Governor 581

Chapter 581, Furyflame Annihilation

The two battle groups stationed in the Phantom Moon Star System spent their days in constant anxiety.

They were acutely aware that, regardless of what the Alliance's next move might be, they would soon be the first targets to be dealt with.

They weren't strong, but not weak either—counting the Alfonso battlecruiser that fled here, they had three giant ships, about two thousand Interstellar Warriors, along with a fleet carrying potentially millions of Mortal Auxiliary Army and Princess Legion soldiers. This force could be evaluated as on par with the Star Realm Army.

Theoretically, this was a power capable of conquering an entire Star Domain.

If they weren't dealt with, the backyard could catch fire at any moment.

In their fear, the original ruling class of Phantom Moon Star began to hatch some ideas.

They sought intermediaries to probe the two battle groups, attempting to "discuss" the possibility of surrender… no, of "reinstating the rightful order."

After all, they were all humans, not some Aliens;

They all revered The Emperor, not any heretical deviants;

It was merely because Humphrey Paolo, that ambitious provocateur, deceived everyone into thinking those on Holy Terra were all villains that they were led into pursuing independence.

Recognize Humphrey Paolo as a traitor, reacknowledge Holy Terra, and accept the Alliance's rule…

Would this allow them to reintegrate into the Empire?

Of course, it wouldn't be without penalties.

The price for betrayal would have to be reckoned with.

But no matter how steep that cost might be, could it be worse than fighting a near-hopeless war against the Alliance, suffering massive casualties and losses, and then facing yet another reckoning from the Alliance afterward?

If that were to happen, no member of Phantom Moon Star's ruling class could hope to remain in their position. Indeed, the number of survivors might not even be significant.

They wanted to surrender—even unconditionally, they'd accept it.

But they clearly didn't have the authority to decide such matters; they had to consult with Adler Politos.

Since the arrival of Furyflame and the New World Torch, all military power on this planet had been taken over by them.

Which was entirely reasonable.

More accurately, Phantom Moon Star's native military force—those billion or so Native Defense Forces—might as well be dismissed. The real value of Phantom Moon Star lay in its relatively complete planetary defense system. While not particularly powerful, it had everything it was supposed to, which was already commendable.

In comparison, the most reliable forces were the two battle groups themselves and the armies and fleets they brought along.

The local elites, wishing to surrender, certainly couldn't have the final say.

They'd have to persuade the Interstellar Warriors.

And the outcome of this persuasion was Politos killing them all.

After realizing these Phantom Moon natives were unreliable, Politos initiated a major cleansing.

He purged the upper echelons, promoted select members of the middle ranks, and pulled trustworthy personnel from the Princess Legion and Battle Group Auxiliary Army to fill critical positions.

With powerful forces backing them and the residual intimidation left by the cleansing, they were able to firmly grip the entire planet.

After all, Politos didn't need to worry about long-term governance; short-term strict control would be sufficient.

Subsequently, he redeployed large land forces from the Starport, Star Fortress, and ships to the planet's surface.

After unloading the ground forces, the lighter Fury Fleet departed the orbital region of the Phantom Moon Star System and ventured into deep space.

They wouldn't leave the star system, but the vastness of a star system's void space offered plenty of room for maneuver. They would hide, provide external support when the Alliance attacked Phantom Moon, or swiftly escape if the Alliance tried to pursue them…

Of course, there were significant risks involved, such as the fact that the Retribution-class Battleship lacked the mobility for such operations.

It wouldn't be deployed recklessly.

Fast destroyers and cruisers would undertake the mission—harassing the Alliance's assault fleet. If the Alliance ships showed any signs of turning around to deal with them, these nimble vessels would retreat.

If left unchecked, they'd return to resume harassment; if chased, the scattered Fury Fleet vessels would hardly be easy to pursue. Whenever separated, the fear would persist: what if the enemy had a battlecruiser, a combat barge, or a battleship hidden in the void, ready to strike at any isolated Alliance ship?

Of course, all of this sounded elegant, but in reality, it was merely a response born of helplessness.

To put it bluntly, Politos had already recognized the situation clearly.

There was no escape for him, and a conventional defense held no chance of success. While the Alliance might not be able to muster all its forces against him instantly, given a few months for them to repair their ships—combined with Gu Hang's exaggerated, inconceivable Spiritual Energy power, and the formidable combat strength demonstrated by the Phoenix and Blood Shark—even Phantom Moon, with its complete orbital defense system, wouldn't stand a chance.

He himself had considered surrendering.

Just as the local elites on Phantom Moon thought, the two sides weren't completely locked in a life-or-death struggle. They weren't Aliens, nor had they succumbed to Chaos.

However, after careful deliberation, Politos abandoned this notion.

It wasn't for any other reason; if preserving the battle groups was possible, he was willing to sacrifice everything and do whatever it took.

But he believed that surrender wouldn't preserve his battle groups.

He could swear that if he surrendered, he'd guarantee never to stand against the Alliance in the future.

However, he dared not trust any promises made by the Alliance.

The hatred between both sides was too deep and too numerous, and it was mutual.

The Furyflame had once destroyed the Phoenix, and had confronted the Alliance alongside the Dragonhawk; the Alliance and the Phoenix had also savagely crushed the Furyflame. The previous Battle Group Leader, Erso, who was deeply loved by his battle brothers, had fallen at the hands of the Phoenix…

Politos could only promise himself to remain rational, willing to endure all humiliation, but he couldn't guarantee that each member of the battle group thought the same. If just one Fury Flame Warrior, after surrendering, couldn't swallow his pride and acted out, it could easily give the Alliance a pretext for a massacre.

From the Alliance's perspective, it wouldn't trust the Furyflame just because they surrendered. Would they dispatch them for critical missions? How could they dare? What if betrayal occurred again at the last moment?

If Politos were in Gu Hang's position, he believed he would accept all surrender conditions from the Furyflame, then secretly imprison the entire battle group and have them executed without public knowledge.

For this very reason, he did not dare to surrender.

He resolved to hold out on the ground, in the unearthed bunkers, and also in the deeply buried tunnels.

All he could see was darkness, devoid of any future.

Yet, even so, he had to hold out in this darkness, even if the final outcome remained unchanged.

…

Just as Politos predicted, the Alliance's assault on Mirage Moon began quickly.

Participating were only the Zhuge-class Aircraft Carrier, three Battle Cruiser-class ships, and the Bloodshark Fleet.

The rest of the fleet had gone for repairs.

Though the number of ships was small, the most pivotal figure—Gu Hang—was there.

Everything the Furyflame had prepared and worked for was completely devastated in just moments.

The planet's outer defensive systems were the first to fall under attack. The Furyflame Fleet that ventured out according to plan deployed small-scale ships for harassment.

The Alliance decisively pursued them.

The Furyflame Fleet scattered to escape. The Alliance also split up to chase them.

The three colossal ships that had been hidden in the shadows hoping the Alliance would hold back now faced a dilemma.

You're not playing by the rules!

If they did not reveal themselves, they would only watch as the Alliance wiped out all the small and medium-sized ships that had gone out.

Though the value of these ships wasn't too high, after two or three rounds, the fleet would be depleted.

But if they revealed themselves… the Alliance wasn't unaware of their presence. They dared to disperse their forces and pursue them—surely, they'd prepared for this eventuality.

After deliberation, they decided to emerge.

All three colossal ships revealed themselves, blocking the Alliance Battle Cruiser Ronglin right in its path.

This was an excellent opportunity for a strike, but the three colossal ships still acted with extreme caution. They did not recklessly charge at the outnumbered enemy but instead chose to keep their distance, aiding their own ships and intending only to force the Ronglin away.

Even with such prudence, they ran into trouble.

The Ronglin was utterly unfazed.

It ceased its pursuit of small ships, but it did not retreat either. Instead, it relied on the speed and agility of a Battle Cruiser to maneuver at the edge of the firepower threat zone.

Its posture was unambiguous—tracking them, shadowing them, ensuring they could not escape until reinforcements arrived that could collectively annihilate this lone remnant of traitorous naval forces.

The Furyflame Fleet, left with no alternative, was forced to go all in, advancing on the Ronglin to eliminate or drive it away.

The Ronglin began to retreat.

The tug-of-war commenced between both sides.

When the ships had pulled apart to a certain distance, where it became clear that the 'Starfire Wings' Battleship could not catch up in time, the Ronglin suddenly made its move.

It turned its bow and launched a fierce barrage at the ship originally belonging to the Alfonso Sect.

Simultaneously, that ship's Void Shield suddenly vanished.

At the same time, another Furyflame flagship, 'Fire of Triumph,' went silent.

Without a doubt, this was Gu Hang and the Phoenix taking action.

The remaining two hundred Fury Flame Warriors aboard the 'Fire of Triumph' were powerless to resist. The Think Tank couldn't stop Gu Hang from tearing through the Void Shield, and instead had its head exploded by Gu Hang; the Interstellar Warriors stood no chance against the Phoenix. Only three hundred Phoenix warriors teleported onboard, outnumbering their opponents by merely 50%, but their individual combat capabilities were vastly superior; the remaining Battle Group Auxiliary Army aboard the ship was being overwhelmed by the relentless, fearless spirits…

By the time the 'Starfire Wings' Battleship finally arrived at the battlefield, the Alfonso Sect's last surviving Battle Cruiser was ablaze with fire across its hull, clearly heavily damaged; the firing system on 'Fire of Triumph' was visibly weakened, signaling that inside the ship, the conflict had tipped overwhelmingly in favor of the Alliance.

Under these circumstances, the 'Starfire Wings' did not retreat. It knew full well its slower speed meant escape was impossible; its only option was to launch a death charge.

The 'Starfire Wings' attack proved effective.

The charging Ronglin was knocked off course.

Earlier, retaliation from the Alfonso Sect's Battle Cruiser, as well as firepower from 'Fire of Triumph' before its systems were entirely disabled, had landed hits. The Ronglin's Void Shield had already turned crimson.

The prolonged engagement delayed by the Battleship's arrival had placed the Ronglin in a very precarious state. Multiple consecutive strikes, including three Doomsday Light Spears, had pounded the

Void Shield from crimson to glowing red—the precursor to overload; then came a shot from an X-class ’Divine Punishment’ Spear Array, shattering the shield and melting a hole into the Ronglin’s armor.

The difference in frontal combat effectiveness between a Battle Cruiser and a Battleship was starkly evident in this moment.

Immediately, incoming volleys of cannon fire were dodged or intercepted with emergency maneuvers by the Ronglin. Yet, one X-class Colossal Cannon hit the stern brutally.

The armor failed to hold; the ship sustained major damage, now wobbling uncontrollably, struggling to maintain a stable trajectory.

However, just as the ’Starfire Wings’ intended to press the attack and destroy the Alliance vessel, it suddenly took a hit on its flank.

The shot was fired by the ’Fire of Triumph.’

The ’Starfire Wings’ captain was dumbfounded.

He couldn’t comprehend why this happened.

It was clear that the Phoenix was formidable, and the Furyflame couldn’t match them; everyone understood this by now.

It was perhaps absurd to be overwhelmed so quickly, but marginally acceptable…

Yet, to capture a ship so swiftly? That wasn’t simple—it required a significant number of crew members.

Did they jump over with engineers alongside? And had enough personnel teleported in during ongoing combat to seize control of the vessel?

This was unheard of!

Yet, the ’Starfire Wings’ captain quickly recalled one detail: the ’Fire of Triumph’ wasn’t an ordinary warship—it was a Battle Barge exclusively used by Interstellar Warriors.

It had numerous critical shipboard roles that could only be operated by Interstellar Warriors. Through neural links and black shell interfaces, they could directly control significant portions of the vessel, much like their neuroconnectivity to Power Armor.

This seemed to account for the situation.

Although certain nuances remained unclear, such as the apparent lack of password locks or genetic recognition safeguards…

And besides the neural-linked roles, the rest of the positions still required many crew members. Where did those come from?

These questions stayed unresolved.

But the ’Starfire Wings’ had already lost its best opportunity to destroy the Ronglin.

Numerous Escort Ships had arrived, including a Lunar-class one, charging aggressively toward the ’Starfire Wings.’

These small and medium-sized ships intercepted what remained of their own Destroyers and Cruisers while attacking the Ronglin, and simultaneously disrupted the next two volleys from the ’Starfire Wings.’

Though they paid a steep price—losing two Lunar-class ships and more than ten Silver Shield and Silver Sword-class ships—the Ronglin was ultimately preserved.

Meanwhile, they were breached.

Spirits wreathed in lightning appeared across the vessel, and over a hundred Phoenix warriors teleported onboard.

Soon, the 'Starfire Wings' fell into the hands of the Alliance as well.

Once the outer fleet was completely wiped out, the downfall of the Furyflame became a countdown to inevitability.

Chapter 582: The Fruits of Victory are so Sweet

Boarding combat has never been an easy undertaking.

At least, Matins always believed so before teaming up with Gu Hang.

In his battle experiences, whether during the Phoenix's prime or in the subsequent Redemption Crusades, he had participated in numerous boarding operations.

Every single one was fraught with danger.

The reasons were simple: during the boarding phase, no matter how individually skilled an Interstellar Warrior was, the risks of boarding were unavoidable. Whether it was a failed Spiritual Energy teleportation disrupted by interference or a boarding torpedo being destroyed mid-flight, once such incidents happened, the warriors sent on the boarding mission could only await their inevitable demise.

Even those who managed to board faced major risks. The number of warriors who could endure the hazardous boarding process, especially those leading the charge, was always limited. Typically, modern starships were equipped with sizable and well-armed contingents of Navy Marine Corps and elite ground troops. Boarding forces had to fight desperately with limited equipment and manpower.

Establishing a foothold, completing tasks such as disabling the enemy ship's interception systems, artillery, and creating landing zones—these were all essential missions for securing reinforcements.

The reinforcements, however, often arrived in insufficient numbers and were dispersed across multiple waves.

Under conditions where the enemy held the home-field advantage with superior equipment and personnel, the difficulty of boarding combat was evident. Battlefields often turned into bloody meat grinders, with boarding forces taking heavy losses to deploy their troops, and further suffering immense casualties while waging combat under unfavorable conditions. Only by overcoming various crises could a boarding operation succeed.

However, after working for Mr. Gu, he discovered—boarding combat, can it really be this easy?

Not that it was truly easy—after all, ever since the fleet battles with Alfonso Fleet in the Bowang star system began, Phoenix had already lost over four hundred warriors. This loss was nearing half of their personnel, making it undeniably profound.

Yet, compared to their achievements—capturing one giant ship after another, annihilating countless Elite Protectorate Army troops and Mutinous Interstellar Warriors—this loss seemed like a “bargain.”

If it weren’t for Mr. Gu’s nearly interference-free, 100% successful Spiritual Energy teleportation, many warriors would have died during mid-transit across the boarding missions, and countless operations wouldn’t have been feasible at all; without those miraculous Spirits leading the charge, relying on a mere few hundred Phoenix warriors to plunge into the vast ocean of enemy elite forces, completing the missions would have been a pipe dream.

These two elements alone allowed Phoenix’s boarding battles to become unstoppable, to the point where they looked like miracles to the Blood Shark forces next door.

During the assault on Fury Fleet’s few remaining ships, Phoenix clearly understood the crucial role played by Mr. Gu.

Initially, Gu Hang wasn’t aboard the besieged Ronglin ship, instead stationed on Eagle Horse.

The Alliance had deployed Phoenix’s main forces—a total of six hundred warriors—across four ships: Eagle Horse, Ronglin, Furyclaw, and Yunluo. Eagle Horse had three hundred warriors, while the other three ships each housed only one hundred warriors apiece.

When news arrived that Ronglin was under siege, Gu Hang immediately mobilized, bringing two hundred Phoenix warriors via teleportation onto Ronglin.

This, in itself, was something beyond Matins' comprehension.

The distance between Eagle Horse and Ronglin—how vast was it?

It far exceeded the normal range of space combat engagements!

Even with interference-free conditions and pre-set coordinates, this feat was simply too incredible.

But Matins had grown numb to it.

Seen it too many times. Doesn't matter anymore.

After the naval battle concluded, Ronglin was severely damaged. Despite the efforts of the repair crew exerting every ounce of their strength, the battlecruiser could only barely recover its operational capabilities to prevent further deterioration—combat was out of the question. Sending it out now would render it nothing more than an immobile target, unable to contribute effectively.

Yet, the offensive against Phantommoon continued as planned. The loss of one battlecruiser didn't hinder the Alliance's assault.

In fact, this phase transitioned into a relatively conventional fight for orbital defense systems, followed by clearing a relatively safe area of space to dispatch troops for large-scale planetary descents and ground battles to seize key staging zones.

During this process, the Alliance even deployed the "Starfire Wings" and "Flames of Triumph," two ships they had recently salvaged, into Phantommoon's orbit.

These two ships had not undergone comprehensive repairs. There were even possible survivors among their original crews, hiding in some obscure corners of the massive vessels. After all, these two ships

were colossal starships capable of carrying hundreds of thousands of people—it wouldn't be inaccurate to view them as cities floating in space.

They were largely unusable for the Alliance in combat; many systems within the ships still required cracking or had to be replaced outright.

Yet, the Alliance still maneuvered them into orbit around Phantommoon, showcasing them to the enemy.

This was a display of power, aimed at boosting their own forces' morale while severely striking the enemy's. It was akin to openly declaring to the planet's defenders: "You have no hope left. Surrender is your only choice."

The effect was remarkably effective.

Several orbital space stations transmitted surrender signals to the Alliance, allowing Alliance ships to dock without resistance. The station personnel laid down their arms, were taken away by the Alliance, and the stations—undamaged—were merely temporarily abandoned. They could later be repurposed and reused.

Chapter 582: The Fruits of Victory are so Sweet

The orbital defense system was rapidly dismantled, and at the same time, the ground offensive was becoming increasingly smooth.

Without the disturbances from the orbital defense system, the Alliance Fleet began providing smoother support to the ground offensive.

The ground-based orbital cannons continued their futile resistance, but when facing attacks from both the skies and the ground simultaneously, their defense became overwhelmingly difficult.

In fact, the Alliance didn't even deploy Interstellar Warriors for the ground offensive.

This time, the main force comprised the Battle Nuns of Saintly Mercy Lily. Superior Georgette was the highest-ranking commander. Although the Battle Sisters she led did not have the individual combat prowess of the Interstellar Warriors, with a thousand Battle Nuns, plus the assistance of over six thousand Glory Guards, they could ensure that their ground operations would not be overrun in one blow by Furyflame or the New Torch.

Moreover, the enemy didn't dare gather their Interstellar Warriors in large numbers.

In a battle for control over a critical surface hub city, the enemy assembled a hundred Interstellar Warriors, successfully pushing back the Alliance Army's advance on the city.

Immediately, the Alliance refrained from taking rash action. Instead, they encircled the city and established a humanitarian corridor, giving the residents inside three days to evacuate.

The Interstellar Warriors could not escape; they were too conspicuous to blend in with the evacuating pedestrians and flee among them.

They attempted several breakout attempts, but on the open plains, they faced not just Battle Nuns and Glory Guards but also a mass of tanks and heavy artillery. A frontal breakthrough was impossible.

Only a handful managed to escape, while the rest were forced back into the city.

Afterward, the Alliance ceased to concern itself with how many civilians remained in the city and began orbital bombardment.

For three days and nights, they bombed relentlessly until the city was flattened in a physical sense. Post-operation estimates suggested that there were likely no surviving lifeforms within.

Following this battle, Furyflame and the New Torch almost entirely abandoned forming large-scale assemblies—unless it was to strike under the cover of night, in complex environments during ambushes. But even then, they had to quickly retreat after a swift victory and didn't dare try to expand their gains.

They also abandoned nearly all key positions and fortresses, moving their frontlines to the underground tunnels of cities, into previously excavated bunkers and subways, as well as into mountainous and other complex terrains.

These areas were unsuitable for large-scale military operations. Their dispersed layout also rendered orbital bombardment largely ineffective.

This effectively meant that they had nearly entirely relinquished control over Phantom Moon.

If the Interstellar Warriors solely aimed to survive and hold out, they indeed proved difficult to eliminate.

Even Skyburn Torpedoes might not completely wipe them out. If they stockpiled sufficient supplies and oxygen, hiding in excavated mountains or underground spaces, they might very well endure for several years, emerging only after the heat of destruction subsided—how they would escape a dead and silent planet would then be a separate issue.

But survive, they could.

Unless, of course, one were to resort to a planet-busting weapon such as a higher-tier Extinction Order device, which would obliterate the entire planet into countless space debris. Perhaps, after thousands of years, gravity might coalesce the fragments once more, or it might result in countless asteroids and meteoroids. Regardless, only this method could truly eradicate all traces of life from a planet without exception.

It hadn’t reached that point, not yet anyway.

However, under these circumstances, the war situation remained awkward.

The Alliance had essentially taken control of the entire Phantom Moon, but their military advantage still depended largely on the elite forces—the combined strength of the several thousand Battle Nuns and Glory Guards, supplemented by at least two battlecruisers and ten Lunar-class ships providing orbital support.

In such conditions, Furyflame and the New Torch dared not expose themselves, reduced to skulking in the shadows like rats.

However, they effectively tied down a considerable portion of the Alliance's forces—stationed on Phantom Moon—with fewer than two thousand Interstellar Warriors.

If the Starships were withdrawn—even partially, leaving fewer remaining ships—global coverage would no longer be feasible. Furyflame and their ilk would likely become more active. And should the Nuns and Glory Guards also withdraw, they could brazenly establish new bases and even reclaim control of the planet.

Yet, not withdrawing while being unable to swiftly eradicate these two battle groups was equally frustrating.

Truly a headache.

…

Gu Hang became aware of the situation on Phantom Moon but didn't devote much thought to managing it.

There was nothing much to manage.

Perhaps the war there was extraordinarily brutal, and the guerrilla operations of the two remnant groups were causing Superior Georgette immense frustration.

However, overall, Phantom Moon's output in various domains was undergoing reconstruction. Under the current condition of global military administration, the Alliance was extracting 20% of the output, with Georgette's forces obtaining an additional 10% for military supplies—primarily food, basic necessities, and equipment maintenance.

The rest was left to the local interest groups on the planet for internal distribution.

That should suffice.

As for Furyflame and the New Torch hidden in the mountains and subterranean areas, they would be left to Georgette to handle further.

A portion of the Starships in Phantom Moon's orbit would be withdrawn while others stayed; three cruisers would suffice.

While it wouldn't cover the whole planet, it was enough to provide fire support whenever Georgette ordered a reconnaissance or eradication operation against the Mutinous Star Warriors.

As for the frequent attacks on some of Phantom Moon's local production sites, let them attack.

The output from those facilities wasn't significant.

The cleanup operations for the two battle groups could proceed slowly.

After all, Gu Hang was no longer under time pressure.

As for himself, he had more important matters to attend to.

The Battle of Bowang and its derivative conflict, the Phantom Moon Campaign, brought an unprecedented victory for the Alliance, along with immense spoils.

The tally was astonishing: two battlecruisers in exchange for one Emperor-class, two Retribution-class, a combat barge, and a Dragon-Serpent-class.

What a profit—equivalent to gaining an entire Alliance Fleet!

Just from plundering ships, they had hit the jackpot!

Strategically, too, the war had shifted significantly.

The Alfonso Sect's main expeditionary force was crushed; Furyflame and the New Torch were broken. Resolving these two major issues meant that the Alliance was no longer under dual-threat pressure in the Proudclaw Cosmos.

In the Princess Star Domain, meanwhile, the Iron Armor Battle Group's main force was locked in a deadly struggle with the Lord of the Phoenix in the western frontlines—a conflict on a scale even larger than the Alliance's battles. Could Humphrey Paolo possibly divert more forces for an expedition into Proudclaw?

That seemed unlikely.

Could the Alfonso Sect, having lost a War Ark and an Emperor-class ship, muster a fleet for another southern campaign?

That too seemed improbable.

True, the Alliance would face a brief period of weakness following the Battle of Bowang—at least six months to a year of repairs for their fleet.

But in truth, Gu Hang wasn't too concerned about encountering any military threats during this phase of vulnerability.

On the contrary, it was his enemies who ought to fear his military strength.

He might be in a vulnerable phase, but considering the routes from Proudclaw to Thistle Muster or Alfonso Starfields, they were left unguarded and poorly defended.

Would the victor of this war, Gu Hang, be in worse shape than the losers?

That simply didn’t make sense.

Even if Iron Armor’s Paolo or the Alfonso Sect’s Great Sage Martin Valuk chose to target Gu Hang and were willing to risk their own core stability, they couldn’t redeploy forces so easily.

Crossing multiple Star Domains alone—organizing, mobilizing, and marching forces—would take an indeterminately long time.

Even in the most conservative estimations, Gu Hang believed he’d have over two years to catch his breath.

Oh, but it wasn’t he who needed to catch his breath; it was Paolo and Valuk who did.

“Still too weak. If only we had preserved our fleet’s strength, we wouldn’t give them even a moment to breathe!”

Gu Hang sighed and turned to focus on consolidating his spoils of war.

The fruits of victory were indeed sweet.

The Proudclaw Campaign’s triumph, beyond capturing ships and ’consuming’ a Neuron Progeny, achieving a strategic upper hand, yielded another, often-overlooked trophy: Gift Points.

Chapter 583, Military Upgrade

Gu Hang’s Gift Points have now surpassed the thirty million mark.

The accumulated monthly income of Gift Points is still a small portion, as it has only been a year since he last exhausted his Gift Points. His fixed monthly income has skyrocketed to four hundred thousand, but over the course of a year, it totals only four million.

The sporadic earnings from other battles pale in comparison; the largest haul remains the Bowang battle, where the Alfonso Fleet was annihilated.

The Gift Points gained from that battle directly exceeded twenty million.

These thirty million Gift Points, if used for the lottery…

But Gu Hang held back.

Drawing key technologies could significantly enhance the Alliance's war potential, no doubt about it.

Furthermore, according to Gu Hang's estimates, the Alliance currently appears to have a two-year window of relative stability.

This doesn't mean the cessation of all war. Conflicts still persist in regions like Phantom Moon, the Wuqi-Wenqi line, the Carlett-Kaiseldo line, and even scattered battles throughout the Proudclaw Cosmos.

War never truly stops.

But overall, the Alliance within the Proudclaw Cosmos can enjoy a period of relative peace.

This indicates the Alliance has some time to digest the technologies acquired.

However, the damages of war must first be addressed and remedied by Gu Hang.

It is foreseeable that major wars lie ahead.

Troops need extensive replenishing.

Weapon and equipment production capabilities must be ramped up to their limits.

Both these areas require significant investment of Gift Points.

Of course, it won't use them all up. Thirty million Gift Points are enough to train three billion troops, way more than necessary.

In wars beyond local territories, troop numbers often aren't the critical factor. Limited transport capacity makes it impossible to deploy troops by the billions onto battlefields, and doing so is fraught with risk. If a massive transport ship loaded with troops and equipment faces an accident en route, the losses would be astronomical.

Moreover, producing enough ships for such deployment is no easy matter.

In terms of personnel replenishment, Gu Hang prioritizes sailors.

Those captured large ships are notorious "man-eaters."

For an Emperor-class Battleship to be fully staffed with sailors, Marines, and servants, it would need to carry eighty thousand people; Retribution-class Battleships require fifty thousand; even that combat barge would need at least forty thousand; while the Dragon-Snake Class Cruiser, though smaller, still demands twenty-five thousand.

Additionally, the Alliance has a considerable number of ships estimated to be nearing completion. These ships will also require a large number of qualified sailors.

The demand for sailors will lead to reallocating seasoned personnel from other vessels to handle key positions.

The Alliance Navy is undeniably an excellent career choice.

And it's not just the Alliance; this holds true across the Empire.

Navy personnel enjoy good working conditions, living fairly stably aboard ships, unlike the arduous struggles faced by Army soldiers in harsh environments that could arise at any time.

Even the Navy's lowest-ranking servants have advantages when compared to the Army—being less likely to be used as cannon fodder, and therefore experiencing drastically lower mortality rates.

As for the downside, it's that when a ship explodes, there's nowhere to run; an entire crew perishes together.

Yet even in the face of such death, Navy servants and senior officers share equality—if the Starship explodes, everyone dies the same way.

Dying this way is relatively less painful.

So overall, the Navy is much better than the Army.

Additionally, the Alliance Navy has a distinct advantage compared to the Empire Navy: significantly better opportunities for promotion.

Ordinarily, Empire Navy personnel have to endure long waiting periods to accumulate seniority. Positions aboard ships are fixed, and the long construction time for new ships means fleet members seldom get chances for promotion.

The Alliance, however, operates differently: multiple shipbuilding centers are running at full capacity nonstop. The Alliance's shipbuilding industry is not only advanced but is backed by the entirety of Alliance society, pooling resources to prioritize continuous investment in shipbuilding.

This naturally consumes vast resources. The labor costs for shipbuilding are extremely high, while material consumption is even greater.

In most places, the lack of adequate shipbuilding technology is one challenge; but even where technology exists, many regions simply cannot operate at full capacity—costs are prohibitive.

The Alliance, on the other hand, possesses sufficient technological capabilities, strong governance, and the economic foundation to integrate resources across multiple Star Domains. With support from the Eastern Cosmos Domain and neighboring domains, it has secured sufficient raw materials through trade.

Moreover, the black box technology has handled some of the most challenging aspects of shipbuilding. Massive energy consumption is covered by energy crystals produced on Rage Owl Star and the expanding Stellar Energy Factory network, continually harvesting stellar energy and compressing it into energy blocks… All this allows the Alliance's shipbuilding industry to operate at full throttle.

Consequently, there is a steady influx of new ships, supplemented by captured enemy vessels, steadily expanding the Alliance Fleet's size. This growth opens up abundant positions for sailors, granting them ample opportunities for advancement.

Sailors have the chance to rise to leadership positions and become officers; junior officers can move up; senior officers have opportunities to captain new ships…

Officers reassigned from existing ships to newly launched ones generally receive promotions; vacated positions then pave the way for others to ascend.

Chapter 583, Army Upgrade_2

A significant wave of promotion opportunities, the naval system was brimming with excitement and optimism.

As for low-ranking officers and the missing personnel among the enlisted sailors, replacements would still need to be made.

Earlier, when the Alliance Navy reached a certain scale, the [Personnel Card] interface quietly unlocked the sailor training branch. It required soldiers to reach the T5 level, and at the cost of 1 Gift Point per 10 individuals, qualified sailors could be trained.

The deficit of fewer than three million sailors translated into a total cost of 300,000 Gift Points.

With Gu Hang's current possession of 30 million Gift Points, this was a relatively insignificant expense.

However, Gu Hang wasn't planning to completely rely on Gift Points to solve all the problems.

Nor did he need to.

The comprehensive educational system actively developed across the Alliance territory was expected to yield results.

The Naval Academy on Flying Wing Star trained mid-level and senior officers, while under his Alliance governance structure, military schools were prevalent everywhere—not only in the Tianma Star Sector but also throughout the Alliance. Education systems represented a significant budget allocation within the Alliance.

Gu Hang had always understood that the issue of talent could partially, even crucially, be resolved using system resources, but it could never be completely addressed this way. As his domain expanded to encompass two or more Star Domains, with a population measured at hundreds of billions or even trillions, the vast requirements for military personnel, engineers, technical workers, and managerial talents…

These demands couldn't solely rely on Gift Points to be met.

No matter how many Gift Points Gu Hang earned through wars, it would never be enough to support such expansive territories and immense populations.

Fortunately, Gu Hang had long considered these issues. In the past, he placed heavy emphasis on the Alliance's educational system. On one hand, he exchanged vast amounts of Gift Points for academy buildings, ensuring they were established in various worlds across the Alliance's territory. On the other hand, despite the Alliance's stringent budget constraints, educational funding was always allocated—even if it had to be scraped together from the corners of the budget.

The educational system, paired with Gu Hang's use of the [Hero] interface to inspire exceptional talents and the [Personnel Card] interface to train key personnel, was one of the critical reasons for the Alliance's robust development. It ensured the Alliance excelled in economic growth, manufacturing, overall governance, and military readiness by cultivating a substantial backbone of talent.

The Navy was just one aspect.

The abundance of skilled sailors was enough to fill the void of several million navy personnel.

Gu Hang planned to allocate Gift Points to address only part of this deficit. He devised a plan to spend roughly 60,000 Gift Points, training 600,000 sailors. As for the remaining vacancies, a mentor-apprentice system would be sufficient to bridge the gap effectively.

On the other hand, the Navy Marine Corps required significantly more investment.

Although in past naval battles it was often the Alliance boarding enemy ships, preparations needed to be made in advance to counter scenarios where this situation reversed, particularly against Iron Armor forces.

The reason for such frugal planning was another major expense: the strengthening of frontline combat troops.

Among the two million sailor deficit, roughly half was reserved for the Navy Marine Corps.

Gu Hang intended to elevate this unit's capabilities to a very high standard.

Beyond a large quantity of sophisticated gear designed for fighting within ships, the elite caliber of personnel could not be neglected.

Gu Hang anticipated training these forces to achieve an average combat capability of T3 level.

This approach also applied to the existing Navy Marine Corps personnel within the fleets.

Their primary mission was to execute anti-boarding operations; at critical moments, they could be deployed as boarding forces or paratroopers for ground support.

The Alliance Navy Marine Corps had an estimated total scale of about three million personnel, inclusive of those required for both new and old ships.

This amounted to an expenditure of three million Gift Points.

But this figure encompassed only part of the overall costs.

Two other substantial expenditures involved the Army and the Interstellar Warriors.

For the Army, the Alliance Army's formal forces reached a size of about 1.5 billion personnel. Within the Alliance system, these units were equivalent to the Star Realm Army in the Empire structure, capable of combat deployment outside their home planets, distinguishing them from the native Pact Army.

For a long time, Gu Hang had ceased training every Alliance Army soldier using Gift Points—it was unaffordable. Currently, only about 30% of the soldiers had undergone Gift Point training.

This proportion was already quite significant, equating to the training of approximately 500 million soldiers, an expenditure of over 5 million Gift Points.

Proportionally speaking, the situation was still manageable.

The Alliance's military schools didn't solely train naval officers; they focused more heavily on the Army.

Furthermore, the Alliance Army's training system had long been established, fundamentally mirroring the Imperial structure: selecting elites from the Planetary Defense Forces.

The basic quality of these troops was already high. While not all members reached T5 level, the deviation wasn't significant enough to hinder operations, and a considerable portion of the personnel had reached this level.

With an additional 30% trained via Gift Points, the overall proportion of T5-level soldiers exceeded 60%. The collective strength of the Alliance Army remained comparable to the combat readiness of typical Star Realm Army Corps.

In fact, it even surpassed some.

After all, many Star Realm Army Corps generally maintained only about 30% of personnel meeting T5 standards.

Such quality in the Alliance Army could even rival certain well-known Star Realm Army Corps.

And with a scale of 1.5 billion, the magnitude was even more formidable.

Currently, over 1 billion soldiers were battling across various sectors of the Proudclaw Cosmos.

They were working toward extinguishing fires of conflict in different areas to ensure hundreds of worlds within the Proudclaw Cosmos came under control, thus securing resources essential for sustaining the war. The Alliance's provisional administrative bodies, operating under wartime strategies, managed these worlds with support from the Army.

Once these worlds were sufficiently stabilized and new Planetary Defense Forces were established, the Army would withdraw from each planet.

Looking to the future, the demand for Army personnel was unlikely to decline. Considering the prospect of prolonged confrontation during the Iron Armor War, even more troops might be required.

Gu Hang planned an additional expansion of the Alliance Army by 500 million personnel.

Recruits would be drawn from the Defense Forces of Meng River and Dragonhawk Star Domains. Gu Hang allocated 2 million Gift Points to train 200 million of these soldiers, ensuring high quality among the new recruits.

Mindful of limitations on troop deployment numbers, Gu Hang aimed to increase the proportion of elite forces. He intended to elevate one to two Skeleton Divisions within each Army Group to T4 levels, establishing them as core combat units.

The Alliance currently fielded 2,000 Army Groups, with a total of 2,600 Skeleton Divisions comprising 1.3 billion troops. To train all units to T4 level, excluding those whom war experiences or prior training had already elevated to this level, Gu Hang needed to train at least 1 billion personnel to T4.

This required an expenditure of 10 million Gift Points.

But the results would be worthwhile.

Skeleton Divisions at this level of capability would dominate battles against armies of similar size, including the Princess Legion or the Battle Group Auxiliary Forces.

Even the core units in some renowned Star Realm Armies only achieved comparable levels.

Additionally, Gu Hang expanded the Alliance Glory Guard Corps from its current 10,000 personnel to a scale of 50,000.

This elite force would consist entirely of soldiers at least T2 level, with a significant number reaching T1 level.

Glory Guards with such scale and average strength were projected to annihilate two fully-staffed ordinary Battle Groups in direct combat.

Given the high cost and limited numbers of Interstellar Warriors, Gu Hang had no choice but to take this approach.

This added another 1.5 million Gift Points to the expenditure.

In total, Gu Hang spent 16.5 million Gift Points on personnel expansions across the Navy and Army.

Half of the assets he had accumulated from the current war were thus spent.

Gu Hang estimated that, following this significant investment in personnel and equipment, the Alliance Army's needs could be met for ongoing operations, at least for the foreseeable future.

There would be a clear enhancement in the overall combat strength of the Alliance military.

Even the most basic Army Group would hold its ground against enemy elite forces and could potentially gain an advantage.

After addressing the Army, Gu Hang turned his attention to the Interstellar Warriors.

Both Phoenix and Blood Shark required nurturing.

Chapter 584, The Alliance is too enticing

The Alliance has achieved resounding victories lately, but it's also clear that some are bearing heavy burdens to achieve them.

Take Gu Hang for instance—he nearly got drained dry in the Battle of Bowang, but after ingesting a Neuron Progeny, he was reinvigorated.

The Interstellar Warriors are another group carrying the weight of progress.

Whenever there's a ship capture operation, it's always the Phoenix Battle Group that bites down on the critical parts, tearing them apart. Without these top-tier warriors, many victories wouldn't have been possible.

But fighting battle after battle like this, including those stationed in the warships and fortresses, the Phoenix Battle Group has suffered close to five hundred casualties.

Half a unit wiped out.

For most battle groups, this kind of relentless fighting would be utterly unsustainable. Unless it's a fight of particularly significant importance—an operation like sinking ships outright instead of forcing Interstellar Warriors to risk their lives to capture them—it's not something anyone would agree to.

Not even with direct orders.

The Phoenix Battle Group followed orders anyway. Part of this is because Gu Hang holds considerable sway over them; another part is because Matins knows that the losses will be replenished quickly.

Unlike regular battle groups where losing half their brothers-in-arms would require endless years of selecting recruits, performing implant surgeries, and waiting for them to mature. Beyond that, turning fresh recruits into veterans or even core members could easily take decades.

For some less fortunate battle groups, recovering from a single devastating battle might take a century or more.

The Phoenix Battle Group is different.

Matins knows that as soon as he loses 500 warriors, in just a few months, Gu Hang will deliver 500 fresh recruits with Genetic Seed implants ready to report for duty.

Nowadays, even the Genetic Seed transplant surgeries no longer need to be performed by the group's Apothecaries. The new recruits come from numerous planets across the Dragonhawk Star Domain.

These recruits will rapidly become fierce, battle-hardened warriors, no weaker than veterans.

Given these conditions, what else could Matins say?

Under such circumstances, the decisions made by this battle group are fundamentally different from others. The Phoenix Battle Group is now equipped with elite soldiers, cutting-edge gear, and even batch-

deployed Phase Swords. Not to mention that almost every member is outfitted in “Colossal” Power Armor, which clearly outclasses typical Power Armor. Their Iron Knight Terminators surpass standard Indomitable Terminators as well…

Besides these two points, consider their unique traits: fearlessness, constant replenishment, and super-fast recruitment…

Matins feels his battle group has become invincible.

Other battle groups? No, he even believes they could take on their parent group, the Phoenix Legion, without any issue. Phoenix indeed has more Champion Swordsmen. The group as a whole, especially in close combat scenarios, has inherited swordsmanship skills that outshine those of the Phoenix Battle Group. Moreover, as a newly-founded battle group, Phoenix’s individual combat prowess is likely still superior, arguably operating at the same elite tier.

Add their swordsmanship legacy, their advanced combat capabilities, and the techniques and equipment passed down from the era when humanity built the great Empire… Newly-founded battle groups are the pinnacle when it comes to unit strength.

And Phoenix, among them, is the cream of the crop. Yes, perhaps their Genetic Seed compatibility isn’t perfect, which results in challenges in recruiting new warriors. Their sub-group numbers are small, and their population is sparse, which further impacts their political leverage at the broader Empire level. They couldn’t compete with the influence of larger battle groups. But their pursuit of perfection embedded in their Genetic Seeds, combined with their exceptional swordsmanship, makes them the absolute top combat force among all newly-founded battle groups.

Nonetheless, if Phoenix were to face the Phoenix Battle Group, considering the latter’s willingness to sacrifice and super-fast replenishment rates, what could Phoenix even do?

Eventually, they’d be worn down and destroyed.

Under Gu Hang’s leadership, the Phoenix Battle Group truly lives up to its name—like a “Phoenix,” they are practically immortal.

Of course, this is contingent on them maintaining their integrated connection with the Alliance.

And in practice, that linkage isn't likely to be severed. As Battle Group Leader, Matins understands this well. If he ever decided to break from the Alliance, wouldn't every single member of his unit think he was insane and immediately tie him up to hand over to the Governor?

The only ones who might follow him into rebellion would be the other three veterans from the farthest reaches of the old deployment series.

Oh, even they likely wouldn't—especially Priest Rizzo, who definitely wouldn't join.

Then again, Matins himself acknowledges the absurdity of such thoughts.

Under the Alliance's system, he's living a comfortable and privileged life; only a madman would think about leaving.

As far as Gu Hang is concerned, replenishing the Phoenix Battle Group with 500 fresh recruits primarily consumes Gift Points.

Training a single elite veteran costs about 1,000 Gift Points per person within his battle group interface. This includes the Seed exchange, recruitment, and training costs.

However, this time, the actual expense won't be that high.

While training the additional 40,000 Glory Guards, the selection process was essentially completed. The Glory Guards themselves were meticulously chosen using [Recruitment Tokens]. Among them, the most outstanding candidates, generally aged around 16, capable of reaching T1 training standards, are considered prime candidates to become Interstellar Warriors. Their Genetic Seed implant success rates are notably high.

Additionally, as the Phoenix Battle Group has been engaged in combat for five years now, they've managed to cultivate a batch of Genetic Seeds themselves. From the 400 warriors who fell in battle, most of their Genetic Seeds were successfully recovered by the group's Apothecaries.

Chapter 584, The Alliance is Too Appealing_2

Here, Gu Hang could reduce the cost of replenishing new blood for the battle group by three to four hundred Gift Points.

Quite a bargain.

And this batch of Interstellar Warriors Gu Hang developed outwardly numbered only 500, but in truth, there were as many as 1,800.

Among them, 500 were assigned to the Phoenix.

Another 300 were sent to the Blood Shark.

The Blood Shark Battle Group, which had assisted the Alliance and rescued three Strike Cruisers, lost two of their own Strike Cruisers during subsequent battles. This time, the Blood Shark Battle Group that returned with Commander Youwin had a total of just over 700 members, but by this point, over 200 of them had been lost.

These losses were significant for the Blood Shark and extremely difficult to bear.

Unlike the Phoenix, they didn't have an invincible and enduring support system to rely on.

Gu Hang couldn't exactly reveal everything to the Blood Shark Battle Group, with whom he wasn't yet sufficiently trusting or close.

But that didn't mean Gu Hang couldn't act in this way.

The Genetic Seeds of the Blood Shark didn't require Gu Hang to exchange Gift Points for them.

Though it was likely he could exchange for them in the near future.

The [Event] interface had already displayed an event related to the Blood Shark.

[Event Activated: Blood Shark Battle Group]

[An Interstellar Warrior Battle Group returning from the dark outer regions, they've decided to end their long nomadic life and rejoin the Empire's sphere of influence. They urgently seek to establish their prestige and power within the Empire, aiming for a brighter future. The Alliance is their first stop, but will it be their final one?]

[Please decide your actions carefully. Your behavior will determine the next phase of the event.]

[Event Reward: Once the Blood Shark pledges allegiance to you, unlock the ability to exchange for Blood Shark Genetic Seeds.]

Gu Hang had not cared much for this event reward in the past, but a recent discovery made it something he had to take seriously.

He had uncovered a limitation in the [Battle Group] interface: The number of Phoenix Genetic Seeds that could be exchanged was finite!

The total number of Phoenix Genetic Seeds in existence, whether implanted in people or held as spares, could not exceed 2,000. Once this cap was reached, new seeds could not be exchanged unless some were lost from the Alliance's control — for example, failing to recover them, them becoming inactive or destroyed, or paying the Genetic Seed tax to the Empire…

This limitation had never previously come up because he had never been idle or rich enough to exchange large quantities of seeds and stockpile them for no reason.

But this time, when he wanted to push the boundaries a bit to create more Interstellar Warriors, he hit the cap and found himself stuck.

Gu Hang's vision of using Phoenix Seeds to create hundreds of thousands of Interstellar Warriors and establish a "Phoenix Legion" was shattered. It seemed he still needed to go down the path of collecting seeds from different battle groups to increase the number of seeds available for exchange.

Under these circumstances, the Blood Shark Genetic Seeds, which Gu Hang had previously not paid much attention to, suddenly became quite desirable.

How could this goal be achieved?

The Blood Shark wasn't like the half-dead Phoenix of yesteryears, which could be easily manipulated.

On the contrary, the Blood Shark was currently very strong.

This meant it would require more effort and subtlety.

Gu Hang planned to adopt a maneuver — "clearing the nest to replace the bird."

The Blood Shark had a tradition of collecting blood tax, and Gu Hang had already agreed to this.

This time, during their campaign with the Alliance, the Blood Shark had not engaged much in ground combat. As a result, their consumption of cannon fodder was minimal, and their need to replenish auxiliary personnel was small.

Their current blood tax request to the Alliance was for "exceptionally strong, resolute, devoutly faithful, and highly skilled young men."

This, in essence, was the core of the blood tax: selecting youths capable enough to satisfy the Blood Shark's standards and become the new blood of their battle group.

On the surface, this was an extremely stringent requirement. While physical fitness, military skills, faith, and determination weren't too difficult to meet individually, the key restriction to "young men" made it especially troublesome.

A 16-year-old youth seldom possessed all these qualities simultaneously.

According to the Blood Shark's experience, meeting these criteria required selecting from tens of thousands, and then subjecting them to rounds of bloody and brutal trials and combat baptisms.

This was akin to nurturing poison through mutual slaughter; those who survived were undeniably the best of the group. Whether due to their own initial excellence or growth during the grueling process, as long as they met the objective, it was sufficient.

But for Gu Hang, selecting qualified new blood wasn't difficult at all.

After replenishing the Phoenix, there was still a surplus of youths whom Gu Hang had trained.

Three hundred young men were sent into the Blood Shark. Prior to this, not only had Gu Hang trained them to T1 level, significantly increasing the success rate of their Genetic Seed implantation surgeries, but they had all undergone additional Gift Point training in "Political Officer" expertise.

The Blood Shark wouldn't immediately accept all of them wholesale, but Commander Youwin would soon discover that the 300 youths sent by the Alliance fulfilled their requirements perfectly. Even compared to the auxiliary candidates selected through their previously ruthless screening methods, few could rival these 300.

As for their loyalty to the Alliance?

Even setting aside whether the Blood Shark's evaluation process accounted for such factors, most normal battle groups rarely concerned themselves with such matters.

Interstellar Warriors' lifespans bordered on eternity. Compared with the decades or centuries they would spend living and fighting in the battle group, the fleeting mortal experiences of 16-year-olds were insignificant. A small attachment to their homeland was normal, but it would soon be eroded through the cultural immersion of the battle group.

This cultural transformation wouldn't even account for the significant physical changes resulting from Genetic Seed implantation, evolving the youths from mortals into superhumans. This process involved considerable physical pain and emotional shifts induced by hormonal imbalances.

In short, almost no battle group worried about such concerns.

Could Youwin have foreseen that the "Political Officer" training would instill unwavering and long-lasting loyalty to the Governor in these youths?

Probably not.

In any case, Gu Hang didn't intend for these youths to do anything unusual.

They only needed to be good Blood Sharks.

These "new Blood Sharks" didn't even require Gu Hang to provide Genetic Seeds. After their implantation, system recognition still categorized them as part of the Alliance.

This only reassured Gu Hang regarding their loyalty while enabling him to plan his next steps.

He spared no effort in leveraging the Interstellar Warrior-exclusive training systems to push the development of these "new Blood Sharks" to the limits. Not everyone had the aptitude to be trained to the level of a company champion; out of the 300, only 18 could reach this rank. However, everyone could be trained as veterans, with half even reaching the rank of Sergeant.

From Youwin's perspective, this was an outright delight: the youths provided by the Alliance not only exhibited exceptionally high implantation success rates — minimizing the Genetic Seed Bank's losses — but also excelled tremendously during their growth phase after integrating their superhuman organs. Remarkably, they quickly achieved the performance standards expected of Blood Sharks!

This was exceedingly rare!

The impressive combat capabilities of older Blood Sharks were earned through years of dark and harrowing battles in the outer regions. To see new recruits reach — or even slightly surpass — such levels was a source of immense excitement!

The battle group's strength, initially predicted to take many years to rebuild, had been restored in a remarkably short time.

Originally, Youwin had intended to adjust post-campaign strategies to reduce manpower deployment in certain battles with the Alliance.

But now, adjustments were still necessary—only this time, they would involve dispatching more troops!

The Alliance's blood tax was simply too good.

Chapter 585: Spend All the Granted Points

The Alliance provided Blood Shark not only with blood taxes.

There was also a sum of grey taxes; Gu Hang would not forget.

Generosity, when needed, should be offered generously.

Blood Shark had rescued three of their battle cruisers, exerted significant efforts during the Battle of Bowang, and even participated in boarding ships for captures… These achievements were all remembered by Gu Hang.

What does Blood Shark want?

Consumables?

Things like ammunition, medical supplies, equipment, starship repairs, and parts… Give them, it's just small expenses.

Equipment?

Blood Shark wasn't particularly interested in Alliance's vehicles—they had plenty of good stuff scavenged from the dark outer zones, as well as elite gear traded with other sects of Mechanics. However, quantity was an issue, and the Alliance's production could fill this gap with a considerable number of equipment, greatly enhancing the operational strength of Blood Shark's subordinate armies and auxiliary forces. From exoskeletons to feedback-type power armor; from armored vehicles to sentinel mechas… Previously, Blood Shark's auxiliary forces were nothing but cannon fodder. How could they have dreamed of such treatment? With these improved equipment, even if they are to die as cannon fodder, they can hold out longer.

Still, there were some cutting-edge pieces of gear from the Alliance that Blood Shark needed. Ironclad Terminator Armor, grand power armor—they were excellent pieces. Some of their equipment was exceptionally powerful; their battle group even possessed two Underworld-tier Terminators, which were nearly the most advanced Terminator Armor available and quite rare across the Empire.

However, due to limited numbers, Blood Shark primarily used the more common Sky Eagle Type power armor and Resolute Terminator units.

Now, with Alliance supplying, getting an upgrade batch would definitely make them happy.

Additionally, there were the exquisite phase weapons. According to Blood Shark's style, they could be made into war axes or polearms—either option was viable.

Phase weapons were not yet mass-produced by Alliance and relied solely on black box manufacturing, resulting in relatively limited numbers—even Phoenix hadn't been outfitted with much of these. Consequently, these weapons were priced exorbitantly.

And rightly so—they were worth every penny.

For a battle group like Blood Shark, adept at close combat, such top-tier weapons could prove even more vital than power armor upgrades. A few phase axes would be well worth the high price they demanded.

Among the equipment, however, the most valuable was not these.

It was starships.

What Blood Shark wanted most was, of course, that combat transport ship.

But their accolades and sacrifices were not sufficient to exchange for the combat transport ship originally belonging to Fury Flame Battle Group from the Alliance. After all, during the Battle of Bowang, the most instrumental role was played by Gu Hang himself, followed by the Phoenix Battle Group. Blood Shark helped to some extent but didn't achieve as much as Alliance's own Glory Guards or Battle Nuns.

In the arena of starship naval battles, Alliance Navy was more impactful compared to Blood Shark Fleet. Truthfully, Blood Shark initially didn't consider fighting against the formidable Alfonso Fleet in the Bowang star system as a wise choice. Naturally, Youwin wouldn't hand his entire fleet to the Alliance's command to risk their lives together. Only after Alfonso II, the most powerful War Ark, was destroyed did they put aside their hesitation and engage seriously.

Even themselves, Blood Shark couldn't claim their contributions justified receiving the best ship.

However, they did rescue three Alliance battle cruisers and sacrificed two hundred of their own during the sustained combat.

The Alliance was willing to construct one Holy Chalice-class Battleship Cruiser and three Interstellar Warrior Strike Cruisers for them.

Ordinary ships don't interest Blood Shark—they only wanted ships fast enough to match their agile operations.

Combining excellent blood taxes, Alliance-provided grey taxes, and enhanced fleet strength, overall, Blood Shark was quite satisfied with the rewards from fighting alongside the Alliance in this war.

These were far superior to the rewards from business dealings or missions taken up in past battle group histories with certain sects of Mechanics.

Gu Hang's promise of "better than standard prices" had been proven true.

Blood Shark was willing to continue fighting alongside the Alliance in this war, obeying the orders of Gu Hang, the Southern Line's imperial commander.

Of course, their independence remained high; the relationship between both sides was more akin to allies. While Youwin would follow Gu Hang's orders, how to execute them and to what extent would be his call.

Gu Hang had no objections to this.

It was as it should be.

This did not affect the Alliance's provision of blood taxes and grey taxes.

These were rightful dues.

Moreover… what's yours is mine; why draw such fine distinctions?

…

Gu Hang cultivated 1800 Interstellar Warrior recruits, 300 of which were given to Blood Shark, not only replenishing their losses but also providing surplus to slightly bolster their force. Another 500 were allocated to Phoenix, restoring their manpower to 1000. Although nearly a hundred were valiant warriors waiting in life-sustaining pods for revival, their numbers still reached the upper limit of a battle group's standard strength.

Where did the remaining thousand go?

Gu Hang established a “Shadow Battle Group.”

They were entirely cultivated using Phoenix’s genetic seeds; their level of training and Gu Hang’s expenditure of Gift Points matched that of Phoenix. However, Gu Hang didn’t intend to let too many people know of their existence.

As the name implies, they were a shadow.

Gu Hang designed their role to firstly enable quicker replenishment for Phoenix.

Under normal circumstances, even with the expedited means afforded by consuming Gift Points, a youth implanted with genetic seeds would still require several months for their internal superhuman organs to fully develop.

Chapter 585, Spend All the Grace Points_2

There’s likely to be a relatively long period of recovery right now, so taking a bit more time isn’t a problem. But if the fighting intensifies in the future, and the Phoenix suffers heavy casualties, then replenishing personnel quickly will be critical. With the members of the Shadow Battle Group, it won’t even take a few months for replenishment, allowing for seamless recovery.

Additionally, the Shadow Battle Group can do other tasks for Gu Hang.

When the Phoenix is too occupied or when there are tasks not even suited for the Phoenix… they will prove useful.

Interstellar Warriors are not exclusive to the Empire.

Those lost defectors, or even those who have fallen into Chaos, make excellent identities.

They’re ideal for dirty work.

Some people die at the hands of 'traitorous' Interstellar Warriors; some deeds are carried out by defectors or Fallen. In any case, the blame can't be pinned on the Alliance, can it?

At the moment, Gu Hang doesn't have much opportunity to deploy this tactic.

But in the future? Who can say for sure?

While his Gift Points are abundant, it's best to prepare in advance.

In fact, if the timing is right in the future, Gu Hang could even 'go public with a shell.'

Within the Empire, there are no shortage of Battle Groups that have been lost in the annals of history.

Of course, the Battle Groups officially erased by the Empire or destroyed entirely aren't the best names to use. But it doesn't matter—there are plenty of Battle Groups in Imperial history that vanished without a trace.

Although there's always the risk of one resurfacing suddenly, like with the Blood Shark, such cases are rare. For those that haven't been heard from in centuries, the risk is fairly low.

As for the incomplete formalities and lack of recognition, these are indeed practical issues.

But Gu Hang believes he'll gradually stop fearing such problems.

If I'm willing to borrow a shell, others will be thrilled. And once the Battle Group expands to a certain size, how many people can actually challenge Gu Hang?

Of course, getting to that point would result in some reputational damage. Gu Hang isn't yet powerful enough to completely disregard how Holy Terra might perceive this.

Still, everything needs to be prepared in advance. Otherwise, when the opportunity arises, being unready would be troublesome.

…

The various expenses associated with the Interstellar Warriors are very high, but the main costs are in resources and funding.

The use of Gift Points, however, is relatively manageable.

It only cost 1.5 million.

Although they're immensely powerful, expensive, and capable, their scale is limited to roughly a thousand people, so the spending isn't astronomical.

Besides, Gu Hang's idea of creating a full Interstellar Warrior Corps was thwarted due to the limits on Genetic Seed exchanges.

That made the expenses even less significant.

By now, Gu Hang has spent over 18 million of the 30 million Gift Points he had at his disposal.

About 10 million remains, and Gu Hang hesitated.

The main consideration was whether to conduct a technology lottery.

Doing a technology lottery now is quite costly. The earlier prize pools have largely been exhausted, and conducting a single ten-draw in the million-level pool would drain his remaining Gift Points entirely.

But he still has plenty of uses for those Gift Points.

Especially in terms of productivity.

Gu Hang had ideas about redeeming countless factories and academies to spread across the entire Alliance.

War is not just about the immediate military issues.

War is a competition of foundations.

Especially when it comes to the Navy: building a single Starship can easily cost tens or hundreds of billions. Currently, the Alliance's shipbuilding cycle includes one Retribution-class, one Zhuge-class, and four Battleship Cruisers, totaling over 200 billion.

What does that mean?

It doesn't mean the Alliance must directly pay that much in tax currency—at least, not entirely. For instance, the Dragon-Snake Class Battleship Cruisers that Mingyang Sect continuously orders—two per cycle—are purchased directly.

The other ships are indeed built by the Alliance itself, without spending actual cash.

However, the real costs in terms of resources are hardly less significant.

A single Starship, so colossal in scale. Building a Nest Capital that can navigate space and engage in combat requires an immense supporting industry.

Countless people work to make this possible. It's not just the shipbuilding industry's technical workers—though they alone represent an enormous workforce. When you account for the Alliance's compensation for them, the construction of their housing, and maintaining their relatively decent living standards through food, medical care, consumer goods, and even entertainment, the costs become staggering.

On this matter, exploitation and oppression don't work. To even qualify to participate in the shipbuilding industry—not to mention high-level engineers—even mid-level technical workers are considered 'talent.'

Relying on oppression would harm morale and could even reduce efficiency.

The creation of various components, hulls, and supporting raw material processing… all of it is incredibly 'expensive.'

Or, to put it another way, it consumes a significant portion of productivity.

A considerable part of the Alliance's finances has already been funneled into the shipbuilding industry.

But even so, it's still not enough.

In fact, based on the 'national strength' of the Meng River and Dragonhawk Star Domains, maintaining the current shipbuilding efficiency is already at its limit—perhaps even overextended.

Fortunately, after the war, the Imperial Tax no longer needs to be paid—otherwise, it would be completely unsustainable.

Additionally, as the Alliance's offensives progress and yield favorable results, support from the Empire itself has increased.

Some of this support comes in the form of direct military aid. Over fifty warships have been mobilized from surrounding areas, forming a joint force under Gu Hang's command as the Supreme Commander.

Chapter 585: Spend all the Grace Points_3

Although they were all small-to-medium-sized ships, even a single escort ship would cost hundreds of millions in tax credits. Fifty ships would amount to a truly substantial sum.

On the ground forces side, there were six Star Realm Army Corps, totaling approximately forty million soldiers, who were gradually sent to the front lines to serve as forces Gu Hang could command.

Once the war was over, these forces had to be returned. Gu Hang had no intention of exploiting allied troops, nor did he harbor cruel thoughts about sacrificing them in the brutal war on purpose.

There was no need for that. They were merely complementary forces that didn't impact the grand strategy, and Gu Hang didn't want to tarnish his own reputation.

Still, these troops served as solid reinforcements.

The Empire's war support wasn't limited to waiving the Imperial Tax—for precision's sake, it would be more accurate to say the Imperial Tax was allocated specifically to the Iron Armor War effort.

Additionally, the Empire directly provided 'funds.'

The latest sum, paid on behalf of the Eastern Cosmic Realm Government but actually sourced from two or three neighboring domains as mandated by the Central Empire, amounted to a staggering 150 billion.

The transfer occurred after the Alfonso Sect joined the war effort.

No matter the circumstances, 150 billion was an astronomically large figure.

Gu Hang had no intention of using that money simply as tax certificates. Such paperwork was meaningless to him since he didn't need to offset taxes. However, these 'certificates' could be used locally in neighboring star systems—and even entire domains—to purchase all the resources the Alliance needed.

Shells, energy, weapons, provisions… even externally-built ships!

There were items that couldn't be bought even with money, yet now they could be acquired at standard rates.

Gu Hang directly purchased a Retribution-class Battleship from the neighboring Solitary Mountain Domain, from the Duanchen Sect, at a price of 60 billion.

The production cost of such a vessel alone was 50 billion. Factoring in equipped sailors, the fuel to transport it here, and a fully stocked arsenal… 60 billion essentially broke even with no profits to be made.

What's more, the Solitary Mountain Domain—a region consisting of seven star systems—was already plagued by severe Green Skin outbreaks. That the Duanchen Sect managed to offer such a battleship for sale to Gu Hang, rather than allocating it to their own domain's defense, was already a show of great consideration.

This favor wasn't meant for the Alliance; after all, there was no rapport between the two sides. It was purely thanks to the influence of the Central Empire.

The funds came from the Central Empire, and the purchasing authority also stemmed from there.

Having Holy Terra as a powerful backer brought undeniable advantages.

That worked perfectly for him.

Gu Hang had always been a loyal subject of the Empire!

In conclusion, without the Imperial Tax's localized reallocation, without the Empire's external economic support, the Alliance's war machine could never have maintained such full-throttle operations as it did now.

But this arrangement wasn't sustainable in the long term.

One must rely on their own strength.

After much deliberation, Gu Hang decided to hold off on experimenting with the lottery function for now.

Out of the remaining ten million Gift Points, he poured almost all of it into boosting productivity.

This was primarily achieved through two methods.

First, he funded the construction of numerous academy buildings, concentrated in areas like Dragonhawk and even the Meng River Star System.

While he exchanged some Comprehensive Academies, Loyal Heir Academies, and Military Academies, the majority were Technical Academies.

By enhancing the education and training efficiency in this regard, the number of engineers and skilled technical workers in the Alliance would increase significantly in the future.

The combined population of the two star systems exceeded tens of trillions. If professional skill levels across the workforce were meaningfully elevated, human resources could be fully tapped and utilized, leading to a considerable uplift in overall productivity.

The exchange cost for a single academy was 1,000 Gift Points.

Gu Hang exchanged a total of 3,000 academies.

For example, on Flying Wing Star, where there were already thousands of universities, he allocated Gift Points to directly enhance the role of 500 of these universities as an educational hub for the planet.

He also assigned 100 academies to Korolya and populated the densely-inhabited Nest Capital World, where such additions were highly warranted; Rage Owl Star received 100 as well, greatly boosting the supply of shipbuilding talent on the spot.

Other worlds received coverage too. Gu Hang wanted to ensure that the 774 worlds across the two star systems he regarded as his territory each had at least one academy. On those with larger populations or more industrial activity, he allocated even more.

This consumed three million Gift Points.

The remaining nine million Gift Points were entirely invested in exchanges for factories.

Whether civilian or military factories, when overlaid onto existing facilities, these new ones served to boost operational efficiency significantly—a more straightforward yet highly effective approach.

Gu Hang exchanged for 50,000 factories, nearly covering every planet and industry sector in the region.

Food processing, materials handling, construction, consumer goods production, civilian engineering machinery—none of these civilian sectors could be neglected. Even from a purely military standpoint, they formed the backbone of the war industry.

But much of the investment was focused on the arms industry.

Especially the production of various components related to shipbuilding, like the shipyard assembly plants in starports. For those, spending 100 Gift Points on Level 1 factories simply wouldn’t suffice.

Gu Hang opted for Level 5 factories directly!

The cost of factory upgrades increased by one decimal place with each level of advancement.

However, Level 5 factories could nearly double operational efficiency.

Of course, this represented a dramatic improvement in equipment and personnel productivity but didn’t literally cut shipbuilding time in half. Instead, advantages manifested in the number of ships being built simultaneously, reduced resource and energy consumption, and fewer personnel required.

Achieving a 50% increase in shipbuilding speed through resource and manpower savings alone was already a tremendous benefit.

At 1 million Gift Points per factory, Gu Hang didn't hesitate to allocate them to the two major shipbuilding hubs on Rage Owl Star and Flying Wing Star.

In addition, Gu Hang committed 100,000 Gift Points to equip Level 4 factories for the Yunluo shipbuilding facility and the Gelangya shipyard in the Meng River Star Domain.

Blueprints for the Holy Grail-class vessels were distributed to these sites as well. Even if the Alliance had to scrape resources painfully, establishing production lines for two more Holy Grail-class battleships at these sites was non-negotiable.

Thus, from military to economic investments, Gu Hang's 30 million Gift Points, freshly acquired and barely warmed, had been entirely spent down to the last point.

Chapter 586, The Supreme Mother

In the Spiderweb Domain, within the Millennium Star Domain, aboard the flagship of the Iron Armor Battle Group—the "Iron Body"—Humphrey Paolo was engaged in a discussion with Great Sage Valuk, who was far away in the Alfonso Star Domain.

"Has Alfonso erupted into chaos already?"

Valuk's mechanical-like face bore no trace of emotion: "Essentially true. After the fleet led by Dubo was annihilated in the Proudclaw Cosmos, the Imperial Faction within the sect has begun to regain the upper hand. They are intensely questioning the sect's strategy for entering the war, blaming the fleet's destruction on the decision to engage in conflict, and increasingly doubting the sect's ongoing collaboration with the Iron Armor Battle Group."

To others, this might seem like pressure being exerted.

But Paul did not interpret it that way.

His expression remained unchanged, and he didn't doubt Valuk's position for even a moment.

He simply sighed and remarked, "I have never underestimated the Alliance. When Erso was still alive, I urged him not to act recklessly and emphasized the need to take the Alliance seriously. He didn't fully heed my advice, which ultimately led to his untimely demise in the South."

"I tried to win them over. Even if they were unwilling to stand with us, I hoped to at least keep them neutral. Unfortunately, they also rejected my overtures; my bargaining chips were too insufficient."

"I have been prepared for years to wage war against the Alliance. That's why I instructed Politos to deploy the entirety of Furyflame, along with an additional New Dawn Torch, to hold off the Alliance's southern advance."

"Yet their capabilities have surpassed even my expectations. Just a few years ago, they were merely brimming with potential. But within such a short time, they've not only fulfilled that potential but become even stronger than I had anticipated."

"Politos is a highly capable individual, yet he couldn't meet my expectations. It's not his fault. Even when I sought your aid and Sage Dubo personally commanded the fleet, it led to an even larger failure. I genuinely couldn't have foreseen that your intervention, which I had planned as one of my trump cards, would falter. The Alfonso Fleet was originally a force powerful enough to change the tide of the entire war."

"The Alliance not only forced that trump card into play, compelling me to deploy you prematurely, but they also destroyed your fleet in the South…"

"I'm furious, even somewhat afraid. At times, I can't help but wonder: was our initial strategy misguided? Should we have struck southward? Doing so might not have shaken the Empire to its core, but we could've eliminated a major adversary before they grew this strong, sparing us the current predicament."

Great Sage Valuk, who had been listening silently, calmly responded, "That's unrealistic. If you had pursued that path, the situation might be even worse now."

Humphrey Paolo fell silent for a moment, then sighed: “Indeed, as you say, the outcome could very well have been worse. I couldn’t abandon the core region, which at the time was still unstable, to charge southward. When the time came to choose a primary theater of engagement, had I opted for the South, the Alliance might have been crippled, never realizing their wartime potential. Yet they could’ve trapped me amid the ruins. At that point, perhaps there would’ve been the Princess to hold the North, but the West… we would’ve been torn apart by that Phoenix.”

Valuk said, “Agreed. We’ve discussed this topic before; there’s no need to revisit it. Dwelling on the Alliance’s strength is futile. What we need are strategies to counter and resolve their threat, or at the very least stabilize the southern front.”

“As you mentioned, I think I need to speak with the Princess again.”

Valuk advised, “Speaking with the Princess may not suffice. You might need to have this conversation with the Empress.”

Now, it was Paul’s turn to hesitate.

“If that’s the case… things might escalate beyond the point of no return. We might not be fully prepared yet…”

“You must make this decision, Paul.” Valuk’s voice remained devoid of sentiment. “There’s no longer room for deliberation. This matter shouldn’t hinge on your judgment. Seek the Empress’s will; allow Her to decide. We need only follow.”

Humphrey Paolo waved his hand, saying, “Let me think… let me think further.”

As he spoke, his pupils began to glow faintly purple, and his skin abruptly revealed a web of purple veins before they quickly receded, leaving only the sharp teeth visible as his mouth opened and closed.

Valuk issued a final warning: “Hasten, quickly. While you deliberate, so does our enemy prepare, and the Empress’s patience wanes. Moreover, the Imperial Faction within Alfonso, already boiling over after Dubo’s defeat, is teetering on the brink. I will do my utmost to maintain order, but no one can guarantee what events might unfold in the Alfonso Star Domain.”

“Understood.”

After cutting off communication, Humphrey Paolo stood motionless for a long time.

Eventually, he appeared to have made some kind of decision.

Sealing himself off from everyone, he sat alone in the throne hall of the warship. He retrieved an indescribable object—a palm-sized piece of flesh that ceaselessly throbbed, seemingly revealing the flow of purple blood within.

He devoured it in one gulp. Moments later, purple light radiated intensely from his eyes.

In an instant, he appeared to connect with some supreme will.

A voice emerged—a voice so lofty and awe-inspiring as to compel submission, yet so tender and motherly as to soothe the soul.

In that moment, Humphrey Paolo surrendered all his inner struggles and resistance, adopting an expression of utmost reverence, humility, and fervor as he communicated with this will at the level of high-energy information.

Perhaps they exchanged countless thoughts, yet the entire process transpired in mere moments.

When Humphrey Paolo opened his eyes once more, he seemed drained of most of his strength, staggering backward several steps before collapsing to his knees.

Gasping heavily, Paul felt faint and nauseous.

He forcibly suppressed the sensation.

Opening his eyes again and standing tall once more, he reverted to being the Iron Legion Commander—the ambitious tyrant and pivotal figure who had sparked massive rebellion across the Imperial's Eastern Frontier.

Resuming his seat on the throne, Paul calmly issued one directive after another.

Before long, his forces were mobilized.

The urgency unsettled many subordinates, leaving them in suspense about what was unfolding.

But Paul himself knew.

The Supreme Mother had mercifully granted his request, bestowing upon him one final chance.

He had to seize it.

Chapter 587, Phoenix Defeated

Holy Terra, Imperial Palace District.

An important meeting was underway.

The thirteen High Lords had gathered to discuss the ongoing eastern war.

The news of Gu Hang's victory on the Southern Line had already reached Holy Terra.

The high-ranking officials present experienced a significant emotional rollercoaster.

Although everyone was aware that the Alfonso Sect, situated next to the Princess Star Domain, maintained exceptionally strong ties with the Iron Armor Battle Group. During this war, the Alfonso Sect, a Mechanical Sect spanning an entire Star Domain, undoubtedly provided powerful support behind the

Iron Armor Group. The Iron Armor's ability to secure and sustain such a vast number of warships, combined with their well-equipped armies, was inseparable from the backing of the Alfonso Sect.

On the battlefield, Imperial soldiers even discovered equipment from the Alfonso Sect, hurriedly transported and unmarked, possibly due to time constraints.

This was a known adversary to everyone.

Yet, for political reasons, no one wished to force the Alfonso Sect into direct confrontation.

If they want to supply equipment, let them; the lords would rather lower their heads and play ostrich than provoke the Alfonso Sect into direct intervention.

But they intervened anyway.

When the news first reached Holy Terra, there was considerable panic.

While some remained clear-headed, there were also the less rational ones, blaming the Alliance for advancing too aggressively and inadvertently dragging the Alfonso Sect into the fray.

Interestingly, the individuals making such accusations might very well overlap significantly with those who had earlier demanded the Alliance push forward and criticized the Alliance for cowardice.

Even among those clear-headed enough to recognize that the Alfonso Sect's involvement was inevitable—only a matter of time—and that earlier was better than later, and that it was preferable for them to head south rather than west or north, pessimism was prevalent.

They acknowledged the achievements of the Alliance. Without them, if the Alfonso Fleet had suddenly appeared on the Western Front, the front led by the Phoenix Legion under Su Lie would likely have collapsed instantly.

From this perspective, the Alliance's rapid advance in the Proudclaw Cosmos, aggressively targeting both the Furyflame and New Torch Legions, had created a significant strategic advantage for the Imperial side.

However, acknowledging the Alliance's contributions did not prevent anyone from doubting their prospects.

The reason? The enemies the Alliance faced were overwhelmingly powerful. According to intelligence from the front lines, the strength of the Alfonso Fleet was nothing short of terrifying.

The War Ark, Emperor-class Battleships… these were weapons of mass destruction. Even if Terran Central deployed an entire fleet at full capacity to fight in the eastern frontier, barring the need to retain adequate defensive forces for the capital, they probably still couldn't assemble a fleet to match that power.

Mars would certainly never agree to deploy a single War Ark to the eastern warfront. And after the Solar Fleet's recent strong support for the Southern Solaria campaign, it could not even spare a single Emperor-class Battleship or two Retribution-class ships for the battle.

How could the Alliance possibly contend with such a situation?

One of the thirteen High Lords of Terra, the Grand Marshal of the Imperial Navy, convened his Admiralty staff to assess the war situation. Their pessimistic conclusion was that the Alliance's best option was a full strategic retreat, utilizing a layered defense, and, if necessary, abandoning the entire Proudclaw Cosmos and even the Menghe Star Domain. Trading space for time and adapting to future changes was the strategy they favored.

Perhaps, if they could hold out long enough, the Empire could muster some additional reinforcements from elsewhere to assist the southern front.

The Imperial Navy's Grand Marshal even collaborated with the Marshal of the Star Realm Army to draft a comprehensive cross-service strategic plan for ground and naval operations alike, intended to serve as the guiding principle for the Southern War. This plan was sent to the Alliance.

Although merely a “recommendation,” such “suggestions” from Holy Terra were essentially equivalent to orders or demands. Commanders on the front lines rarely deviated from these directives.

Otherwise, disregarding the superior will of Terra meant that, in the event of defeat, the line commander would bear full responsibility. In fact, they might even be removed before the war was lost.

Of course, Gu Hang was an exception. The so-called Southern War Zone, despite receiving substantial support from the Empire, primarily in resources and funding, consisted mainly of a few million Star Realm Army troops and a few dozen small- to mid-scale warships. These ships included scarcely any of the Luna-class; most were Escort Ships, Patrol Ships, or even armed merchant vessels. While the money sent was significant, it had a limited impact in such a high-stakes theater of war.

In essence, the Southern War Zone was the Alliance fighting largely on its own.

Thus, revoking Gu Hang’s command was not feasible.

Nonetheless, they strongly urged Marshal Gu to follow their strategic guidelines for the conflict.

Victory was unlikely, but at least it might forestall defeat.

However, the Alliance paid their advice no heed.

Nor did they disclose their intentions to Holy Terra. The Bowang Sea Battle, where the Alliance ambushed the Alfonso Fleet, was planned in utmost secrecy—Gu Hang was certainly not going to share his operational plans with Terra, lest they risk a leak that might jeopardize the mission.

Still, the Alliance’s consistent lack of communication, coupled with even perfunctory responses, left the two Grand Marshals on Holy Terra greatly dissatisfied.

They grew increasingly anxious, fearing the Alliance might act recklessly, relentlessly pressing them for a clear war strategy.

The “ambassador” stationed on behalf of the Alliance in Holy Terra responded with a deferential but ultimately evasive attitude: Marshal Gu was fully prepared; Marshal Gu knew how to fight this battle; rest assured, their leaders’ concerns would be passed on in due course…

Then, the results of the Bowang Sea Battle were announced.

Their dissatisfaction vanished in an instant once the news was confirmed.

Only shock, disbelief, and sheer ecstasy remained.

The shock and disbelief came from the fact that they simply could not comprehend how the Alliance had achieved such a decisive victory. The power disparity between the two sides wasn’t a matter of “4 versus 6” or “3 versus 7”—it was an outright two-tier difference, incomparable on the same scale!

How could this result in victory?

How did they manage to win?

And this wasn’t just a minor victory or forcing the enemy to retreat—it was an indisputable, annihilating triumph!

It was outright inconceivable!

The ecstasy stemmed from the fact that, with the annihilation of the Alfonso Fleet, the situation suddenly opened wide!

At present, the focus of their discussions was on the coordinated strategy for the North, West, and South Lines. If they could establish and enhance communication and collaboration between these fronts, they could exert even greater pressure on the Iron Armor, propelling them further toward victory.

At that moment, the Supreme Council’s doorbell rang.

A guard entered to report that His Excellency Galaraldo, the Military Affairs Department Chief, requested an urgent audience.

Galaraldo was not a Grand High Lord and was thus unauthorized to participate in the Supreme Council's highest-level meetings.

Still, given the claim of an urgent matter, after some deliberation, they allowed him to enter and report.

The grand and imposing doors of the council chamber swung open as Galaraldo strode inside, exuding an air as though he belonged there by right.

Holding aloft a parchment, he shouted:

"Urgent report from the eastern frontier's western front! Phoenix defeated; our frontlines have collapsed!"

Chapter 588, Western Front Collapse

Galaraldo's declaration in the sacred Supreme Council hall stunned everyone.

The High Lords sat in their seats, their expressions varied. Some were solemn, some clenched their teeth, some leaned forward uncontrollably…

"Explain carefully, I need to know the details." The question came from the Imperial Prime Minister—Zebert.

Regardless of his mood, Galaraldo's expression was at least serious.

He recounted the intelligence in its entirety.

Among the three battlegrounds of the Iron Armor War, if ranked by importance, the order would undoubtedly be West, North, South.

The sudden involvement of the Alfonso Fleet in the war caused the strategic importance of the Southern Front to surge abruptly.

But even so, it at most equaled the significance of the Northern Front.

Both of these fronts still paled in comparison to the Western Front.

As for the Southern Line alliance, let's set that aside for now. The Northern Line appears to be bustling with activity—with the two fledgling battle groups Infinite and Bat, and the Black Cross Legion also participating. Other battle groups sent forces as well. After being initially obstructed by the Insect Race, help arrived from the Extraplanar Tribunal, with the special battle group Silver Watch joining the fray…

However, in reality, the most critical pillars—Infinite and Bat—each sent only one company, totaling just two hundred troops. The Black Cross Legion contributed more forces—a complete flotilla led by Marshal Mathieu Leroi, consisting of a thousand Black Cross warriors forming the backbone of the defense.

Still, the combined total was only about 1,200.

Other battle groups, including Silver Watch, contributed a combined force of just five hundred interstellar warriors. No one committed their entire strength—they merely sent reinforcements.

Beyond deploying Silver Watch, the Extraplanar Tribunal provided only minimal numbers. After all, they had numerous other alien threats to address.

In practice, the main carrier of conventional Imperial Navy and Imperial Star Realm Army forces still relied on the support behind the Northern Line: the Star Devouring Cosmos.

A single Cosmic Domain's strength—is it sufficient?

Not quite.

The Star Devouring Cosmos is one of the two richest and most expansive Cosmic Domains in the Imperial North Border. However, like every other Domain, they also grapple with their own internal issues. Within the Star Devouring Cosmos exists a rebel force spanning two Star Domains, unresolved for a long time. This faction, worshiping chaos, indulges in wanton pleasure while possessing a uniquely enticing influence that has continually vexed the Space Domain Government. Several large-scale anti-rebellion campaigns have not only failed to resolve the issue but have led to units succumbing to corruption and defecting. Uprisings frequently emerge across nearby worlds as well.

If it weren't for the Iron Armor offensive already reaching the neighboring Spiderweb Domain, located directly north of the Star Devouring Cosmos, they wouldn't have been providing such intensified troop, material, and fleet support to descend southward into the conflict.

But even then, constrained by internal turmoil, they still cannot fully commit to descending south en masse for the war effort.

Unless fledgling groups like Infinite and Bat dedicate greater determination and send more manpower, or the Black Cross Legion summons another flotilla… Otherwise, there's little hope of significant change on the Northern Line battlefield.

In contrast, the Western Front is entirely different.

Phoenix has summoned several sub-groups to join the war; and with incremental reinforcements, the core force of this group has reached a total of seven hundred warriors.

Even Black Feather and Devil Bird, two other battle groups, have mobilized their full forces.

Although not at full strength, together they amount to sixteen hundred troops.

Adding the support from a total of seven sub-groups, each contributing two to four companies, the forces of interstellar warriors engaged on the Western Front exceed 4,500.

Crucially, the Heretic Tribunal, one of the three major tribunals, is the angriest of all. They have been steadily reinforcing, deploying at least 20,000 Battle Nuns from the Blood Rose order to the battlefield; in addition, they've brought allied fleets and Battle Nuns from National Church congregations.

Altogether, the Battle Nuns of various convents exceed 30,000 in number.

Adding elite Tribunal Stormtroopers and Judges into the mix, the Heretic Tribunal has committed significant forces to subdue what is potentially the Empire's largest internal rebellion in nearly a millennium.

In reality, the core forces of the Iron Armor Battle Group are also concentrated in the West, fully countering the joint offensive from Phoenix and the Heretic Tribunal on the Western Front.

Not only countering but even pushing back.

The Western Front is indeed Iron Armor's primary line of assault.

Moreover, Phoenix's leader, Su Lie, has steadily increased his forces over time; they didn't start with this many troops.

At one point, the Empire even suffered the humiliation of being pushed out from Spiderweb Domain by Iron Armor forces, retreating all the way to Magrey Cosmic Domain.

Only after reinforcements from various fronts arrived and the Alliance launched a southern offensive did Phoenix regain its footing and begin to counterattack.

Recently, Phoenix has successfully fought its way back into the Spiderweb Domain.

Though progress is slow, it's steady and calculated.

This favorable situation is what led the venerable Lords of Holy Terra to consider strategies for connecting the three fronts, enabling mutual aid, coordinated operations, or even shifting manpower to alter the primary offensive direction…

But now, Phoenix has collapsed.

The collapse itself wasn't overly complicated.

The opposing Iron Armor forces suddenly concentrated their strength and launched a ferocious assault.

In a naval battle, over twenty massive warships engaged Su Lie's fleet in an intense clash.

Su Lie had no intention of a decisive engagement and, recognizing the overwhelming aggression of the enemy, opted for a strategy of fighting a retreating battle, focusing on delay and dispatching smaller units to disrupt Iron Armor's rear and flanks.

Such a concentrated deployment of forces by Iron Armor inevitably meant they were diverting strength from other areas.

This strategy theoretically had the potential to unravel Iron Armor's ferocious offensive.

However, this time things turned out differently.

Iron Armor brought in the Bedrock Shield and launched particularly brutal boarding actions.

Additionally, among the enemy ranks appeared some very… peculiar adversaries.

These individuals seemed to be ordinary Mortal Army troops accompanying interstellar warriors in boarding actions. Yet their physical capabilities far exceeded those of regular mortals, and they looked distinctly different from normal humans.

Precisely how they differed remains unknown due to the lack of further intelligence.

Following the battle, Phoenix's flagship, the "Phoenix Crown Feathers" Queen of Glory battleship, vanished.

The loss of this ship—a vessel no longer within humanity's capacity to construct, personally designed by The Emperor and painstakingly crafted by Mars—led directly to the collapse of the Western Front.

Numerous ships were destroyed, survivors scattered and fled; trailing behind, the transport fleets were forced to hastily unload troops and supplies onto planetary surfaces before making a desperate escape…

After the brutal engagement, with intelligence from the frontlines scarce, the enemy's losses remain hard to estimate.

However, they are presumably significant.

In their retreat to regroup, the Imperial forces lost Battle Group Leader Su Lie and the Queen of Glory battleship. The remaining Phoenix warriors numbered just two hundred, now commanded by a company leader; other battle groups combined probably still have around a thousand soldiers regrouped.

The Battle Nuns suffered even greater losses, with over 10,000 killed or missing. Of the remaining 20,000, only 10,000 have regrouped at the rear lines. The remaining Battle Nuns and an estimated 1,000 interstellar warriors are dispersed across planetary surfaces with uncertain futures.

Chapter 589, I Want to Impeach

The news brought by Galaraldo plunged the entire council chamber into silence.

The high-ranking lords remained silent.

They were all deep in thought.

The collapse of the Western front and the disappearance of the Phoenix along with Battle Group Leader Su Lie was undoubtedly a massive shock. However, the High Lords quickly recovered from their initial astonishment.

What they needed to contemplate now was what the Empire should do next.

The impact of the Western front's collapse was immense.

It was the primary battlefield among the three fronts. Before Galaraldo arrived to report on the Western front's situation, the meeting had been discussing how to break through the three fronts and focus the attack on Ironclad.

Well, there's no need to discuss that anymore.

The primary assault force is gone!

Now, the real question is: what should be done after the Phoenix is gone and the Western front has collapsed?

The extent of Ironclad's losses is unknown at this point, and current assessments suggest they are considerable. However, without more concrete data, it's impossible to ascertain whether Ironclad still retains offensive capabilities.

Preparing for the worst, assuming Ironclad still has the ability to launch attacks, the Western front's collapse will lead to a dire situation.

If Ironclad pushes further westward, the entire Magrey Cosmic Domain will be left completely exposed. If they shift their focus north or south—heading south might be a slightly better scenario, as the Alliance may have a chance at repelling the enemy. However, if they head north to merge with the Void Insect Species, Marshal Leroux won't be able to hold them and will have no choice but to retreat.

Previously, people didn't take this possibility too seriously. Could the Void Insect Species, known for being poor candidates for negotiation, really merge forces that easily?

But snippets of information from the Western front's collapse have sparked speculation among the council, even though none dare to openly state it.

Could it be that Ironclad has aligned itself with the Insect Race?

The idea seems preposterous. What benefit could possibly come from siding with the Insect Race? The Insect Race and Chaos Traitors aren't the same. Those who pledge allegiance to Chaos may become warped and corrupted, but they might find joy in their transformation, gaining power and even ascending to higher positions. The Empire's sealed archives contain records of interstellar warriors and mortals rising to the status of Demon Leaders. Researchers term this phenomenon "Demonic Ascension," where once-great human heroes fall and transform into "Demon Princes."

From this perspective, pledging allegiance to Chaos, though depraved and grotesque, at least offers "room for advancement."

As for the Insect Race? What "room for advancement" could they offer? The Insect Race merely devours everything!

Pledging allegiance to them would only lead to being consumed, wouldn't it?

Who would willingly do that? …Wait, actually—

In this world, things like that do exist.

Corrupted individuals by the Insect Race are often the result of drifting insect larvae parasitizing mortals, creating new species. These individuals tend to hide within human society, taking forms like religious cults or underground gangs entrenched in the lower Nest Capitals and slums. They spread their "infection" everywhere, whether through physical parasitism by insect larvae or through ideological manipulation, gradually growing until they are capable of overthrowing governments—or at least sparking major unrest.

When their activities on a planet grow increasingly rampant, one day, an unstoppable army of the Insect Race will descend upon that world and devour it entirely.

From this perspective, Ironclad appears to fit this pattern.

Yet many mysteries remain unsolved.

Past records don't mention interstellar warriors being infected.

If Ironclad's ruling class is truly infected, wouldn't these ravenous creatures—governed purely by their primal instinct to consume—be unable to resist gorging themselves?

Currently, they are essentially in control of an entire Cosmos Domain!

After some contemplation, people couldn't help but speak up.

They must pay greater attention to the developments in the eastern territories.

Some proposed it was time to form an Expeditionary Force departing from the Sun Zhou Domain, utilizing the Empire's core might to suppress the rebellion before it worsens further; others suggested that the Tribunal and Assassin Court needed to get to work—not necessarily to assassinate Humphrey Paolo, but at the very least to gather intelligence and uncover what truly transpired in the Princess Star Domain.

During the discussion, someone noticed that Galaraldo remained present.

Minister of Justice Ou Juren spoke curtly, "Please have Prime Minister Galaraldo leave; the Supreme Council session must continue."

His tone was lofty, even tinged with a hint of disdain.

They had once been allies, part of the same political faction. Ou Juren had even been Galaraldo's superior during the latter's early days, when Galaraldo fled to Holy Terra and "sold out" his old colleagues within the Apostle of War faction—Ou Juren had been the one who received him.

It was Ou Juren who had brought him into his faction, helped him establish his footing, and allowed him to grow his wings.

But once the wings were sturdy enough, they were bound to fly away.

Could Galaraldo ever settle for mediocrity?

Clearly not.

Especially since he had a “close brother” stationed on the Southern Front.

When the Alliance initially refrained from entering the war, it was Galaraldo who shielded Gu Hang from pressure in Holy Terra. For this, he often argued with Ou Juren.

At first, these were mere attempts to deflect and stall. But when stalling was no longer possible, heated disputes erupted, sparking an increasingly apparent split within their faction.

Galaraldo was no slacker. To Ou Juren’s surprise—who had always assumed he wielded final control over his subordinates—many chose to side with Galaraldo after the fallout.

A Prime Minister of Military Affairs, even without a Supreme Council seat, remains one of the top officials in the Central Empire and has the clout to gather a cohort of marginalized and overlooked members within his political faction and unite them.

Ou Juren had initially believed that, after Galaraldo’s “betrayal,” he could easily oust him from his position as Prime Minister of Military Affairs.

After all, in his view, Galaraldo’s rise had been entirely dependent on him. Surely, he could just as easily bring him down.

Yet, with the Alliance launching proactive offensives and achieving stunning victories in the Proudclaw Cosmos Domain, Ou Juren soon realized that Galaraldo would not be easy to deal with.

In the Supreme Council, Ou Juren's attacks on Galaraldo unexpectedly drew criticism from Prime Minister Qi Bodu.

This jolted Ou Juren into understanding that he could not remove Galaraldo.

On one hand, battlefield victories under Gu Hang's command bolstered Galaraldo's prestige as Prime Minister of Military Affairs; on the other hand, he was now clinging to the Prime Minister's favor—a connection far stronger and more influential than Ou Juren himself.

Their relationship had officially soured.

Thus it was only natural for Ou Juren, laced with contempt, to demand Galaraldo's departure now.

Moreover, Ou Juren wasn't entirely wrong.

Galaraldo did lack the authority to participate in Supreme Council deliberations.

But Galaraldo remained unfazed, smiling as he met Ou Juren's gaze.

As expected, someone spoke up.

"Let the Prime Minister of Military Affairs stay. The final results of our discussion will need to be communicated to him for execution, so there's no need for unnecessary repetition."

"Thank you for your generosity, Prime Minister." Before Ou Juren could respond, Galaraldo bowed slightly and expressed his gratitude.

Then, lifting his head, he smiled and spoke, “Incidentally, I do have one matter I wish to raise in this assembly.”

“I intend to impeach Minister of Justice Ou Juren. I possess evidence of Minister Ou Juren’s misconduct and corruption, and I solemnly accuse him of being responsible for the collapse of the Western front!”

Chapter 590, Please Call Me Your Excellency, the High Lord

Ou Juren’s face turned extremely grim.

“What nonsense are you spouting? This is no place for your words! Guards! Throw him out!”

Inside the conference hall stood loyal Secret Guards. According to the rules, they were supposed to obey the High Lords. Prime Minister Ou Juren belonged to the High Lords, and if he ordered the removal of a non-High Lord—even if that person was the Prime Minister of the Military Affairs Department—their compliance was expected.

But… there wasn’t just one High Lord present.

The guards exchanged glances, none willing to act first.

They were somewhat conflicted, their eyes drifting toward the seats of the High Lords.

This wasn’t the first time Ou Juren had tried to eject Galaraldo. Previously, Ou Juren had demanded Galaraldo leave, but wasn’t it the Prime Minister who had interjected to let him stay?

Maybe this was the Prime Minister’s position again?

As for the internal power struggles between the High Lords, we mere guards best not meddle.

Better to wait until the top-tier figures offer clear instructions, then act. As for who specifically to toss out when the time comes, that would depend on the orders then. These guards, with years of

experience, deeply understood one rule: in the Empire's highest chamber of authority, any kind of situation could change in the blink of an eye. Don't draw conclusions prematurely.

At the very least, for guards like them, understanding the dynamics was impossible. Waiting for cues was their best course.

For now, only Ou Juren had spoken; the guards decided to hesitate for about a dozen seconds.

If no one else spoke during that time, they would assume everyone tacitly agreed with Prime Minister Ou Juren's stance, and then they would act.

Ou Juren understood the nuances as well; he took deep, heavy breaths and waited.

Galaraldo, however, didn't hesitate.

Ten seconds was plenty of time to say a great deal.

Calling out Ou Juren's "violations of laws and protocols" didn't hold much weight. The High Lords wouldn't care about such trivialities.

Those "violations of laws and protocols" would serve as evidence for public exposure when Ou Juren steps down someday, but they wouldn't be the actual reason for his downfall.

If one wanted to speak, they had to bring up something truly explosive—something that impacted all, or at least the majority, of High Lords' interests; furthermore, they had to demonstrate their own value. Galaraldo needed to show the High Lords that overthrowing Ou Juren required no effort on their part—he would handle everything if they simply lent their support.

Of course, there had to be benefits involved.

Galaraldo cleared his throat and said, "My colleagues in the Military Affairs Department and I have reached an agreement and presented suggestions regarding the Western front. A Solar Fleet, and a

Mars Fleet, were supposed to depart, but Prime Minister Ou Juren's orders obstructed their deployment…"

As he spoke, Galaraldo could already hear footsteps behind him.

The guards were approaching.

At that very moment, Prime Minister Qi Bodu spoke up: "Let him finish. As High Lords, we must be able to endure all forms of scrutiny."

The guards came to a halt.

Now, among the speaking High Lords, the count stood at a tie: one versus one. And the one advocating not to drag Galaraldo away was none other than the Prime Minister.

Under such circumstances, rash action was no longer an option.

The guards breathed a sigh of relief—it was now up to the power players to argue out a resolution.

Galaraldo, too, felt a wave of reassurance.

His seemingly straightforward words actually revealed a significant matter: the Military Affairs Department had been fully consolidated under his control. He was no longer the puppet placed there several years ago.

For this, Gu Hang's victories deserved recognition. Without them, Galaraldo wouldn't have been able to establish his credibility.

Conversely, Ou Juren's face grew even darker.

At this point, he could basically confirm that Galaraldo wasn't suddenly betraying him in this meeting to take him down, but rather that this was orchestrated with Prime Minister Qi Bodu's involvement.

Qi Bodu wants me gone?

Why? Do we have some kind of enmity?

Or has Galaraldo made him some kind of promise, agreeing to align with the Prime Minister afterward?

The Prime Minister wants greater centralization of authority, to make the Supreme Council voice only his own? If Galaraldo aligns with him and, as Prime Minister of Military Affairs, replaces me as a High Lord, then combined with the Department of Taxation and Administration seats, along with Qi Bodu's own—that makes four seats. The Great Mentor of the Assassin Court, Clement, came into power years ago with contributions from both my faction and the Prime Minister's. Including him, that makes five.

Five seats out of thirteen High Lords. It undoubtedly constitutes the strongest faction.

How would the other High Lords react?

They wouldn't agree to this, would they? Who could be persuaded?

In a fleeting moment, Ou Juren's mind raced with countless thoughts.

He was overwhelmed with ideas and analyses, his mind slightly muddled, rendering him momentarily speechless. He knew he couldn't speak recklessly; a single misspoken word could cost him dearly.

But Galaraldo wasn't about to stay silent.

On the contrary, he seemed emboldened by encouragement, picking up speed as he continued:

“This is a document bearing the signatures of the Legal Department’s Deputy Prime Minister, the Second Secretary-General, the Military Affairs Department’s Deputy Prime Minister, the First Secretary-General, the Department of Taxation’s Second Secretary-General…” He rattled off multiple positions as he produced a long scroll, “…a document signed by numerous individuals, detailing the full account of this matter.”

“Fleet reorganization, operational progress, the Military Affairs Department’s coordination efforts—all undertaken to execute the Supreme Council’s decision and bolster the Western front campaign. According to our estimates, the Solar Fleet could mobilize at least three Retribution-class Battleships; Mars is prepared to deploy over ten Dragon-Snake Class Battleship Cruisers. This combined force could have coordinated with a Legal Department fleet to reinforce the Western front.”

Chapter 590, Please Call Me His Excellency High Lord_2

“If executed, with elite reinforcements on the western battlefield, Battle Group Leader Su Lie likely wouldn’t have lost the decisive battle.”

“However, Prime Minister Ou Juren’s delays have caused the fleet to still be unable to depart.”

“If anyone on Holy Terra must bear responsibility for this failure, it has to be Ou Juren!”

“Nonsense!” Ou Juren growled, knowing he could no longer remain silent. He had to defend himself: “Preparing the fleet isn’t as simple as you think! The Navy, Mars, and the Legal Department—three entirely independent forces—require an immense amount of coordination! Is deploying the fleet all that’s needed? The accompanying forces are equally crucial, yet negotiations with the Star Realm Army remain incomplete, and the Legal Department hasn’t been able to gather sufficient accompanying units. Not to mention, the commander of the United Fleet has yet to be confirmed…”

Mid-defense, he abruptly stopped speaking.

Cold sweat dripped down his forehead.

Was he really defending himself?

Of course he was.

Providing a support fleet and reinforcing the western front was a decision discussed in the Supreme Council; who wouldn't execute it?

But matters like troop assembly, hierarchical relations, determining who contributes the most, and who will command the fleet—aren't these critical issues? Bringing together forces from diverse origins meant facing various problems, just as Ou Juren himself had mentioned.

This wasn't his fault.

Or at least, not entirely his fault.

Yet, such a defense was inappropriate at this moment.

The current Supreme Council had three others present: two Grand Marshals from the Imperial Navy and Star Realm Army, and the Mars Representative.

When combining three fleets and requiring accompanying forces from the Star Realm Army, conflicts and disputes were all but inevitable.

To be fair, the slow troop assembly and delayed departure meant that despite Su Lie's urgent, relentless calls for aid, the reinforcements failed to arrive in time. The primary responsibility likely lay with the Imperial system itself; secondarily, it was the four sides—Navy, Legal Department, Mars, and Star Realm Army—mutually hindering and blaming each other, with their accountability roughly equal.

And frankly, didn't the Military Affairs Department, tasked with integrating these forces, bear any responsibility?

Everyone held some blame.

But should this really be said now?

Shifting blame might seem acceptable for now, but pushing it onto two opposing factions would create major problems.

The Prime Minister's intent to oust him meant Ou Juren would need to rely on those High Lords not aligned with the Prime Minister to stand up for him. What he should have done was stoke their apprehensions toward the Prime Minister rather than trying to absolve himself by throwing mud on the other two factions.

But the words had been spoken—what now?

He abruptly switched gears, intending to change his argument, but one of the rarely vocal High Lords finally spoke.

The speaker was Jean Rousseau, a Battle Group Champion from the Death Angel Battle Group, representing Grand Instructor E'er Ganglong and acting on his behalf in High Lord duties.

"Grand Instructor E'er Ganglong is deeply concerned about the western campaign. Battle Group Leader Su Lie's whereabouts and the fate of the Phoenix weigh heavily on all Battle Groups, regardless of their lineage. The sluggish response from the Central Empire caused what should have been swift reinforcements to fail in arriving on time, leading to the defeat of the Lord of the Phoenix. This is something no Battle Group can accept. Someone must take responsibility for this!"

Galaraldo's smile grew more radiant.

Jean Rousseau's remarks appeared to broadly assign blame, merely expressing dissatisfaction as a representative of the Interstellar Warriors and showing sympathy for the Phoenix's plight. Yet, in truth, they served as a masterful maneuver.

If someone had to bear responsibility—then who?

The Navy? The Star Realm Army? Mars?

That was obviously impossible; these three High Lords would never accept the blame. The overall discontent of the Interstellar Warriors might be exaggerated, but the fallout was inevitable. The Phoenix was a Battle Group of great renown and historical significance. Their plight due to delayed reinforcements was bound to infuriate those who learned of it.

No one wanted to be the target of the Interstellar Warriors' grievances.

Conveniently, wasn't there a ready scapegoat available in Prime Minister Ou Juren, a High Lord already under fire?

The Prime Minister aimed to bring him down; his faction faced serious internal issues—not just dealing with Galaraldo as a turncoat, but the fact that many signatures on the accusatory documents came from individuals originally aligned with Ou Juren.

Facing external attacks, internal discord, and the dissatisfaction of the Interstellar Warriors—combined with the Navy, Star Realm Army, and Mars deflecting responsibility—the factors added up to an overwhelmingly dire situation for Ou Juren.

The arguments and chaos at the meeting would not end easily. But once the Navy, Star Realm Army, and Mars Representative—the three High Lords—voiced statements like 'the slow reinforcements integration isn't our fault but due to other reasons,' the votes Ou Juren could secure were dangerously compromised.

He had no choice but to personally engage in verbal sparring with Galaraldo.

Prime Minister Zebert and his allies, the Taxation Minister and Administrative Minister, remained silent. Galaraldo, as their stand-in, wielded their backing to launch eloquent and aggressive attacks with the ferocity of a fighting rooster.

Both men were skilled orators. While Galaraldo spoke sharply, Ou Juren was no less adept.

But verbal equality only signified utter defeat for Ou Juren—a High Lord sparring with a non-High Lord in the Council Chamber demonstrated a significant lack of decorum and amplified his decline.

Ultimately, the meeting progressed to a vote.

The topic was the motion proposed by Interstellar Warriors representative Jean Rousseau: “Who should bear responsibility for the failed reinforcements?”

Although the extent of the penalty wasn’t specified, the implications were clear.

Galaraldo had neither voting rights nor observer privileges; he was escorted out of the room.

He left triumphantly, like a victorious rooster.

…

“Do you know what the final outcome was?”

“You definitely won,” Gu Hang asserted straightforwardly.

“Hahaha!” Galaraldo burst into laughter. “That’s right! I won! From now on, you should address me as ’High Lord Galaraldo!’”

“Salutations to High Lord Galaraldo!” Gu Hang obliged his friend.

Thirteen days had passed since that meeting.

The result was sealed then. The Supreme Council passed the motion with 7 votes in favor, 3 abstentions, and 3 against, holding Ou Juren accountable for the delays in the United Fleet’s deployment, which led to insufficient reinforcements. It was confirmed that Ou Juren, as Minister of Justice, delayed and pursued personal interests when mobilizing the Judicial Department Fleet and accompanying forces, causing the United Fleet’s failure to unite promptly.

No immediate decisions were made at the meeting, but subsequent outcomes were set in motion as mere formalities.

A series of scandals under Ou Juren's tenure surfaced, accumulating into damning evidence. Ou Juren attempted to resist but was soon subdued.

Through a series of political negotiations, Ou Juren conceded, opting for a dignified exit.

In a second Supreme Council vote, the results were 9 votes in favor, 4 abstentions, and 0 against, confirming Ou Juren's removal from his High Lord seat and his position as Minister of Justice. Ou Juren participated in the vote and abstained.

Subsequently, a third vote passed with 6 votes in favor, 3 abstentions, and 4 against, narrowly approving Galaraldo's elevation to High Lord through his appointment as Minister of Military Affairs.

Thus, the political faction once led by Ou Juren within the Central Empire collapsed.

The disjointed political influence was divided—half assimilated under Galaraldo as he joined Prime Minister Zebert's faction, and the remainder was fragmented among various parties.

After his confirmation, an elated Galaraldo immediately contacted his confidant, Gu Hang, via stellar communications to share the good news.