picked from the vast populace, the consistent investments in talent cultivation over the years by the Alliance weren't in vain. Let alone the numerous outstanding talents produced thanks to the Grace Points used by Gu Hang—there were certainly more than enough qualified individuals.

More importantly, as a relatively new force, and with Gu Hang always paying close attention to preventing systemic ossification, a large number of young talents took up government posts.

This youth was not only reflected in their age but more so in their mentality. That special vigor and readiness to do great things were scarce in the weary and inertia-driven Empire Government.

However, the main reason why the Alliance did not replace all officers was that the officials of the Alliance were after all newcomers, lacking deep understanding of many local matters. A complete replacement all at once would cause chaos.

But even with the retention of personnel, it was impossible to retain particularly high-grade officials. Decision-makers were definitely to be replaced, swapped with Alliance officials, who would then form teams with half the members brought from the Alliance homeland and the other half selected from the local officials.

The execution layer retained more personnel, but a significant proportion of Alliance officials were also incorporated among the middle and lower-level officials to learn local affairs and supervise the work of local officials.

And ensuring these measures tantamount to a power transition, were the Fleets hovering over the skies of Yunluo Star and the Alliance Army landed on the surface.

In fact, whether it was the local officials of Yunluo Star or the middle and lower-level officials of the original Star Domain Government, there was hardly any significant resistance, but rather they were quite active in moving closer to the Alliance.

The reason is simple: they are all working people, just middle and lower-level officials; their interests would be affected but not fatally so. The Alliance's screening and dismissal process, on the contrary, required them to perform well and strive not to be sifted out.

With changes happening above, not actively aligning oneself, what else could one think of?

As for the high-level officials whose interests would be affected and who would be stripped of power, their opposition wasn't of much consequence. After all, the Alliance intended to sideline them: not being physically eliminated was already a stroke of luck, what more could they possibly want?

Moreover, the Alliance hadn't completely blocked their way out.

The current explanation was merely temporary evaluation, assessing their loyalty and capability. The Alliance also promised that if they passed the evaluations, these high-level officials might still have opportunities to hold senior positions in the integrated future Alliance and Star Domain Government.

By then, it should be within the Star Domain level of the Alliance Government.

These high-level officials actually had quite mixed feelings.

On one hand, they resented being stripped of power; on the other, they feared the military might of the Alliance and the possibility of being purged. Deep down, they longed to retain their positions of authority.

Some individuals with connections had already started making moves.

There were two directions for their efforts: either go to the Space Domain Government or to the Alliance.

Chapter 499, I Have Returned_2

The path to the Alliance was actually quite singular. Since the establishment of the Alliance, the exchange and communication between officials haven't been very frequent or close.

But wasn't there Ms. Nell Raouise?

She was considered a supporter of Gu Hang. When Gu Hang started his career, she offered her help. Then, nearly two or three years ago, she took the opportunity of representing the Fury Flame Battle Group to negotiate with the Alliance and defected, establishing 'another Star Domain Administration Department' in the half of the Star Domain controlled by the Alliance under the name of the Chief of the Star Domain Administration Department.

People knew that this so-called second Administration Department didn't really play any role within the Alliance's territory; it was purely used as a signboard by the Alliance Government.

Be that as it may, she went there first and had connections with the Alliance, so she could at least speak some words.

Everyone went in search of connections to Raouise, seeing it as a direction.

But this path wasn't easy to walk. The Alliance wasn't fond of this method, and Raouise herself didn't have a strong will to help either. She knew how to bide her time; despite her age, she still yearned for progress.

Uniting many old acquaintances and exerting her meager influence to push these people into the Alliance's system to serve as officials could indeed establish a small faction centered on her, which could be of help to her.

But at the same time, this was a very risky move.

She didn't want to be perceived as having the suspicion of forming cliques, which was quite a sensitive issue within the Alliance system.

If the Alliance path was not so smooth, then the only other option was the Space Domain Government.

And this path was thought to be relatively easy.

The Star Domain Government had always been in close contact with the Space Domain Government. Or rather, there was indeed a hierarchical relationship between the three levels of government: Star Sector, Star Domain, and Cosmos Domain. Many officials were transferred among each other, with clear promotions and demotions.

Many senior officials serving in the Dragonhawk Star Domain came from some department of the Eastern Cosmos Domain Government to take up leadership roles locally. On the one hand, it was a promotion; on the other hand, having experience in a local post could be beneficial for the future.

But when the Alliance effectively stripped them of their power within the Dragonhawk Star Domain, their first choice was, of course, to turn to the Space Domain Government and seek redress. Most importantly, they had to think of ways to find opportunities to be transferred back to the Space Domain Government or, at the very least, to manage a transfer to serve in another Star Domain.

However, this route was only possible for those with truly solid relationships.

The Alliance did not obstruct their departure, but from within the Space Domain Government, there was an unwritten rule that has become a tacit understanding: senior officials from the Dragonhawk Star Domain should stay put; other places should not accept them, and they should not be transferred out.

Since it was a tacit rule, it could be broken; those with strong enough relationships and who were not too conspicuous could indeed be transferred out.

The Alliance didn't care about these few small shrimps.

But since it's a tacit rule, sometimes it's more reliable than some formal rules that are not properly enforced.

For the vast majority, leaving the Dragonhawk Cosmos was not possible.

Tan Jiuyi was one of them.

This Star Domain Head—oh, the word 'former' should now be added—was not for lack of connections. His position in the entire Star Domain was actually quite high. He was certainly not inferior to the few senior officials in the Cosmos Domain Government, and he could definitely be considered within the top fifteen in rank within the entire Space Domain Government.

He did not lack for connections.

But he was too prominent.

He really couldn't be transferred.

He could only wait uneasily in his office on Yunluo Star, with nothing to do.

In theory, Gu Hang had already been appointed as the Dragonhawk Star Domain Leader, but he had not arrived yet. In the whole Empire, this was actually quite a common scenario. Generally, he would need to stand his last post, waiting for the new leader to arrive and then hand over his duties.

Even with the handover, the process can be quite lengthy. If the former leader does not have another urgent appointment, they might stay in their current position for several months, helping the new leader to adapt to the work.

However, he didn't need to stand this last post any longer, and there probably wasn't going to be any handover duties needed to be done.

The Alliance had taken everything.

He not only had nothing to do but also had certain restrictions on his personal freedom.

He could only quietly await his fate.

And soon, the person who would pronounce his fate finally returned.

He received advance notice and went to the Starport on Yunluo Star several days in advance.

To be honest, he was quite excited.

Was he willing to lose everything just like that?

Of course not.

And after all other methods proved fruitless, the only avenue left for him was to rely on Gu Hang.

The best would be to have an opportunity for a private exchange, to let him personally display a gracefully executed kneel before Marshal Gu Hang.

But such an opportunity seems difficult to come by.

Nevertheless, he is after all the former Star Domain Head, and a handover process is due; they must meet at least once.

During that one meeting, perhaps there'd only be the chance for a single sentence. The space for kneeling is limited, but precisely because of this, he must consider carefully.

Weigh every word, design every subtle expression…

He has been practicing this for several months now, and the moment to perform has arrived.

After waiting another day at the Starport, he was again invited by Guards to the makeup room, donned in a set of grand attire, and then stood with many others at the Starport's docking bay in wait.

A massive warship slowly sailed in.

That was the Firebath Nova, the flagship warship of the Alliance Navy, a Battleship.

At the exit where they waited, a red carpet was laid out, stretching far and wide.

A fleet of hover vehicles drove out; elite Guards disembarked, securing the surroundings. Meanwhile, from the central limousine, emerged the most esteemed person in the entire Dragonhawk Star Domain.

Alliance Governor, Star Domain Head, Empire Marshal — Gu Hang.

Seeing Gu Hang's rather youthful face, Tan Jiuyi was momentarily astounded.

This was his first real-life encounter with Gu Hang; at most, he had seen virtual images during Star Speech calls.

He must be only about forty-six years old this year, right?

For most people, this would be the prime of life, but also on the verge of late middle age. In fact, for those living under harsher conditions, by this age, their appearances are often significantly aged.

But for Gu Hang, longevity procedures, and even his own Spiritual Power, are ways to obtain a much longer life, living three to five hundred years is no issue at all.

From this perspective, his life has just begun.

Yet, such a young man has already achieved today's status.

And his own fate now entirely depends on the thoughts of this man.

He was nervous, but he also did not forget what he had to do.

After various Alliance officials had met Marshal Gu, shaking his hand, it was his turn.

He hurriedly approached and shook hands with the smiling Gu Hang.

"Marshal Gu…" Tan Jiuyi's friendly smile appeared flawless.

Gu Hang's smile faded slightly, very perfunctorily shaking hands with Tan Jiuyi.

Tan Jiuyi wanted to say more; his opportunity was scarce, perhaps just time for a sentence, as the next person in line was already waiting to shake hands.

He had long prepared his words, yet under the fleeting glance of Gu Hang, he suddenly felt intimidated.

Gu Hang did not want to listen.

He dared not speak.

Walking further away, he couldn't help but turn his head back, taking another look.

He felt a sense of unwillingness; hadn't he just braced himself and spoken well?

But at the same time, he felt somewhat relieved; being too forthright might have angered Gu Hang, right?

The complex emotions of fear and relief echoed in his chest.

…

Gu Hang did not care about Tan Jiuyi's complex thoughts at all.

What he cared about was everything before him.

When he returned to the Dragonhawk Star Domain this time, what greeted him was a complete Star Domain.

This made him happier than any gift; how could he have the interest to listen to the words of someone who no longer mattered?

No matter how well-prepared, it was all meaningless.

The Alliance Government did even better than Gu Hang had imagined.

The blood feud to the death between Phoenix and Furyflame was initiated by Matins. Before he proposed this idea to the Fury Flame Battle Group, he had reported to Gu Hang and obtained his consent.

Otherwise, how could he dare to stake the lives of a hundred Phoenix warriors as a gambling chip on the table?

And the reason Gu Hang agreed, of course, was because his own confidence was even stronger than Matins's.

After approving Matins's suggestion, he provided a list of a hundred names, instructing Matins to draw from this list when arranging the duel.

He had brought the training level of these hundred people all up to the grade of squad champions.

Regrettably, the highest level of regular training that the system could carry out was only to this extent; it couldn't go any higher.

But Gu Hang had other methods.

The enlightenment from the [Heroes] interface could also be used on Interstellar Warriors, though the cost of enlightenment was more expensive.

But for this duel, Gu Hang was definitely willing to spend the money.

In fact, the work of enlightenment began even before their training as squad champions. After all, Gu Hang could not entirely ensure beforehand what kind of hero template would emerge from the enlightenment. Some people, in fact, had talents not completely in combat but could be in battlefield command or stealth assassinations. One Interstellar Warrior's talent even turned out to be that of a civil government officer!

By the way, it is somewhat feasible to have Interstellar Warriors serve as administrators, in a sense!

After undergoing genetic modification, most of their mundane desires were removed, making them not easily corrupted by various low-level desires; they were full of energy, capable of working all year without rest. Mortals cry out in pain at the 996 work culture, while Interstellar Warriors can indeed achieve 007—no joke, at least for a short period.

However, this is just a thought.

The cost of training an Interstellar Warrior civil officer is far higher than that of a mortal, and the effect of improvement is far less than the enhancement of an Interstellar Warrior compared to mortal soldiers on the battlefield.

Moreover, Gu Hang also had to consider the ethos within the Empire. Allowing Interstellar Warriors to govern is a bit taboo, apart from the Infinity Warriors who have this privilege in their Infinite Starfield, there are no other Interstellar Warriors doing this.

Regardless, the Grace Points spent on the Interstellar Warriors are still valuable, bringing about the improvement of a large number of Elite Warriors. Additionally, this blood feud to the death can cause significant damage to Furyflame's elites.

Under normal circumstances, this would not be easy to achieve.

Take, for instance, the Battle Group Leader Erso; how difficult would it be to behead him on the battlefield? One would have to break through countless obstacles, and even when facing him, he is still a top-notch Extraordinary Soldier.

However, in the dueling arena, he was left to stand alone.

The same applies to the other high-level members of the Fury Flame Battle Group.

It was a great opportunity to weaken the Fury Flame Battle Group.

Gu Hang expected that Furyflame would certainly send a fair number of elite warriors to the duel, and it was the perfect chance to eliminate them!

Of course, although this was indeed Gu Hang's plan, beforehand he could not have possibly imagined that the final result would be so good.

Even Erso himself died here.

How could he have expected that Erso, with his mind clouded, would actually enter the fray?

Moreover, after listening to the report about the duel, he felt a bit of a fright. The fight between Erso and Matins, a matter of life and death, truly happened in an instant, and if they were to fight again, the result could be completely different.

If the outcome had been Erso killing Matins, although the losses of the Fury Flame Battle Group would still be huge, the slaying of Matins would have salvaged some face, and with Erso himself intact, the morale of the Fury Flame Battle Group, while low, would not have completely collapsed. In that case, when the Fury Flame Battle Group retreated, it would not be so hasty, nor would it have completely abandoned its plundering actions.

Even, because of the losses at the gladiatorial arena, the plundering during the retreat could have become even more cruel and violent. It was quite possible that what would be left for Gu Hang would be a completely devastated Yunluo Star, and that would be a great loss.

While the victory of the blood feud to the death was not a war, what was won back was even more than from a war!

From this perspective, Phoenix has earned great merit.

Of course, one can't overlook the subsequent achievements of the Alliance Government.

They rapidly took over almost the entire western Star Sector, and in the following eight months, not only did they stabilize the local situation on each planet, but they also implanted the system of the Alliance, which was even effectively operating.

Gu Hang was very satisfied with this.

The government system he had crafted with his own hands, into which he had thrown an untold amount of Grace Points for talent and loyalty training over a long time, finally exhibited the effects he had hoped for.

At this point, the entire Dragonhawk Star Domain was entirely under his control.

Oh, that's not quite right.

Speaking of which, there were still some places not completely incorporated into direct rule by the Alliance.

That would be the Steel Fire Dragon Star Sector.

The Mingyang Sect almost entirely controlled the Steel Fire Dragon Star Sector, and at the end of the Iron Teeth War, as they swept across the Green Skins territories, they also struck out, taking control of the two northern Star Sectors, i.e., the Dragon Tamer and Dragon Pass sectors.

Chapter 500, Alliance World 400_2

However, one should be a bit more cautious regarding the actions of the Sect of Mechanics.

These Oil Heads are not easy to deal with.

But under normal circumstances, they seldom pose a threat.

These two Star Sectors, along with the Steel Fire Dragon Star Sector directly controlled by the Mingyang Sect, can be left alone for now. Later on, Gu Hang already has a travel plan in mind, to personally visit Jindi Star and have a thorough discussion with the Mingyang Sect.

By then, the remaining issues should all be resolved.

After all, among the senior levels of the Mingyang Sect, there exists an ‘old acquaintance’ of Gu Hang: Wu Jiarong.

A lot of things become much easier to handle when one has an insider.

Gu Hang had not anticipated that his casual act from the past would now provide such ample shade.

For now, let’s put aside the matters regarding the Sect of Mechanics. Inside the Dragonhawk Star Domain, the remaining 34 Star Sectors have all fallen into Gu Hang’s hands.

In total, not one more or less, exactly 400 worlds.

The total population has reached 8.2 trillion people.

Gu Hang’s assets have become much richer in a flash!

Moreover, different from the territories Gu Hang obtained during the previous wars, the western part of the entire Dragonhawk Star Domain, in overall terms, is actually somewhat more prosperous than the east.

Previously, the population in the areas Gu Hang occupied totaled only about 3.4 trillion; whereas the west has a greater total population of 4.8 trillion.

And leaving aside Yunluo Star, a Starfield Capital even more developed than Flying Wing Star, the entire Yunluo Sector is radiating influence to many worlds from Yunluo Star at its center, strongly driving the economic development of these worlds, unlike the previous situation with Flying Wing Star, which stood alone in its splendor while the other worlds in the Tianma Star Sector were as poor as beggars.

At the same time, in the Fire Eagle Sector, Xiong Hun Sector, and Gu Totem Sector, these three Star Sectors which were completely untouched by the flames of war before, have a combined total of over forty worlds. Due to the war, they became a strong support for the Star Domain Government at the time.

A massive amount of resources gathered from the Cosmos Domain and other regions of the Star Domain were stockpiled here. This place was also developed into some production bases as much as possible, to provide resources for the front lines.

At the same time, there was also a considerable transfer of population from the worlds that were in a state of war along the front lines.

War, objectively, has provided a very good development opportunity for the forty-plus worlds in these three Star Sectors.

These three Star Sectors, together with the Yunluo Sector, have become a relatively developed economic engine for the western part of the Dragonhawk Star Domain.

Currently, the Dragonhawk Star Domain has roughly formed a general situation of ‘three cores, vast ruins’.

The so-called three cores refer to one centered around Yunluo Star, with Gu Totem, Xiong Hun, and Fire Eagle as the three major attached Star Sectors in the southwestern core, which is also the largest gain obtained by the Alliance this time.

Just these four locations alone have a population of 2.5 trillion, with a total output of 6.3 trillion. The annual Imperial Tax paid reaches 67 billion, but even so, the financial surplus left for the Alliance after taxes is also 100 billion.

Such a financial surplus represents almost the cost of two Battle Cruisers per year with some left over!

Rich lands!

And the other core, naturally, is centered around Gu Hang's old base, the Tianma Star Sector, uniting with the surrounding six Star Sectors to form the Seven Horse Territory. This area has a population of 1.7 trillion and a total output of 3.6 trillion.

To tell the truth, it's a cut below the Yunluo Center. After all, the Seven Horse Territory Center is a late-developing area, one that only began to grow in the last eight years under Gu Hang's rule. Moreover, the regions that have developed well are mainly within the Tianma Star Sector. The Tianma Star Sector has been fully exerting its economic influence on the other six Sectors, but given the short time frame, its development is still relatively limited.

And speaking of total population, that's not ample either. It has reached 170 billion, but that's only due to the recent policies encouraging childbirth, coupled with the influx of people migrating from several other war-torn Star Sectors.

But overall, it still has significant potential for development, and under the guidance of the Alliance, it is indeed on the fast track of rapid growth.

There's also a third core area, the Steel Fire Dragon Center, which is a collective of industries that have built up around Jindi Star, the Foundry World of the Sect of Mechanics. But given it's not entirely under the control of the Alliance, it's not worth mentioning in detail.

Besides these three cores, the other 23 Star Sectors have a total of 258 worlds, yet the aggregate population is just 388 billion, and in terms of output, it's even less impressive; the total output is barely over 300 billion. After paying the Imperial Tax each year and subtracting local consumption, there's a deficit of 11 billion remaining.

This means that the accession of these worlds is a loss-maker for the Alliance.

A loss of 11 billion a year is no big deal; the Alliance can afford it. To the Alliance, which has acquired the whole Star Domain, this is a minor issue that can be easily fixed.

But the crux is that this deficit only accounts for resident consumption and the Imperial Tax.

If one were to include the costs of maintaining rule, the deficit would grow even further; moreover, many of these worlds have been ravaged by the Green Tide war and need post-war reconstruction. Investing more in humanitarian aid is necessary; otherwise, not only will it take a long time to get better, but there's also the possibility of further deterioration in the short term.

Establishing governments, building up military forces, deepening rule… When you add up all types of investments, the Alliance estimates a fiscal deficit of about 60 billion pouring in every year!

That's no small sum!

By way of comparison, the theoretical annual Imperial Tax for the Dragonhawk Star Domain is just over 120 billion!

The heavy economic burden these worlds impose has begun to weigh the Alliance down.

The Alliance's fifty Army Groups and ten billion Land Forces cost less than 15 billion a year to maintain!

An annual figure of 60 billion is indeed too exaggerated.

In fact, after Gu Hang returned to the Dragonhawk Star Domain and met with many people on Yunluo Star, the first internal governmental conference of the Alliance was convened to address this problem: What exactly should be done about those 258 'deficit worlds'?

Currently, there are three broad directions of discussion among the officials within the Alliance.

The first is to continue maintaining a high level of centralized rule, with an investment of 60 billion a year, which is not even enough; they'll need to continue pumping money in, up to 70 or even 80 billion. This is not a loss that needs to be sustained over the long term; a high level of initial investment will deliver future development of these worlds. After one to two years of investment, the cost should be able to reduce by more than half; meanwhile, the output of these worlds will be fully revived under the stimulation of substantial investment.

It's estimated that within four to five years, this could turn a loss into a profit.

But another faction is strongly opposed to this plan.

It's too extravagant. Even if everything goes according to their estimates, the total investment in five years might need to reach over 250 billion. Yet what they achieve is just not bleeding out anymore; as for developing to the point where they can be a financial asset to the Alliance, or even earning back the 250 billion invested, it's uncertain how many years that would take.

Now, it's true that the wars can be considered temporarily over. But the Alliance still faces tremendous external threats. The 'evil neighbor' next door, the Iron Armor Battle Group, might act out at any time; after the Fury Flame Battle Group returns and licks its wounds, will they forget the humiliation and pain inflicted by the Alliance?

The Alliance cannot shift all its focus to economic construction.

Spending so much money on the recovery of these 'deficit worlds' will severely hinder the military buildup of the Alliance.

If the enemy attacks before the construction yields results, the home front might be pounded into ruins.

As for the third faction, they don't have any particular insights; they just represent the centrist stance between the other two.