

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7451 Preparing For The Worst

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When she put it that way, Ves could not easily back away from this challenge.

He already had a history of defying conventional wisdom and realizing the impossible.

That said, he did not direct much attention to this line of thinking. He still needed to complete other mech design projects before he could think about developing an elven Woodsap mech that could resist its own counters.

The clandestine meeting soon came to an end. Calabast possessed a wellspring's worth of intelligence, but much of it was either unverified or trivial.

Ves did not need to know everything, especially now that Casella assumed leadership over the Larkinson Clan. The older he became, the more he came to appreciate the ability to delegate work to the people led and befriended over the span of many years. He trusted the ace commander to act appropriately on the intelligence collected by the Black Cats.

Before she left, Calabast left another warning behind.

"Do not underestimate the native aliens. The enemy cannon fodder that have been battering our frontlines are not representative of their true strength. Their core defenders exist on another level. Many major alien races have truly woken up at this point. While they have been sending their old and haphazardly upgraded warships out to die, they have also utilized their enormous industrial capacity to construct entirely new lines of modern phasefighters and warships. Their shipbuilders have incorporated many human-derived advancements into their hulls. Hyper technology and E-technology are no longer foreign to them. While their scientists are not as innovative as ours, their numbers are thousands if not millions times greater than ours. Their adaptation speed is uncommonly fast, especially because of the guidance provided by the cosmopolitans."

"I am already aware of that, Calabast. Do you have anything more specific to tell me about the threat we are about to confront?" Ves asked with an annoyed expression.

"In fact, I do, Ves. As you know, the native aliens are badly getting mauled by the mutated voribugs. For whatever reason, the Red Cabal has decided that they need to break the spine of red humanity first, so the major alien races have mobilized their elite warfleets to the Terran front. From the perspective of the alien leaders, instead of letting their best and brightest get consumed by an unending tide of cheaply produced space insects, it is better to utilize their potent strength to

achieve an ultimate breakthrough. Once they have breached the Terran lines, they hope to trigger a chain reaction that will ultimately drive red humanity back to Bridgehead One."

"That sounds like wishful thinking." Ves looked skeptical. "Many of those elite forces will get wiped out by the Light of Sol. Even if the native aliens manage to overwhelm the Terran defenders despite all of their losses, the Red Ocean Union won't stand by. There are still several more god pilots that can reinforce this flank, and there are also the war planets from the Cybernetic Empire to consider."

Calabast raised a finger. "Ah, but I have yet to mention the best part. There are signs that the Red Cabal is finally prepared to deploy a greater proportion of their 'native gods' to the frontlines. Not only will greater phase lords and phase whales become more prevalent, but their leaders may show up as well. You should understand that our entire task force has no chance of defeating a single ancient phase whale."

That caused Ves to grimace. She was unfortunately correct in that. Ancient phase whales not possessed bodies at least as large as moons, but also possessed a large collection of powerful and highly developed phasewater organs!

Even if they still possessed shortcomings in comparison to god pilots, that did not provide any relief to forces that lacked the protection of the latter!

An ancient phase whale possessed the ability to rapidly traverse across space. The True God-level creature could also instantly teleport from one side of a star system to another, or completely trap an entire human fleet in an invisible space cage.

In short, if the combined fleet of Larkinsons and other forces encountered a single ancient phase whale, neither escape nor victory was possible!

Though Ves definitely had to take this threat seriously, he did not let this deter him either.

"We have taken this potential threat into consideration." He said. "While it is true that we may not be able to survive a direct encounter against an ancient phase whale, we just have to work really hard to avoid one in the first place. Much of our preparations entail the seeding of scout vessels and listening devices. The Terrans also have a vested interest in assisting our cause."

Calabast maintained a wary expression. "Gathering intelligence in alien-occupied space is another whole other game compared to observations within human-occupied space. It is much more difficult to obtain a complete picture in territories where the mere presence of humans or human devices invites immediate retaliation. Ancient phase whales are also difficult to track if they have put down their egos. If they are clever enough to leave their massive honor guards behind and utilize their exquisite mastery over spatial manipulation to obscure their tracks, they can sneak closer to the frontlines without alarming anyone aside from the occasional peers they encounter along the way."

Ancient phase whales could be really sneaky if they wanted to. They possessed many different spatial abilities that could help them prevent detection. This was one of the main reasons why they consistently managed to infiltrate deep into human-occupied space and put a strategically important central star node such as Bridgehead One inside a greater spacetime bubble!

"We have taken this possibility into consideration." Ves said. "I cannot say anything about it due to confidentiality reasons. Just know that if we truly have the misfortune of bumping into a native god that our champions cannot handle, we can still answer with a trump card of our own. The cost of employing this solution is very high, though. It is better if we do not have to resort to such a measure. Just know that without this final guarantee, I would never agree to greenlight the Nemesis Campaign so easily."

He truly wanted to inform more people about this contingency plan, but it was of utmost importance that none of the details leaked to the wrong parties.

Ves could only keep his mouth shut and hope that the situation would not deteriorate to this point.

Once Calabast and Eliza bid him good night, he stayed behind for half an hour and finally decided to retire for the night.

Much had happened and he needed to enjoy a proper rest in order to regain a fresh perspective.

As usual, his wife had already slipped into their shared bed first.

When Ves laid down, she turned around and stared into his eyes with a judging expression.

"What is it, honey?" He wearily asked.

"I can recognize that look of yours. That face tells me that you have put even more burdens onto your shoulders. I can feel that you have become more restless than a few hours ago. What happened?"

He sighed. "Let's just say that I have become more exposed to the truth. Knowing too much can be a burden as well as a blessing. People at my level constantly have to worry about the bigger picture. What I find troubling is that the more we engage in galactic-level affairs, the less attention we can spare to the smaller things in life. A part of me regrets that I have become too high profile too quickly. I am increasingly more convinced that it is not wise for anyone below the age of 100 to become a tier 2 galactic citizen."

His wife softened her expression somewhat. She gently reached out and brushed her slender palm against his cheek.

"Do not regret your successes. You are absolutely qualified to assume all of those responsibilities. You should not compare yourself to your lessers. I did not go out of my way to break the Wodin Dynasty's traditions and expectations just to marry an inferior boy. I may not agree with every decision you have made, but you have managed to blaze your trail anyway. I trust you, Ves, and I do not do so lightly. Have confidence in yourself."

Though Ves frequently doubted Gloriana's judgment, he still felt flattered by her unreserved trust. He knew very well that he had made many questionable decisions over the years that had stretched her patience. She would have never tolerated him if she had not shed much of the behavior imparted by her Hexer upbringing.

"Tomorrow is the big day." He told her. "That is the final time you can choose whether to stay behind with our children. Are you still set on your previous decision?"

His wife actually adopted a hesitant expression, which Ves found odd. The dangers of embarking on the Nemesis Campaign was still very great despite all of the preparations he and his allies had made.

No plan survived contact with the enemy. Unforeseen situations could always arrive, and even the best countermeasures could fail during critical moments.

The only way to guarantee 100 percent survival was to get escorted by a god pilot, but no matter how important Ves may be, he did not warrant such excessive treatment.

The Light of Sol was the only real backbone of the Terran defensive lines.

He could not move away for a single day, or else the flood of alien attackers would overwhelm the partially depleted Terran linefighters in fairly quick order.

It would have been a lot better if the Terran Alliance had two god pilots at its disposal, but reality was not so kind.

"I think... I would still like to accompany you." She said. "I cannot bear to separate with our youngest son and daughter, so you will get to enjoy their company as well."

Ves frowned. "I... am not sure whether that is a wise decision, dear. It would greatly reassure me if you, Andraste and Marvin return to our old haunt New Constantinople VIII and wait for my return."

"No." Gloriana sounded uncommonly firm this time. "I have faith in you and our forces. More Larkinson Saints have rallied to us than ever before. The Terrans and the Red Three are all backing us in different ways. This is not a suicide run in my opinion. All of us are living in a dangerous age. If we do not have the courage to brave the dangers of the present, we will fare worse against future threats. This applies to us as well as our children. I believe that Andraste and Marvin will be able to learn valuable lessons in the next few months that they can never acquire in friendly space. Is this not what the Larkinson Clan is all about?"

She made a point that Ves could not easily refute. He had always been an advocate of learning through adversity.

That said, there had to be a limit to how much he could afford to endanger his wife and children, especially when they had little to contribute.

"Our children..."

"Aurelia has remained behind. She has just begun to study how to operate a warship in one of the safest central star nodes in the new frontier. That is enough in my opinion." Gloriana reminded him. "She is our heir. If anything regrettable happens to us... then a part of me will be reassured that our bloodline will continue. My handpicked agents from the Larkinson Clan and the Wodin Dynasty will accompany her and manage her inheritance in our stead. My brother Brutus has personally promised me that he will dedicate his life to protecting our eldest daughter if she is the only one left of my line."

"..."

Her preparations left him momentarily speechless.

She sounded as if a part of her had already assumed that the upcoming campaign would go terribly wrong.

Still, he approved of her preparations. It was better to prepare for the worst than to do nothing.

Chapter 7452 Early Tempering Plan

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His wife held a lot of concerns about her children. It was in her nature as a mother to worry about their lives.

Yet she always wanted her children to excel in their respective careers. Ambition burned within her tired eyes.

"I have spent a large amount of thought about the meaning of the Age of Dawn." She whispered to Ves even as she shuffled closer to lean against his chest. "This is an age of gods and miracles. It is to our benefit that we have entered the start of it. Think about it. We previously lived through the Age of Mechs that has run for over 4 centuries. All of the early movers have already monopolized most of the power and resources available in our society. The wars had already been fought and the power plays had already resulted in the institutionalization of the Big Two, god pilots, Star Designers, grand admirals and so on. The only way we could have risen to the top in the old system was to follow the rules set by others."

"The old system has crumbled." Ves responded.

"Exactly, dear." An opportunistic glint shone on his wife's eyes. "We no longer have to play by other people's rules, knowing that the established powers are far better at playing this game than us. The Age of Dawn has put everything into disarray. In this grand reshuffling of power, brand-new ways of climbing to the top have emerged. You have already done so by gaining the allegiance of hundreds of human phase lords. Unlike most pioneers who mindlessly kept obeying the old rules, you willfully violated them and took advantage of opportunities that everyone else has missed. This is the kind of attitude that a winner must possess in the early phases of every age cycle."

"You sound as if you have conducted a study on this subject."

Gloriana briefly grinned. "I have, in fact. I dove into the historical archives and skimmed through the accounts of the winners and losers of every age. Did you know what I found? The latter always consisted of those who behaved more proactively than their peers. The latter more often than not consisted of established groups who had grown far too comfortable in their own skin. Their stability allowed them to extract the greatest amount of benefits in their golden era, but as soon as the circumstances had undergone a drastic change, that same stability held them back from adapting quickly. This pattern occurs so often that I have concluded that we must be braver if we wish to thrive in the Age of Dawn."

She was very correct in her assertion. Ves knew from his understanding of biology that species that evolved to adapt extremely well in a specific ecosystem tended to do great during this stable time scale.

However, no period lasted forever. Once the ecosystem became disrupted, the previously pampered species always found themselves struggling, with many of them going extinct outright!

The species that tended to do a lot better during these transitions generally tended to be the species that previously struggled to occupy a niche under the oppression of the previously dominant species.

Since the former had to work a lot harder to survive, many of them inherently possessed the capabilities that allowed them to adapt and thrive in different environments.

This pattern was so universal that it had been observed on countless untamed planets in both the Milky Way and the Red Ocean.

It could also be observed in domains beyond biology, as Gloriana had learned.

"What you have described is not an absolute rule." Ves gently retorted. "While I agree with you in principle, you are speaking of generalities. There are exceptions such as the Terrans. These people have declined over millenia since the peak of the Terran Empire, but always possess just enough flexibility to maintain their foundations in the next ages. There are also many enterprising groups and individuals who acted recklessly and suffered massive losses as a consequence. None of my actions can guarantee success. Sure, we enjoy greater advantages than most, but it only takes one catastrophic misstep to see everything fall apart. We are still dancing on a knife's edge."

His wife shook her head. "It is better to strive for greatness when the opportunity arises than to settle for mediocrity for the rest of our lives. This is one of the lessons that your Larkinson Clan has taught to me. I admit my judgment is tainted by all of our successes, but that only provides further proof that this age is practically made for us. The introduction of exotic radiation is the best accelerant to our ambitions. I am not blind to the consequences of failure, but I would not be a true Larkinson if I let my fears override my ambitions."

"That may be easy to say for adults like us, but our children..."

"Our children are destined for greatness." Gloriana spoke with such conviction in her soft voice. "Andraste wants to become the best warrior of her generation. Marvaine wants to follow our footsteps and become an innovative mech designer like ourselves. Most parents would react to this by giving their children encouraging words, but not much more. Not us. We are different. We are Larkinsons. We are wealthy and capable enough to help our children realize their childish but precious ambitions. One of the essential steps that we must take is the opposite of what many parents are doing, which is to flee as far away from active warzones as possible and raise their offspring in the safest and most peaceful regions imaginable."

He understood her point. She had become a strong believer in the premise that a harsh and challenging environment tempered the greatest heroes.

Though she used to start off as a pampered and privileged scion of the Wodin Dynasty herself, she may have convinced herself that she had become just as deserving of greatness as her much more successful husband due to accompanying him throughout all of his wild expeditions.

Ves had plenty of ideas on how to temper his children, but he did not want to go too far with them. Andraste had not yet reached her 10th birthday, though it was awfully close. Marvaine was far too young to consider such matters. The only reason why the possibility even existed was because his learning and maturation rate was uncommonly high!

"So what do you propose we do for our children?" He asked as he decided to throw the ball in her court.

"Bringing Andraste and Marvaine along with us as we journey behind enemy lines is dangerous, but an essential part to teaching them the reality of living in a dangerous time and galaxy." Gloriana meticulously said. "In order to justify the risks of doing so, we must ensure that they will be able to make the most of this experience. Though young, our children should not be treated as passengers, but very young trainees. They must actively participate in the Nemesis Campaign in order to gain first-hand experience of struggle and conflict."

That was her true intention!

Though it sounded ridiculous for a pair of pre-teens to actively participate in a major military campaign, it was not entirely impossible in this case.

Ves still held very high authority in the Larkinson Clan, and his control over the Bluejay Fleet was significant. It should not be particularly difficult to arrange a few easy but fulfilling side jobs for his kids.

Perhaps they might not be as useful as university-educated interns, but their study programs already exceeded that of most first-raters at the same age ranges.

"I think... your proposal has merit." He slowly said. "I still insist that our kids should enjoy their time as kids. We cannot diminish their free time too much. We would be doing them a disservice by depriving them of the hours they spend on playing and fooling around. My suggestion would be to cut back on the time they spend on learning book knowledge and fill up the free slots with 'light' work sessions. While they are not qualified to do anything more than odd jobs, these are still valuable opportunities to learn the principles of hard work and diligence. They can also come into contact with soldiers or workers who can impart valuable stories and lessons."

He thought back on his own early and highly formative years as a mech designer.

From starting his business on Cloudy Curtain to getting drafted into the military by the Bright Republic, a part of Ves still thought fondly of those early years.

Sure, he might have shed his innocence and naivete at a distressingly fast rate, but all of those dangerous and exciting experiences also built him up to become a leader of his generation!

Did he want his children to undergo similar experiences?

Hell no!

Ves would rather settle on the next best solution, which was to control their exposure to risk and ease their way into a more dangerous but rewarding life.

Dangers could not be negated entirely, but he could do his best to minimize them while still making the experiences authentic enough to leave a profound impact on his children.

The goal was not to traumatize his children, but to allow them to learn valuable life lessons first-hand that they could never truly understand in a classroom.

Ves inwardly chuckled.

Back when he was still an Apprentice Mech Designer, he used to rage at the Bright Republic for recklessly and wastefully forcing mech designers into active warzones.

Yet it was exactly because of this policy that the Bright Republic fostered a community of hardy, tempered and less frivolous mech designers.

The 'removal' of a lot of potential deadweight made his old state a lot more efficient over the long term, allowing it to maintain equilibrium with the then-larger and more formidable Vesia Kingdom.

Of course, all of that had turned into ancient history a long time ago. Ves did not even recognize the Komodo Star Sector of the present day anymore.

Though he would never put his children through such a dangerous and callous trajectory, he could still give them more moderate exposure to stuff they would have to deal with in the future.

"We can have Andraste do odd jobs with the infantry assigned to our ships." Ves mused.

"Naturally, she won't be accompanying them when they go on their deployments. Boarding enemy warships and landing into hostile alien cities is no place for a kid, even if she is skilled with both blades and firearms. I think it is already enough for her to learn how to clean and maintain equipment, participate in virtual training sessions, voice her opinions during planning sessions and maintain overwatch through a remote-controlled drone."

His wife smiled. "Andraste will definitely be ecstatic if she can control a drone. It is not as good as fighting the aliens in person, but it is best if she is able to spill alien blood on occasion."

Ordinary parents would definitely feel horrified at the thought of letting young children take the lives of sentient beings, even if they were enemies of the human race.

Neither Ves nor Gloriana fit into the category of ordinary children.

Perhaps it was too much to expose a little boy as young as Marvaine to bloodshed even if it took place from a distance, but Andraste should be more than up to the task of killing.

Her designer genes included plenty of bioprogramming that allowed her to cope with the heavy consequences of taking lives much better.

Other enhancements, both planned and unplanned, should ensure her mentality should largely remain within a healthy range even if she ended up spilling human blood!

"As for Marvaine, we can have him tag along with the maintenance crews as they do their work." Ves continued. "He already spends time with us in the Design Department as we work, but he won't be able to learn all that much from us at this stage of his development due to his limited scientific foundation. It is better to increase his exposure to the practical side of mechs and machinery. He can even learn how to operate simple machinery that is responsible for cleaning or conducting light repairs. If he is doing well, we can gradually elevate his responsibilities. There is always work to do on a carrier during an active expedition or campaign."

Chapter 7453 Internships

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The next day, Ves and Gloriana took their two children aside to inform them of their new schedule.

Predictably, the two kids reacted with excitement, as they lacked a complete understanding of the risks involved.

"Will I be able to accompany the troops and fight the aliens directly?!"

"Can I ride along in the cockpit of one of our mechs?"

"Dise told me that a true warrior can only be forged in battle! My sword is ready! A blade that isn't watered with blood will rust over time!"

Ves raised his hand after enduring the nagging of his overenthusiastic brats. "Calm down, calm down. Your mother and I will never permit you to fight the enemy directly. You can throw away all fantasies about accompanying our boarding troops into hostile vessels or occupying a second seat in a mech on deployment. No matter how clever you have become, you are still kids, and very young ones at that. Be grateful for what we are willing to extend to you. Ordinary parents would never let you do this stuff."

That calmed the two children for a bit.

Gloriana bent down to her knees and pressed her palms against their cheeks. "I hope the two of you can forgive us for infringing on your right to be children. We love you, but that is also the reason why we do not want to smother you with comfort and peace. We have thought about sending you back to a safe location such as New Constantinople VIII, but we have decided not to because we think you will be much better prepared to face the challenges of the future if you are already taking part in our work."

"I am fine, mama." Andraste leaned into her mother's touch. "I am not as big of a girl as Aurelia, but I am more than willing to become an intern."

"Me too!" Marvaine said. "Putting Mekanos together is fun and all, but they are just toys in the end. Working with real mechs is much more exciting. I want to take those big machines apart and see what they are like inside!"

Ves briefly smiled at them. "I am glad to hear that you are fully onboard with our idea. That said, the two of you need to take your new assignments seriously. We are bestowing you the duties that are normally assumed by adults. This means that we expect the both of you to learn the professionalism of your guides and imitate them as much as possible. We do not expect you to perform at their level, so do not push yourselves too hard. Leave the actual work to the professionals. You are there to learn."

After making sure their children knew what to expect, Gloriana briefly explained their specific assignments.

"We would prefer to station you on a Larkinson ship, but we do not want the two of you to become separated from us. The Tarrasque may not be the largest ship in the combined fleet, but she is still the safest hull on a comprehensive basis. We have negotiated with the mechers to embed you into their units for a test period. If there are any problems or too many disturbances, we will end this trial, understand?"

Both children nodded.

"Andraste, you will be splitting time between two different infantry units. You will first begin to learn the basics of soldiery, discipline, conventional firearms and small-scale tactics with the help of a squad of the RA's elite commandos. After you have proven you can learn how to operate alongside well-trained and highly disciplined career soldiers, we will allow you to spend time with the RC's 2nd Apocalypse Wardens. These are the bodyguards that you often see around us. Their combat methods, gear and doctrines are on a different level. They encapsulate the results of many advancements made since the start of the Age of Dawn. The Apocalypse Wardens fight more closely according to your talents and inclinations."

The red-headed girl practically jumped with energy when she heard that she could actually learn a thing or two from the Apocalypse Wardens!

Their dramatic names already hinted at their amazing combat power. Despite not possessing the sheer destructive scale of mechs, their cutting-edge infantry-grade equipment combined with the powers bestowed by their considerable attainments in qi cultivation allowed them to fight at a level far beyond any infantry squad from the previous age!

As one of the Red Collective's flagship battalions, the 2nd Apocalypse Wardens also received an upgrade to their combat armor and a portion of their armaments.

Although not all of the Apocalypse Wardens received the latest upgrades, the collies made sure to assign the unit attached to Ves with the latest versions of mid-grade superdimensional gear!

Though Ves felt that the relatively early implementation of superdimensional technology had a lot of room for improvement and optimization, the raw power of superdimensional alloys still transformed the combat power of the Apocalypse Wardens to another level!

They could easily defeat 10 times their former selves due to this expensive upgrade alone!

Andraste clearly understood this disparity as well. Though her parents had limited her exposure to superdimensional combat gear out of safety concerns, she yearned to wield a true superdimensional sword just like her Swordmaiden mentors!

A hand suddenly patted the top of her head, causing her to feel belittled. "Hey! I am a big girl now!"

"Whatever you say, pumpkin." Ves responded with an indulgent smile. "Do not get ahead of yourself. I am sure that your instructors have drilled into your mind that weapons are not toys, but you are still so young that we are not quite sure the lesson has stuck. Your 'internship' will expose you to a lot of deadly stuff. Prove to us that you can act responsibly around them. Becoming a soldier is a duty, not a reward. As long as you can prove that you understand this distinction, we will give you a surprise when you are ready to move on to greater responsibilities."

This promise clearly lit the little girl up. "I love you, papa!"

"Haha, I love you too." Ves gently said before turning to his youngest child. "Marvaine, as for you, we do not expect you to work as hard as your sister. Your sessions are shorter and your work assignments will not be as arduous. Don't look disappointed. Your schooling is still important and you have many more years to gain practical experience. That said, we think it is good for your development to spend a few hours a week auditing one of the RA maintenance crews assigned on this ship. The mechers work substantially differently from Larkinsons like us, but their professionalism with anything related to mechs is not in doubt."

Gloriana gave her son a stern look. "Safety comes first, boy. You will obey the orders of your supervisors. You will not attempt to deviate from your instructions unless you have gained explicit permission. You will not approach any mech up close unless it is completely secured and locked down. In any other case, you are only permitted to interact with mechs from a distance and preferably inside a well-protected control room. While the mechers hold themselves to a high standard, accidents can always happen, particularly during high-intensity combat scenarios. Damaged machines can topple over. Overloaded power reactors can leak deadly radiation. Scalding hot coolant can melt the hazard suits of unprepared workers. Even if you are wearing a luxurious high-performing personal shield generator, that is no excuse to take your safety lightly."

She had good reasons to be concerned about safety.

The hangar bays of the Tarrasque may be built to very high specifications, all of the redundant safety measures could easily become compromised if the section suffered direct hits from enemy attacks.

Though Ves believed it would be difficult for any enemy to target the Tarrasque under heavy escort, he could never rule out the possibility.

Therefore, no one aboard the ship could take their safety for granted. This included 'non-combatants' such as Gloriana who would ordinarily be stationed well inside the citadel of the heavy cruiser.

"Will I be able to make suggestions of my own?" The little boy asked. "Can I put together a basic machine with the machines?"

"Possessing an inquisitive mind is one of the essential traits of a successful mech designer." Ves answered. "Though you are limited by your age, you will still obtain limited opportunities to take part in discussions and operate many different kinds of production machines. However, everything you do will remain under supervision from professionals who know what they are doing. Each of

them will receive an express instruction to err on the side of caution. You are still many years away from putting together a real mech."

Both Ves and Gloriana regarded their son's love for the technical side of mechs with fondness. It was only too bad that he had been born too late to do anything truly serious. Letting him 'assist' with light repairs and routine maintenance already stretched the boundary as far as they were concerned.

"Will I be able to work on a powerful ace mech like the Riot Mark III?!" Marvaine suddenly asked.

"Absolutely not." Gloriana's tone clearly broke no argument. "Do not even think about it. Every ace mech is a carefully designed engine of power and destruction. Even if they are much better designed and built than mass production mechs, the consequences of failure are also that much greater. This is particularly pronounced when it comes to the Riot Mark III, which is a machine that not only harms our enemies, but also the pilot herself and people around her. You will never be stationed in the same compartment as this dangerous machine."

Only a fool or a sadistic bastard would ever consider it a good idea to bring an innocent young child in the vicinity of a powerful but barely-contained D-mech of this level!

Even if Ves was brain-damaged enough to permit this action, Marvaine wouldn't learn anything aside from sheer terror.

The Riot Mark III was far too advanced for student of his level to learn anything meaningful about mech design!

There were good reasons why particularly powerful and high-end mechs kept their distance from the general population.

Their sheer power and visual impact often distorted the psychologies of ordinary people. The greater the disparity, the greater the impact on their minds.

It may be fine to let people get in touch with virtual mechs or view their performance on a projected feed, but true proximity had to be avoided as much as possible.

This especially applied to impressionable young children!

Neither Ves nor Gloriana wanted to 'contaminate' their youngest child too much too soon.

They did not want Marvaine to become obsessed with their approach towards mechs to the point he could only imitate their works.

He deserved to shape his own unique vision and design philosophy towards mechs.

This was also another reason why both parents found it better to restrict Marvaine's contact to the RA first-class multipurpose mechs stationed on the Tarrasque.

The mechers had access to a lot of excellent design philosophies as well as high technologies.

This ubiquitous access did not drive them crazy.

Ves had learned from his talks with Jovy that RA mech designers went through strict training in order to learn restraint and discipline.

They could not wantonly waste the Association's resources, nor abuse advanced technologies when more low-end solutions sufficed.

Ves believed that the RA could teach Marvaine the right starting foundation with regards to mech design.

There should be plenty of opportunities in the future for Ves to shape his son into a more adventurous mech designer, but first he needed to master the fundamentals.

If he was able to do so a decade in advance, then that would grant him more time to delve into the deeper and more profound aspects of mech design when he had reached an adolescent stage!

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Chapter 7454 Multiple Objectives

Chapter 7454 Multiple Objectives

Once they informed their children about their new side activities, Ves and Gloriana split up to perform their individual duties.

Gloriana knew how urgent it was to add another strategic asset to the combined fleet in the short term.

She had cut back the time she spent on other projects and activities in order to speed the Promethea Mark II Project to completion.

They had already made good progress on this ambitious ace rifleman mech design project, but the demand for spreading widespread destruction would definitely become particularly helpful once they began to raid fortified alien positions!

Ves also promised to stop by her lab and find out what he could do in the coming weeks, but before he could do that, he first had to attend a strategy meeting.

"Good morning, guys." He casually greeted me as he moved towards one of the empty chairs in the small conference room.

All of the other leaders had arrived early on. Each of them represented a major force or group in the combined fleet.

The Bluejay Fleet was nominally led by Admiral Gori Tensen, but he only truly commanded the mechs and vessels hailing from the Red Association.

Commodore Zonrad Reze led most of the warships from the Red Fleet, which was warranted due to their much more naval warfare-focused technologies and doctrines.

The Moloch Squadron existed as a third group under the Bluejay Fleet. Centered around the Armitage and the Moloch, what the squadron lacked in technological prowess, it more than made up for it with 31 Ascended Giants and several groups of mixed but capable qi cultivators!

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar directly commanded the Larkinson Clan's Premier Fleet, if not the clan itself.

Despite the fact that she wore multiple impressive hats, she had already delegated many non-essential and civilian responsibilities to other Larkinson executives.

Although the Premier Fleet was rather limited in terms of mechs and warships, its true advantage was the concentration of powerful saints, each of which made use of excellent machines that performed well above their peers.

Combined with the priceless Command Field of the Saint Commander, the Premier Fleet already burnished their credentials during the months it had fought across the Terran frontline.

While the soldiers from the Bluejay Fleet and the Premier Fleet already possessed a certain understanding of each other's combat capabilities, that did not apply to the last group that had attached itself to the combined force.

The rather boring-sounding 1st Experimental Detachment consisted of 4 biomechanical combat carriers.

Although the Terrans had taken advantage of their independence from the Red Two to mount a handful of secondary and tertiary gun turrets across her hull, their true value rested in their bellies.

The Terrans had loaded them up with 120 brand-new prototype Woodsap mechs, of which a quarter consisted of the elven variant!

As Ves skimmed through a more detailed list of assets, he pondered about that last part. He turned towards the Second Elf, who commanded the detachment.

"Mr. Shuku, welcome aboard. I hope you do not mind our company while you are operating alongside our men."

The sole elf in the room briefly stood up and bowed in response. "Thank you, Professor Larkinson. We greatly appreciate that you are willing to accommodate my men and prototype mechs. Both have special requirements, so I wish to apologise in advance for any inconveniences that we might impose on you. We do not ask for much. Our only mission is to fight against the native aliens in diverse scenarios while preserving our organic machines as best as possible. We do not have any priorities beyond that, so I do not intend to participate in any discussions relating to your own campaign goals."

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar nodded in acknowledgement. "It is good that you understand that you are guests here. I have already studied the specifications of your Woodsap mechs as well as the

records of all of your test pilots. I hope that each of them are as disciplined and professionals as your documentation claims. If you want us to continue to tolerate your company, then you must make it clear that they must obey my orders above all others. Operating behind enemy lines is perilous. Speed and agility are more important than swinging your fist. We must maintain the ability to detect formidable enemies in advance and withdraw quickly enough to avoid undesirable contact."

"Understood, commander. You can rest assured that all of our pilots are selected for their loyalty and obedience. They used to be highly trained soldiers serving in other branches of our armed forces, so they are already trained to follow orders. We only ask you to take their relative inexperience into account. They do not possess a deep and thorough mastery of their own biomechs, nor do they fully understand their place on the battlefield."

"There is only one point I am not entirely certain about." Casella said with a frown. "The list of specifications describe the performance of the standard version of the prototype Woodsap mechs in sufficient detail. However, they are decidedly less complete when it comes to the elven edition of the same line."

"There are differences between the two versions, but I am incapable of describing them in a manner that does them justice." Caracalla Shuku explained while his elongated ears twitched with his cadence. "They are new enough that they have not yet undergone any systematic tests. This is also one of the reasons why we are looking forward to deploying them against the native aliens. It is much faster, more accurate and more convenient to ascertain their performance in actual combat scenarios. At a minimum, the performance of our elven Woodsap mechs should at least match the standard version of the same line."

That did not provide much information to any of them. How big was the performance gap? Which areas benefited more from the elven-specific upgrades and which aspects remained unchanged?

All of these uncertainties had a big impact on the Saint Commander's ability to plan ahead.

She moved on from this issue. "Let us consider the local starscape."

A projection of the local region appeared above the conference table. It showed a small portion of the Terran border regions along with a larger stretch of alien territories.

For multiple reasons, the alien territories did not consist of a single racial domain, but were instead split up into many different 'strips'. They belonged to a large variety of both major and minor races.

"We have collated the intelligence on the designed war theater acquired by a number of different parties, which includes our clan, the Red Association, the Terran Alliance along with a number of other helpful allies." Casella explained. "The overall goal of the Nemesis Campaign is to inflict significant strategic disruptions to the alien war operations. It is impossible for our force alone to defeat all of the alien forces stationed in and around this theater in its entirety, but we can still do the next best thing, which is to sow enough chaos and destruction to cause the remaining alien forces to lose their effectiveness. Whether we do so by demoralizing them, sabotaging their logistics or cutting off critical reinforcements, there are many ways to make meaningful progress."

"The Terran Alliance has already issued many different rewards for fulfilling any major objective that can ease the burden to our linefighters." The Second Elf reminded everyone. "There are certain priorities that we pay more attention to than others, but we do not wish to command your troops directly."

This was an important distinction. The Larkinsons volunteered to fight beyond enemy lines. They did so without agreeing to hand over command authority to the Terrans, though the latter arguably benefited the most.

This meant that the Saint Commander could always choose to abandon any important goal and issue the order to withdraw completely from enemy space at any time.

The Larkinsons would have been a lot more reluctant to participate in this campaign if this was not the case!

Casella gestured with her hand, causing numerous star systems to light up with different colors and symbols.

"As you can see, there are many different objectives that we can choose from. We do not have to pursue all of them. What is important to note is that our route will determine which goals we can fulfill in a reasonable timeframe, and that the more impactful ones are located further behind enemy lines. If we want to make a significant impact on the ongoing war, we cannot remain in the shallows, but must venture deeper in order to damage the sites that our enemies truly care about."

Some of those goals started to cycle on the projection.

"These goals include destroying major industrial worlds, killing or capturing greater phase lords that have exercised their leadership, raiding valuable research data and specimens from research worlds, striking the few cosmopolitan enclaves that we have been able to identify, intercepting supply convoys and burning down their logistical centers. We can accomplish much, but each of these locations are guarded by a variety of native alien gods as well as conventional forces. We have enough intelligence on their fixed defenses, but it is difficult to pin down the presence of more mobile forces of our opposition."

That uncertainty was not good news, because the invaders always had to gamble whether they would bite more than they could chew.

"If we were afraid of bumping into serious challenges, then we would have agreed to embark on this campaign from the start." Ves stated. "I think that we should still go deep, but do our best to avoid lingering beyond our welcome. We should aim to achieve a single vital goal before we turn around and return home."

"Agreed." The Saint Commander said before she pointed at one of the glowing star systems located closer to the galactic center. "This will be our tentative endpoint. I have chosen it because there are multiple viable routes we can take to arrive there, and it is not that difficult to switch tracks and follow another route with different goals along the way. Ultimately, our main goal will be to decapitate the greater phase whale that is purportedly responsible for managing the logistics in this approximate region."

The projection changed to show an old greater phase whale with a darker and less refined hide.

"This is the Blackwater Summoner. He may not be familiar to most of you, but according to our intelligence, he is the member of the Red Cabal that most other alien forces answer to when they arrive at his jurisdiction. While he may not possess the power or prestige of an actual ancient phase whale, he still manages to outrank most of his peers due to being one of the numerous descendants of the Tide Caller."

Multiple leaders adopted severe expressions.

The Tide Caller was the ancient phase whale that was instrumental in activating the so-called Tide Stations in order to pull off the Ancient Refuge Plan.

In other words, he was the cowardly ancient phase whale that was chiefly responsible for displacing the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy all the way to Messier 87's neighborhood!

Although he had been ignominiously slain during Operation Night Jazz, his legacy still lived on. Many native gods and mortal aliens still worshiped him despite his demise, and his descendants eagerly took advantage of all of the extra support.

"This Blackwater Summoner sounds like a tricky fellow." Ves commented. "If our forces continue to get closer to his location, what is stopping him from running away?"

"Nothing but his own honor and reputation." Casella replied. "We cannot count on the integrity of a greater phase whale to stay in place and face our forces head-on. If we want to intercept him before he flees out of our reach, we will have to be clever about it. We must employ a combination of misdirection, fast maneuvering and strategic positioning in order to set up a successful ambush."

"That will not be easy."

"Agreed, but it is doable. At worst, we can always change targets midway and aim for another goal."

Chapter 7455 Promethea Progress

Chapter 7455 Promethea Progress

The Terrans highly prized the enemy leader known as the Blackwater Summoner.

Due to his famous ancestor, the greater phase whale grew up within the core hierarchy of the Red Cabal.

Although he might not be among the most outstanding descendants of that famous ancient phase whale, he still received enough favor to take up an important position.

It was clear that the true leaders of the Red Cabal trusted the Blackwater Summoner more than most, which meant that he should be a goldmine for intelligence.

That also made it difficult to capture this 'later generation prince' of the Red Cabal. He never stationed himself close to the frontlines.

Fighting and dying was for cannon fodder, not for an esteemed figure like himself. He would never move close enough for the Light of Sol to stop by and chop his blackened body into pieces!

He also had a habit of relocating to different major alien star systems at irregular intervals. The Blackwater Summoner most definitely knew how much the humans hated him and wished to take him off the board.

All of that sounded like bad news for the Terrans and the Larkinsons.

An intelligent and cowardly opponent was a lot more difficult to hunt than a foolhardy brute.

"Does he have any actual weaknesses?" Ves asked with a frown.

"The Blackwater Summoner is a powerful greater phase lord, but he has tried and failed to complete the next step for many years, which is one of his shames." Casella replied. "He also disdains to interact with cosmopolitans. His racial arrogance is still fairly strong. He acknowledges the threat posed by humans, but he still finds it difficult to take small mortals seriously. Do not celebrate too soon, though. There are other alien phase lords and phase whales that do take red humanity seriously. This is also one of the reasons why we must strike at any cosmopolitan enclave if the opportunity arises."

Ves doubted that a couple of strikes could truly set back the cosmopolitan agenda.

These human traitors had long split themselves up into many different cells, so much so that probably nobody had a full headcount!

All of this fracturing meant that taking out individual cells only diminished the influence of the Cosmopolitan Movement by a couple percent.

The only value of striking their enclaves was to gather intelligence on their activities and find out whether they were cooking up a bigger plan.

"Make no mistake." The Saint Commander spoke as she met everyone's gazes. "Once we go in, peril will be everywhere. The native aliens have enough of an understanding of us to know that Ves is a high-profile target. We will be targeted. We will be hunted down. Even ancient phase whales may not be able to resist the urge to intervene. The only ways we can prevent this from happening is to be smarter, faster and more unpredictable than they can handle. I am confident that we can handle it. Our starships are largely modern and well-equipped. Their superdrives will allow us to evade most alien pursuers, who largely have to make do with inferior and outdated tech."

The meeting soon turned into a more in-depth planning and strategy session.

Ves yawned and rose from his seat. He knew that all of this boring and intricate planning did not require his input. He had little to contribute aside from a bit of technical assistance, and even that was not all that necessary.

"I will leave you to it." He said. "I trust that you guys will be able to lead the native aliens by the nose. Just tell me when the situation has changed to the point that the likelihood of interception is significant enough."

Casella Ingvar nodded. "We will keep you informed. The probability of interception will be fairly high just after we cross the contested border. However, there is not much to fear from the enemy fleets in the immediate region. They are largely cannon fodder that are not as nearly well equipped as their core forces. We can shake them away with ease if their numbers prove too great, or we can choose to confront them in order to inaugurate our campaign and test our initial cooperation."

They had multiple options at their disposal. Ves trusted Casella to choose what was best.

Given everyone's eagerness to clash against the aliens as soon as possible, Ves figured that the Saint Commander would commence battle right after crossing the border.

Perhaps it might have been a better idea to sneak past and avoid contact as long as possible, but that was unlikely to work.

Unless the entire fleet consisted of stealth-capable vessels like the iconic archships, it was impossible to truly prevent the native aliens from detecting the passage of their combined fleet.

"The more formidable alien forces are stationed deeper into the interior of alien-occupied space." Caracalla Shuku reminded everyone. "They are less numerous, but considerably more elite. Eliminating one elite fleet is just as valuable as destroying 10 normal enemy fleets. The former are also often stationed around critical military or industrial nodes, so we can fulfill even more goals by targeting the surrounding infrastructure. However, from the moment the Red Cabal learns that we have ventured deeper into enemy territory than most humans have dared, we will truly become hunted."

It was not unheard of for human forces to cross the border in an attempt to raid alien convoys and minor depots, but that was all they could accomplish.

The Terrans and the other forces simply had too little mechs and starships of their own to conduct frequent raids. They already had their hands full with keeping their defensive lines intact.

Ves left the conference room and made his way over to the design lab.

Once he arrived, he greeted the mech designers that were present before moving straight to Gloriana's private workplace.

It seemed he had come at a good time. She was just presenting the latest results of the Promethea Mark II Project to their client.

"Ah, Ves. You have arrived. Come here. Much of the intricate work surrounding this mech design comes from you. It is better if you explain some of its specialties."

Saint Isobel Kotin stood proudly before Gloriana. The ace pilot possessed a very different presence from most of her kind.

She carried herself as a taciturn woman, but she also projected an invisible burning aura that made people in the vicinity feel as if they were bathing in a hot sun.

This signified that Isobel deliberately restrained herself, and for good reason. Control was the most important trait that she needed to master if she wanted to wield the power of fire.

As Ves came close enough, he briefly scanned the projection of the ace mech design.

"I'm not sure what Gloriana has already told you, Isobel. Did she mention that we will likely be leaving out the second weapon until later?"

The fully cybernetic ace pilot nodded. "She did. The two of you intend to speed up the schedule at the cost of leaving out a few upgrades and additions."

"That is right. I know I promised to bestow a brand-new energy blast projector that can spit out freezing flames, but that was an idea I came up with after we struggled to fight against the mutated voribugs. Now that we have relocated to the Terran front, we don't need a weapon like this all that much. The new version of the Ignitron luminar crystal assault rifle should be more than enough to handle most native alien threats. Any enemy phase leader that is powerful and well-protected enough to resist the attacks from this rifle will not do any worse when attacked by your future second weapon."

Saint Isobel did not look upset. "While I cannot claim to feel good about this, I understand the logic behind your decision. I understand the necessity of patience. I agree with you that wielding an energy shotgun is likely redundant during the current campaign."

It would have been a cool weapon, both literally and figuratively.

The tentatively-named 'Cryotron' luminar crystal energy blast projector would have functioned like a close-ranged energy weapon that could flash-freeze almost anything within its attack cone.

Ves even planned to implement additional functions that could essentially turn the frozen corpses into disposable projectiles, thereby shattering any enemies in their way!

The planned weapon would have been ideal for swarm clearing missions!

Not only that, but Saint Isobel would also be able to deprive the voribugs from one of the resources they needed the most, which was energy!

The Cryotron would definitely be able to play a surprising role against Goliaths that might have been able to resist hot energy attacks.

Fortunately, the more familiar native aliens did not show the same kind of rapid adaptation and evolution. They were all fairly vulnerable to fire and energy attacks, especially once they lost the protection of their ubiquitous transphasic energy shields.

Ves raised his hand and showed off the projection of the upcoming version of the Ignitron.

"I have spent a fair amount of time and effort into improving your main weapon. The design is not yet complete, but I have already been able to incorporate loads of new and updated technologies.

This is a complete overhaul. The implementation of hyper technology and E-technology is much more refined than before as we have a much deeper understanding of these fields. The energy attacks will carry significantly more extraordinary factors, which will make it easier for you to impart your formidable willpower into the energy beams. To be more specific, I have put special effort into maximizing the Ignitron Mark II's compatibility with your King Killer Flames and your companion spirit Kiroshi."

Isobel looked satisfied after hearing that. Her purple flames possessed special properties that made all of her flames more deadly and potent. The easier it was for her to transmit those properties into her upcoming ace mech's offensive output, the better.

As for Kiroshi, the flaming purple cat happened to be her best tool for propagating wildfires across significant distances. Multiple variables impeded the companion spirit from doing her job. Isobel hoped that the upgraded weapon could make the process of deploying her more effective.

"What about the bayonet?" She asked.

Ves waved his hand, causing the projected rifle to extend a sharp and hot blade just below the muzzle.

"The bayonet is supposed to be a weapon of last resort for you, but that is no reason to underestimate it. While it is limited in length, its lethality cannot be denied. Not only do we intend to forge it out of weapon-grade superdimensional alloy, it is also designed to channel your King Killer Flames to a greater extent than normal superdimensional materials. You will be able to punch through pretty much anything and burn everything in proximity. Just keep in mind that the rest of the rifle's structure is made out of armor-grade superdimensional alloys. They are still tough, but please don't use your weapon to parry a weapon as outrageously sharp as the Decapitator."

"Will the Promethea's other blades be made out of weapon-grade superdimensional alloys?"

"Sadly, no." Ves shook his head. "We cannot justify the expenditure of so much weapon-grade superdimensional matter for a ranged mech. Other mechs such as the Lionheart Mark II and the Bastion Mark II need it more. You will have to make do with a short plasma sword and a compact armor-grade superdimensional knife as backup solutions. The Promethea Mark II may fare much better at close range than her predecessor, but she is still optimized for ranged combat, so please keep your distance from your enemies."

The plasma sword and the superdimensional knife may be fairly strong in their own right, but they did not shine compared to her main armaments.

In fact, if Ves had any choice, Saint Isobel would never resort to these sidearms!

It should be enough for the Promethea Mark II to resort to hit-and-run attacks to burn her enemies long before they got close!

Chapter 7456 New Resonating Alloys

Chapter 7456 New Resonating Alloys

The specifications for the Promethea Mark II Project received multiple updates over the last few months.

New discoveries made by Ves and Gloriana along with continued access to new technologies from different sources always opened up new possibilities.

Though the two mech designers had fallen into the trap of feature creep, they simply couldn't help themselves.

They had access to more high technologies than ever, and every field witnessed brand-new breakthroughs practically every day.

This was especially the case for hyper technology, E-technology and superdimensional technology!

Of course, now that the priority of completing the Promethea Mark II had risen, neither mech designer had any intention of diverting their attention any further.

They both decided to lock the current configuration and do their best to achieve their delivery within two months or less.

This decision made Ves and Gloriana feel pained. They felt that the Promethea Mark II as a high-end mech platform still had room for more improvement.

Nonetheless, they did not intend to walk back their decision. They had no other choice but to narrow their scope and focus on completing their existing ideas as opposed to adding new ones on a regular basis.

Ves in particular spent a large amount of attention on upgrading the primary weapon.

Similar to the Amaranto Mark III, the mech designers invested a disproportionate amount of value of the Promethea Mark II into her armaments.

Even if they chose to postpone the completion of the Cryotron, the Ignitron Mark II possessed more than enough feature additions and upgrades.

They had listened to all of the ace pilot's feedback and made sure to address her criticism. Not only would she be able to handle the weapon as if it was an extension of her own body, she would also gain access to numerous new modifiers that effectively increased her versatility!

The goal was not necessarily to make the Ignitron Mark II as powerful as possible. Though the high-end weapon contained plenty of upgrades that significantly increased its firepower, Ves did not set this as an overarching priority.

His real goal was to turn it into a one-stop solution for most combat scenarios that Saint Isobel Kotin might encounter on the battlefield.

This was why he borrowed the power of his collaborators to implement a range of handy tech into the weapon.

These upgrades included focusing components that could dynamically split a powerful energy beam into multiple weaker ones or defocus the beam so that it could function like a less efficient energy shotgun, each of these options should allow the Promethea Mark II to handle a greater variety of threats while limiting collateral damage.

"The Cybernetic Empire offers a lot of small nifty technological advancements." Ves explained to Isobel. "While the Cybers have made only limited advances in the fields of hyper technology and E-technology, they have made considerably greater strides in conventional technological fields. The sophistication of their energy weapons is on another level. It is unclear how the presence of the dormant First Flame has affected their energy weapons development, but this factor is not a trivial one. What matters is that you are benefiting quite much from this circumstance."

"What is most urgent at this junction is that we must finalize the choice of key ace mech-grade resonating materials." Gloriana said as she waved her arm to activate a projection. "The Cybernetic Empire has developed many new resonating alloys, each of which bear some relation to the aforementioned circumstance. Let me state that these are not the only compatible resonating materials you can choose from. However, the alternatives that we have lined up for you are significantly less powerful or relevant to you. They are still serviceable, but they are not game changers."

Three projections of different materials appeared before the female mech designer. Isobel could not glean much from the projected images. They all looked like alloy bars with different colors and textures. She could only faintly sense something special about them, but the projections could not do them justice.

"What are they?" She asked with a frown.

Gloriana pointed at the first alloy bar that shone with an ominous dark red sheen.

"This is what the Cybers call 'Exsanguino'. Its effect is singular but also highly effective. Resonating with this material changes the properties of your flames so that they can burn any substance that falls under the category of 'blood' much more effectively. This amplification is quite dramatic. You can expect an increase of at least an order of magnitude."

That sounded quite dramatic, but as Isobel parsed Gloriana's in her mind, she slowly started to frown.

"Wait, it only works on blood? What sort of blood?"

"Any substance that is used to circulate oxygen and other resources within an organism." Ves responded. "The Cybers have conducted extensive research on the bizarre effect of this experimental accident. It works on all organic subjects no matter whether they are artificial or natural in origin. The blood doesn't have to be natural either. In fact, we speculate with great certainty that both basic and advanced Carmine mechs may be susceptible to Exsanguino. This means that if you choose to wield the power of this resonating alloy, you can potentially become a counter against pretty much every Carmine mech."

Ves initially hadn't been too happy when he learned about the existence of Exsanguino.

The Cyber materials scientists initially treated the outcome of a lab accident as a niche product that might be nice to employ against phase whales or mutated beasts.

Yet once they realized that it could also be employed against Carmine mechs with great effectiveness, they valued it a lot more!

Though Isobel already began to appreciate the formidable power of Exsanguino, she also realized that she could not employ it against every target.

"If your description is correct, then Exsanguino is not a universal solution." She said. "It does nothing against purely mechanical targets such as mechs, phasefighters and warships. Perhaps my flames will be able to burn enemy pilots or crew with greater ease, but any normal hot flame can already do so with ease."

Gloriana nodded in admission. "That is very much so. Choosing to integrate Exsanguino into your Ignitron Mark II means that you have chosen to increase your ability to fight and overcome Carmine mechs as well as powerful organic champions such as calamity beasts, phase leaders and Goliaths. This is a serious commitment, particularly when you forgo other key resonating exotics that are much more effective at inflicting mass destruction."

"Do you have an example of that?" The ace pilot curiously inquired.

"Yes. We have specifically selected the second option to provide you with an opposite choice."

The projection of the dark red alloy bar shrunk in size. The projection of a dull blue alloy bar soon attracted the ace pilot's attention.

"This is another interesting new resonating alloy that the Cybers have labeled as Triton-Remose-B. Its effect is to impart flames with a mental suppression effect. To be more precise, proximity to the flames affected by this material causes any nearby organisms to feel discouraged or demoralized. Their courage falters while their hope evaporates. This may sound vague, but that is because the limited lab tests conducted by the Cybers have ascertained that the effects greatly vary from subject to subject. Strong-willed individuals are better able to resist the mental suppression effect, up to a point."

"Up to a point?"

"The magnitude of the mental suppression effect varies depending on both distance and quantity of flames." Ves helpfully explained. "Simply put, the closer the distance, the stronger the effect. The greater and more numerous the fires, the more the organisms in the vicinity become locked in terror."

Isobel furrowed her brows in thought. "Triton-Remose-B certainly provides a very different benefit from Exsanguino. I can see how the former can be useful in many situations. Under many circumstances, the warships and facilities that I wish to burn can often stall their demise for precious minutes due to damage control measures and other forms of resistance. If I can terrorize them into paralysis with my flames, then that would allow me to neutralize their combat effectiveness much faster than before."

This was not a trivial matter! Out of all of the ace mechs of the Larkinson Clan, the Promethea Mark II promised to be among the best at neutralizing large amounts of infrastructure as well as entire enemy fleets.

Isobel's ability to destroy both would definitely gain a significant boost if she made use of Triton-Remose-B.

However, just like Exsanguino, its effects were quite narrow. Not only was the effect limited to organic targets, but it also happened to be relatively ineffective against larger and stronger-willed enemies!

"I take it that enemy champions are not as susceptible to Triton-Remose-B."

Both mech designers nodded.

"That is unfortunately the case." Ves said. "I believe that it is still possible to scare phase leaders out of their wits if they are surrounded by your flames, but we are not sure that the same applies to Goliaths considering that they are under the total control of a remote leader entity. Perhaps it is possible to affect them both when you grow older and strengthen your willpower further, but you will probably have to wait for many years. Until then, you should mostly employ this effect against weaker targets."

Saint Isobel Kotin looked troubled. The effects of Exsanguino and Triton-Remose-B were both unconventional but effective.

They opened numerous new ways to approach a battle and complete her objectives, but they were also circumstantial in effectiveness.

She hated that the resonating alloys imposed conditions on her. She could only truly make Exsanguino useful when she fought against powerful organic foes, and she could only make Triton-Remose-B useful when she used its effect against large enemy populations.

The Mech Touch

Saint Isobel Kotin frowned as she pondered about the options presented to her up to this point.

Neither Exsanguino nor Triton-Remose-B sounded anything like conventional resonating materials.

As one of the most defining properties of an ace mech, resonating materials had an enormous influence on a high-end machine's approach towards combat.

Different from most other objects, resonating materials possessed special attributes that somehow caused them to interact with the extraordinary willpower of an ace pilot in very magical ways.

Saint Isobel was no scientist, and though she considered herself to be better educated than most of her peers, she did not understand the science behind true resonance.

Nonetheless, that did not stop her from making her own observations and rules.

The choice of resonating materials weighed heavily in her mind because of two important reasons.

First, it directly affected how well she could fight under specific circumstances. Whether she could fight longer, hit harder, resist more attacks and maneuver more freely all depended on this choice.

Second, as long as she practiced the power expression granted by a resonating exotic often enough, it would eventually imprint into her being, allowing her to replicate its effects without the necessity of a crutch.

She had shared insights with the other saints of the Larkinson Clan in the past. Each of them relayed how the choice of resonating exotics and alloys directly shaped their paths to godhood!

In other words, the selection of key resonating materials was essentially a turning point in her career. Her choice would directly define what kind of god pilot she could become if she managed to make it all the way in the future.

She needed to take this extremely seriously.

As she continued to ponder over the strangeness surrounding the presented options, she decided to ask a question before the pair of mech designers could present the third resonating alloy.

"Why are you trying to steer me into expanding my versatility? Is there something wrong with strengthening my core advantages? I would have thought it would be better to pick a resonating material that makes my flames hotter or more difficult to douse."

That was a valid question.

Gloriana did not look upset that Isobel had disturbed her rhythm. "There are good reasons for that. We have considered the alternatives, but do not think they can provide as much value to you. For example, the relatively common ChargeMate and HeatMate can directly compensate for the Promethea Mark II's shortcomings by enabling you to generate additional electrical energy or manage the heat build up with true resonance, yet neither of these possibilities adds any new dimensions to your battle partner. The differences will be marginal. You will still be able to defeat the enemies that are susceptible to you, only with less effort than before. As for opponents that overpower you, they will only become mildly less oppressive due to your stronger base properties."

That sounded a bit too exaggerated. Gloriana might not be completely right, but she was not completely wrong either.

"This does not apply to every situation, but we think that it is still a valid description in your specific case." Ves added. "From our perspective as mech designers, there are 'performance mechs' that rely heavily on their peak performance to overpower their opposition. Such machines do not need too many frills. There is always a greater payoff when you strengthen their fundamental properties. Then there are 'special effects mechs' that distinguish themselves not through raw superiority, but by relying on special advantages that can make life difficult for your enemies."

Isobel did not quite know what to think after hearing that. She instinctively felt upset for having her Promethea categorized as an implicitly underperforming mech that could only pass muster due to unconventional reasons.

"I can understand what you are saying, but I am not quite sure whether this is what I want. When I shared my experiences with Tusa and Dise, they both told me that you pushed them to accept new things. The Dark Zephyr gained the power to banish things while the First Sword gained an array of floating swords."

"We proposed those additions because we strongly believe that they are worthwhile." Ves responded. "And we were right. The new features worked out well despite not having reached their full potential at this time. Note that we are not trying to push new things for the sake of novelty. They actually serve to solve real problems. Previously, Tusa had always complained about lacking the power to defeat or occupy tough opponents. His new ability to banish his opponents adds an entirely new dimension to his kit and allows him to defeat or inconvenience his opponents much better. As for the First Sword's latest addition, the sword formations enable her to add extra power to her main attacks while also drastically increasing her swarm-clearing capabilities. The biggest downside in both cases is that both saints need to invest a lot of time and effort to develop their new strengths."

Isobel had heard enough complaints about it from Tusa. He was especially impatient about growing his resonance strength to the point where he became powerful enough to banish whole greater phase whales!

"We are not claiming that the Promethea Mark II is deficient without a more unconventional key resonating material." Gloriana told the skeptical ace pilot. "If you insist, we can present a list of more reliable choices. We merely believe that the Promethea Mark II without any special advantages will struggle too frequently against adversaries that can resist her firepower better than others. You may be able to count on other friendly units to shield you from an unfavorable situation, but that is not always a solution."

"Then why the weird selection? Both Exsanguino and Triton-Remose-B sound incredibly unexpected and are highly situational."

"That is true, but it is partially because of their narrow scope that they are so powerful when they are in their element." Ves responded. "Our selection is limited by the choice of collaboration partner. You might not fully understand this, but access to high-performing resonating materials rated for ace mechs is quite restricted. The ones that are readily available on the commercial markets tend to be stable but also boring and mediocre in performance. While that may satisfy some mech designers, we are different. We expect more. We expect better. If you truly want to gain access to the good stuff, then you have to persuade a major power to open up a part of its product library."

"The Cybernetic Empire."

"Yes." Ves nodded. "As we have explained before, the Cybernetic Empire's unique circumstances have led to biased technological progression. Its many R&D institutions have not been able to gain access to E energy radiation and superdimensional matter, so they are still trying to catch up from behind when it comes to the relevant fields. We can only make do with their own advancements, of which the most interesting often turn out to be completely unplanned experimental accidents."

Very few if any materials scientists would set out to develop odd and highly specific resonating alloys such as Exsanguino and Triton-Remose- B.

It was only due to luck and coincidence that such materials appeared in the first place.

Fortunately, the Cybers recognized their value and propagated the new tech to other planets.

"Hmm." Isobel thought for a moment. "Thank you for taking the time to explain this. While I still am not fully onboard with this, I at least understand what you are going for. Please present the third resonating alloy, please. I want to know what else you think is suitable."

Ves and Gloriana exchanged a brief glance before the latter did her job.

"The final resonating alloy is called 'URI-2461-V6'. It is the most unusual of the three options. As you can already guess, it is another haphazard lab result. It does not bear a more convenient label because the Cybernetic Empress herself has restricted access to it. Very few Cybers know that it exists. It is only due to Ves' prior acquaintance and familiarity with the Polymath that the Cybernetic Empire has given us special permission to learn about and potentially make use of this key resonating alloy."

Isobel turned to Ves. "It sounds as if there is a bigger story behind this material. What does it do, anyway?"

"We haven't gotten the full story from the Cybers, but we have tried our best to fill the gaps." Ves awkwardly said. "As far as I can guess, URI-2461-V6 may have been one of the partially successful outcomes of a study that attempted to replicate or imitate my design philosophy. The Polymath or one of her many researchers under her may have attempted to use special materials and techniques to develop a resonating material that can imbue the semblance of 'life' into inanimate objects. They did not succeed, but came close to doing so. From what the Cybers claim, URI-2461-V6 may permit you to expend your true resonance to make your flames come alive... sort of. Not really."

"???"

Chapter 7458 Difficult Choice

Chapter 7458 Difficult Choice

"URI-2461-V6 is an interesting product." Ves explained with an amused expression. "It is quite funny, actually. Exsanguino and Triton-Remose-B are both accidental creations. The Cybers did not set out to invent them, but managed to make them anyway after they messed around with different alloy formulas. URI-2461-V6 is different as the Special Materials Tower of the Cybernetic Empire sought to develop a means to bestow life to inanimate objects from the beginning."

"That sounds... difficult." Isobel responded. "I think I understand the logic here. Strong enough willpower can turn the impossible into reality. These Cybers probably thought their best chance of replicating your living mechs was to invent a resonating material that could give high-ranking mech pilots a shortcut to doing so. Am I correct?"

Both mech designers looked impressed. Her guess came pretty close to the truth, at least the one disclosed by the Cybers!

It was not without reason why the Larkinsons considered Isobel to be one the more intelligent champions of their clan. Her extensive cybernetic conversion had only further accelerated her mental processes.

"From my perspective, their experiments sound silly... but worth trying." Ves said with a hint of appreciation. "Boundaries exist to be tested. Nothing is truly impossible. The Cybers may have well been able to succeed so long as they decipher the correct rules or got extremely lucky one day. Unfortunately, they have probably wasted a lot of high-quality manpower and resources into this project without yielding a satisfying return. Instead of getting caught up in a sunk cost fallacy, the supervisors in charge probably decided to make the rational decision to cut their losses."

Ves actually felt a little regretful after learning about this decision. He had developed quite a strong interest in this strange resonating material. Even though it failed to satisfy the Cybernetic Empire's stringent requirements, it still promised an alternate means of bestowing life onto mechs.

"All of that sounds interesting, but what does this new resonating alloy actually do, and why do the Cybers consider it a failure?"

"That demands a bit of an explanation. URI-2461-V6 was made to turn mechs alive, but instead of doing so, it can only grant the 'illusion' of life onto inanimate objects. Its effects don't really work on the mech itself, but can affect most objects within range. What I mean by that is that it can animate random objects such as a drone, a shuttle or even a barrel's worth of phasewater. Even if they are devoid of active control, you can bestow them with a measure of false life that makes it so that they can take autonomous action."

"I see. So it is similar to turning them into bots."

"That is a good description, Isobel. By bestowing them with bot-like intelligence and autonomy, you can turn them into tools that follow your instructions. However, extensive testing by the Special Materials Tower has revealed that the effects are not too remarkable. URI-2461-V6 has never come close to breaching the barrier to true life. The affected objects steadily lose their conditions over time. Their intelligence is rather basic and cannot obey precise or complex instructions. It is similar to ordering a bunch of children around. While all of these descriptions may sound bad, we still believe that this so-called failed product can add wings to the Promethea Mark II."

"Explain, please."

Gloriana smirked as she explained their reasoning. "For all of the experiments conducted by the members of the Special Materials Tower, the Cybers are not experts in the field of living mechs. We are different. We are the inventors and the pioneers of living mechs. We have also expanded beyond this narrow category and bestowed the gift of life to a diverse range of subjects. My husband and I have a strong belief in our ability to make MURI-2461-V6 resonate like nothing else in our hands. Even if we are being overconfident, the measured effects are already useful to your ace mech. We believe that it can easily be adapted to turn all of the flames produced by your battle partner into a living, burning army."

She waved her arm, activating a projection that displayed a simulated combat scenario.

In this projection, the Promethea Mark II flew in from a distance before launching a volley of searing energy beams from her Ignitron Mark II.

Each beam accurately struck and burned through the azure energy shields that protected a formidable armada of alien homeships as well as orbital facilities.

Every strike not only inflicted immediate damage on contact, but also generated purple flames.

These initial fires might not look impressive compared to the scale of the enemy vessels and constructs, but they possessed a degree of intelligence and persistence that was unnatural!

One flame in particular happened to be larger and hotter than others.

Kiroshi had manifested at the flame that struck the largest orbital facility. The companion spirit not only possessed a mind of her own, but also served as an extension of a powerful ace pilot.

This made it a lot easier for Kiroshi and the flames she fanned to burn their way into the orbital station and ignite the most critical parts within their reach!

While all of this seemed relatively familiar to Saint Isobel, that did not apply to the other flames!

Isobel was accustomed to the fact that she could not easily strengthen the flames left on other targets.

She only had one companion spirit, after all. The fires started by her ace mech's attacks usually propagated at a much lower rate. Enemy damage control teams and automated countermeasures also succeeded quite often in dousing the flames.

Previously, the only way for her to overcome this resistance was to launch repeated attacks at these ships or constructs. She could either concentrate her attacks on a single section to build up an overwhelming firestorm or disperse her attacks to different points in order to overwhelm the fire-fighting teams.

The problem with those tedious strategies was that all of that took precious time and energy that she could have used to fulfill other objectives.

The simulation demonstrated a potential way to inflict the same amount of destruction with a lot less effort!

The individual flames all gained a semblance of life. They took on the shape of different fantasy creatures such as phoenixes, helldogs and dragons!

Still, no matter what external facade they assumed, each of them executed different plans to burn their respective targets into ash.

The phoenixes flew around and conducted hit-and-run attacks at different exterior points. Their mobility along with their random flight paths made it difficult for alien firefighters to control every blaze in time.

The helldogs on the other hand fought more aggressively and directly. They burned their way into the interior and deliberately hunted down alien soldiers and critical components in order to conduct sabotage as opposed to indiscriminate destruction.

The dragons had the least amount of numbers, but possessed the greatest statures. They concentrated large amounts of flames, enabling them to overcome much of their opposition by relying on a combination of brute force and strategic targeting!

They did not mindlessly try to burn through the toughest barriers, but deliberately sought out weak points only to break through with overwhelming power!

"This is only a handful of possible applications of URI-2461-V6 that we have devised in a hurry." Ves affectionately said. "URI-2461-V6 may not be able to grant new powers or explosive special attributes to your attacks, but they can make nearly every flame started by your attacks into a somewhat intelligent and directed construct. Perhaps you can't make them as alive as a flame commandeered by Kiroshi, but you will still be able to command an army composed of temporary intelligent fire creatures."

The visual impact of observing a flame army attempting to burn down a large alien defensive stronghold by itself was considerable.

While the ace pilot felt confident enough to be able to complete her objective without relying on these fancy tricks, it would have taken a lot more time and energy to take out all of those warships and orbital facilities!

"I see." Isobel said in a tone that betrayed none of her feelings. "What about enemy champions? How can this new wonder resonating material help me defeat alien phase lords and other powerful opponents?"

"We haven't created a simulation that can give you a striking example of what you can do, but URI-2461-V6 can still be useful in those encounters." Ves replied. "You can spread your flames more intelligently and target specific weak points with the forms of your choosing. However, the effectiveness will admittedly be more limited against most phase leaders and Goliaths. They are just too massive that it is difficult to defeat or kill them in a short amount of time. It takes brute force or a truly effective counter to slay them efficiently. Exsanguino can potentially do so, but URI-2461-V6 cannot because it does not fundamentally make your flames more damaging."

Gloriana gave another warning. "There is also another caveat that you must be aware of, Isobel. The flames animated with the help of URI-2461-V6 are all sustained by your true resonance. This means that enemies that possess the capabilities to neutralize this property can revert your flames. This mostly applies to ace pilots or god pilots with stronger willpower than yours. In more concrete terms, senior ace mech can suppress or outright snuff your flames with their domain fields alone. Even if the enemy saint is equal or slightly inferior in resonance strength to you, your flames will still lose a large amount of definition, making them barely better than uncontrolled fires."

This was a major disadvantage.

Though Saint Isobel Kotin did not consider herself to be an avid duelist like Saint Dise, she still possessed her own pride and ambitions.

She did not truly want to become known as an exterminator of the weak.

While she recognized that she could do so on a much larger scale than her peers and rivals, she still yearned to defeat the powerful.

Her frown grew deeper as she entered into an inner struggle. She had actually been troubled by this matter for many months. She had been doing her best to push it aside, but the choice of key resonating materials brought her conflict up to the forefront of her mind.

Both Ves and Gloriana possessed enough of an understanding of their client to know what was going on. This was why they specifically presented these options to her. They wanted her to start thinking seriously about what kind of champion she wanted to become.

Did she want to become a nightmare to alien monstrosities by transforming their blood into their own nemesis?

Did she yearn to break down alien infrastructure on a massive scale by spreading highly demoralizing firestorms?

Or did she want to target the weak points of her opposition more effectively by commanding her own army of temporary flame beasts?

"You are forcing me to make a difficult choice." Isobel looked and sounded irritated. "None of these options match my expectations. They are not necessarily bad, but it is difficult for me to immediately determine their full worth and potential. I will need more time to consider my selection. I do not feel comfortable with making an impulsive decision based on my initial impressions and feelings. Can you wait until I have made up my mind?"

"That is... a wise and prudent approach." Gloriana carefully responded. "It is not our intention to pressure you into making a hasty choice. Nonetheless, it is still better for all of us if you do not take more than a few days to present us with your answer. The Promethea Mark II Project has already reached an advanced enough stage where we must urgently work to incorporate resonating materials into the overall design. The absence of choice leaves far too many gaps in our work. Please decide quickly so that we are not left with too many uncertainties."

Chapter 7459 The Starting Move

Chapter 7459 The Starting Move

The first assault commenced.

The combined fleet of Larkinsons, mechers, fleeters and Terrans fell upon the gathering of mixed alien enemies like a pack of sharks.

Relying on their sophisticated tech and their blazing fast superdrives, the relatively small but formidable human armada managed to shorten the time between detection and contact to the point where most alien commanders had yet to form a coherent response!

The inherent arrogance of the major alien races was on full display as multiple different fleets and racial groups failed to unite and coordinate properly against the sudden assault.

The orvens and nunsers worked fairly well together, but the puelmers and juregs fought in separate formations that isolated them from other alien 'allies'.

Even children could recognize that their timings, positioning and strategies were all misaligned!

The only major advantage that they possessed was their numbers. These were all fleets that were either on the cusp of assaulting the human regions or prepared to go a little deeper to hunt supply convoys.

Yet despite outnumbering the invading humans by more than 10-to-1, the attackers still remained completely confident in their ability to achieve victory on the battlefield!

As the unwieldy and uncoordinated alien defenders brought their forces to bear against the sharp thrust of the human foes, one particular machine had gone ahead of the rest!

The Dark Zephyr Mark III Revision 2 relied on his blazing mobility to fly way ahead of the main force and harass the enemy defenders!

Though enemy sensors managed to detect the powerful machine's approach in advance, they struggled to track the living mech as he began to flit around like a flighty bird.

Long-ranged interception fire bombarded his coordinates, but the ace light skirmisher dodged and weaved through every attack without letting anything strike his masterwork armor plating!

This could not last forever.

The alien barrages grew denser and more coordinated by the second. The alien spacers began to employ systematic firing solutions that enabled them to saturate entire regions with firepower.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III became increasingly more boxed in by all of the energy beams and kinetic projectiles!

As the distance shrunk at an alarming rate, the probability of getting hit also began to rise.

If the Dark Zephyr Mark III sported a superdimensional armor system, then the ace mech might have been willing to brave the attacks head-on.

Unfortunately for the ace pilot and his battle partner, the downside of being the first of the Larkinsons to achieve sainthood and receive an ace mech upgrade was to miss out on the superdimensional revolution.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III was still clad in tranphasic hyper archmetal!

The light skirmisher did not boast thick layers of armor plating to begin with. Though its transphasic hyper alloy still boasted comprehensively good performance compared to other

comparable high-end light mech, its defensive capabilities could not even come close to matching that of the much newer First Sword Mark III or the Minerva Mark II.

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson sighed inside his cockpit.

"How long do we need to wait until you get an upgrade?"

"AS LONG AS IT TAKES." The Dark Zephyr replied. "I HAVE MANY BROTHERS AND SISTERS THAT HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR YEARS. THEY SHOULD GET A TURN FIRST."

Though Tusa felt envious of the few peers that already managed to pilot a real superdimensional mech, he did not truly feel upset about being put on a waiting list.

After all, the Dark Zephyr was the ace mech that relied the least on armor to protect himself on the battlefield!

As the aggressive ace mech continued to fly closer to the enemy positions, the machine finally veered to the side in order to target one of the flanks.

Diving right in the middle of all of the enemy formations was too much even if the Dark Zephyr could rely on his Saint Kingdom to mitigate a lot of incoming hits!

By approaching one of the outermost enemy fleets, the Dark Zephyr could not only make it more difficult for distant enemies to land their hits, but also use the nearby alien vessels as his makeshift shields!

That was exactly what happened. When the ace light skirmisher finally arrived, the machine only bled off a bit of speed, but displayed a huge amount of agility in turn.

Even as phasefighters tried to corner the Dark Zephyr from all sides while the point defenses of every warship sought to overwhelm his defenses, the ace light skirmisher still remained virtually free from harm!

The experienced Tusa skillfully threaded through the formation of jureg homeships and caused many gun turrets to end up hitting their fellow ships instead of the sole enemy unit!

What was worse was that the enemy targeting systems experienced further difficulties.

The ace light skirmisher's Electronic Gremlin System began to produce a large amount of interference. The custom ECM system had received numerous updates over its lifetime as Ariana Roux, its developer, became increasingly more familiar with the military software and hardware employed by different major alien races.

Though the Electronic Gremlin System could only be considered a minor feature of the Dark Zephyr Mark III, its effects still received an unreasonable degree of amplification from his Saint Kingdom.

The relatively outdated and disposable alien warships could not fully defend themselves against this interference!

All of this ensured that the Dark Zephyr got hit way less than it should.

Even if the Dark Zephyr could not evade every attack, the mitigating properties of his Saint Kingdom combined with his azure energy shield left his thin armor system untouched for the time being.

Though the constant attacks still drained Tusa's willpower and his battle partner's energy reserves at an elevated rate, the ace pilot knew that he only had to keep this up for a moderate amount of time.

Though Tusa had to direct much of his attention to evasion and damage mitigation, he did not intend to remain harmless.

The Dark Zephyr periodically utilized his Dark Wind Ultimate Module to bypass enemy azure energy shields and strike directly at the hull!

After returning the precious tier 3 Destroyer spear to the Riot Mark III, Tusa's machine no longer possessed a weapon with a long reach.

Fortunately, the Larkinsons had compensated him with a pair of weapon-grade superdimensional knives.

Though their reach was distressingly small, their sharpness and cutting power was unparalleled.

Each time the Dark Zephyr approached an enemy vessel, his arms turned into a blur as he launched dozens of high-speed slashes, each of which demolished powerful gun turrets or dug deep into the hull!

The ace mech could not afford to stick around too long, or else the surrounding enemies would concentrate their fire and attack his relatively static position.

The Dark Zephyr only dared to stay for a few seconds and do as much damage as he could manage.

Due to the sizes of the alien warships, the ace light skirmisher could only manage to cripple a part of their main cannon batteries, power reactors, engines or other relatively important ship systems.

While the ace mech was able to inflict considerable damage to each individual hull, the overall impact was tiny considering there were hundreds more alien warships in this star system alone!

Yet the psychological impact of witnessing a human ace mech attack with impunity was far greater than the material damage he was able to inflict in this short interval!

Within a minute, the hapless jureg fleet not only lost control of its flagship, but also failed to prevent several other capital ships from suffering crippling damage!

All the while, the incredibly fast and annoying Dark Zephyr Mark III still boasted a completely intact mech frame!

Perhaps the agile living mech could have inflicted greater damage if he chose to toss a handful of transphasic grenades in the holes he created, but the ace pilot decided not waste his munitions.

The good times could not last, however.

A pair of lesser jureg phase lords finally arrived and attempted to box in the human ace mech.

Tusa's eyes grew sharp as he took notice of the threat.

Though the jureg phase lords were not equipped with Saint Piercers or Saint Armors, these favored minions of the Red Cabal often possessed stronger and better-developed phasewater organs.

Even if they lacked the qualifications to obtain superdimensional gear, many phase lords assigned to assault the human border regions also began to wear increasingly thicker and more effective transphasic raiments.

The excited side of Tusa felt the urge to test the might of his ace mech's new superdimensional knives against those thickly protected lesser phase lords.

However, his more sensible side reined him in. The Saint Commander had a plan, and it did not call for Saint Tusa to go wild and take unnecessary risks in order to earn glory for himself.

Now that the Dark Zephyr Mark III was no longer the main fighter of a force, Tusa had to get used to being a cog in a formidable war machine.

Instead of clashing against the enemy champions and other assets head-on, it was much more efficient for the ace light skirmisher to continue to play a harassing and disrupting role!

"See you later, losers!"

The Dark Zephyr grabbed a single grenade from his bandolier and tossed it out. An instant later, it exploded and produced a large cloud of particulates that blocked most sensor systems from tracking the living mech!

It also did a fairly good job of blocking the sight of the incoming jureg phase lords!

Though the Dark Zephyr appeared a short time later, the interruption still stumped the jureg enemies long enough for the ace light skirmisher to make a clean getaway!

While Saint Tusa made a temporary retreat, he had no intention of disengaging from the battle entirely.

He steered his battle partner around the enemy fleet positions and began to approach another relatively isolated group.

This time, the puelmers began to suffer from harassment!

While their weapons and targeting systems happened to be more advanced and effective, it hardly made a difference to an ace mech as fast and good as the Dark Zephyr.

Though Tusa had to fight a little more cautiously, his ace mech was able to inflict proportionately greater damage in less time.

Unlike most other races, the puelmers almost never built any capital ships. Their largest hulls only reached the standard of a human heavy cruiser most of the time, which meant that a single ace mech could more easily cripple them most of the time!

Numerous weakened energy beams sparked off the azure energy shield protecting the Dark Zephyr. Its integrity visibly deteriorated, but it bought more than enough time to put the entire puelmer fleet into complete disarray!

Command and control had disintegrated as Tusa precisely targeted the flagship and other possible command ships that the Terrans had identified in advance.

As the puelmers gave into their anger and launched their attacks without much regard for friendly fire or conserving resources, the Dark Zephyr happily retreated before the enemy phase lords ever came close enough to pose a real hindrance.

At this time, the Dark Zephyr's antics had thoroughly degraded any semblance of coordination among the mixed alien fleets.

Not only that, but the phase lords who initially appeared united had already split up to cover their individual fleets!

This was the true result that the invading humans wanted to achieve!

Even if there were individual alien leaders who possessed enough intelligence and detachment to understand what the humans were doing, they lacked a strong enough voice to enact any effective countermeasures!

By the time the Dark Zephyr intended to harass a third alien fleet, other human units were about to enter engagement range.

Thousands of mechs along with many warships and other hulls shone with the radiance of true resonance.

Under the protection and guidance of Saint Commander Casella Ingvar's Command Field, the human soldiers did not fear their opposition despite being heavily outnumbered!

What was even better was that unlike the divided alien soldiers, most of the human attackers had all been brought under the leadership of a single ace commander!

"LET US TEAR THESE ALIEN APART!"

Chapter 7460 Evolving Command Field

Chapter 7460 Evolving Command Field

The battle finally entered the main phase as the majority of assets on both sides directly made contact with each other.

Although the much smaller and numerically inferior human force largely avoided close contact and relied on clever maneuvers to maintain a healthy distance, it was undeniable that both sides fought seriously against each other.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar completely controlled the main human assets. Many of the mechs and warships obeyed her instructions and followed her intentions no matter their allegiance.

They no longer considered themselves purely Larkinson or Terran at this time.

They were red humans.

They were members of an embattled race that had endured countless attacks and invasions in the span of just a few standard years.

All of them had witnessed their fair share of deaths and atrocities. They harbored very sympathy towards their alien opponents.

Now that they finally gained an opportunity to go on the offensive for once, none of the human attackers intended to show mercy to those that had been on the cusp of launching another incursion into human-occupied space!

The initial results astounded the unprepared defenders.

Not all of them possessed familiarity with the armed forces of the Larkinson Clan. Even if their leaders had received detailed briefings and intelligence reports, many low-ranked soldiers remained in the dark.

As cannon fodder, learning too much about the formidable nature of the human menace would only serve to demoralize them before they even released their shot!

Besides, there were far too many human heroes and groups that possessed their own strengths. It would overwhelm the aliens if they received briefings on every single possible threat they might encounter.

Under more prepared circumstances, the alien leaders could have worked around this state of ignorance.

Unfortunately, the combined fleet led by the Larkinsons commenced their assault far too quickly to allow that to happen!

This meant that the vast majority of alien soldiers had no proper idea how to fight against a force led by an ace commander!

The Minerva Mark II did not even make an appearance. As the most powerful force multiplier of the Larkinson Clan, Saint Commander Casella Ingvar gave up any chance of earning personal glory in favor of keeping herself and her ace command mech hidden from enemy sensor systems.

She chose to embed her living mech right into a specially made slot added to the command bridge of the Tortuous Scream.

The converted alien battleship possessed ample space and could easily accommodate the systems necessary to produce a strong data link.

This way, the Saint Commander's ability to oversee the entire battlefield and calculate solutions received an enormous boost!

While the ace command mech remained physically linked to the bridge, the Minerva Mark II gained full access to the SF-02 Smart AI Data Processing Cluster.

This not only boosted the effectiveness of the Minerva Mark II command and control functions, but also created additional synergy between the ace command mech and one of the battleship's smart AIs!

Sovvy was in his element.

As an RF-developed Smart AI based on the SEA SOVEREIGN template, Sovvy possessed strong understanding and insight of both human and alien naval assets and systems.

Though he did not possess the ingenuity and brilliance of the Saint Commander herself, Sovvy proved to be a stable and reliable assistant. He could not track many more details than Casella Ingvar, but also micromanage human warships more effectively.

The smart AI had earned Casella's trust over the course of many battles prior to this campaign. She did not hesitate to delegate most naval decisions to the artificial war mind.

The two did not even have to speak verbally with each other. Casella was neurally linked to the Minerva Mark II, which maintained an active data link with the Tortuous Scream.

Though she could not 'control' the alien battleship as if the 3.6 kilometer-long hull was her mech, she could still micromanage her systems to an extent.

She occasionally took advantage of this by selectively activating directional sensor bursts in order to gather more data on specific enemy formations or firing the primary cannon batteries at particularly important targets.

However, compared to the large but relatively slow-firing main cannon batteries, the true reason why the Tortuous Scream proved to be a nightmare for alien homeships was her massive array of bunker mechs!

The Larkinsons made the bold decision to tear out all of her secondary and tertiary gun batteries and replace them with bunkers whenever possible.

The result of all of this was that the massive hull boasted 155 specially designed artillery bunkers, each of which hosted modified FFEE1100-L Omega Threshers!

This exclusive Larkinson variant was solely made to utilize the relatively large first-class luminar crystal cannons mounted on the bunkers.

These fixed cannons complimented the base armaments of the Omega Threshers nicely. The mech model's iconic Omega Laser Cannons worked decently well against a large variety of targets, but when they needed to wear down the defenses of enemy warships, the added firepower of the fixed luminar crystal cannons practically tripled or quadrupled their siege power!

This was especially the case when both the Omega Threshers as well as the fixed luminar crystal cannons were fully linked to the battleship's comprehensive systems!

Unlike old-style bunker mechs that still needed to maintain separation with the starships they were embedded with, the Omega Threshers employed by the Larkinsons no longer had to abide by this pedantic rule.

No matter how frequently they pulled the trigger of their energy weapons, the enormous hull efficiently siphoned away much of the excess heat.

The mechs had no concerns about depleting their energy reserves either. So long as the power lines could handle the load, the Omega Threshers could fire their attacks with complete abandon!

What was even more impressive was that roughly a third of them had been Enfeoffed by Casella!

Every other mech had already been Commandeered by the ace commander.

This meant that they not only gained the empowerment of her true resonance, but also came under her direct supervision.

Of course, compared to past battles, Casella showed a greater willingness to grant autonomy to her subordinates. She no longer insisted on controlling their machines more directly, but allowed them to rely on their own skills so that they could grow better.

A similar but much weaker effect applied to the starships and their crews under her command.

Though her ability to Commandeer warships was nowhere near as effective as with mechs, she had been working on strengthening her ability to empower non-mech assets as of late.

Her progress so far was slow, but even a tiny boost could make a significant difference. Warship cannons empowered by a mote of true resonance could easily improve their damage potential and penetration power by 20 percent at the very least!

Yet this amplification was trivial compared to the 63 lucky machines that had been elevated into Casella's Barons.

This had been her true focus in her development as an ace commander. Far too often, she encountered situations where quality trumped quantity.

In order to improve her ability to resist formidable enemies, she had been working hard to increase the capacity of her Enfeoffment ability.

Though she was still far from being able to elevate all 155 bunker mechs into Barons, her current strength proved more than adequate for the occasion!

Every Enfeoffed Omega Thresher struck at distant battleships with thunderous power.

Their large luminar crystal cannons and abundant Omega Laser Cannons burned through powerful azure energy shields with a degree of resonance empowerment that could easily match that of a low-tier expert mech!

While that may still sound relatively underwhelming on an individual basis, the notion of employing 63 expert mechs at once sounded terrifying!

The native aliens most certainly did not enjoy the experience!

In many cases, the Barons only needed to launch two to four salvos of resonance-empowered energy beams to completely gut apart an enemy capital ship no matter their length or bulk!

Azure energy shields mostly lasted one or two rounds before they got overwhelmed. Their hulls offered relatively little resistance against concentrated firepower.

Casella understood alien naval design well enough to be able to deduce the locations of their power generators and other critical systems.

Even if she encountered a relatively obscure and unfamiliar alien ship design, she could easily borrow Sovvy's more expansive databases and data-driven analytical engine to achieve an 80 percent critical hit rate!

In the few minutes since the battle began proper, no other ship within the combined fleet proved to be a ship crusher as outrageously effective as the Tortuous Scream!

Under Casella's Command Field, this impossible warship effectively combined the best of ranged mechs with the best of an armed capital vessel, thereby leading the downfall of a dozen enemy battleships at an extended range!

This naturally alarmed the native aliens so much that they quickly raised the Tortuous Scream's priority to the top!

If they continued to allow the Premier Fleet's flagship to pummel their vulnerable assets with impunity, they would eventually lose all of their large hulls!

This collective recognition partially negated the chaos and disarray spread by the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

Though the ace light skirmisher still harassed the aliens from the sides and the rear, the native aliens uncommonly found a common direction by charging towards the Tortuous Scream!

Casella smirked inside the cockpit of her Minerva Mark II when she saw this response.
"Predictable."

By going on the offense, the alien fleets not only distanced themselves from the abundant amount of orbital defensive platforms, but also transferred the initiative to the human attackers.

Many of the assets under her Command Field dynamically adjusted their positioning. They vaguely formed a crescent, which forced the charging enemy strike craft and warships to endure a brutal crossfire in order to get close.

Even though the alien commanders understood that the cost was massive, they still had hope of achieving their objective due to the difference in mobility.

The Tortuous Scream's mobility remained poor despite her overhaul and resonance empowerment.

This meant that alien phasefighter squadrons and most alien warships could still close the distance and overwhelm her defenses in time!

Besides, the aliens did not solely rely on their mundane assets to take out this priority target.

After a shamefully long period of time, the alien phase lords finally got their act together. They had finally set their egos aside and no longer argued about trivialities. They collectively decided to support their fleets while at the same time coordinating their actions with each other.

Three alien phase lords already began to fly ahead of their vanguard elements and attempt to squeeze and disrupt the space surrounding the Larkinson Premier Fleet!

However, their spatial manipulation attempts encountered an uncommon degree of resistance.

The human ships did not slow down all that much nor began to suffer inexplicable malfunctions.

These were all modern first-class ships built for combat at this level. Their transphasic hulls and systems inherently possessed a certain degree of resistance against spatial effects.

Furthermore, Casella's Command Field provided a light to moderate degree of blanket protection to every empowered mech or starship.

Even if they only received protection equivalent to a quasi-expert mech, this already made an extensive amount of difference!

The alien phase lords grew disturbed, but did not lose hope.

Since affecting the human ships at long range did not work, they just needed to get closer!

Their phasewater organs were still subject to the inverse square law, which effectively meant that they could manipulate space far more effectively at close range!

More alien phase lords emerged from their respective fleets as well.

If three of them proved insufficient to destabilize the human vessels, then they just had to throw in more!

The total quantity of enemy lesser and greater phase lords remained unclear.

Both sides tried to keep their cards close to their chests.

The fact that the native aliens already sent out so many phase lords at this relatively early stage signified that they were either desperate or held back more in reserve.

Chapter 7461 Choosing Responsibilities

Chapter 7461 Choosing Responsibilities

As soon as the mixed alien fleets sent out almost a dozen lesser phase lords, one leader in particular repeatedly urged the Saint Commander to meet the enemy champions in combat.

"The enemy gods are right in front of us! Let us out and we shall show you how we deal with their ilk!" An angry female voice blasted over the command channel.

The Saint Commander remained unmoved even as she continued to control tens of thousands if not hundreds of thousands of individual pieces on the battlefield.

"Your time has not yet come, Fiery Axe." She spoke in a firm and unyielding voice, making sure to put additional authority in her response. "Our mechs and warships can already handle most of the opposition in this star system. Our high-ranking mechs can take care of the remainder. You and your Ascended Giants can provide greater value to the campaign by staying put until the native aliens have escalated their response further into the campaign. Remain on standby. Do not deploy without my express instructions."

The strategos of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx eagerly wanted to prove her strength against her alien counterparts.

Her pride and instincts screamed at her to disregard the human's orders, but her rationality held her back.

As a leader herself, the Fiery Axe knew how taboo it was to engage in direct insubordination.

The Ascended Giants did not lead this powerful fleet.

They were simply one among several combat groups. It was up to the Saint Commander to decide whether it was time to unleash the human phase lords.

Unless the mixed alien forces in this border system managed to hide a far greater surprise than the intelligence services had anticipated, Casella did not intend to expose the 30 or so Ascended Giants at her disposal.

The more cards she revealed to the enemy, the more extensively they could counter them in the next engagement. It did not make sense to go all-out at this early junction.

Besides, letting the human phase lords go loose would completely change the dynamics of the battle.

'Mortals' would no longer be able to play a significant role when their 'gods' grew too numerous and powerful.

The latter had the ability to completely dictate every outcome when they carried too much weight.

One of Casella's goals for this engagement was not to overrun all of the enemies in her way, but to deliver a satisfying opening battle to the troops so that they could maintain their confidence longer as they ventured deeper into enemy territory.

The mech pilots and spacers needed active participation in order to gain a stake in the success of this campaign. It would not do to sideline them right from the beginning and discourage them from stepping up when she needed their strength the most.

At this stage of the battle, the Saint Commander remained vigilant about any surprises the enemy held in reserve.

Although the Terrans collected extensive intelligence about the enemy troop disposition across the border, Casella would be a fool if she believed in its completeness.

The Red Cabal recently strengthened their resolve to break through red humanity's defenses. Who knew what they had brought to bear during this time.

So far, multiple well-armed and well-armored phase lords had already made an appearance.

The combination of 'martial' phase lords and 'erudite' phase lords presented a difficult challenge for most human forces.

Even if they were lacking in superdimensional equipment, the native aliens had clearly advanced the development of raiments.

The enemy had long grown familiar with the common traits of human high-ranking mechs. Their statues may be small, but their quality was exceedingly high. Their mobility was often superior, which allowed them to outmaneuver almost any phase lord in combat.

Therefore, the native aliens clearly made adaptations in order to give their native gods a better chance to survive an encounter.

With the help of stolen human technology and cosmopolitan mech designers, the native aliens constantly improved the capabilities of their raiments.

The enemy took full advantage of their relative abundance of phasewater and other resources and developed increasingly more impressive transphasic hyper energy shields, armor systems and auxiliary systems.

Their costs were high and the amount of resources needed to construct each individual raiment was significant due to the relatively larger scale of phase lords, yet the major races freely drained their formidable reserves in order to attain victory.

What impressed observers such as Ves and Gloriana the most was how much the development of native alien raiments began to converge with the development of human mechs.

Such a trend was already present in the design of raiments of Ascended Giants, but many people did not expect the native aliens to be so shameless about copying human tech and design principles!

"I liked the aliens better when they clung to their arrogance." Ves grumbled under his breath. "What do you think, Isobel?"

Since Saint Isobel Kotin still lacked an ace mech, Ves had invited her to witness the battle from the bridge of the Tarrasque.

She declined to sit on the spare observer's chair and remained on her artificial feet. Her posture showed that she was on guard for any threats or accidents.

Her domain field, though weak without the amplification of true resonance, conveyed a sense of anticipation. She was like a low burn that could quickly flare up into a conflagration on command!

"Dise and Stark alone can wipe out these lesser phase lords." Isobel judged. "It will take time, though. We will need to deploy more if we want to turn this into a painless victory. The phase lords can still pose a credible threat to the Tortuous Scream if they decide to disregard their losses."

"If you were able to deploy on the battlefield with the Promethea Mark II, which configuration would you prefer to have? Which key resonating material do you wish to have at your disposal?"

That was an interesting question. Isobel had already been thinking on how she would respond to this situation based on what advantages she had at her disposal.

"If my Promethea Mark II fought alone or with just one or two friendly ace mechs by my side, then I would have preferred to pilot the version that has integrated Exsanguino." She said. "Since we are confronted by so many phase lords, I would not go for the kill, but instead focus on mass debilitation. Their defenses may be formidable, but my firepower should not be weak. I only need to launch concentrated attacks to create a single hole in order to turn their blood aflame. The subsequent pain and damage should frighten the phase lords to the point where their courage begins to waver. This will not reduce our losses, but also create openings for other forces to go for the kill."

That was a very realistic scenario. Under more ideal circumstances, it was not out of the question that the Promethea Mark II alone could scare away a dozen lesser phase lords!

"We are not quite sure how much pain the resonance effect of Exsanguino can create." Ves honestly said. "The Cybers could not test this extensively due to many reasons. They suspect that it is not light, due to the fact that the effect is essentially conceptual in nature. This is a very strong qualifier. Aside from that, I can tell you that as a phase lord myself, our blood is an extremely essential part of our existence. Our ranks are defined by the proportion of phasewater in our blood."

Anything that directly harms our blood is equivalent to burning our soul. Whether phase lords can endure the basis of their existence being scorched at an alarming rate is dependent on their morale and mental resilience. Of course, your resonance strength also plays an important role. You still rank close to the bottom among junior ace pilots. There is plenty of room for growth, but that is a matter for the future."

This meant that there was no guarantee that phase lords would get scared into retreating if they got affected by Exsanguino.

Isobel frowned. She might not have the patience to wait until she could truly unlock the terrifying potential of Exsanguino.

"Triton-Remose-B is a less interesting option for me." She said. "You already said that its fear-generating effect is heavily discounted against high-ranking opponents such as phase lords and Goliaths. It is mostly a tool for frightening mundane enemies. If I chose to go with this resonating material, then I probably wouldn't bother with attacking the enemy phase lords unless I absolutely have no choice. My Promethea Mark II can probably suppress at least half of all enemy warships on the battlefield by herself."

Ves made a rueful smile. "The problem is that you may not have that choice. Our enemies will not always oblige with our demands. Cleaning up the regular enemies may allow our forces to concentrate our firepower on the phase lords that remain, but letting the latter rampage without constraint will never end well for our side. The Promethea Mark II that has integrated Triton-Remose-B is a combat platform that produces the greatest value when it is a part of a greater machine. Locking into this choice means that you have chosen to forsake personal honor to maximize your ability to meet strategic goals. You will have to make peace with the fact that you can only ever achieve full effectiveness when you are fighting alongside other champions."

A few seconds of silence passed. Isobel clearly felt troubled by these implications. As a powerful saint, she hated the thought of being limited in her ability to handle singularly powerful threats.

"You are making me like Triton-Remose-B less and less." She noted.

"Do not misunderstand me. It has its strengths. It is due to the current engagement that it is difficult to highlight it. The Minerva Mark II is currently doing a good job of handling the enemy naval assets. Your ace mech will shine much better if it is part of a force that does not include our command mech. That may still happen if we manage to finish the Promethea Mark II in time. The Saint Commander may decide to split our forces in half. Your ace mech will serve a similar role to the command mech. Both of them are great when it comes to eliminating regular enemy assets on a massive scale."

Isobel slightly bowed her head in thought. "I... do not hate this role. Someone has to do the dirty jobs. If I happen to be good at it, then I am not opposed to taking up this responsibility. However, it is difficult to give up the ability to handle enemy phase lords more effectively by giving up on Exsanguino. That other material, URI-2461-V6, may allow me to do both."

Ves turned at her and gave her an unreadable look. "That may be true, but you know what they say about jack-of-all-trades. That is not to say that the ability to imbue false life into your flames is a mediocre ability. It is just... different and less focused in application. You are giving up on a lot of alternatives in favor of gaining a large amount of flexibility. In the hands of a clever and

experienced saint, you can potentially bully both enemy fleets and champions with your intelligent flames. You may even be able to exceed the normal limitations and achieve a breakthrough in methodology and power application that can bring your flames to the next level. However, this is absolutely a long-term investment. At the beginning, your applications will be severely constrained by your relatively poor resonance strength and comprehension of the fire element."

That troubled Isobel the most.

She was unwilling to limit her usefulness and settle for a more limiting choice. This was why she favored URI-2461-V6 the most out of the 3 options.

The only question was whether she truly wanted to develop her fighting style into a manipulator of flames.

Chapter 7462 A New Countermeasure

Chapter 7462 A New Countermeasure

A part of her wanted to avoid making hard decisions.

URI-2461-V6 therefore stood out as a compromise choice. It did not excel in anything, but boosted her effectiveness in a broad range of combat scenarios. It would always be able to provide value no matter the circumstance.

The key resonating material also appealed to her because it complemented her rational approach towards combat. She used to take pride in her ability to fight smart. In order to waste as little shots as possible, she always had the habit of analyzing her opponents for any weak spots and targeting them with precision.

However, this approach often limited her due to the linear nature of her attack solutions.

Her energy beams could only fly straight and hit the first obstacle in their paths.

Her flames could only erupt at where the beams struck and could only spread like normal flames unless they were possessed by Kiroshi.

It was exactly because of her prior usage of her companion spirit that Isobel knew how powerful URI-2461-V6 could be if she could animate all of her flames, not just one at a time.

From bypassing fire-resistant sections to precisely burning the parts that mattered, being able to command her flames as if they functioned as her loyal troops, she could think of hundreds of interesting uses for this power.

Yet... was this truly what she desired?

One of her biomechanical fists started to clench.

The past version of herself that had never burned herself in an attempt to force a breakthrough may have been willing to embrace such a tactical solution.

Control was important in combat, and choosing a key resonating material that promised to grant her unparalleled control over her flames could solve many problems.

If URI-2461-V6 truly did what the Cybers promised, then any fears about inflicting unwanted collateral damage would be completely gone!

No longer did she have to be afraid of burning any friends and allies.

She also did not hold back her firepower anymore for fear of harming her fellow soldiers.

Despite these attractive advantages, Isobel still refrained from locking in this choice.

She initially found it difficult to rationalize why she did so, but she eventually managed to figure out the real reason behind her hesitation.

A part of her no longer wanted to outsmart her opponents.

She wanted to overpower them with raw strength!

Her traumatic encounter with the Emperor Tree had brutally taught her a lesson on how difficult it was to overcome an absolute disparity of strength.

Though Isobel still acknowledged the importance of control, she was no longer willing to sacrifice everything just to make her flames as safe and unthreatening to allies as possible.

What she truly wanted was to unleash all of her shackles and spread as many flames as possible!

She occasionally had dreams where she piloted a completed version of the Promethea Mark II that fully allowed her to indulge in her growing desire to burn everything down!

The larger and hotter her flames, the greater her satisfaction!

The more rational side of her felt disgusted at this. She knew that it was not healthy for her to desire to turn herself into a weapon of mass destruction and burn down entire planets!

Not that it mattered. She could not help but become captivated by its allure.

She clenched her alloy teeth.

Isobel never wanted to end up in a helpless and cornered position again.

Only by grasping absolute power would she be able to prevent herself from falling into the brink of death!

"Dise and Stark are finally making their moves." Ves uttered, interrupting her current line of thought.

The ace pilot focused sharply on the projected feeds as they showed two ace mechs in action.

Both of them had deliberately waited before they made their moves. The Saint Commander wanted to put as much separation between the advancing phase lords and the remainder of the enemy forces as possible.

She wanted to rule out as many chances for the alien phase lords to retreat with their lives intact as possible.

This unfortunately spared the incoming enemy champions from a lot of powerful attacks.

The Amaranto Mark III had to hold in her firepower for an awfully long time.

Usually, the ace marksman mech would have begun to snipe her targets from extreme distances many minutes ago!

When the Saint Commander finally permitted Saint Davia Stark to attack in earnest, she finally felt liberated from her shackles.

The Instrument of Vengeance had already been warmed up in advance. She had not let the waiting period pass in vain. A moderate amount of energy had already accumulated inside the oversized luminar crystal rifle.

Now, the formidable surged in power, causing both the crystalline rifle and mech to shine like an incredibly bright lightbulb!

The slender but greedy Amaranto Mark III accumulated power without any reserve, especially now she was physically linked to the hull of the Tortuous Scream.

One of the many changes that the Larkinsons had made to the orven battleship was to create many different 'foxholes' along many different points of her hull.

These shallow cavities may not look like much, but they provided just enough cover to a mech like the Amaranto Mark III.

They also featured hardpoints that allowed the ace marksman mech to link with the battleship's energy systems.

In other words, the Amaranto Mark III enjoyed almost the same advantages as all of the other bunker mechs!

Saint Davia Stark intended to take full advantage of this so long as no enemy champion managed to get close enough to drive her away.

Her eyes along with the sophisticated targeting system of her ace mech already locked onto a suitable target.

The rapid evolution of alien raiments made it more troublesome to achieve a one-hit-kill these days.

The Amaranto Mark III had developed a degree of notoriety within the high-level circles of alien society for that reason.

The existence of this lethal ace mech may have played a contributing role to the development of increasingly thicker and more resilient defenses among alien phase lords!

One of the aspects that Davia Stark had mixed feelings about was that she could not stop her living mech from telegraphing her most powerful attacks.

This was the price of drawing upon the power of light and borrowing the strength of the Illustrious One.

Both of them adored attention. They existed to be seen and noticed. It was practically heresy to think about hiding their radiance!

As such, Saint Davia Stark could only sigh helplessly as the approaching alien phase lords detected the new threat in advance and activated additional defensive measures to meet the imminent strikes.

For example, the orven phase lord that she had in her sights had withdrawn a foldable alloy shield from his back.

Though it was not tall or broad enough to cover his body entirely, it was still large enough to protect his head and his torso!

The thickness of the physical shield exceeded that of the raiment, thereby turning it into a very effective impediment against most attacks.

Perhaps this response might have prompted most of her peers to give up on assassinating this target.

Not Stark.

She knew what she was capable of, and what her Amaranto Mark III could do as well.

Multiple forms of energy and power amplification affected her Instrument of Vengeance.

Of particular note was the U-ERC Luminar crystal technology, which was an ingenious application of hyper technology and E-technology.

It could literally convert emotions into concrete power!

She had plenty of practice in doing so during prior battles.

At this moment, she found it difficult to channel a large amount of joy or fury. She could not bring herself to take a collection of lesser phase lords seriously.

Instead, she drew upon her feelings of contempt.

She harbored contempt towards the native aliens of the Red Ocean. She looked down on everything related to them. From worshipping phase lords as their gods to literally throwing away the lives of billions of soldiers without any sign of finesse, the aliens of this dwarf galaxy had thoroughly proven their degenerate and inferior nature.

The phase leaders in particular carried the blame for the anemic development of their civilization. It was only due to the external pressure of the human race that their society and technology finally entered the fast lane.

As her contempt towards the native aliens grew, the Instrument of Vengeance started to glow in a murky light.

The light conveyed a disturbing and nauseating feeling, as if just looking at it would make you sick!

Not every form of radiance was benign!

By the time the Instrument of Vengeance was almost fully charged, Saint Davia Stark briefly waited until she instantly pulled the trigger.

In an instant, a large and incredibly powerful beam of sickly light erupted from the muzzle of the oversized luminar crystal rifle and instantly crossed the void!

The beam arrived before the orven phase lord before anyone else could respond.

It should have struck the enemy's azure energy shield and spatial barrier before drilling straight through his raiment.

If Saint Stark had not overestimated the lesser phase lord's multi-layered defenses, then there should be enough power left of the energy beam to burn partway through the chest of the massive alien.

That did not happen.

For whatever reason, at the moment the ace pilot pulled the trigger, the targeted phase lord somehow disappeared!

"The Amaranto missed!"

"How can that be?!"

"Saint Stark is the most accurate mech pilot in our fleet! I can't remember the time when she last missed her shot. How are the enemy phase lords able to evade her strike?!"

"Multiple analysis engines went to work in order to decipher what had happened."

Their initial guess was that the aliens had relied on deception. Perhaps the target did not exist in the first place. What the Amaranto Mark III actually targeted was a very sophisticated and realistic decoy.

However, the spatial activity generated by the phase lord in question quickly allowed the Larkinsons to decipher the truth.

"The orven phase lord blinked several kilometers to the side 0.713 seconds before he was supposed to get hit!"

The humans were not that shocked that phase lords could teleport away, especially when the humans had yet to subject them to any warp interdiction effects.

What truly perplexed them was that the targeted phase lord did not blink away too early or too late. He did so in such a tiny window of opportunity that Saint Stark could not reacquire her target in time! "This is impossible! How can these stupid aliens predict the Amaranto Mark III's timing so well?!"

The Larkinsons desperately sought answers.

Their most likely guess was that the new raiments contained advanced computing systems that provided a large amount of auxiliary functions to their wearers.

Perhaps one of them accurately analyzed the behavior of the Amaranto Mark III based on historical data as well as ongoing observations and gave the orven phase lord an accurate prediction on when to teleport away.

One particularly bold speculation claimed that the phase lords may have resorted to cybernetic augmentations in order to achieve a greater fusion between their true bodies and their raiments!

This would result in a synergy that vaguely resembled the cooperation between a mech and mech pilot!

Another possibility was that the Red Cabal or the major alien races successfully developed a new generation of phasewater organs that possessed exotic capabilities.

There had been speculation that new advancements in materials, technologies and so on may have spurred the phase whales to develop powerful new phasewater organs that took advantage of the properties of hyper materials to grant qi cultivation-like powers to their own kind!

Currently, nobody had any definite answers. They could only keep their eyes out for more anomalies and hope that the native aliens did not present too many unexpected surprises.

Saint Stark had grown thoroughly angered by her latest result.

All of her contempt towards her enemies had gone away. These unusually well-equipped phase lords had thoroughly challenged her pride.

She channeled her mixed emotions into her Instrument of Vengeance as she prepared to unleash her second attack.

The red glow of fury and the purple glow of pride mixed together to produce a more weighty and ominous combination of magenta light.

This dark and moody radiance seemed to sap the light from the surrounding area.

For a moment, nothing else but the Amaranto Mark III and her iconic luminar crystal rifle mattered!

As Saint Stark and her battle partner set their sights on the orven phase lord yet again, they grew determined to wipe away their failure!

"WE SHALL NOT MISS A SECOND TIME."

Chapter 7463 Mutual Progression

Chapter 7463 Mutual Progression

Saint Davia Stark had no idea how her initial target was able to blink away in the nick of time, but she did not believe that she would miss again.

This was especially the case now that she knew that the enemy possessed this capability!

Her attention narrowed into a razor sharp arrow that pointed straight at the orven phase lord.

The alien leader in question did not let down his guard. He continued to hold his alloy shield as if his life depended on it, which was a very prudent action on his part.

The intensely glowing Amaranto Mark III made no secret which target she intended to strike next!

Saint Stark disdained to play any misdirection games. She believed too much in the firepower of her mech and her own skill in marksmanship to resort to any dirty moves.

For a moment, nothing else mattered in their minds except each other.

Davia Stark's intuition told her that her chosen target most likely possessed the ability to blink to safety yet again.

Yet the only way for him to succeed was to predict her timing correctly.

She did not know how her adversary was able to do so with such accuracy, but she refused to believe that he could read her like an open book.

Seconds passed as both sides remained on standby.

This could not last as the Amaranto Mark III and her Instrument of Vengeance had reached close to full charge.

Both the remarkable archemech and the luminar crystal rifle lacked the strength to contain so many energies at such elevated levels for a long duration of time.

Perhaps the story might be different once the Amaranto received her much-anticipated superdimensional upgrade, but that was probably at least a year away from happening.

For now, Saint Stark felt increasing pressure to pull the trigger before her own machine started to melt and malfunction.

Her mind momentarily blanked before she abruptly pulled the trigger!

Once again, the area around the ace marksman mech and the space around the living mech and her target seemed to darken as an enormous magenta energy beam cut through the distance!

Davia had channeled all of her pride, fury, indignation and will to succeed into her attack, causing it to become more powerful and persistent than the previous attack!

Such a strike would have definitely been able to pierce through multiple defensive layers before inflicting a serious or even crippling injury to a mere lesser phase lord!

Yet...

"She missed again!"

"What is happening?!"

"The interval is even shorter this time! Only 0.544 seconds passed between the enemy phase lord blinking away and the ace mech launching her shot!"

"These phase lords have evolved!"

A single split-second evasion may have been a fluke.

Twice was not a fluke. It was a pattern.

The orven phase lord may not look that impressive compared to his peers, but he had most definitely gained at least one major upgrade!

All of the alien phase lords gained confidence in this display of spatial prowess. Their traversal speed increased while they relied on their energy defenses to block incoming attacks.

Everyone began to take the enemy a little more seriously. The Larkinsons had grown too accustomed to fighting the enemy cannon fodder. They finally realized that the ones stationed across the border may not necessarily be so inadequately trained and equipped.

Multiple warships began to divert a hefty amount of processing power into analyzing the possible new strengths and capabilities of the approaching lesser phase lords.

One of their fastest conclusions was that not all of the native gods received cutting-edge goodies.

While all of them wore thicker and more advanced raiments, the ones worn by the orven phase lord and a handful of other alien champions possessed distinctive traits that were absent in others.

Technological propagation was highly inconsistent among the native aliens.

Since the Larkinsons struggled to update all of their low-ranking and high-ranking mechs to the newest and most advanced specifications, the problem was at least ten times worse among the major alien races!

After analyzing all of the data, the Saint Commander immediately issued an order to Saint Stark.

"Your targeting priorities have changed. Give up on your current obsession and clean up the phase lords that appear to be less well-equipped. The probability that they can evade your attack by relying on an apparently automatic response is significantly lower."

The ace marksman mech scowled inside her cockpit.

She hated the fact that she failed twice in a row. She wanted to take out that smug orven phase lord even more than before!

Yet she knew that pursuing her current target would not benefit the greater picture. The Saint Commander's new instruction made sense, and Stark hated this fact.

Her pride screamed at her to disregard the Larkinson Matriarch's orders, but she ruthlessly clamped down on those selfish feelings.

She was a soldier!

She knew her duty. Achieving victory and limiting the losses suffered by friendly forces ranked higher than finally getting a hit on that annoying orven champion.

"FINE." She grumbled.

She obediently began to target one of the enemy phase lords specified by the Saint Commander.

As her Amaranto Mark III began to charge up for another precision strike, the ace mech no longer glowed with strong emotions anymore. Its radiance largely remained white and clean, indicating that Saint Stark simply could not muster any particularly strong feelings at this moment.

This was not just because she felt disappointed in herself, but also because her intuition told her that her new target did not pose as much as a challenge anymore.

This time, a pure white bright light beam cut through the space in between!

No more surprises occurred as the attack successfully shattered the targeted phase lord's spatial barrier and physical defenses.

There was even enough power left over to burn deep into the nunser phase lord's true body and cause him to recoil in pain!

"Finally!"

"So not all of the alien phase lords can blink away before getting hurt."

This was encouraging news!

Though the Amaranto Mark III failed to achieve a one-hit kill, the ace marksman mech already began to charge up her next attack in order to finish the job.

Of course, the opposing side would not make that easy. Now that he had lost his spatial barrier and gained a large hole in his raiment, the nunser phase lord deliberately flew behind his fellow native gods, hoping to rely on their bulk to shield him from a lethal blow.

Saint Stark huffed at the cowardly but logical response. If she still possessed the capability to bend her energy beams, then she might have attempted to finish the job anyway.

Perhaps she may still be able to do so even if she no longer had the option of resonating with Opticonium.

It was situations like these that she missed the ability to surprise her opponents by hitting them from unexpected angles.

In comparison, the classic combination of HeatMate and ChargeMate sounded much more underwhelming in comparison.

This was especially the case now that the Larkinson Clan no longer abided by the rule that prohibited deep integration between mechs and starships.

Since the Amaranto Mark III often fought by drawing directly on the energy reserves and heat capacity of friendly vessels, some of her conventional shortcomings no longer applied anymore!

HeatMate and ChargeMate only became relevant if the Amaranto detached from the hull of a starship or large installation and fought by herself.

Though there were a number situations where the Amaranto had done so in order to occupy more favorable angles, these situations mostly occurred in the later stages of a battle when the greatest danger had already passed.

Perhaps Saint Stark should approach the Design Department after the battle issue a request to swap out HeatMate and ChargeMate with a more interesting key resonating material.

"WHAT DO YOU THINK, AMARANTO?"

"GO FOR IT. I FEEL QUITE JEALOUS AT THE DARK ZEPHYR AND THE MINERVA FOR OBTAINING IMPRESSIVE NEW RESONATING ABILITIES. I HAVE HEARD THAT THE NEW VERSION OF THE PROMETHEA IS ALSO IN LINE TO RECEIVE AN IMPRESSIVE UPGRADE. WE CANNOT AFFORD TO FALL BEHIND."

Saint Stark mentally reminded herself to have that talk before returning her focus to the battle.

The Amaranto Mark III's subsequent shots no longer missed, but did not achieve any particularly astonishing results either.

The enemy phase lords clearly knew what they were getting into when they chose to engage with the Larkinsons.

Their upgraded raiments could take a greater beating and they relied on their undamaged comrades to block her linear aim.

Nonetheless, the ace marksman mech still played a very useful role. She not only exerted a large amount of pressure against the phase lords in the open, but also degraded their defenses on an incremental basis.

It was extremely impressive that a junior ace mech possessed the capability to break a phase lord's spatial barrier from an extended range.

Once broken, it took a lot of time and effort to revive this barrier. Unless the phase lord in question possessed numerous defensive phasewater organs, it was pretty much impossible to do so within the span of a typical battle!

Saint Stark did not need any further instructions to focus on breaking barriers over completing any kills.

She knew her place. Her ace mech only had to act as fire support during this particular engagement.

The Larkinsons had other assets on hand to deal the finishing blows.

Two of the assets finally made an appearance once the enemy phase lords were about to fall upon the Tortuous Scream.

The First Sword Mark III and the Riot Mark III both emerged into space and flew straight towards the incoming threats!

Chapter 7464 Boxed In

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Anticipation among the human soldiers jumped considerably when the two ace mechs finally began to take action.

The First Sword Mark III possessed an unbeatable record while the Riot Mark III brandished a powerful tier 3 Destroyer spear.

Though both of them possessed a lot of similarities, they possessed entirely different appearances and conveyed significantly different impressions.

The First Sword Mark III's uncoated surface gleamed with the light of hard superdimensional alloys. The new SEVA System relied on high-frequency vibrations to better withstand incoming attacks, so her exterior looked a little fuzzier than normal when active.

Her Saint Kingdom radiated an invisible sense of sharpness. It seemed that any action taken by the ace swordsman mech possessed the potential to cut much deeper than normal!

What truly attracted everyone's attention was not the luxuriously expensive mech frame or the impressively large and impossibly sharp greatsword, but the 33 sword fey followed from behind!

The Prime Sword Fey and the 32 lesser sword fey assumed a formation that took on the shape of wings.

This made the First Sword Mark III appear more transcendent and imposing.

The appearance of this notoriously lethal superdimensional mech elicited a strong reaction from the opposing lesser phase lords.

Their charging speed faltered as multiple enemy leaders recognized one of the few superdimensional ace mechs employed by red humanity.

The First Sword Mark III had already reaped the lives of over a dozen native gods in the months she became active!

Whether by cutting off their heads with her impossibly sharp Decapitator or skewering them with dozens of superdimensional sword fey, the ace swordsman mech had established a reputation for letting not a single lesser phase lord leave her vicinity alive!

As for the Riot Mark III, the machine had earned much less infamy due to accompanying Ves on his trip to the Rubarthan Pact, but her superdimensional archemetal plating along with her nefarious and unstable aura indicated that she was probably just as difficult to deal with if not more.

Even though the two high-end machines should technically be categorized as junior ace mechs, their superdimensional construction alone defied this simple categorization.

Lesser phase lords did not necessarily fear a fight against junior ace mechs, especially when they had numbers on their side, but the alien leaders were not stupid.

Even if not all of them were well-informed, they at least knew that their attacks had very little chance of penetrating through the materials they believed to be derived from the bones of the Elder Gods.

This made it all the more suspicious that the lesser phase lords refused to abort their attack run.

Though their confidence had obviously dipped, they reluctantly resumed their flight and pushed forward in an inevitable confrontation between themselves and two superdimensional ace mechs.

"Are they ignorant or suicidal?" Isobel questioned as she watched the situation unfold from the bridge of the Tarrasque.

"Both and neither." Ves responded. "They are ignorant because they cannot possibly know everything our Larkinson ace mechs are capable of. They are suicidal because the combination of the Amaranto Mark III, the First Sword Mark III and the Riot Mark III can make short work of them regardless of what they can do. The fact that they are still moving forward is because there is a greater purpose behind their actions."

"They are sacrificing themselves." The idle female ace pilot speculated. "Are they trying to act as decoys?"

Ves shrugged. "Maybe. Possibly. It makes sense. They only need to keep the three aforementioned ace mechs occupied to allow another plan to come to fruition."

"You do not sound particularly concerned."

"If I can make this prediction, so can the Saint Commander. Nothing can escape her awareness."

Seconds passed as the distance closed at an astonishing rate. The First Sword Mark III possessed greater mobility than the Riot Mark III, especially when the former powered up her Electro-Reactant Flight System.

Electric wings adorned the metallic mech, causing her to resemble an angel of steel.

This sword-wielding machine charged straight towards the lesser orven phase lord that had previously shown unusual evasion capabilities, accelerating at such a high rate that it would seem that a collision was inevitable!

Yet moments before the Decapitator could slice through the orven phase lord's defenses, the native god blinked away!

"TCH." Saint Dise made a sound of frustration when her charge accomplished nothing.

Even though her ace mech had already activated her high-end space suppression module, the living mech apparently needed to get a lot closer in order to make it unviable for the phase lord to teleport away.

"The Red Cabal most definitely upgraded the phasewater organ capable of enabling short-distance instant teleportation." Ves spoke into a communication channel. "The distance at the time of that last blink should have produced enough of a space suppression effect to block the displacement of a typical lesser phase lord. The fact that he was able to do so in the face of this difficulty suggests a recent but substantial upgrade. Expect this fellow to be particularly elusive."

That did not sound good.

Saint Dise wasted a lot of time in vain just now. It took a lot of power and effort for her First Sword Mark III to change course and redirect her considerable momentum.

Despite achieving very little results so far, she did not become discouraged.

The Amaranto Mark III and the Riot Mark III managed to achieve much more substantial results. The former kept chipping away at the defenses of the more vulnerable phase lords while the latter decisively finished them off with her destructive spear thrusts!

With each and every strike, the ace spearman mech easily outmaneuvered the slower and clumsier phase lords and inflicted significant internal damage to their true bodies.

In contrast, every phase lord that confronted the Riot Mark III directly lost a lot of coordination and fluency. They flew as if they had become drunk all of a sudden. Even if they managed to land a hit, the superdimensional ace mech only accrued the tiniest of surface scratches.

For once, Saint Orfan no longer fought against overwhelmingly powerful opponents!

Though she found very little challenge in bullying these 'ordinary' lesser phase lords, a part of her relished the opportunity to crush her foes by relying on superior tech and materials.

Much of the confidence that she had lost in previous battles slowly began to return. Her Saint Kingdom grew more active and volatile as this happened.

This caused the Destroyer spear-wielding machine to evoke even more fear among the enemy phase lords!

They did not even pretend to make any attempts at defeating the superdimensional mechs. They had already split up some time ago and attempted to charge straight towards the Tortuous Scream with the hopes that at least one of them could make it all the way through!

This sacrificial play strengthened the suspicion that the native aliens must have come up with a devious plot, but the details remained unclear for the time being.

Whatever the case, splitting up did not avail them much. The Riot Mark III might not be the fastest machine within the combined fleet, but it was still capable of hunting the easy prey down one by one.

The Amaranto Mark III in the meantime focused her firepower on the most distant and isolated targets.

So long as the lesser phase lords did not possess the strange new blinking tech, they were practically sitting ducks against the most accurate and powerful marksman employed by the Larkinson Clan.

Energy beam after energy beam precisely struck, crippled or outright killed the native gods that used to enjoy the worship of millions if not billions of alien citizens!

However, despite all of the slaughter, three lesser phase lords managed to escape this ignoble fate.

They all possessed the same advanced blinking technology that allowed them to escape every lethal attack, no matter whether it came from afar or up close!

The Tortuous Scream appeared tantalizingly close to the surviving lesser phase lords. The three enemy champions that remained only needed to survive a stretch further before they could lay their hands on the large but unwieldy battleship!

However, the Larkinsons did not intend to let that happen.

"YOUR LUCK ENDS HERE."

The Larkinson ace mechs still had multiple powerful trump cards at their disposal, but they already dismissed most of them for being excessive.

They all wanted to solve the problem with the least amount of cost.

The three ace pilots only exchanged a few words before they settled on a new battle plan. They did not need to speak at length because they already fought alongside each other for many years. Their tacit understanding had already reached a considerable height.

When the First Sword Mark III charged at the same orven phase lord that had escaped her reach multiple times, she no longer acted as a single unit.

Instead, her 33 sword fey unfolded from her rear and began to spread forward and outward in an expanding cone!

The ace swordsman mech deliberately controlled her speed to allow her sharp spurs to fly in position ahead of time.

It did not take much guessing for the orven phase lord to predict that the sword fey sought to box him into a cage of superdimensional blades!

Yet even if the enemy was able to discern Saint Dise's intentions, he did not attempt to escape this formative trap.

This caused multiple Larkinsons to smirk.

"I knew it." Ves grinned as he witnessed how a simple sword formation put the orven phase lord into checkmate. "That blink ability could not possibly be cheap or easy to activate. Pulling it off once is exhausting to his true body as well as the relevant phasewater organs."

The orven phase lord could blink away in advance, but what would be the point? It would only weaken him further while at least a couple of hull-grade superdimensional sword fey pierced through his energy defenses and poked holes directly through his raiment!

Even if the sword fey were not made of the highest grade of superdimensional alloys, they were still more than lethal enough against non-superdimensional defenses!

The alien bravely chose to make his stand. He held his thick alloy shield with one arm and drew out a serrated sword with another arm. The armored native god clanged the side of his blade against his shield, issuing a silent challenge against the incoming steel angel.

Though Saint Dise respected the orven phase lord's martial attitude, that did not mean she was willing to take her time to savor the duel.

Twelve of her sword fey abruptly left their positions and swiftly converged on a central target!

The orven phase lord noticed what was happening and finally blinked away with great effort!

He appeared a few kilometers away, which may have been good enough to evade a singular powerful attack, but only delayed the inevitable in this case!

The ace swordsman mech made no further move. The living mech simply stood by as all of her sword fey converged upon the repositioned enemy with a vengeance!

It only took a few seconds before the first superdimensional fey pierced right through the enhanced azure energy shield and spatial barrier as if they were made of paper.

The thick alloy plating that protected the enemy's true body offered very little effective resistance.

The blades sunk all the way in until nothing but their 'hilts' remained visible.

Though the handful of blades inflicted severe but not fatal damage, the same could not be said for the remaining 30 or so sword fey!

Their greater distance meant that they only took a little more time before they turned the orven phase lord into a giant pin cushion!

At this stage, no amount of upgraded phasewater organs or newly developed equipment could preserve his life!

Although the dozens of sword stabs looked devastating, Saint Dise deliberately made sure to keep the carcass reasonably intact.

"Good job, Dise." Ves complimented the ace pilot. "Multiple parties have expressed a great amount of interest in the latest developments of the major alien races. We need to study the new blinking tech in detail so that we can figure out how to counter it more effectively in the future."

Saint Dise issued a wordless grunt in reply. She had already dismissed her current opponent and set her sights on the other notable enemy champions.

Her Decapitator still hungered for the blood of alien gods.

Chapter 7465 Unfortunate Counter

Chapter 7465 Unfortunate Counter

Currently, the native aliens sacrificed the lives of multiple lesser phase lords, yet inflicted no effective damage up to this point.

Under ordinary circumstances, this attack run should have been declared an abject failure.

Yet still the two remaining lesser phase lords desperately attempted to close the remaining distance so they could fulfill their ostensive mission of wrecking the Tortuous Scream before they inevitably got butchered.

Why?

The smoother the sequence progressed for the humans, the more vigilant they became.

Whatever scheme the native aliens had set up would definitely become exposed soon!

In any case, during the time the First Sword Mark III boxed in the lesser orven phase lord and punctured his true body with 33 sword fey, the Amaranto Mark III and the Riot Mark III took care of the remaining two native gods.

Their game plan was quite simple. The Riot Mark III charged straight towards one of the enemy gods like a raging bull. Saint Rosa Orfan demonstrated no finesse at all, which made her attack run all the more frightening and intimidating!

The unsettling Saint Kingdom around the striped orange-and-black ace mech alone evoked a lot of concerns among the surviving enemy phase lords.

They did not think they could blink away successfully once they fell under its highly disruptive influence!

As such, the phase lord targeted by the Riot Mark III blinked away a little sooner than usual.

This was still sufficient enough to make the ace spearman mech miss its initial target!

With the formidable momentum behind the Riot Mark III, it would take precious seconds for the machine to turn around and charge after her prey.

Yet because the Riot Mark III had to chase from behind, it would take even more time for the two to finally meet!

Instead of doing so, Saint Orfan took a different course.

Her Riot Mark III followed a much gentler curve through space and began to charge at the final remaining lesser phase lord!

This meant that the spear-wielding machine could no longer threaten her previous target, but that did not matter because another machine had already taken care of her old problem!

Less than a second after the enemy in question had blinked to his new coordinates, a bright but ruthless energy beam abruptly shattered through the azure energy shield and spatial barrier before burning a deep hole through the native god's armored helmet and heat!

This time, no insane tech or miracle solution succeeded in saving the enemy's life at the last moment.

Even if the enemy somehow possessed the ability to blink a second time in a row, it still required an impossibly tight reaction window to make that happen.

Clearly, Saint Davia Stark never intended to give her foe enough time!

The third and final lesser phase lord perished just short of reaching his goal. The ace marksman mech and the ace spearman mech simply repeated their earlier tactics and managed to achieve an identical result.

This was good news for the Larkinsons, because they did not have to expose any other cards to deal with the imminent threat.

A brief lull ensued as multiple officers and leaders wondered whether this was truly the extent of the enemy plan.

"This can't be it... right?"

"Stay vigilant, but do not let up the pressure on the remaining enemy assets. Their numbers are still formidable."

While nearly everyone directed their attention to the enemies in the open, the ones who had been moving around in the dark finally delivered what was supposed to be their coup-de-grace!

Hundreds of large and formidable-looking missiles and torpedoes lost their stealth as they sought to close the remaining distance in full burn!

Before they unveiled themselves, they had quietly drifted fairly close to the perimeter of the human armada. Their minimal emissions and their ballistic trajectories ensured that even the best human-developed sensor systems would have been able to detect their traces from a distance!

There was hardly any time for the point defenses of the Tortuous Scream and other warships to respond to the latest threat in time.

Even if they managed to shoot down the majority of enemy munitions, the remaining ones would definitely strike the human warships with their new and massively enhanced warheads!

Multiple sensor systems already started to sound the alarm when they detected highly volatile activity from the incoming missiles!

They were all laced with a small amount of mid-grade superdimensional matter!

Though some may have found this expenditure to be wasteful, their presence easily elevated their threat level to the point that they could even pose a serious threat against superdimensional mechs upon direct impact!

"The aliens responsible for launching them had timed their attack nearly perfectly. It would have been even better if they struck their targets while the alien phase lords at the front kept the ace mechs busy, but the latter had still been drawn too far away to return and fend off the incoming payloads!

Yet before these missiles could even come close enough to threaten the human starships with proximity explosions, hundreds of Commandeered bunker mechs stationed on the Torturous Scream and other Larkinson vessels instantly cut down the threatening missiles with accurate intercepting fire.

All of the threatening missiles and torpedoes faltered well short of their target without exception. The Omega Threshers had managed to shoot them into slag without giving their failsafes any chance to detonate prematurely!

As such, this surprise attack ended with a whimper, much to the disappointment of the native aliens who had been hoping to deliver a crippling blow to the human invaders!

Ves sighed in relief. "The Saint Commander is as reliable as ever. It would have been much more difficult to deal with this particular threat without her participation. It is bad luck on the part of the aliens that they attempted to conduct a covert strike on our fleet. Nothing can remain completely hidden within the generous radius of Casella's Command Field."

Even though the Saint Commander had yet to gain the ability to usurp control of enemy soldiers and machines, it was still easy enough for her to detect any unwelcome intruders within her sphere of awareness.

The lower the distance, the more effectively she could gain the measure of her opponents!

It did not take much thinking that Casella detected the stealthed missiles well in advance and secretly prepared her Knights to intercept them all with the most optimal amount of firepower.

That was not the extent of her countermeasure.

Her Barons suddenly shifted from bombarding the native alien capital ships at the front to turning their powerful ship-mounted luminar crystal cannons and Omega Laser Cannons on the other side of the battlefield!

Moments later, a vast array of energy beams and plasma bolts struck seemingly random coordinates of space.

Yet instead of hitting nothing but vacuum, over a dozen strangely-shaped crystalline hulls appeared into view!

"Archeships!"

"I knew those sneaky turtles had to be skulking around somewhere. They are the secret defenders of native alien space. Many of our scouts and stealth vessels end up getting hunted down by these alien stealth masters."

Though the arche race did not maintain large populations or vast territories, it still managed to keep up with the other major alien races by virtue of their elusiveness.

Just a dozen-or-so archeships could inflict as much damage as a fleet ten times the size by making the most out of the advantage of surprise.

Yet the combined fleet did not cross the border between human and alien space without making adequate preparations.

Even without the benefit of Casella's Command Field, multiple recently upgraded warships such as the Tarrasque and the Babylon Excavator possessed sophisticated sensor arrays that could detect all manner of stealthed objects. They had been specifically tuned to detect the approach of archeships in particular due to the potential damage they could inflict on an unsuspecting fleet.

However, their effectiveness at an extended range could not match that of the domain field of a genuine ace commander.

In order to make her counterattack foolproof, Casella took direct control of all of the bunker mechs assigned to attack the archeships.

Both Knights and Barons combined their firepower to accurately cripple or destroy the archeships that had clearly been caught off-guard by the human response!

The arche soldiers never expected their 'unwitting' prey to detect them in advance and strike their ships directly!

Due to the need to maintain active stealth, the archeships kept their azure shield generators inactive.

Even if they had been designed to go online in a hurry, it still took precious seconds for the bewildered aliens to complete the process.

This was way too late to prevent the resonance-empowered energy beams from burning holes through the hulls and damaging a considerable amount of archemetal!

Unfortunately, archeships possessed a lot more redundancy than conventional warships. It was extremely difficult to completely knock out an archeship's subsystems.

Aside from a few exceptions such as the power reactor and other systems, many other functions such as sensors, propulsion and life support could still persist despite half of the alien hull getting scrapped!

This was why half of the archeships still managed to activate some energy shields, though their power levels were so low that they only bought a few seconds of time before they shattered apart.

The impressive resilience of archetech could have saved the saved arche stealth flotilla if not for one inconvenient fact.

The archeships were not all that big.

The arche consistently lacked resources and population.

Their extreme specialization in sneak attacks did not help them with holding resource-rich territories.

Nobody had ever witnessed a capital archeship before. By far most of the ones encountered by red humanity consisted of frigate-sized alien vessels.

The ambush force this time was a bit more luxurious than that. Half of them still consisted of archefrigates, but a handful of them also consisted of the much-rarer archedestroyers.

Yet what truly attracted people's attention was an archeship that was significantly larger than the rest!

Its volume roughly matched that of a more substantial human cruiser!

The moment a certain Senior Mech Designer caught sight of this extremely rare construction, she instantly grew crazy!

"CASELLA!" Gloriana forcefully shouted into the command channel! "DO NOT DESTROY THE FLAGSHIP OF THE ARCHES! I NEED HER! COMPARED TO THEIR TINY FRIGATES, THE LARGER HULLS MOST DEFINITELY CONTAIN MORE ADVANCED AND DIVERSE APPLICATIONS OF ARCHETECH. OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THIS UNIQUE BRAND OF ALIEN ENGINEERING WILL DEFINITELY PROGRESS BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS IF WE CAN CAPTURE HER MOSTLY INTACT! ABSOLUTELY DO NOT INFLICT HEAVY DAMAGE ON HER. THE CRUISER ANALOGUE NEEDS TO BE AS INTACT AS POSSIBLE IF WE WANT TO UNLOCK ALL OF HER SECRETS!"

Though the Saint Commander did not issue a verbal reply, her Knights and Barons moderated their firepower straight away.

They still attacked the archefrigates and archedestroyers at full power but deliberately lowered their power settings when striking at the archecruiser.

The energy beams also became a lot more discriminating in their targeting. They no longer tried to burn holes straight into the interior of the hull and instead focused on knocking out surface components.

Though it was difficult to fully understand how the archecruiser worked, the Saint Commander relied on her judgment and the analysis of Sovvie to neutralize anything related to weapons and propulsion.

Soon enough, the archecruiser had lost much of her ability to affect the battlefield. Her archemetal exterior gained a lot of scorch marks, yet still retained much of her core integrity.

This did not mean she was harmless or even crippled.

Even now, the archecruiser still attempted to back away from the frighteningly competent human fleet by relying on some sort of reactionless drive that couldn't be knocked out without damaging the core of the priceless alien flagship.

However, if the agonizingly slow alien vessel thought that it could get away from the Larkinsons, then she had another thing coming!

The Babylon Excavator along with a small squadron of RF escort warships quickly swooped in and began to surround the mostly impotent vessel from multiple directions.

They soon launched physical harpoons that pierced through the archemetal with just the right amount of force and locked the archecruiser in place.

They also activated their high-powered scanners at close range in order to gather as much data on their interior as possible.

Once they collected a satisfactory amount of raw data, they activated specialized directional jamming systems and other forms of ECM to debilitate the captive hull as much as they could manage.

Their effectiveness was questionable as anything made out of archetech was naturally a lot more resistant towards most forms of electronic interference.

Still, it was better than nothing.

Once the Saint Commander became satisfied that the RF warships could keep the archecruiser in their grasp, she finally issued the order to the boarding parties.

It was time for the infantry soldiers to earn their keep.

Multiple boarding shuttles under the escort of first-class multipurpose mechs launched from various hangar bays and furiously burned their way to the archeship.

None of the armored soldiers knew what was in store for them, but that did not sway them from their duty.

"Let's butcher some turtles."

Chapter 7466 Limited Dispersal

Chapter 7466 Limited Dispersal

From the moment the native alien defenders learned that their native gods had been slaughtered and the arche failed in their ambush, they completely lost all hope of victory.

The flow of the battle experienced a massive shift as the native alien soldiers all experienced a massive decline in morale!

If their side could no longer deploy any phase lords or other trump cards, then a total defeat became inevitable.

The native aliens made the only decision that allowed them to mitigate their losses as much as possible.

They no longer stood their ground and commenced an all-out retreat!

"The aliens... they're running away!"

"Too soon! They still have tens of thousands of phasefighters and hundreds of intact warships!"

"The native alien commanders aren't stupid. They can see that our smaller fleet can nibble them all to pieces if they insist on fighting to the bitter end. That will not accomplish anything as there is almost no chance of killing any of us while we remain under the protection of the Minerva and the other ace mechs."

When one side possessed an absolute advantage in high-level combatants, then the other side had little chance of accomplishing any further objectives.

Perhaps the huge disparity in numbers could still fend off a handful of ace mechs by virtue of exhausting them, but the Saint Commander fared particularly well in these kinds of scenarios.

Even without an ace mech that specialized in mass destruction like the Promethea Mark II, Casella Ingvar possessed enough endurance to keep her Knights and Barons empowered until they managed to break the backs of the alien fleets!

Defeating these enemies was easy, but wiping them out demanded a lot more care and attention.

A force led by the Saint Commander could easily break a concentrated and numerically superior hostile group, but once the latter started to disintegrate and flee in all directions, it became increasingly harder to maintain resonance empowerment on all of her scattered troops!

Although the range of her Command Field was enormous compared to the Saint Kingdoms of ordinary ace pilots, it was only enough to exert her influence across a moderately sized space battlefield.

Once the different enemies truly chose to go their separate ways, the pursuing mechs and warships could not afford to distance themselves too much from the flagship of the combined fleet.

If they chose to exceed this invisible boundary, then all of the Knights would lose their precious resonance empowerment, causing them to become a lot weaker in every dimension!

The differences were so massive that the unenhanced mechs and warships would definitely become vulnerable to counterattacks.

"Damn, there are at least a few smart heads among the surviving alien commanders."

Though coordination and cohesion among numerous alien fleets had reached the bottom due to the strategic elimination of their native gods as well as their flagships, the remaining leaders still possessed enough awareness to know that their pursuers did not dare to split up too much.

They only needed to do a bit more thinking before they figured out one of the combined fleet's major weaknesses.

The human forces did not dare to splinter too much!

As such, after a bit of fleeing, most of the surviving alien assets began to slow down and take the time to regroup.

Though the aliens still feared the human invaders, they could still afford to take a breath now that it appeared that pursuit became unlikely.

"Disgusting. These aliens do not intend to flee any further now that we have shown that we cannot possibly catch them all. They do not appear to organize any offensives either. These enemies know that they stand no chance if they get caught in a fight on our terms."

This was annoying because the native aliens still managed to preserve a huge amount of phasefighters and homeships. They continued to pose a credible threat and could inflict serious damage to the humans if the Saint Commander was no longer available.

The human forces therefore needed to stay on guard. The mech pilots had to rein in their aggression but remain alert for any unexpected developments of the battlefield.

Of course, the Larkinsons did not lack means to chase after the scattered alien fleet elements.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III excelled in these kinds of pre-and-post battle skirmishes.

So long as an enemy force lacked the protection of both phase lords and overwhelming numbers, the ace light skirmisher could easily launch continuous hit-and-run attacks without incurring too much risk!

The powerful living ace mech could easily keep this up until his energy reserves bottomed out or Saint Tusa's willpower had reached its limit.

The Riot Mark III received permission to go solo as well.

The mech did not even get close enough to sating its bloodlust during this relatively short engagement. The D-mech yearned to spill the blood of tens of thousands of alien soldiers and Saint Rosa Orfan was happy to oblige her recalcitrant 'partner' force once!

The ace spearman mech might not be able to match the acceleration of the Dark Zephyr Mark III, but the Riot Mark III could still fly fast enough to close the distance on individual alien fleets.

Saint Orfan did not fear their attacks. Her D-mech's high-grade superdimensional construction alone was enough to neutralize the vast majority of conventional attacks!

"You can run, but you can never hide!"

Alas, the alien forces that got chased by the seemingly invincible and indomitable Riot Mark III only chose to splinter their elements even further.

This prevented the Riot Mark III from eliminating her targets too quickly!

Still, these minor frustrations did not take away from the victory attained by the combined fleet.

As long as no reinforcements arrived, the Larkinsons and their allies managed to win enough effective control of the border system.

"We shall remain in this area until we have collected our spoils." The Saint Commander decided. "We need to be quick about it. We should proceed to the planetary depot in the inner system and destroy as much orbital and planetary infrastructure as possible. The alien fleets may be able to stay out of our reach, but the same cannot be said for their fixed assets."

Many salvage teams subsequently deployed from various warships as well as the logistical vessels attached to the combined fleet.

While the latter did not possess a lot of capacity due to the need to remain swift and agile, they had been specifically configured to conduct high-value salvage and repair operations.

Right now, numerous broken archeships as well as phase lord carcasses presented a lot of choice salvage opportunities.

Of particular importance were the carcasses of the 3 lesser phase lords equipped with cutting-edge short-ranged teleportation technology.

No matter whether these well-equipped native gods managed to delay their demise by relying on innovative cybernetics, phasewater organs or both, red humanity needed to get to the bottom of this mystery!

Another attractive salvage target was the archecruiser.

However, unless the boarding parties managed to secure the interior, it was extremely risky for noncombatants to approach the vessel in advance.

When the first wave of boarding shuttles had just managed to stop alongside the partially damaged hull of the immobilized vessel, Gloriana suddenly transmitted another emergency message.

"Casella!" She shouted. "My pet arche engineer and I have studied the scans of the archecruiser in great detail. Both of us have noticed over two-dozen critical sections that we must secure as soon as possible! The arche race is extremely protective of its technologies. Not only have they deliberately made it as difficult to adapt to other races as possible, they also have the habit of installing many self-destruction triggers in their own vessels. The arche officers are trained to activate these triggers as soon as their situation becomes hopeless. I fear that time may come very soon!"

"I am aware of the possible risks, though I did not know that there are far more ways for the aliens to blow up their own ship." The Saint Commander replied. "I have already prepared a speedy countermeasure. Even if I cannot stop the arche from scuttling their own ship entirely, I should still be able to buy enough time for our boarding parties to usurp control over the hull. I need two answers from you. First, can every arche crew member trigger the self-destruct function? Second, will we be able to keep the archecruiser stable once our men have swept the interior?"

It took a few seconds for Gloriana to answer.

"Arche society is very stratified based on the quality and exquisiteness of their archeshells. They are easy to recognize by our troops. Tell them to pay attention to arche that carry shinier, fluorescent or majestic shells on their backs. They are often equipped with more elaborate equipment as well. Only the officers among these aliens can command their ships to self-destruct. The lower ranks are often conscripts who harbor a measure of envy, jealousy and resentment towards their 'better-shelled' superiors. Granting them the right to activate the self-destruct function is equivalent to playing with fire."

That was good news. It would be a lot easier for the boarding troops to quickly get the archecruiser under control if they only had to kill or restrain the shiny-shelled officers first.

"As for making sure the archecruiser will not go out of control once the alien crew cannot operate her anymore... I will take care of that in person."

"Pardon?"

Gloriana took a deep breath. "You heard me, Casella. As soon as it is safe to do so, I shall board a shuttle and transfer to the archecruiser in person. I am the only person in our combined fleet that possesses the specialized expertise, equipment and assistants necessary to operate the opaque systems of this major archeship. If I cannot do it, then I can guarantee you that no one else will be able to do better, and that includes my husband."

The notion of a mech designer as 'soft' as Gloriana stepping aboard a dangerous alien ship when they could not fully guarantee that it would blow up the next second sounded exceedingly stupid!

Yet if the Larkinsons wanted to make a huge contribution to the war effort in the very first battle of this campaign, then Gloriana bravely accepted the risks!

She did not want to prioritize her safety over glory when so many Larkinsons around her routinely took far greater risks on the battlefield.

The young Senior Mech Designer wanted to remind everyone that she was a Larkinson as well.

Casella could easily discern these motivations without needing to ask any questions.

She only had one response to this dangerous request.

"I will let you go as long as Ves approves of your initiative."

"He will." Gloriana sounded certain of this. "An action like this fully aligns with his ideology. It would be hypocritical for him to deny me a chance of earning glory and merit through my own effort."

"Then get ready. I shall do my best to pave the way, but only you can traverse it to the end."

The Saint Commander put the capture of the archecruiser high on her priority list, but now she had no choice but to drag it all the way to the top!

Nothing could go catastrophically wrong. The bunker mechs of the Tortuous Scream charged up their resonance-empowered energy cannons in advance. She would need their focused firepower in case she urgently needed to destroy a dangerous section or critical system of the captured vessel.

Casella did not care about destroying priceless advanced archetech. Keeping Gloriana alive mattered the most!

Her greater urgency prompted her to channel additional power to a certain Ultimate Module that had already arrived by the side of the immobilized archecruiser.

Floating just a short distance away from the damaged hull, an ostentatious green metallic owl proudly spread her wings before she began to summon an arcane storm!

The Victrix was ready to serve as a relay of the Minerva Mark II's formidable resonating abilities!

Chapter 7467 Unproven Soldier

Chapter 7467 Unproven Soldier

One of the problems faced by Saint Commander Casella Ingvar was that her importance vastly exceeded her ability to defend herself against direct attacks.

As a command unit and one that acted as the most powerful force multiplier of the Larkinson Clan, the Minerva Mark II always ranked high on the enemy's priority elimination list.

What truly vexed the Larkinsons was that despite the recency of her upgrade, the Minerva Mark II had yet to become a superdimensional mech.

She still relied on a good old transphasic hyper armor system to fend off attacks when evasion and energy defenses failed to keep the living mech spotless.

Though the Minerva Mark II's sacrifice ended up benefiting the Riot Mark III in a massive way, that did not change the fact that the ace command mech had become extremely vulnerable to quick takedowns in the current day and age!

As the failed arche sneak attack just proved, the native aliens made increasingly greater use of superdimensional armaments.

From the increasingly more prevalent Saint Piercers to the newly unveiled munitions enriched by small amounts of superdimensional matter, any of these weapons could easily blow apart the Minerva Mark II's relatively weak resonance shield and tear through her thin layers of transphasic armor plating!

Due to lacking both a proper Saint Kingdom and a superdimensional armor system, the Minerva Mark II had turned into a highly inconvenient asset that needed to be treated like a fragile vase.

Casella found it... inconvenient.

She knew that even if the Minerva Mark II received her promised superdimensional upgrade in the future, the ace command mech would still have to avoid direct combat whenever possible. Her inability to project a traditional Saint Kingdom deprived her of a powerful means to protect herself against a wide variety of attacks.

Fortunately, all was not lost.

The addition of the Victrix granted her an alternative means of getting close to the action.

Ves may have labeled the Ultimate Module as a remote command fey, but to Casella, she was nothing less than an avatar of the Minerva Mark II and by extension herself!

The Saint Commander had already experimented with the Victrix during previous engagements. She developed quite a bit of uses for the large and powerful remote command fey.

Using the living Ultimate Module as an extension relay for her Command Field was her most fundamental purpose.

Though it did not sound particularly exciting, the applications were myriad.

What she truly appreciated about the Victrix was that it became a lot easier for Casella to channel her various resonating abilities and other powers from a distance by using the remote command fey as her surrogate.

The importance of this benefit could not be overstated.

The inclusion of Mindstorm Alloy as the key resonating material for the Minerva Mark II was supposed to compensate for her weakness by giving her the option of intervening directly from the rear.

While its potential was great, her resonance strength was not yet fully up to the task of producing powerful psionic storms on the other side of the battlefield.

Distance remained a persistent problem. She had relatively little issue with generating a psionic storm a few hundred meters away from her ace mech, but that was practically useless.

However, the story was different if she could accomplish a similar feat with her remote command fey.

From the moment the Victrix arrived before the mysterious archecruiser, Casella was able to exert much greater control over the alien vessel.

The intensity of her Command Field penetrated deeper into the hull, though the Saint Commander also noted that she still encountered far greater resistance than typical.

Different from conventional alien homeships, archeships were entirely made out of archemetal, which possessed very similar compositions to the iconic shells of the arche race.

This had many implications. First, archeships were generally a lot denser and more massive than a similarly-sized homeship belonging to a different native alien race.

All of these dense and electrically charged layers of archemetal happened to form more effective barriers that repulsed foreign or hostile influences.

They also generated a lot of interference that diminished the amount of details that she could glean from the interior of the vessel. The center of the immobilized archecruiser was especially fuzzy to Casella's senses!

Furthermore, while the archecruiser could not be regarded as a living warship, her full archemetal construction along with the fact that hundreds of arche spacers interfaced directly with her hull through their archeshells meant that she was not fully lifeless either.

The alien ship possessed more traits of life than any other alien vessel that Casella encountered up to this point.

This hindered her power expression even further. Even with the boosts provided by the Victrix, when she finally attempted to generate psionic storms in every compartment that contained relatively more powerful lifeforms, the output was just a fraction of what was possible in open space!

The deeper into the hull, the lower the intensity of her psionic storms.

This was bad news. Though Casella could still ascertain that she was causing at least some amount of disruption to the enemy crew, she could not guarantee that one of the alien officers could activate the self-destruction function.

The only way to truly preserve this strategic prize was to secure her the old fashioned way!

The boarding troops all received updated information packages. The internal maps of the archecruiser gained a lot more details while also pointing to the approximate quantities of alien crew members in every compartment.

The suspected officers all got highlighted in red, making it abundantly clear that their elimination had to be accomplished first!

"According to intelligence derived from various sources, the arche soldiers stationed on a more prestigious ship like this will generally be much better armed and armored. You are guaranteed to encounter stiff resistance, especially when the alien opposition is able to make ample use of internal defenses. The good news is that I have successfully disabled the arche crew stationed in the peripheral compartments. You can ignore them for the time being. The aliens stationed closer to the center of the hull will still be able to resist to varying degrees. It will take a substantial amount of time to overcome their defenses."

The Larkinson Clan possessed greater familiarity with archetech than other human groups. That also meant that the Larkinsons had a much greater respect for the alien tech and the race that refined it over many ages.

The Saint Commander continued her briefing. "If our estimations are correct, then the only unit in the first wave that can break through the enemy defenses and enter the citadel in time is the detachment from the 2nd Apocalypse Wardens. Your mid-grade superdimensional gear will grant you an overwhelming advantage against the alien opposition. According to my senses, the arche has not managed to preserve any superdimensional matter, though I cannot be fully certain when it comes to the deepest compartments of the archecruiser. Your priority is clear. Let the other boarding troops take care of the riffraff. Your mission is to reach the center and either capture or kill the highest-ranking alien officers. You are permitted to destroy or disable any alien devices that you perceive to be a threat or hindrance."

The message was clear. Speed was of the essence. All 16 soldiers of the Apocalypse Wardens adopted grim or anticipatory expressions as they completed their final gear checks.

Their heavy and substantial superdimensional armor did not permit them to seat themselves. They lacked the flexibility for this motion.

None of them minded. Given the cramped and limited space inside the archecruiser, the Apocalypse Wardens chose to put their trust in their armor, hence why they chose the configuration with the heaviest proportion of frontal plating!

They also mounted a variety of powerful kinetic and energy armaments, many of which occupied the modular hardpoints of their heavy combat armor.

Yet the only weapons they held in their gauntlets were large superdimensional hammers.

Each of them looked as if they were massive and heavy enough to put a dent in the armor of a mech!

"I look forward to cracking the shells of those proud alien turtles with my hammer."

"Don't play any games. Our mobility is not high. If an enemy can be solved at range, then do so unless it takes too much time."

"Understood."

The Apocalypse Wardens was one of the more well-known elite infantry troops of the Red Collective.

Despite their relatively short existence, their names had already become distinguished due to a series of successful actions during the Red War.

While the squad assigned to serve as the bodyguards of Ves Larkinson had not yet witnessed much real action, that was about to change today.

Each of these prized and elite talents wanted to prove their mettle. This mission was right up their alley, and the possibility that the arche might succeed in blowing up their own ship did not faze them in the slightest!

The only variable that seemed out of place was the armed drone floating above their heads.

Compared to the robust superdimensional construction of all of the suits of combat armor, the drone looked a lot more frail and delicate.

It was a relatively generic product made out of transphasic hyper alloys. While it was relatively modern and well-equipped, the drone had no advantages aside from the fact that it was unmanned.

"Andraste, how is the connection?"

"It is stable for now." The voice of a young girl replied on the encrypted communication channel. "The interference produced by the Saint Commander and the surrounding warships shouldn't affect it too much as long as the signal amplifiers built into your suits remain active."

Every armored soldier served to extend the degree of control that the Saint Commander and other humans could exert in the vicinity. The more troops managed to gain a foothold inside the hull, the more they were able to wrestle control away from the alien crew!

Though not every human soldier chose to activate their communications systems or signal amplifiers, the Apocalypse Wardens did so without hesitation due to the confidence in their own strength and the power of their superdimensional gear.

They were not infiltrators who had to minimize their emission as much as possible in order to sneak past enemy defenses.

They were the hammer that brought the force of human supremacy down the heads of their alien foes!

Even if the alien defenders could see the Apocalypse Wardens coming, it shouldn't make much a difference given the enormous disparity in capabilities.

The only person who lacked this confidence was the intern that had recently begun to spend time with the elite soldiers.

"I could have fought alongside you all in person." She grumbled over the communication channel.

"Do not make impossible demands." A female Apocalypse Warden rebuked the precocious young Larkinson. "You know as well as anyone that you are too young to enter the field. It is already a stretch to let you participate through this drone. Your mission is to observe and provide information upon request. Do not go out of your way to move your drone out of cover. The firepower of this device is so anemic that it won't even scratch the shells of the enemy soldiers."

"I hate it." Andraste frustratingly said. "The least my papa and mama could do was keep their promise and build an awesome superdimensional drone. That way, I can kill my enemies just as well as the rest of you! But no, my parents are so busy that they have no time to give me proper combat gear. I have no choice but to make use of this toy!" Several Apocalypse Wardens made strange faces as they heard the preteen complain.

"Do you know how many people wish they could possess superdimensional weapons or armor? They are so rare that only the best of the best has earned the right to make use of them in advance. You may have a much easier time obtaining them than others, but until you have proven that you can make full use of their power, they will only be wasted in your hands. The first step to earning

our acknowledgement is to show that you can operate an armed drone without any serious and preventable problems. Consider this a test. We will not waste any time to protect your toy from harm, so if the enemy manages to shoot it down, the fault lies with you. Do your best to keep it alive."

"Challenge accepted." Andraste simply responded.

Chapter 7468 Arche Infantry Combat Doctrine

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Before the 16 Apocalypse Wardens leapt out of their boarding shuttle, the arche soldiers serving on the archecruiser managed to put up a formidable defense.

The human troopers who set foot first inside the enemy vessel managed to wipe out the arche soldiers stationed close to the exterior of the hull fairly easy.

The psychic storms generated by the Minerva Mark II through the Victrix posed a different kind of threat that the arche had never thought to defend against.

Every extraordinary storm that descended on a group of arche usually caused them to suffer severe mental maladies, ranging from intermittent blindness to moderate headaches.

However, the arche managed to endure the psychic attacks quite well compared to other races. Their archeshells and the unique combat armor that complimented this organic component provided comprehensive protection that just happened to make a difference in this case.

Still, even if the arche could still retain their wits, they became so distracted that they turned into easy pickings.

Only the officers and better-equipped alien soldiers managed to endure the psychic storms without flinching too much. Their superior strength and equipment allowed them to resist the human attackers a lot better, but when the disparity in numbers became too much, they easily got isolated.

Despite the good start, the boarding troops encountered much stiffer resistance when they moved further inside.

No matter which angle they approached the center, the arche soldiers had already organized an effective defense.

They relied heavily on the layout and internal defenses of their own ship. Many lanes converged at deliberately designed funnels which served as excellent choke points.

Given that the boarding troops lacked the firepower or equipment to drill straight through dozens of layers of archemetal bulkheads, the human soldiers had little choice but to play along and assault these funnels!

Both humans and arche shouted furious warcries as their fights quickly got heated.

The arche maintained a distinct advantage by relying on their fortifications as well as ceiling turrets, extremely hidden mines and variable gravity chambers.

While the human soldiers possessed the necessary equipment and training to dismantle these fixed defenses, they could not do so without investing a considerable amount of time and effort.

"Speed up the assault! We cannot afford to remain stuck here for too long!"

Every human soldier knew that they could not settle for a methodical takeover of the archecruiser.

Time was not on their side.

Though it was not wise to press forward when faced with stiff resistance, the human soldiers chose to risk their lives and hasten their advance.

This inevitably caused them to suffer greater losses!

Even though many incoming attacks were neutralized by the Dragon Scales projected by the Victrix, the special resonance-based defensive amplification only had a limited effect on infantry-scale combat armor.

The effect still saved a bunch of lives. Many soldiers that got shot by one of the fixed turrets or the alien soldiers who weaponized their own archeshells, their combat armor managed to last long enough for them to evacuate successfully.

Unfortunately, the defenders still possessed enough of an advantage that they succeeded in picking off one or two human invaders every once in a while!

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar felt every death through her Command Field.

She did not wish for them to lose their lives, but neither did she want to coddle the infantry too much.

Each of them served a purpose. It would do the Larkinsons no good to neglect the infantry and refrain from deploying them due to one reason or another.

Besides, replenishing them was much easier than replenishing mech pilots. The Larkinson Clan could easily hire whole armies of infantry troopers if necessary!

Neither Casella nor the boarding troops felt bothered by the casualties, but they did not want to throw the lives of their fellow humans away in vain.

They needed to make a concerted push, but given that they already encountered so many hindrances, their casualties would skyrocket if that happened!

Numerous human soldiers stood or crouched behind cover and gritted their teeth.

They could barely pop their bodies into view before they received a barrage of energy beams and more esoteric attacks!

The human soldiers had already used a combination of armor-piercing missiles, high explosive grenades and portable laser cannons to knock out the defensive hardpoints.

That still left them with the arche soldiers themselves, who formed a living wall that blocked the way forward.

The attacking force threw a lot of firepower against this wall of alien soldiers, but few of their attacks made a serious dent.

It turned out that arche infantry combat doctrine was almost entirely geared around situations like these!

They just loved to occupy narrow choke points and form lines where they turned their backs against their enemies.

Their archeshells performed several functions at once.

They generated transphasic energy shields that happened to combine seamlessly with the energy shields generated by their alien comrades. The composite energy defense therefore withstood way more attacks than if the alien soldiers fought in isolation!

On top of that, the archeshells also possessed the capacity to shoot out energy beams of varying strengths and properties!

The most common variant were transphasic laser beams, though the arche soldiers with more elaborate shells could launch anything from plasma bolts to transphasic crystal shards.

If that was not enough, every arche always had a trick up their sleeve. Their archeshells incorporated so many exotic materials that they often managed to take their human opponents by surprise.

For example, one arche officer was able to perform hasty improvised repairs to his archeshell by cannibalizing the archemetal of the ship!

Another arche soldier was able to dive into the deck and swim through the archemetal as if it was water before popping out to flank his human foes!

One of the most powerful displays was when an arche officer with a particularly bright and luminescent archeshell generated a powerful directional EMP pulse!

The sheer amount of power behind this disruptive attack was powerful enough to overcome multiple layers of protection and cause over a dozen suits of combat armor to malfunction or lose power outright!

By the time the beleaguered squad managed to bring their powered armor back online, they had already lost over half of their roster!

The arche truly proved their mettle with their resistance. The internal defenses of their archecruiser were way more formidable than their scout vessels.

Though Saint Commander Casella Ingvar already predicted that the arche would put up a much greater fight on a ship of greater strategic importance, she admittedly looked down on their ability to resist her troops.

However, all of the information collected so far went on to benefit the Apocalypse Wardens, whose heavier configuration caused them to advance at a slower pace than many other infantry units.

Each Apocalypse Warden was fully connected to each other by both a battle network and a virtual net.

The former allowed them to coordinate almost perfectly with each other while the latter enabled them to process data rapidly with the help of their custom cranial implants.

This meant that before they arrived at the first funnel, they already formulated a precise and detailed plan of action!

It also meant that Andraste was left out of the loop. The soldiers remained completely silent until they finally commenced their assault!

"RUINATION BEFORE DEATH!"

The Apocalypse Wardens did not choose to bypass the funnel, but advanced straight from the middle, thereby giving the prepared alien defenders plenty of chances to attack the intruding squad!

However, all of the attacks bounced off the superdimensional armor plating without causing any visible damage.

Perhaps a few armor sections grew a little bit hotter or received a number of shallow marks, but that was the extent of the initial results.

Ordinary transphasic attacks could not effectively overcome the ridiculous properties of mid-grade superdimensional alloys.

Though the arche officer quickly adjusted to this terrible sight and ordered his line of arche soldiers to concentrate their attacks on a single Apocalypse Warden, the humans already launched attacks of their own!

The guns mounted on their heavy combat armor spat out transphasic hyper laser beams, positron beams, kinetic rounds and plasma bolts with perfect accuracy and coordination.

The fixed turrets and other defensive installations got taken out first. Their construction was robust, but the firepower from the Apocalypse Wardens was even greater!

Many of the attacks not only inflicted direct damage, but also generated flames that continued to spread heat that further impaired the functioning of sensitive components.

Fire E energies wove through the attacks launched by the Apocalypse Wardens. The temperature in the alien compartment rose at a steady rate, which caused subsequent attacks to become even more effective!

The elite human troopers were creating their own favored environment!

Though the archecruiser responded by activating her fire suppression systems, the relevant devices immediately attracted a lot of firepower, causing them to get knocked offline before they could be of any use!

At this time, the Apocalypse Wardens had already managed to knock out the fixed defenses and a third of the arche soldiers without suffering any significant damage in return. At most, they got pushed back or stalled for a small amount of time.

Yet their integrated weapon systems soon reached a limit. Their gun barrels overheated while their energy or ammunition reserves became strained.

While they could still launch further attacks, doing so would waste precious time and munitions.

Fortunately, they already marched close enough to the enemy line to deploy one of their most devastating combination attacks under optimal conditions.

The Apocalypse Wardens simultaneously raised their hammers with two arms!

At the same time, their companion spirits all entered the weapons in question, causing the hammerheads to glow bright and hot!

Soon enough, fiery energies rose up from the hammers and formed into a giant hammer that brushed against the ceiling of the compartment!

"BRING DOWN THE APOCALYPSE!"

A massive explosion ensued as soon as the large flame hammer descended directly onto the archeshells of the surviving enemy soldiers!

Amplified by the accumulation of ambient fire energy, the extraordinary attack completely engulfed the alien resisters with flame and force!

By the time visibility returned, only the arche officer and a pair of arche soldiers stationed further away from the center of the impact managed to cling onto life, though only barely.

The Apocalypse Wardens easily finished off the alien grunts and attempted to capture and restrain the officer whose archeshell had been ruined by the combination attack.

The shell previously looked gorgeous. Its bright combination of blues and greens evoked the image of a lifebearing planet similar to Old Earth.

Now, the massive strike had caused the shell to become cracked and dull. Its colors had become incredibly muted under all of the ash and soot.

"#%\$&*#\$@."

The devastated arche officer uttered an incomprehensible sentence before choosing to end his life.

Chapter 7469 The Need to Narrow the Gap

Chapter 7469 The Need to Narrow the Gap

The archecruiser was a decidedly inhuman warship.

Its interior layout did not conform to that of human standards. The ceiling was a little too low and it lacked many of the amenities that humans found commonplace in other starships, including that of other major alien races.

The air mixture was filled with exotic particulates that could wreck a baseline human's lungs long before he could choke to death.

The temperature fell considerably outside of that same human's comfort zone.

Even the light levels were decidedly a little too bright to the point where a person could be blinded if they looked at a reflective surface for too long!

Then there was the architecture. The interior of the archecruiser was a lot more confining than people were comfortable with. Despite the relatively large size of her hull, a greater proportion of her hull consisted of solid archemetal.

It was as if the arche tried their best to emulate the solidity and the sheer functionality of their own archeshells but at a much larger scale!

There were many implications to this architectural approach. For one, sensor systems and other means of detection could not penetrate very far before encountering successive layers of interference and blockages.

The human boarding troops also found it incredibly difficult and time-consuming to breach their way past solid bulkheads and locked gates.

Furthermore, the interior of the vessel also created an invisible atmosphere that the boarding troops found oppressive.

The further they entered the belly of this alien archemetal beast, the more they felt removed from everything they found human and familiar.

Strange sights that appeared to be decorative pressed on the psyches of the soldiers more and more.

For example, one troop passed by a memorial of sorts that mounted a collection of exquisite archeshells.

The arche mounted them in an upright chevron shape while also placing offerings on the altar before them. These sacrifices disturbed the passing human soldiers, because the ones doing the honoring had literally sliced a piece of their own archeshells, which were still stained by their own alien blood!

According to what they knew about the arche, they prized their shells above their own lives, so the act of cutting a piece of their own pride must have been as sickening as a man cutting off a piece of his own manhood!

Still, despite how much the invading troopers felt disturbed by their surroundings, they resolutely shoved their concerns and fears to the side and focused on their respective missions.

They were all soldiers. Each of them had a responsibility to do their duty. Their training already accounted for situations like these. If they faltered in the face of the unfamiliar, they would not only disappoint their superiors, but also their comrades and themselves.

That was not acceptable.

Among the hundreds or so human troopers that had set on inside the immobilized archecruiser so far, no unit performed better than the heavily armed and armored Apocalypse Wardens.

Despite their relatively slow advancement speed, their strength was so formidable that the arche soldiers found it impossible to impede their march!

When the Apocalypse Wardens came across another guarded funnel, they wrecked the fixed defenses from afar while demolishing the 'archeshell line' that the resident aliens often resorted to in battle.

When the elite collie footsoldiers faced a closed gate that the arche had hastily reinforced with additional archemetal debris, the Apocalypse Wardens came close and struck at the obstructions with their superdimensional hammers!

The extraordinary materials inflicted kinetic blows that literally destroyed the transphasic effects that made the archemetal so abnormally tough!

Together with the use of sharp superdimensional implements, the Apocalypse Warden squad only got delayed by a minute or so before they reached the next compartment.

Their progress only started to slow when they encountered the more elite and better-equipped arche defenders.

If the arche soldiers stationed close to the exterior of the hull comprised of cannon fodder that the alien leaders had already written off, then the ones stationed close to or inside the citadel consisted of the true mainstays of the arche race!

Their shells were all bright, colorful and beautiful at first sight. Even the lowest-ranking soldier possessed an archeshell of such quality that he could have been an officer of a typical archefrigate.

Yet instead of following the alien version of an officer track, these elites dedicated themselves to personal or infantry-scale combat. Their archeshells all followed one of multiple different standard development tracks.

While their degree of uniqueness and individualism was much lower, the advantage was that multiple arche with the same type of archeshells could combine their forces more easily, thereby producing much greater results than if they fought as separate individuals!

Not that this made too much of a difference. The Apocalypse Wardens had already consumed a significant amount of resources up to this point, but they still possessed plenty of power to eradicate these tougher enemies!

The Apocalypse Wardens no longer leisurely opened fire with their integrated ranged armaments. Their reserves had run low, so it was better to save them for emergencies.

Their advance abruptly sped up, as if their previous plodding pace had been an illusion!

In fact, these troops could have advanced faster, but doing so significantly raised their energy consumption.

They not only had to activate a module that reduced the force of gravity acting upon their superdimensional combat armor, also channel a significant amount of energy into boosters that could speed them up and allow them to maneuver a lot more nimbly than they should!

This abrupt change in tactics completely caught the defending elite arche soldiers off-guard. They had seemingly learned their lesson and no longer congregated into one big line that could serve as an easy target.

Instead, they split up their troops into half-a-dozen different squads that were stationed all around the compartment in a way that enabled them to mutually cover each other from different angles.

While this may indeed protect them from getting flattened by a single flaming hammer all at once, it also made them vulnerable to getting defeated in detail!

The elite human soldiers and cultivators knew exactly what to do. Their active battle network constantly kept their thoughts perfectly in sync, and now they began to split up into three so that they would always be able to overpower any single alien squad!

Though the native alien defenders tried to pummel one of the human fireteams with concentrated firepower, all of the attacks still accomplished little aside from scratching or heating up the surface of their superdimensional armor.

Even if it looked as if the excessive quantity of transphasic attacks could slowly dig deeper into the armor, the Apocalypse Wardens were not stupid enough to present themselves as easy targets.

They took advantage of their newly gained mobility and changed the orientations of their combat armor.

They never allowed their enemies to attack the same sections of armor for too long!

Aside from that, other soldiers routinely stepped into incoming attack waves in order to relieve the pressure and spread out enemy firepower even further.

They did all of this while going on the offensive!

As soon as a team of Apocalypse Wardens came close, there was nothing the elite arche soldiers could do to come out on top.

Even though the latter put up a valiant attempt at killing the humans by going down on all fours before attempting to impale them with the shard archemetal spikes of their improved combat armor, the Apocalypse Wardens easily managed to block or evade these counterattacks.

Not a single arche soldier or arche officer could withstand several direct impacts by a superdimensional hammer!

Even if their archeshell did not immediately show cracks after a single blow, a handful more would definitely do the job!

The victorious cultivator soldiers even had the leisure to raise their bloodied hammers and voice out their warcries!

"DEATH BEFORE RUINATION!"

"RUINATION BEFORE DEATH!"

A single drone witnessed all of this action from behind.

Andraste looked completely gobsmacked as she observed the exploits of the men and women who appeared unstoppable ever since they embarked on their mission.

She already had high expectations for this elite infantry unit, but her imagination never conjured a scenario that was this lopsided!

Among the Larkinsons, perhaps only Swordmaster Ketis could do better, and that was largely due to her high-quality superdimensional gear as opposed to her extraordinary skills and powers alone.

Even if the Apocalypse Wardens depended heavily on superdimensional gear themselves, their impeccable training and unflinching confidence raised their effectiveness to the peak!

"To think these are the castoffs." She muttered under her breath as she watched this all from the safety of the Tarrasque.

As proud as these soldiers may be, they never considered themselves to be best of their kind.

Their leader once shared their collective frustration to Andraste.

"As you may have learned, we are detached from the 2nd Apocalypse Warden Battalion. Since there is a second, there is also a first. The 1st Apocalypse Wardens are the true masters at combining infantry and cultivator combat methods. During the selection, training and elimination processes,

the trainees who scored high managed to enter this prestigious unit. The 1st always gets the best. Their superdimensional equipment is more powerful and expensive than ours. Their postings are public and highly prized due to their greater importance. They also receive the best support when it comes to subsequent training and skills development."

Andraste looked up at the officer with an uncertain look. "Then what about the 2nd?"

"Us? We fell short of that standard. We had been relegated to being treated as the workhorses of the Enforcement Department. Even if the 2nd Apocalypse Warden Battalion sits at the head of our group, we are denied the greatest honor that we can earn. This is why none are truly satisfied. We often thought of ourselves as the best, yet the aforementioned processes have exposed the lie that we told ourselves. Under fair and equal conditions, we have learned that there are still soldiers who are better and more talented in us in the areas that matter. Nothing we can do can change this fact."

"You do not sound reconciled."

The officer made a humorless grin. "We are not arrogant enough to think we can outperform the monsters from the 1st. While my men and I of the 2nd are determined to improve ourselves, the ones from the 1st are not staying still either. The entire Enforcement Department is committed to strengthening them as much as possible. The only thing we can do is make sure to make the gap between us as narrow as possible. We do not dare to hope for more. This is why we are eager to prove ourselves in the field. The only distinctive advantage that we have compared to many other units is that we are assigned to follow your father. Unlike other mech designers, our client is known to be a risk taker and battle maniac. We will never find ourselves short of opportunities to refine our methods on the battlefield. This is the only advantage that we can take, so you can be assured that we will exploit it to the limit."

The Red Collective positioned the 1st and 2nd Apocalypse Wardens as elite bodyguard units. The former usually answered directly to the RC while the latter was usually loaned out to various different allies and associates.

This also meant that the probability of encountering actual combat was fairly low in most cases. Only in this instance did a squad from the 2nd Apocalypse Wardens get pulled into an offensive campaign that promised plenty of encounters against the native aliens!

Considering this dynamic, Andraste should not be surprised that the soldiers she was interning with fought so well and so seriously.

They did not want to deliver an average performance.

The Apocalypse Wardens wanted to prove themselves at their very first action, thereby making a powerful impression on Ves and other leaders!

Only by delivering a smashing success would they be able increase the likelihood for getting chosen to fulfill other offensive missions in the future!

Chapter 7470 Enemy Consolidation

Chapter 7470 Enemy Consolidation

If there was one aspect about the Apocalypse Wardens that impressed Andraste the most, it was their incredible tacit understanding of each other.

Sure, their qi cultivation was impressive and profound, and their superdimensional combat gear granted them the privilege of directly overpowering their alien opponents.

Yet even if these advantages got taken away, the Apocalypse Wardens still possessed the capacity to dominate most other infantry units under equal conditions!

This was because they had been trained to trust and understand each other on a very deep level.

Though they clearly came from different backgrounds, whatever training the RC had put them through had moulded them into a single united fist.

Andraste had already witnessed plenty of facets of this tacit understanding by spending multiple hours among them during routine periods.

Even without their battle network, each soldier was able to convey their meaning to each other with subtle expressions or the slight tilting of their hands or shoulders.

The Apocalypse Wardens behaved as if they were in sync 24 standard hours per standard day.

They woke up at the same time and ate their meals together.

They moved around in silent coordination and always positioned themselves to cover every dangerous angle in a room or compartment.

They wordlessly passed on their snacks or their weapons to each other whenever there was any need.

It was kind of eerie and uncanny for Andraste to notice these ingrained patterns. She felt like a complete outsider who had been dropped into their midst without warning, which was precisely what had happened.

Though the Apocalypse Wardens did not resent her intrusion into their routine days, she still felt as if she had taken the role of a ugly splotch in an otherwise beautiful and harmonious painting.

Due to her outsider status, she never really knew what they were thinking. The Apocalypse Wardens possessed amiable personalities when they were not on-duty, but Andraste always felt that they were deliberately holding back a lot of things.

She could never fully get along with them like she did with the Swordmaidens. The two groups may be consummate warriors, but their martial traditions were completely different.

Nonetheless, spending a few days with the Apocalypse Wardens had already opened her eyes to how a different professional outfit operated on and off the battlefield.

They showed her a side of soldiery that was more rigorous than that of the Swordmaidens and more realistic than that of the mech pilots of the Larkinson Clan.

The Apocalypse Wardens showed that they could still excel in combat without resorting to piloting mechs or mastering the art of wielding a weapon to the point where their willpower took over its shape!

Still, Andraste wondered if the Apocalypse Wardens would be open to piloting a Carmine mech in the future.

There was no reason why they could not do so. They could become strong enough to influence the course of battles that took place on a much larger scale.

Yet from what she had managed to pick up from them, the Apocalypse Wardens had not shown much interest in piloting Carmine mechs one day.

In a society that still worshiped and looked up to mech pilots, that seemed odd.

Whatever the case, the Apocalypse Wardens had no need to pilot Carmine mechs at the moment, nor would they be able to make use of them in this particular mission.

They continued to advance through a mix of relatively cramped corridors and large compartments with tall ceilings.

Nobody understood the reason why the arche built their ships this way. There had to be a fundamental reason why the interior design of their archeships had to be shaped in this fashion.

More oddities continued to attract attention as the Apocalypse Wardens proceeded deeper. They found more alien altars and totems that signified some sort of belief or superstition.

Whatever the arche believed in, the fact that they resorted to self-mutilation in order to earn respect told the Apocalypse Wardens that these soldiers and crew members were unlikely to give up resistance too easily.

"Interference... increasing... Signal strength... degrading... Too much archemetal... Unknown... active jamming..."

The communication channel grew fuzzier despite raising the power to their suit-mounted communication systems. Even the drone that accompanied the squad of elite cultivator soldiers defaulted to an automated following routine.

The Apocalypse Wardens did not ignore this issue. Maintaining an open communication link was crucial to preventing possible mistakes!

They took the time to detach a handful of modules from their modular combat armor and expertly began to slot them together. The human soldiers had practiced this sequence many times during their training sessions, so their armored hands remained steady as they completed their preparations.

Soon enough, they turned on the field-assembled signal tower.

The device immediately made a difference by strengthening and stabilizing incoming and outgoing data transmissions!

"We can hear you clearly now, ma'am."

"Excellent." The Saint Commander sounded a bit relieved. "Time is short, so I will be brief. Resistance across the hull of the ship has largely ceased. The other boarding parties have all told us that the arche soldiers and arche officers have all left their posts and withdrew in good order. Our scouts have attempted to track their passage but failed due to the continued operation of internal defenses and sensor systems."

That alarmed the Apocalypse Wardens. The enemies they encountered so far hadn't been strong enough to inflict casualties on them, but that was because they dispersed their troops across the entire hull.

Now that they had withdrawn, more than a few human soldiers believed that their alien adversaries had finally decided to group them all together.

They all became vigilant for possible traps or ambushes. They would definitely face increasing risks if they got attacked by nearly all of the alien crew at once!

"What are the chances that the aliens have given up and chose to blow up their ship even as we speak?"

"My Command Field has been able to penetrate deeper thanks to your efforts and that of the other boarding troops. Archetech is not entirely unfamiliar to me, but I have never observed such a large and complex structure as this arche cruiser. From what I can read and guess based on the energy transmissions coursing through the hull, her systems are not being overloaded, but that can change any minute. What I did sense is an increase in... anomalous activity. This is very relevant to your unit because it is taking place in the exact center of the ship."

"...Elaborate."

"I cannot divulge more details to you because the center compartment, which is quite large I might add, is most definitely the most shielded area of this alien ship. We do not know why the arche has invested so much open space in their most defensible location, but we doubt it is anything simple. The enemy most definitely knows that you are coming. We believe... that the arche is preparing a final stand."

Several Apocalypse Wardens grew concerned.

Not afraid.

These hardened warriors did not easily give into their fears.

They just knew that fighting against a prepared opponent that had already seen what the Apocalypse Wardens were capable of might cause them to suffer actual casualties for once.

"What are your instructions, commander? Should we proceed forward at our current pace or should we slow down and wait until reinforcements arrive?"

That was a difficult matter to decide upon. The Saint Commander uncharacteristically threw the ball back into their court.

"That is up to you, Apocalypse Wardens. Your combat effectiveness is much greater than that of any other infantry unit we have on hand. Additional reinforcements might be able to help you relieve pressure, but that may not be necessary considering how many attacks you can endure. We are still concerned about giving the enemy too much time to set up whatever they are working on. My suggestion is this. If you are confident enough, you can continue your advance and take a look inside the central compartment. If the odds are not too great, then you have the freedom to choose to proceed alone."

"That sounds... acceptable, Saint Commander. We will utilize our own judgment."

This worked out well for the Apocalypse Wardens, as they had been trained to operate autonomously and rely on their own problem-solving skills.

The armed and armored cultivator soldiers continued to make their way through a number of empty junctions and corridors.

Though the arche that used to man these positions had disappeared, the automated defenses still remained active.

It took quite a bit of time, effort and firepower to neutralize all of them without suffering any excess damage in return.

Still, the Apocalypse Wardens steadily dismantled one turret or trap after another at a brisk pace.

They had grown more familiar with many different manifestations of archetech at this time. Though they still felt disturbed by the inhuman aspects, they at least knew how to solve most of them with the least amount of effort.

As they neared the entrance to the central hall, they noticed that the entryway had grown larger and more expansive.

The atmosphere had changed. A sense of solemnity had descended over the area. Strange smoke drifted across the moist area.

The bulkheads had grown much more decorative and elaborate. Combinations of splintered archeshells and artful metalworking formed into magnificent alien wall frescos that told highly meaningful stories.

It was too bad that the Apocalypse Wardens lacked the expertise or context to interpret them properly. They just took a few glances at the pretty artworks before dismissing them as irrelevant.

They had a mission to complete.

As they stood before the thick and massive entrance, they could feel that they were about to encounter something... formidable.

The Apocalypse Wardens did not immediately attempt to enter the next space, but took a brief pause in order to check their gear and supplies.

Once they took stock of their fighting readiness, they finally shoved open the massive gate and carefully stepped inside a brightly-lit hall.

Each of them froze as soon as they entered what appeared to be a large and crowded religious space.

Chapter 7471 The Monster of the Arche

Chapter 7471 The Monster of the Arche

When the Apocalypse Wardens entered an ornate hall, they froze as they beheld the sight.

The same applied to the leaders observing by remote.

Though the signal interference inside the large hall was much higher than any other location on the archecruiser, the repeated planting of ECM-resistant short-ranged communication relays helped to keep the active data feeds intact.

What arriving soldiers noticed at first was where all of the arche soldiers and crew members had gone.

They had converged straight into this chamber and formed a massive circle around a central location.

Each arche soldier had lowered themselves on all fours while keeping their alien heads bowed.

The Apocalypse Wardens initially stood poised to defend themselves against an attack against the entire collective, but subsequent observations quickly showed that these aliens shouldn't be of concern.

"They're... dead. They're all dead."

"Look at all of the blood that spilled on the deck. Instead of organizing themselves to mount a final defense, they... gave up and killed themselves."

That sounded incredibly strange and illogical. Even if these arche thought that they had dishonored themselves or their gods, they should not recklessly throw their lives away. As soldiers, they should have been prepared to fight to the bitter end even if victory no longer became attainable.

While most of the arche had been killed through straightforward cuts to their throats, the story was different for the aliens positioned closer to the center of the chamber.

The inner circle arche had been killed through much crueler means.

A powerful implement of sorts had ripped the archeshells straight out of their backs!

It did not matter whether these arche officers wore alien versions of high-quality combat armor. Whatever struck them easily breached the protective archemetal layers in order to deshell the aliens with intent and precision.

It did not take much guessing what the arche had done after collecting dozens of high-quality archeshells.

That was because a single large object stood at the center of the chamber.

Surrounded by ornate but alien pedestals and cauldrons still half-filled with alien blood was a shiny, crystalline, colorful and luminescent reproduction of an arche.

It was an artificial arche that when standing upright had almost been scaled up to match the height of a typical mech.

"What the..."

"Is that... a mech?"

A profound sense of shock and horror overtook the soldiers and the remote observers.

Of all of the crazy things the arche had cooked up inside their precious archecruiser, they never imagined that these turtle-like aliens would attempt to copy a human mech!

"It is not a mech." Saint Commander Casella Ingvar very decisively issued her preliminary verdict. "It is an imitation of a mech. There is a difference. There are numerous characteristics about this crystal monstrosity that may seem familiar to you, but make no mistake. It is not a mech as you and I know it. That is not a reason to let your guard down. Its combat power is unknown, but I do not think it is low."

Although the Apocalypse Wardens trained intensely to face all kinds of threats, they always struggled to perform well in scenarios that included hostile mechs.

If this alien imitation was anything like a real mech, then the Apocalypse Wardens could not avoid casualties!

The reaction from the mech designers who patched into the live feeds sounded even more hysterical!

"WHAAAAT?!" Gloriana screeched over the channel! "HOW-HOW-HOW DARE THEY?! WHO STOLE MY WORK? THIS... THIS ARCHESHELL MONSTROSITY IS NOT A COMPLETELY ALIEN WORK! LOOK AT THE JOINTS. LOOK AT THE PROCESSED ARCHEMETAL COMPONENTS. THESE ARE CLEARLY DERIVED FROM MY ARCHEMECH DESIGNS! IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR THESE ALIENS TO IMITATE MY WORK BY STUDYING RECORDINGS OF OUR ARCHEMECHS. THE ARCHE MUST HAVE RECEIVED HELP FROM HUMAN TRAITORS. EVEN MORE ALARMING, THEY MAY HAVE RECEIVED FROM A HUMAN EXPERT ON ARCHETECH!"

These were shocking accusations!

Though not all of them may be true, the fact that Gloriana clearly recognized bits and pieces of her own work in this alien imitation mech most definitely turned this into a massive security issue!

The cosmopolitans were definitely involved somehow. Only they could have provided essential expertise and stolen human technology to the arche so that the latter could create this monstrous machine.

Ves' voice sounded calmer but no less furious over the communication channel.

"This mech... feels extremely strange. It is... not entirely alive, but not entirely dead either. It feels like the archecruiser, but in a much more concentrated package. Aside from that, have you noticed that the arche spilled so much blood and collected it all? I can sense that part of it is circulating inside this amalgamation of archeshells right this moment. I fear that even if it does not meet the definition of a mech, it may share enough resemblances to my Carmine mechs to function in a similar fashion."

It was not enough for the arche to steal from Gloriana's work.

At least the native aliens may be able to justify their actions by accusing her of stealing from their race in the first place.

Yet what the arche had done by incorporating elements of Ves' groundbreaking work represented an even more egregious violation of human sovereignty!

No human could accept such a crime!

Though the Cosmopolitan Movement had transferred so much human technology to the native alien races already, most people had already become numb to this reality.

It was almost impossible to prevent this from happening. The most they could hope for was that humans outpaced this ongoing theft by innovating at a faster rate.

Yet out of all of the undeserved technologies that the native aliens managed to incorporate with the help of human traitors, mechs had always remained as an inviolable domain.

The native aliens must never be given the chance to replicate human mechs in any way.

Though not everyone understood the full reasons why the native aliens still failed to produce their own versions of mechs, they all felt assured that the human race still managed to maintain their current monopoly.

The alien creation standing before the Apocalypse Wardens might not have broken it, but it came closer to any other known attempt!

This was why this entire situation took on a whole new level of importance!

More and more people patched into the live feeds. Since the Apocalypse Wardens belonged to the Red Collective, far more parties had the right to access them than the Larkinsons or collies alone.

As word began to spread, various leaders and industry professionals among the mechers, fleters, Terrans and so on frantically tried to study the archeshell mech from the limited data available.

Unfortunately, they could not observe too many details. The sensor systems mounted on the suits of combat armor tried their best to collect as much data as possible, but they were not designed to work like lab or workshop-grade scanners.

The archeshells that made up much of the structure of the alien 'mech' also hindered any attempts to discern what lay beneath the surface.

Many of the shells had been ripped off the backs of affluent and successful arche officers. Their archeshells had been carefully nurtured by ingesting synergistic combinations of high-quality exotic materials and also hyper materials as of late.

That meant that the archeshells not only possessed a range of powerful functions, but also possessed the capacity to channel lots of energy!

Right now, whatever power source the arche had crammed inside made sure the construct was not short on power!

After a short delay, the archeshell machine or the alien inside of it finally began to speak.

"#\$%&#\$&#@."

Fortunately, red humanity had managed to develop a translation of the arche language a long time ago, so everyone could interpret the alien leader's words.

"HUMANS. INTERLOPERS. YOU DO NOT BELONG IN THIS SACRED HALL. OUR GOD IS NOT READY. WE ARE SHAMED THAT YOU HAVE WITNESSED OUR INCOMPLETE GOD. WE HAD NO CHOICE. WE SACRIFICED OUR BLOOD AND SHELL TO BRING IT CLOSER TO COMPLETION, ONLY TO PROVE OUR INCOMPETENCE. WE FAILED. A NEW GOD OF THE ARCHE SHOULD HAVE BEEN BORN IN TOTAL SECRECY, YET BECAUSE OF YOUR INTRUSION, MY REBIRTH WAS PREMATURE."

Multiple people had difficulty parsing the full meaning of his words. Even if the translation sounded accurate enough, it most definitely did not explain a lot of alien subtext and nuances.

Fortunately, Gloriana possessed a greater understanding of arche language and culture.

"We are presumably being addressed by the captain of the archecruiser. He is talking about attaining godhood through this unconventional method. One of the facts about the arche race that you should know is that many of them do not exhibit strong worship towards phase whales and phase lords. That is because it is much more difficult for them to produce phase lords themselves. They need to invest at least an order of magnitude more phasewater and high-quality exotics than other races due to the excessive requirements of scaling up their archeshells. This makes me think that we are witnessing an attempt for the arche to attain godhood as they know it through alternative means. They have blended their traditional alien methods with human archemech design."

"Are you saying that this thing is not only an imitation of a mech, but also an imitation of a phase lord?!"

"I... cannot discount this possibility. It is highly unlikely to match the power of a genuine lesser phase lord, but... it may be able to replicate the abilities of one at a smaller scale."

!!!

That certainly explained a part of the anomalous readings. The archeshell contraption generated fluctuating levels of spatial interference which could not be explained by the presence of phasewater alone!

Chapter 7472 A Different Path to Godhood

Chapter 7472 A Different Path to Godhood

It was not enough for the arche race to violate the taboos of the human race.

They had gone ahead and violated the taboos of their own pan-racial galactic community as well!

According to the alien controller as well as Gloriana and a bunch of other experts, the archeshell construct turned out to be an unholy fusion between a human mech and an alien phase lord!

Such a reckless and unthinkable combination should have produced an unambiguous failure.

Yet the fact that it was able to stand before them and power its alien systems indicated that it possessed at least part of its intended functionality!

There was a huge range of possibilities between absolute failure and total success. Where this archeshell contraption fell into remained to be seen.

However, as long as its place did not veer too close to the former, then it could absolutely pose a significant threat to the Apocalypse Wardens!

"There is good news." The Saint Commander said. "The other boarding teams have progressed steadily through the blockades and remaining fixed defenses. The first to arrive will be able to enter the central hall within several minutes. However, I have ordered them to remain on standby and conduct other preparations just outside. They lack the firepower and defenses to fight against this new threat directly."

That was probably the best decision that she could make. Ordinary infantry troopers could not defeat an ordinary mech unless the latter was controlled by a moron.

That said, their situation was not completely hopeless.

Whatever monstrosity the arche had cooked up, it was currently confined within a single hall. It could not easily move away and snipe the human soldiers from afar without getting out first.

Even that may not be a wise decision as doing so would only make it vulnerable to the human mechs and warships floating outside.

In fact, no matter how strong this archeshell mech may be, many people doubted that it could defeat a single ace mech, let alone a superdimensional one like the First Sword Mark III.

What was the point of putting on this show?

The would-be arche god freely addressed everyone's doubts, as if he wanted to leave his mark behind in this galaxy.

"#\$%&\$%&\$%&@."

"MY ORDERS INSTRUCT ME TO DESTROY MY GOD VESSEL TO PREVENT ITS EXPOSURE. I MUST DISAPPOINT MY LORDS ABOVE, BECAUSE I DESPISE WELCOMING DEATH AS A MORTAL. IF I AM TO DIE TO YOUR HUMAN WEAPONS, THEN I SHALL DO SO AS THE CLOSEST FORM TO A GOD THAT I CAN MANAGE."

The crystalline 'mech' that was made up of hundreds of interlocking and partially fused archeshells gradually increased its emissions.

Its internal activity rose while its archeshells all shone brighter.

To multiple human observers, it was as if they beheld an alien and warped version of the Amaranto Mark III!

However, unlike the archemech that weaponized the power of light in a material fashion, the alien construct only glowed bright for other reasons such as aesthetics.

What was much more concerning was the fact that it also produced notable spatial activity!

This unholy machine partially possessed the traits of a phase lord, which made it all the more confounding.

Nobody knew how the arche had managed to do it! The best theory they came up with was that they haphazardly fused their traditional phase lord ascension ritual with a crude attempt at creating their own Carmine mech!

Such a crazy combination should have failed outright, yet due to unstable factors such as conducting a bloody sacrificial ritual, the aliens somehow lucked out and managed to produce a working device!

Now, it appeared that the alien leader had stalled long enough to gain a measure of control of his partially 'divine' form.

"#@%\$%\$&@%\$."

"FAR TOO MANY OF MY BRETHREN LIVE AND DIE WITHOUT GETTING NOTICED BY THE RED OCEAN. THIS IS THE CURSE OF OUR RACE. I SHALL NOT FOLLOW THEM. WITNESS ME. BLEED FOR ME. REMEMBER ME. IF I CANNOT LIVE AS A GOD OF MY RACE, THEN I SHALL LIVE ON AS A GOD OF YOUR RACE."

Before anyone could figure out what he meant by that, the archeshell construct finally took action!

"He's fast!"

The bizarre alien construct violently vibrated before he began to run forward at a pace exceeding everyone's expectations!

Instead of blundering forward with slow and badly coordinated limbs, the large construct dropped to all fours and charged forward as if the alien leader was controlling his own body!

That was not all. Another factor that boosted his speed was the weak spatial warping effect that acted on his artificial form.

Though the warp bubble was not as large and strong as that created by a proper phase lord, it still made a significant difference, especially when fighting against a bunch of infantry troopers!

The alien arrived so quickly that only ten or so Apocalypse Wardens managed to evade to the sides in time.

As for the remainder, they reacted quickly enough, but their evasion speeds failed to bring them out of their adversary's trajectory in time!

CRUNCH!

The collisions produced loud impact noises as the unlucky Apocalypse Wardens got smacked by the enemy and uncontrollably flew into the air!

Their flight only lasted for a brief moment before they collectively collided against the closed gate to the rear.

Fortunately, due to their superdimensional armor, their armor remained mostly intact, though it had become minutely deformed due to being subjected to strong kinetic impacts.

"What is your status?!"

"We are still alive. The inertial dampeners failed to fully cover our bodies, but... aside from suffering bruises, we are still able to fight."

The Apocalypse Wardens might not be body cultivators, but they did not need to be when they mostly relied on their combat armor for protection.

The power of ultra-modern human technology and an obscenely high budget neatly compensated for the shortcomings of traditional qi cultivators.

As the stricken Apocalypse Wardens gathered their wits, their comrades did not remain idle. They all aimed their transphasic hyper armaments at the obvious target and opened fire!

Dozens of energy beams, energy bolts, kinetic rounds and even micromissiles struck the archeshell mech from multiple angles.

They initially struck the torso, only to see it withstand all of the attacks without suffering any meaningful damage.

The Apocalypse Wardens diverted their firepower to the joints and other probable weak points.

"Our attacks are hardly getting through! These archeshells are even tougher than the ones we have cracked before!"

The crew of the archecruiser had purposefully deshelled the remainder of their officer cadre in order to provide the alien machine with the strongest physical defense that they could manage under the circumstances.

Even so, the durability of these archeshells exceeded everyone's expectations by a considerable margin!

What was going on with this archeshell mech?!

As the resident expert in archetech, Gloriana felt frustrated by her inability to understand what the arche had made!

"This does not make any sense!" She shouted over the command channel! "According to the limited sensor readings and what we can estimate on the material composition of the officer archeshells, they should have shown signs of damage by this time. This degree of durability exceeds the level of high-quality transphasic hyper alloys typically used in the construction of RA first-class multipurpose mechs!"

"Do not forget about the spatial activity." Saint Commander Casella Ingvar reminded the female Senior. "Could that play a role in enhancing its durability? This is supposed to be a partially successful hybrid between an archemech and phase lord, correct?"

"That is an overly simplistic and deceptive description." Ves responded as the local expert on phase lords and spatial manipulation. "The machine possesses traits of a phase lord, but we have not quantified to what extent. From my limited observations so far, I can tentatively conclude that the construct is not larger than it looks. Its true body has not inflated, and its internal components are not shunted into extradimensional spaces. It also very clearly lacks a spatial barrier. What I am able to ascertain is that a moderately powerful spatial field is constantly acting on the structure of the archeshells. This strange field is acting on or maybe even resonating with the phasewater integrated into all of those high-quality shells. I speculate that this is the source behind the abnormal durability. There may be other unknown effects."

The good news was that the archeshell mech did not inherit the ability to enlarge its shape, thereby becoming a much bigger problem!

The bad news was that they were not dealing with a known quantity, but a radically new and different biomechanical construct with lots of mysteries!

The Apocalypse Wardens had never been trained to face such a mysterious enemy, but they did not give up or attempt to flee.

They stood their ground and fought, not because they thought that their adversary was weak, but because they believed in their own strength and training.

After the opening attacks, they quickly adapted to the circumstances and began to split up to prevent too many of their number from getting attacked all at once.

The archeshell mech noticed the changes and simply chose to respond by focusing its aggression on a random pair of Apocalypse Wardens!

This time, the alien monstrosity did not charge at full speed. It deliberately controlled its rate of advancement so that it would not overshoot by the time it caught up with its targets.

The creature then utilized its most primitive method of attack by stomping down on its forelimbs!

"@\$&\$!"

"DIE YOU SHELL-LESS BEINGS!"

One of the Apolapse Wardens managed to jump away in time to miss the giant crystal limb.

The other only managed to get halfway out! Before the lower side of his armored form could get clear, the enemy's limb had already arrived!

This time, the impact was too strong!

The archeshell mech had deliberately put its own weight behind this blow, thereby causing the superdimensional combat armor to finally succumb to an extent!

The Apocalypse Warden suffered massive damage, and all of his augmentations and cultivation attainments could not save him from the agony of feeling his legs getting pulverized!

The other soldiers frantically tried to relieve their injured comrade by opening fire or charging forward with their superdimensional hammers, but their responses were not fast enough to save their unlucky comrade!

CRUNCH!

This time, another crushing limb cracked and partially flattened the upper side of the trapped soldier's body, thereby causing the squad of elite cultivator soldiers to suffer its first real loss!

"BRING DOWN THE HAMMER!" Their officer called!

Even as splotches of red human blood stained the undersides of the archeshell mech's forelimbs, the Apocalypse Wardens simultaneously gave up on their attacks and charged forward while raising their superdimensional hammers!

They collectively sent their companion spirits into their hammers. This heated them up before they combined forced to project a giant hammer made out of flaming energies yet again!

The giant flame hammer only floated above everyone's heads for a moment in order to absorb a sufficient amount of energy.

Though the Apocalypse Wardens would have preferred to pump more energy into this extraordinary form, they lacked the time, skill and comprehension to do so efficiently enough.

"DEATH BEFORE RUINATION!"

"RUINATION BEFORE DEATH!"

With these twin cries, the flaming hammer of doom descended onto the archeshell mech!

The would-be native god responded by assuming a very typical defensive posture for his race.

The archeshell mech remained on all fours but retracted its head and limbs into its thick and hardened shell as much as possible!

The giant oval shell composed of dozens of high-quality archeshells proceeded to shine brightly as the spatial field concentrated its power into them. Other energies also diverted to the upper shells, thereby producing additional effects that the sensor systems on site could not fully register!

BOOOM!

The loud impact and fiery explosion echoed throughout the entire hall!

The surviving Apocalypse Wardens briefly took a brief. They had invested a considerable amount of energy into that last attack.

Yet as the dust and fireball settled, the archeshell mech came into view once again.

Aside from scorching the surface of its upper curve, the alien super construct remained undamaged!

This was the first time the Apocalypse Wardens witnessed an enemy withstanding the power of their extraordinary combination strike!

Chapter 7473 Honor Above All

Chapter 7473 Honor Above All

Compared to the other constructs that the arche had made, their blasphemous 'archeshell mech' demonstrated a level of durability that exceeded the limits of conventional transphasic alloys!

Even if archetech ingeniously made machines a lot denser without severely impacting their functionality, there were limits to how much creative engineering could make them tougher.

What soldiers took from this monstrous archetech creation was an alien 'mech' that could compete against the best of standard mechs in terms of damage resistance alone.

However, what mech designers such as Ves and Gloriana took from this unprecedented work was an accidental product that coincidentally combined multiple design solutions that were normally incompatible with each other!

The fact that archetech somehow managed to get along with phase lord body cultivation and not immediately fall apart was a miracle in their eyes!

The research value of this anomalous alien work suddenly shot into the roof!

"Ves!" Gloriana communicated over the command channel. "You should understand how much research value this archeshell mech holds to us. Haven't you always dreamt about transforming your living mechs into phase lords? This may very well be the missing link that can illuminate a path towards your goal! As for myself, the treasures contained within this archeshell amalgamation are countless. As I am concerned, securing it for ourselves is our greatest priority!"

"What do you want, Gloriana?"

"We cannot let anyone else take it away from us!" She hissed. "Let us end this farce. As valiant as the Apocalypse Wardens may be, they are merely infantry. They should be left to deal with enemies of equivalent scale. A mech should only be defeated by another mech. Send in our best. We should order the First Sword Mark III to carve her way straight through the hull of the archecruiser and surgically disable the alien creation. As much as I abhor any notion of damaging its unique structure, I can tolerate the idea of cutting off its limbs before attempting to put it in stasis. We should avoid damaging its torso and archeshell as much as possible!"

"No."

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, NO?!"

"I meant what I said." Ves responded. "I agree with you that the archeshell mech can potentially deliver a huge amount of novel research data to us. What I do not agree with is to interrupt this fight by bringing in an ace mech. The archecruiser is also precious, and drilling a mech-size tunnel straight into the citadel will inflict a huge amount of damage, much of which we can never recover due to our unfamiliarity with arche naval design."

"WHO CARES ABOUT THE SHIP WHEN THE MECH IS MORE IMPORTANT!"

"I think the Red Fleet will disagree with you." Ves calmly responded. "More importantly, we must respect the will of the warriors. As alien as he may be, the arche captain has disobeyed his orders just so that he can fight one last time at the peak of his entire life. The Apocalypse Wardens accepted his challenge and has yet to call for assistance. This means that they still think that they can complete their objective by relying on their own strength. The least we can do is to honor their bravery."

Gloriana felt perplexed by this response. "Honor their bravery?! THIS IS FOOLISHNESS! We are not talking about child's play here! Securing the archeshell mech must be our highest priority! Who knows what will happen if we let the Apocalypse Wardens damage its structure with their

destructive hammers! Preserving the integrity of this construct is a much higher priority than satisfying the egos of upjumped infantry! Soldiers may be responsible for fighting on behalf of our race, but it is intellectuals such as you and I who ensure that red humanity can win this war!"

"ENOUGH." The Saint Commander interrupted the argument between the married couple. "I hold command authority here. I agree with Ves on this matter. As important as the archeshell mech may be, we cannot and should not pin all of our hopes on a single miracle solution. Mech designers such as the two of you may be able to develop the tools that can give us an edge on the battlefield, but it is the grit of our warriors and the will of our people that truly determine the outcome of this war. Honor is not a redundant social construct. It is the pillar that makes countless soldiers sacrifice their lives for the good of our people."

"..."

"My standing orders are to let the Apocalypse Wardens fight until they have won, died or called for backup. Until any of these outcomes happens, all nearby forces are instructed to remain on standby, though ready to intervene quickly if their intervention is necessary."

That settled the matter as far as the Saint Commander was concerned.

Gloriana was not reconciled with this outcome. She privately contacted representatives hailing from the Red Association and the Terran Alliance behind everyone's backs, but she did not expect for their opinions to coincide with that of the Saint Commander!

It appeared that even the mechers and the Terrans agreed with the sentiment that soldiers must be given space to fight an honorable duel!

This truly reinforced the reality that red humanity was run by warriors as opposed to intellectuals!

The female Senior Mech Designer gnashed her teeth.

She could not understand why so many people disregarded the logic of her argument and seemed willing to let a potentially priceless alien research specimen incur irreparable damage!

It was times like these that she wished that the Polymath had successfully taken over red humanity.

Though everyone accused her of being a heartless tyrant, at least no one would fault her for making illogical decisions that harmed their civilization as a whole.

With the Polymath in charge, other leaders would have little choice but to abide by her rules and customs.

A matter such as this should have led to an immediate resolution whereby the archeshell mech got captured as soon as it entered their sights!

Instead of that, red humanity had chosen a different regime, one where fractured organizations and warlords tried to outcompete each other by behaving like primitive barbarians!

Their society had regressed!

As Gloriana despaired over these observations, the Apocalypse Wardens intensified their actions against their sole opponent.

After discovering that their conventional armaments and solutions failed to inflict any observable damage to the archeshell mech, the elite cultivator soldiers quickly changed the configuration of their combat armor.

With a decisive command, the gun barrels, ammunition canisters, energy converters and other assorted components got ejected from their mounts.

Other modules such as expended energy cells and ineffective azure shield generators left the pile as well.

The Apocalypse Wardens had slimmed down their combat armor considerably as a result. The removal of so many redundant modules not only increased their speed and agility, but also committed them to a single means of attack.

Each of them knew without saying it that the only way for them to defeat this alien construct was to bludgeon it with their superdimensional hammers!

After unburdening their superfluous equipment, they instantly changed their approach. Their active battle network continued to keep their thoughts and spirits in sync.

None of them wasted their movements.

None of them hesitated for a second.

None of them had any intention to retreat from this duel.

Despite the enormous disparity in scale, the difference in total mass was not as great as it appeared on the surface.

Superdimensional alloys were much denser in reality than transphasic alloys because the former shunted much more matter into a considerably wider range of dimensions.

This had lots of implications, of which one of them was that a collision between a superdimensional object and a similarly-sized transphasic object often ended up badly for the latter!

Of course, much of this was so new to red humanity that no one could guarantee that the Apocalypse Wardens truly had a chance of subduing the archeshell mech.

The only way to be certain was to put their superdimensional hammers to the test.

This time, the Apocalypse Wardens no longer performed any coordinated combination attacks. Their most iconic move had done nothing but give the archeshell mech a harmless fire bath.

They instead opted to go close. They gripped their formidable superdimensional hammers with two hands and began to close the distance from multiple sides.

The alien leader did not take these human soldiers lightly. He knew that if he hadn't made a desperate attempt to ascend to godhood, he would have suffered heavy damage from that flame hammer!

The fact that his current form could resist the last blow did not inflate his confidence. He chose to take advantage of his larger size and charge straight towards one of the human teams, hoping to crush them to death before the remaining warriors could converge and overwhelm him with the advantage of numbers!

As soon as the archeshell mech dropped on all fours and repeated the same move that successfully claimed a soldier's life, the Apocalypse Wardens did not react as slowly as before.

They had already witnessed this move once, so they were psychologically prepared to encounter it again.

Their combat armor had also become significantly lighter and more agile.

The targeted Wardens already jumped to the side before their formidable opponent arrived. Just as they thought that they would be able to turn this situation around and launch a counterattack, the archeshell mech made another move.

The large construct abruptly pushed with two of its limbs, causing it to roll to the side!

This altered its trajectory and caused it to trundle forward in a diagonal angle!

Not only that, but the warp bubble surrounding the archeshell mech's form briefly spiked in strength, causing it to produce an unexpected boost of speed!

At this time, the sole Apocalypse Warden threatened by this attack hardly had any time to react. He didn't even have enough time to think!

He could only fall back to his training and his instincts. He spared no time and immediately made two moves.

First, he triggered the emergency setting of his boosters, causing them to produce a powerful but damaging impulse that blasted his combat armor in an upwards trajectory.

Second, he swung his heated hammer down in the hopes of inflicting a final blow!

CRACK!

All of this happened so quickly that the optical sensors struggled to register the collision.

When everything became clear, the observers first noticed how the stricken soldier failed to evade the attack.

His suit of combat armor lay crumpled in the distance.

Yet unlike the previous case, the damage to his armor was not fatal. The emergency jump caused a collision between the archeshell mech and the legs, causing the latter to crumple and bend in an unnatural angle.

Aside from getting his legs disabled, the human inside the combat armor only suffered moderate collision damage.

The intact triage systems of his combat armor automatically took control. The leg sections froze up in order to prevent the soldier's injuries from worsening. The arm sections automatically began to drag the unit away with the help of intact boosters.

As for the archeshell mech, he came away with much lighter injuries.

For the first time since the start of this confrontation, the alien construct actually suffered material damage.

The final hammer blow had struck the lip of the giant archeshell, causing a part of the edge to fracture into hundreds of crystalline archemetal fragments.

"We can kill the beast."

It wouldn't be easy, but the remaining Apocalypse Wardens still had hope.

"The archeshell mech is becoming stronger with the passage." Ves warned over the communication channel. "Its energy activity isn't rising, but it is becoming increasingly more organized. The alien captain is unused to his new form, but that is changing as we speak. You need to take him down quickly before he gets too close to reaching his full potential."

"You have five minutes." Saint Commander Casella gave the Apocalypse Wardens a deadline.

Chapter 7474 Growth and Sacrifice

Chapter 7474 Growth and Sacrifice

Although Casella Ingvar wanted to give the Apocalypse Wardens as much space as they needed to overcome this challenge, she could not indulge in their ego without limit.

Gloriana's demands were not entirely unreasonable. The so-called archeshell mech possessed inestimable research value to red humanity. Capturing it and preserving as much of its unique structure as possible remained a high priority.

This was why the Saint Commander set a time limit. The longer this went on, the greater the chance that something could go wrong.

The announcement did not cause the Apocalypse Wardens to change their approach.

They already instinctively figured out that time was against their side. Too much could go wrong if the fight dragged out. This was especially the case when confronting a completely new and unfamiliar opponent that possessed an abundance of technological depth.

The archeshell mech continued to become more proficient with its own strength abilities with every passing minute.

Its two-limbed and four-limbed gait visibly improved. Not only was the archeshell captain able to accelerate faster, but he also became increasingly more agile and limber with his maneuvers.

He frequently caught the Apocalypse Wardens off-guard by making strange movements that people never expected to see from a turtle-like alien construct. The archeshell mech rolled his body around and even leapt a few times!

Each of these maneuvers severely tested the elite human soldiers. The ongoing duel matched the worst virtual training scenarios, the ones where defeat became an expected outcome.

All of the remaining active Apocalypse Wardens knew that if they wanted to come out on top, they had to grow as well!

They continued to analyze their adversary and developed numerous responses against known problems.

Though the archeshell mech made increasingly more bizarre movements with the help of its powerful limbs and its growing mastery of spatial manipulation, the alien mind in control of the construct did not exhibit complex thinking.

He was clearly not a professional groundpounder by profession.

The arche captain likely hailed from his own race's version of the highborn caste.

These privileged arche might not have enjoyed as much luxuries as human scions, but they benefited from a diet of quality exotics that elevated the strength and beauty of their archeshells far above the mundane citizens of their race.

Such arche were destined to become senior officers and scientists. They never had to do any dirty work in their lives. The uglier arche with worse archeshells naturally assumed such duties.

Though red humanity did not know whether highborn arche engaged in duels on a regular basis, the former archeship captain clearly did not possess a lot of actual combat experience.

He may have been intelligent enough to learn the new capabilities of his partially divine body relatively quickly, but judgment stayed on the level of an amateur!

"This alien guy telegraphs most of his big attacks."

"He doesn't know the importance of performing feints."

"His actions are constrained by his momentum. His turning radius is fast, but not fast enough."

"His mentality is impaired. He is either in pain, exhausted or engaged in excessive multitasking. He responds poorly to unexpected situations."

The Apocalypse Wardens fought more vigorously as knowledge was power. The more they learned what their enemy was capable of, the greater their chance to stay one step ahead!

The elite cultivator soldiers demonstrated this brilliantly by baiting the archeshell mech into another charge attack.

Though the alien leader tried to be clever and roll to the side in order to rush down a soldier that was previously positioned out of the way, the soldier in question had already anticipated the possibility and activated his boosters at full power in advance!

This not only caused the archeshell mech to waste its chance, but also collide against the side of the hall!

The powerful impact created a significant dent in the thickened and reinforced bulkhead.

Before the alien construct could recover from the collision and turn around, the closest team of Apocalypse Wardens dove in and repeatedly struck their superdimensional hammers against the rear of the enemy's archeshell!

Each and every powerful impact shattered the crystalline components and completely destabilized the phasewater that reinforced the organic composite materials.

Cracks continued to spread across the knobbed surface as individual archeshells crumbled into pieces.

In certain cases, the underlying layers of archemetal became exposed, along with the alien blood that connected them all together!

The archeshell mech roared in pain, signifying that it was more of a new body rather than a mech for the archecruiser captain!

"#&\$@&\$!"

The alien responded in a furious fashion by jumping and landing backwards, hoping to crush the annoying human soldiers between his damaged archeshell and the deck of the large chamber!

Of course, the Apocalypse Wardens anticipated this move and jumped away just as the alien bent its limbs.

The entire compartment seemed to shake as the powerful alien landed hard with its belly up!

This offered the humans a priceless opportunity to attack the softest side of the alien!

Half-a-dozen Apocalypse Wardens dove in and struck with their superdimensional hammers.

This time, the thinner layers of individual archeshells offered considerably less resistance. More blood spilled from the wounds while lots of crystal fragments flew into the air!

Suddenly, the space around the damaged archeshell mech seemed to freeze.

Though it did not significantly affect the movements of the nearby human soldiers, they grew so alarmed that they preemptively jumped away.

They barely managed to get clear before an enormous clap of light and sound erupted from the large construct's position!

"It blinked!"

The giant archeshell mech appeared in the same upside-down position right above the most distant Apocalypse Warden!

Though the soldier responded quickly enough by trying to boost away, the completely unexpected nature of this new ability meant that he failed to reach safety in time!

CRUNCH!

Superdimensional armor or not, getting dropped by a large and remarkably dense archeshell mech exceeded the defensive properties of the relatively thin armor layers!

The Apocalypse Wardens suffered another loss.

Not that they became discouraged by this event.

"Avenge the fallen!"

"Death before ruination!"

As the clock continued to tick down, the Apocalypse Wardens doubled down on their offensive and took greater risks!

They attacked the archeshell mech relentlessly even as it tried to swat the superdimensional flies with its large but clumsy frame.

It utilized its short-ranged teleportation capability several times, and managed to clip a couple more human soldiers.

Even if the surprise attacks did not manage to kill them, they most certainly had been taken out of the fight!

This increased the pressure on the remaining combat-capable cultivator soldiers. If not for the fact that they had attacked their opponent frequently enough to cause its proud archeshell to become riddled with cracks and holes, they would have given up hope for victory by this time.

As it was, both sides knew that they were competing to inflict as much attritional damage as possible.

The surviving Apocalypse Wardens simultaneously gritted their teeth. The deadline loomed increasingly more over their heads. They could no longer guarantee absolute success, but that did not mean their sacrifices lost their meaning.

Even if they had to withdraw before they could properly defeat their opponent, they at least managed to soften it up for the next wave of reinforcements!

Still, they all hoped to win this duel by themselves. They wanted to prove through their valiance and competence that not every challenge had to be fought with mechs!

The Apocalypse Wardens made a bold feint by attracting the alien leader's attention at the front. They barely managed to evade a flurry of forelimb strikes when the other Apocalypse Wardens jumped on the damaged top surface and began to strike their hammers with abandon!

They did not attack random sections of the archeshell, but focused most of their hammer blows to the rear, which was not only more difficult for the enemy to guard, but also incurred the most damage already.

Soon enough, the archeshell mech cried out in pain once more as the superdimensional hammers brutally penetrated the hardest upper layers and began to inflict material damage to the softer archemetal matter beneath the surface!

Not every part of the archeshell mech was made out of the highest-quality archeshells 'donated' from the arche officers.

The archecruiser did not have so many highborn officers on hand. The internals of the alien construct largely consisted of softer, duller and more fragile archeshells taken from the middle and lower ranks of the alien ship.

The superdimensional hammers inflicted much greater damage on these components!

While the same extraordinary spatial field that reinforced the surface layers also acted on the internal archeshells, the latter clearly did not receive as much of a boost due to their lower base values.

There was only so much the spatial field could do to reinforce a crappy defense!

If the archeshell mech worked much closer to a conventional mech, then the heavy hammer blows would have caused the construct to suffer increasingly more severe performance hits.

It was not impossible for the machine to get outright crippled due to the loss of a crystal part or system!

Yet what made archetech so remarkable was its much higher rate of redundancy and compartmentalization.

Despite the substantial internal damage, enough of the overall structure of the archeshell mech remained intact that it still retained the ability to move and fight!

At most, its overall strength and speed had only dipped by 10 to 20 percent.

While this made a considerable difference, the Apocalypse Wardens were no longer fighting in their peak condition either!

The intensive battle and the mounting losses had made it increasingly harder for the surviving soldiers to stay on top of the situation.

The battle took yet another turn when the archeshell mech did not mount an immediate counterattack.

After completing another costly and exhausting blink, the alien construct stood still for a moment.

The alien leader was probably concentrating in order to perform a new ability.

Seconds passed in silence while the Apocalypse Wardens raised their guard.

Yet instead of being met with a new form of attack, the archeshell mech instead bent down its alien head and began to devour the deck and the archemetal structure underneath!

The alien construct eagerly gobbled up the seemingly random bites of archemetal, only for its entire structure to exhibit signs of transformation.

Loose pieces of archemetal coursed throughout its entire body and began to fill in the holes left by all of the hammer blows.

Though the substitute archemetal clearly looked inferior and out-of-place among the proper archeshells, their commonalities happened to be numerous enough to maintain a certain degree of compatibility!

"The archeshell mech is conducting improvised repairs on itself by consuming archemetal!"

"Interrupt it immediately!"

The Apocalypse Wardens did not want to see most of their efforts undone, so they resumed the attacks in the hopes of denying their enemy the opportunity to repair much of its wounds.

Unfortunately, this was exactly what the archecruiser captain wanted.

Just as a handful of Apocalypse Wardens came close, the alien leader made a surprising move.

The archeshell mech opened its maw and shot out chunks of undigested archemetal!

The alien construct had not used them up to perform emergency repairs, but deviously kept them in reserve for this very moment.

Though half of the chunks missed their mark, three Apocalypse Wardens got struck head-on by dense pieces of archemetal that were at least twice as big as their combat armor!

Even if the actual mass between them and the large projectiles were not equivalent, the notable amount of force behind the attacks still caused the Apocalypse Wardens to crash!

The human soldiers that managed to evade the projectile attacks frantically attacked the giant archeshell, shattering much of the more fragile parts that just got repaired.

Yet that did not stop the alien construct from lumbering forward in order to crush the prone soldiers that could not maneuver away in time!

The Apocalypse Wardens suffered several more losses.

Multiple observers winced in pain or turned their heads away.

The elites from the Red Collective had lost just over half of their numbers at this time.

The remaining Apocalypse Wardens still retained their fighting spirit, but they could not deny that the probability of achieving their objectives had dropped to the lowest point.

"We..."

Before another round of fighting could commence, the entire archecruiser seemed to vibrate for a few seconds before a powerful ace superdimensional mech breached the main gate.

The First Sword Mark Mark III had cut her way straight through the side of the precious archeship and into the center of the hull!

Though the living mech did not bring along her sword fey, the appearance of her mech frame along with the presence of her Saint Kingdom was enough to freeze every action!

"YOU HAVE FOUGHT VALIANTLY, APOCALYPSE WARDENS, BUT THERE IS NO NEED TO PROVE YOUR COURAGE ANY FURTHER."

The formidable ace mech pointed her deadly greatsword at the surviving Apocalypse Wardens, who all seemed weak and tiny compared to the cold steel machine.

"YOUR CHALLENGE HAS COME TO AN END."

The ace mech then proceeded to turn towards the damaged and shabby-looking archeshell mech.

"YOUR EXECUTION HAS BEGUN."

Saint Dise's declarations conveyed the finality of her will.

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Chapter 7475 An Optimistic Beginning

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The fight came to a decisive end.

Unlike the previous duel, the next bout of fighting began and ended almost in the same instant.

The power disparity was too great.

Though the archeshell mech admittedly possessed its own points of brilliance, it was far too lacking in the ways that mattered.

In addition, the alien 'pilot' lacked too much practice and familiarity with his new strength. He was not a soldier who excelled in personal combat, but a commander who issued orders to those who fought in his stead.

This meant that there was a mismatch between skills and responsibilities, as was the case for many other phase lords.

High-ranking mech pilots usually did not suffer from these problems because each and everyone of them earned their strength.

Through blood, sweat and tears, expert pilots and ace pilots had to crawl through hell and push themselves further than 99.99 percent of other mech pilots!

Saint Dise particularly excelled among her colleagues as a duelist and a swordswoman. She was quite possibly the worst matchup for the newly ascended native 'god'.

The First Sword Mark III did not even bother to perform any extraordinary techniques. The ace swordsman mech rushed forward with blazing speed and surgically chopped off the archeshell mech's limbs without any noticeable effort!

Unlike the tiny mid-grade superdimensional hammers wielded by the Apocalypse Wardens, the Decapitator was a true high-grade superdimensional weapon.

The difference in scale, mass, density and spatial supremacy was so much greater that the archeshell mech could never offer any meaningful resistance in the first place.

The archecruiser captain's moment of glory had come to an abrupt end for that reason.

Though Saint Dise wished to complete her task by decapitating this disturbing alien construct, Gloriana insisted otherwise!

"Do not cut off the head, Dise!" She shouted over the communication channel. "The archeshell mech is not a mech. It is a phase lord that possesses a body that partially resembles an archemech. If you kill a phase lord, his entire true body will cease to function properly. I presume the same rule applies to this research specimen. If it is possible, I want our forces to secure it without inflicting any unnecessary damage."

Her request sounded reasonable if somewhat cumbersome.

"The Red Association harbors a great amount of interest in studying this so-called archeshell mech." Jovy Armalon entered the command channel and voiced his offer. "We have the necessary capabilities to put the damaged but living subject under stasis long enough to ship it back to the Yernstall Central Star Node where our research institutions can dissect its workings."

"Not so fast, Mr. Armalon." Formation Master Andrea Vos interjected. "Multiple mech designers have confirmed that the archeshell mech is not a mech. It is just called this way because of its superficial resemblance to one. Properly speaking, the subject is actually a mutated phase lord. According to the relevant agreements, phase lords of any kind or species fall under the jurisdiction of the Red Collective."

"This offensive operation is taking place under the auspices of the Terran Alliance. Do not deny us the right to study this capture." Caracalla Shuku said. "Our territories are also just over the border. Instead of sending it on a long and dangerous journey back to Yernstall, it is better to send it to the heart of our colonial alliance to minimize the risk of interception from both human and alien parties."

More voices joined the conversation. Each of them wanted to stake a claim on this priceless alien treasure. That included the Larkinson Clan!

Ves already expected this to happen. The Nemesis Campaign was bound to yield a large variety of unprecedented gains.

He just felt surprised that the representatives did not even bother to wait until the combined fleet had fully tallied all of the loot.

"Everyone who has contributed to this battle gets to have a share." Ves decisively declared. "In my opinion, leaving this research specimen to the Red Collective is the best overall option as far as I am concerned."

The others could not easily refute this argument. The Red Collective was indeed the most open superorganization around. Everyone participated in it, which meant that everyone would ultimately be able to access any benefits from studying the research specimen.

Though the Terrans still insisted on shipping it back to their own turf, the mechers strongly objected to the notion.

The rivalry between the two parties still remained as acrimonious as ever. The mechers probably feared that the Terrans would play dirty and deny them proper access.

In any case, the conclusion of this event marked the formal end of the battle.

Though the fighting had not totally ceased at this point, most forces became more preoccupied with search, rescue and salvage operations.

Many mechs and warships still remained on guard in case the large numbers of intact enemy forces decided to initiate a rematch, but that was more of a precaution.

Only skirmishes broke out on occasion. The combined fleet not only busied itself with salvaging the most valuable spoils from the debris field, but also moving further in-system in order to raid and raze the orbital and planetary outposts, supply depots, fueling stations and other military infrastructure.

Of course, the native aliens did not intend to let the humans wreck their stuff so easily.

While their assets cautiously kept their distance from the main human force, they sent out squadrons of mechs and warships to cover the peripheral facilities that they wanted to preserve.

This resulted in the outbreak of numerous smaller skirmishes that took place without the intervention of high-level units.

Dozens and in a few cases over a hundred strike craft danced with each other while warships cautiously exchanged fire over longer distances.

Despite all of these clashes, the intensity of the battles never rose to a heated level.

As soon as one side gained an advantage, the other side usually disengaged and fled in a hurry.

None of these skirmishes occupied the attention of Ves and other leading figures. They had become more invested in the post-battle settlement.

Multiple briefings took place at varying levels. The initial battle of the Nemesis Campaign had been very revealing to red humanity. It exposed the many strengths but also numerous shortcomings of the combined fleet.

Ves already looked forward to studying the battle records and data logs of the Woodsap mechs. He had not forgotten about them or their importance to the progression of his design philosophy.

Though the main battle lasted too short for the prototype advanced Carmine mechs to engage in a proper fight, the unit under the command of the Second Elf did not shy away from conducting smaller tasks.

The 120 Woodsap mechs had split up and engaged in numerous skirmishes against numerous different phasefighter squadrons.

Though risky, these controlled and carefully chosen encounters should provide a wealth of valuable empirical data about the actual performance of the Woodsap mechs.

Their performance during these skirmishes should also be much cleaner due to the absence of other interfering variables.

There was no value in studying their performance when lots of friendly Commandeered units carried their side to victory.

Yet before he was willing to dedicate his time to studying the first proper battle of his prototype Woodsap mech, he first wanted to inspect the combined fleet's first high-value spoils.

The acquisition of a damaged but somewhat functional archecruiser and 'archeshell mech' signalled a fantastic start to the Nemesis Campaign.

Everyone's morale rose when they heard that they managed to get their hands on such valuable and unique gains. Even if they did not know exactly what made them so coveted, they still figured out that red humanity was bound to advance their technological superiority as a result.

The soldiers began to look forward to making more unique contributions to the war effort. Alien-occupied space must be filled with other rare and precious treasures that were not easily obtainable from the human side of the border.

However, the archecruiser and the more exceptional bounty found inside became the immediate priority.

Once the boarding troops managed to sweep through the entire hull and destroyed all obvious points of resistance, multiple teams of specialists arrived in order to control the vessel and her strange technologies as best as possible.

Unfortunately, most of them had little to no idea what they were dealing with. A brief crash course into the fundamentals of archetech did not even scratch the surface when it came to understanding how to control the alien vessel's arcane systems.

Let alone understanding the technological principles of archetech, they did not even possess the right means to interface with the controls!

There were only two individuals on the entire combined fleet that possessed a real chance of properly controlling and subduing the archecruiser.

That was Gloriana and her pet arche engineer.

After the Larkinsons and other parties tentatively became certain that the archecruiser was unlikely to blow up the next second, the two finally boarded a shuttle that brought them to the captured hangar bay of the ship in question.

Ves hitched a ride as well.

He was not only there to follow his wife and protect her in case anything happened.

He also wanted to take a look at the exotic spoils up close.

Before they could go deeper into the hull, they first stopped before the group of surviving Apocalypse Wardens.

Each of them looked down at the row of deceased comrades. Recovery teams had already taken them out of the central hall and brought them back to the hangar bay in preparation of taking them back in proper fashion.

Chapter 7476 The Lower Classes

Chapter 7476 The Lower Classes

The gathered individuals maintained a subdued demeanor.

Everyone who witnessed the duel between the Apocalypse Wardens and the archeshell mech could not help but feel sorry for the former.

They fought so hard to prove their strength, only to fail to achieve the objective they cared about the most.

The dream of gaining enough strength to defeat mechs as infantry still remained unrealized.

Even if the fight between the two sides was highly asymmetrical, the Apocalypse Wardens did not attempt to rationalize away their failure by resorting to excuses.

To these elite and proud cultivator soldiers, a failure was a failure.

The armored and suited forms of Ves and Gloriana slowly approached the surviving soldiers as they looked down at the forms of the deceased.

In order to preserve their dignity, the recovery personnel had covered all of the mangled and broken collections of armor and human flesh with gray sheets. Only a part of their contours still remained visible, which was best for everyone involved.

Behind her sealed helmet, Gloriana adopted a mixed expression.

"Was it worth it?" She softly asked.

"It is, Madame Gloriana." One of the surviving Apocalypse Wardens replied with a measure of faith in her tone. "We are soldiers. When we embarked on this life, we accepted the possibility that we may die at any day. Do not mourn for the death of our brethren. They fulfilled their duty and fought valiantly."

"Yet they died while fighting a needless battle." Gloriana couldn't help but insist. "Your deceased comrades could have lived for many more years and participated in many more fruitful battles. Your unit is constantly improving and evolving. Technology progresses so quickly that you will become twice or thrice as strong as now in a matter of years. Why do you still insist on taking excessive risks at the start of your extraordinary journey? Is it because of duty, or vainglory?"

Ves couldn't help but twitch his lips. He would never imagine that his wife would actually use the term 'vainglory' given her own inclinations.

Another surviving Apocalypse Warden spoke up. "It is because of duty that we proactively seek out strong opponents to test ourselves, madame. Our orders are not so explicit, but as a new and arguably experimental unit of the Red Collective, much of our doctrines, planning, cultivation and gear are largely theoretical. Who knows how much of our strength is built upon clouds? It is easy for us to seek out ordinary alien soldiers on the battlefield, but an adversary that somewhat resembles a phase lord but does not match a real one is a rare find. We may have paid a steep price, but our brothers and sisters did not die unjustly. The least we can do to honor their sacrifice is to study our encounter and learn from it so that we can do better next time."

The female Senior Mech Designer could somewhat understand this argument, but she still thought it was a considerable waste.

Did these soldiers value their lives so little that they readily threw them away just to obtain a bunch of empirical data?

Why couldn't they be more patient and test their new tactics and gear against more manageable opponents?

From her perspective, the balance between gains and sacrifice did not favor the Apocalypse Wardens in the slightest!

Ves adopted a more understanding perspective.

"Gloriana, these infantry troopers think differently from the traditional mech pilots that you are accustomed to. When it comes to the latter, each of them are part of the 3.5 percent of the population with a compatible genetic aptitude. In fact, only a fraction of them have actually graduated from respectable mech academies and received the essential suite of augmentations that makes them suitable for piloting mechs of varying capabilities. It is both expensive and time-consuming to produce them, so they are often told to refrain from taking reckless action and to reasonably preserve their lives. Then there is the value of the mechs themselves. When the new recruits finally begin their service, their superiors, mentors and veterans have already drilled into their heads that they must never willfully squander their machines that often cost a fortune that they can never earn in their lifetimes."

Several Apocalypse Wardens nodded their heads. "We are different from the high-and-mighty potentates. Even if we can choose to pilot Carmine mechs today, we are still aware that not every enemy can be fought with towering machines. Infantry combat is the oldest form of warfare that humans have engaged in. It will always remain relevant. It is faster and easier for a state or organization to train large batches of infantry, and they do have their uses even if many of us blend in the background."

This was an inherent difference that could not be erased in a short amount of time. Even if the distinction between a norm and a potentate was not as extreme as before, the latter still enjoyed greater status and opportunities up to this day.

"So you see yourselves as expendable due to the lower barrier of entry?" Gloriana asked.

"We used to think this way in the past." The Apocalypse Warden ruefully responded. "Today? Not so much. What gives us hope is that the Age of Mechs has passed. The Age of Dawn has begun. All of the new tech and magical powers has given us groundpounders hope that we too can matter in

the new era. We, the Apocalypse Wardens, can accelerate or even transform the existing paradigms of infantry warfare. If we want to make a real difference, then we cannot afford to stay passive. We need to go on the offensive for only then will we be able to prove our worth in the most undeniable fashion possible. This is a cause worth dying for. Our hammers light the way so that our successors can improve without paying the same heavy price."

The Apocalypse Wardens embodied these words and sentiments. They did not solely fight for themselves, but also the entire class of infantrymen whose role in red humanity's society had become a lot more malleable due to the radical changes as of late.

Ves let out a deep breath. "Let us end this particular discussion. What is done is done. I will make sure that the Red Collective acknowledges your sacrifice and makes full use of the combat data that you have generated. My chief of staff has already corresponded with the Astral Octagon. The next supply run dispatched by the RC will include troop replenishments to bring your elite unit back to full strength. There will definitely be more chances to board enemy ships and invade enemy strongholds. Mechs are still too large and destructive."

That reminded Gloriana of the large hole that the First Sword Mark III had carved all the way to the center of the hull.

Even if the damage was not proportionately excessive due to the length and mass of the archecruiser, she still bled inside of her heart at the sight of this gaping wound.

So much priceless archetech got destroyed or cut into pieces!

Dise had not even bothered to go around more sensitive and higher-value blocks of archemetal. She cut everything up in an indiscriminate fashion for the sole reason that they were in her way!

"We need to move quickly, Ves." She told her husband. "My pet and I need to reach what constitutes the bridge of this archecruiser as quickly as possible in order to gain preliminary control over her control systems. There is no telling what sort of poison pills or other hidden traps the arche have left behind. An archeship of this caliber is a higher-value strategic asset. The arche would never make it easy for other races to hijack it. There is still a chance that the ship can blow up due to being left unattended for too long."

That was correct. Even though Ves had specifically consulted the seers of the Moloch Squadron and received word that they did not sense an immediate disaster, who knew whether their future predictions could be relied upon when it comes to completely alien technologies.

Their procession finally left the hangar bay and moved further inwards. They navigated one alien corridor after another, occasionally bypassing piles of dead arche soldiers, broken defensive installations and breached gates.

The air and temperature still remained inhospitable to the baseline human physique, so every human that stepped foot inside the hull had to wear hazard suits at minimum to be safe.

Multiple parties of technicians, engineers and other specialists had begun to crawl all over the length of the hull. Their work may be marginal due to lacking understanding of alien tech, but their presence still reassured everyone that the situation was under control.

After a lengthy walk, the core group finally entered the alien equivalent of the bridge.

The elite bodyguards, this time hailing from the Red Association and the Larkinson Clan, wordlessly entered first and swept the entire space to clear it from any immediate threats.

When the rest finally stepped inside, Gloriana and the arche engineer that followed from behind continued to move towards a few rows of man-sized depressions against a surface.

"Hekkel." The woman called.

The suited and lightly armored arche engineer made a servile bow, which seemed very unnatural given his alien physique, before moving towards one of the depressions.

He then proceeded to turn his back and slotted his archeshell into the 'slot', thereby achieving an imperfect fit.

No archeshell was completely identical to each other. They diverged by size, density, dimensions and more.

This was why a perfect fit was never necessary. The archeshell interfaces only needed to make rough contact in order to establish a stable enough connection.

Hekkel went still as he attempted to interface with the control system of a much grander and more powerful ship than he had ever touched!

Strange but disconcerting noises escaped from his alien mouth. His expression shifted frequently as if he was being constantly subjected to stressful events.

The servant alien finally moved away, causing the direct connection to break.

"What are the results?" Ves asked.

Gloriana softly communicated with Hekkel before she offered an answer.

"It is as we feared. The archecruiser is built with secrecy in mind. Preserving her hull and invaluable archetech is difficult if not impossible. Only the captain or other senior officers can stall the inevitable deterioration of her core systems. Hekkel cannot do anything. His status is low and he is not even registered to this vessel. Even if we manage to change this by using human hacking methods to exploit undiscovered vulnerabilities in arche software systems, it is still pointless. Hekkel's archeshell is too shabby and poor. The ship's core system will never accept the authority of such a low-class individual. It was not so obvious when it came to the archefrigates, but these societal rules are hardcoded into the entire archecruiser."

In other words, the alien caste system intentionality served as another protective measure!

"Can we solve this by converting the captured arche officers to our side?" Ves asked.

"That may be possible, but..." Gloriana hesitated. "It is far too difficult to ensure their loyalty in a short amount of time. You should be aware that they can feign compliance, but once their

archeshell makes contact with an interface, they can secretly transmit the self-destruct command and cause us to lose this priceless alien vessel. Are you certain you wish to take this risk?"

"...I guess not." Ves sighed.

There were several conventional and extraordinary means to force an alien into compliance, yet most of them had only been proven reliable when applied to humans.

It was much less clear whether those same methods worked on the arche and whether they reached the same degree of effectiveness.

They could figure out all of this over time through methodical tests and examinations, but who could wait that long?

The archecruiser could very blow up in a matter of days!

As they tried to think of alternate solutions, Ves suddenly came up with a crazy idea.

"Wait, Gloriana. You just told me that possessing a high-quality archeshell essentially serves as an authentication method, correct?"

She nodded. "What are you trying to suggest this time, Ves?"

"Well, what if we take the intact archeshell of the highest-ranking arche officer that we can find and transplant that onto Hekkel? Wouldn't that be a way for us to circumvent the archecruiser's security systems?"

His wife blinked. She hadn't thought about it. She seriously considered this possibility.

"What you are describing is one of the most horrible taboos in arche society. It will never work. Arche are not mechs that can interchange parts with each other. Archeshells are the core of their identity."

Chapter 7477 Greatest Son, Terrible Race

Chapter 7477 Greatest Son, Terrible Race

"I don't care about that cultural stuff, Gloriana. My only question is this: can it work?"

His wife fell silent for a time.

She had difficulty processing the proposal made by Ves.

His remark revealed his general ignorance of arche culture and physiology. She had to put more thought into her explanation.

"Archeshells and the bodies they are attached to form a close biological relationship with each other." She eventually said. "They partially support each other. An arche officer not only possesses a powerful and beautiful archeshell, but also invested in a body that can bear the additional mass and power. High-quality archeshells are usually comprised of many volatile exotic materials that can poison or even outright disintegrate the body of a lesser arche. I have not even talked about the invisible bonds between arche and their archeshells. Even if they have not formed an explicit Blood Pact or similar, they are still inseparable from each other by more than biological compatibility."

In other words, Gloriana saw no chance for the proposal to succeed. Even if there was a small chance that it could work, she would never allow Hekkel to be subjected to such a dangerous procedure.

Ves couldn't help but feel disappointed. It would have been a lot more convenient to take full control of the archecruiser if archeshells were a lot more interchangeable.

They exercised their brains a bit more, but failed to come up with a feasible suggestion.

"Let us inform the other parties and have them come up with solutions." Ves finally suggested. "They all have a vested interest in preserving as much of this archecruiser as possible. A ship like this is a very rare find. I am actually wondering why she was stationed here at this time and why the alien commander chose to launch a risky stealth attack, but I won't look a gift horse in the mouth."

His wife nodded in agreement. "It is a huge loss for us to allow this ship to degrade any further. I do not even care that much about who will be able to claim final ownership of this vessel. I just want the hull and all of her priceless archetech to remain as intact as possible so that I can study all of the advanced applications."

While the Larkinsons had dispatched lots of teams of technicians and engineers to conduct detailed scans of every advanced component, studying data was not as good as examining the real thing up close.

After spending a few more minutes poking around in the bridge of the archecruiser, the married couple finally concluded that there was not much more they could do without obtaining proper access permissions.

"I will leave Hekkel behind to monitor the active consoles and relay any information that may be cause for concern." She said as she stroked the top of the friendly arche engineer's shell. "I think it is best if he does not meet the captain of this vessel in person."

Gloriana had put a lot of time and effort into training her pet arche. She did not want him to harbor any conflicting loyalties when he came across a genuine high-ranking arche leader.

Besides, who knew whether the two arche might secretly communicate with each other.

After settling this matter, the pair moved over to the ceremonial hall that had incurred a substantial amount of collateral damage.

The bout between the Apocalypse Wardens and the archeshell mech had crushed bulkheads, created dents into the deck and destroyed a host of alien decorations.

The obvious marks of damage partially ruined the solemn and exotic atmosphere inside the large chamber. It seemed as if the humans had rudely invaded this holy space and desecrated the arche articles of faith.

That may very well be the case as the First Sword Mark III along with a large number of technical personnel surrounded the crippled archeshell mech.

All four severed crystalline limbs had lost much of their shine and inner light. They looked dull and powerless even as the salvaging teams carefully lifted them into shielded containers.

The thick torso and alien head that remained attached to each other still retained a bit of luminescence, but that was all. The crippled 'body' exuded a despondent air that emphasized its total defeat at the hands of a human ace mech.

"It's a pity." Ves couldn't help but comment.

"How so?"

"This fellow tried so hard to attain the alien version of godhood, only to fall short in both body and spirit. What he has been able to create is quite remarkable, but... no matter how fascinating this fusion may be, it falls short of the standards of a lesser phase lord."

"All the better for us." Gloriana replied with a selfish expression. "This form is better for us. The more radical the transformation, the more difficult it is to decipher and replicate the individual components. This half-completed state is much more convenient for my purposes. There are enough evolutions to derive dozens of advancements in archetech without having to deal with so many impassable hurdles."

"You will need for him to be alive if you want to gain the most benefits out of his unique form." Ves noted. "I am afraid that may not be easy. His spirituality is too weak relative to his new body. Suffering so much trauma and loss in a brief amount of time has made everything worse. His will to live has sunk to the bottom. I am not sure how his body works, but... if he chooses to commit suicide, I do not know how to prevent him from doing so. Perhaps the only reason why he is still clinging to life is because he wants to have a final chat."

That possible realization dampened their enthusiasm. They already had trouble with trying to preserve the archecruiser. If they had to deal with the same problem when it comes to the archeshell mech, then that would truly spoil their victory!

When the pair stopped a healthy distance from the crippled archeshell mech, they began to examine its prone form with greater interest.

The proximity helped them pick up a lot more details than viewing the same subject from a remote feed.

For example, Ves could make much better use of his spatial senses to gain a better grasp of the mechanics of the archeshell mech.

It turned out that he was not wrong when he considered it to be a forbidden merger between an archemech, a Carmine mech and a phase lord.

The archecruiser captain did not pilot this arcane construct. He had fused with it to the point where the two had become inseparable.

This condition reminded him a lot of Saint Rosa Orfan's condition. She too had become fused with her own machine to the point where it was impossible to sever her vestigial biological body from the cockpit.

There were still differences, of course.

Saint Orfan fused with a powerful but adversarial D-mech, creating lots of tensions that still caused problems to this day. The main reason why she was still able to preserve her sense of self was her Saint-level willpower.

This situation differed because the physical vessel lacked a strong spirit prior to its transformation.

Perhaps it may have gained a rudimentary form of life after its macabre assembly, but its stability was questionable. It probably consisted of a messy concentration of remnant spiritualities of all of the arche who had been forced to sacrifice their blood and archeshells to manufacture this alien construct.

Whatever sacrificial ritual the arche had improvised, it had to be sloppy and dangerous beyond all reason!

Given these flawed conditions, Ves did not feel any surprise that the archecruiser captain failed to achieve his objective.

A part of him couldn't help but feel empathy towards this alien leader. Every race pursued ascension. It was a universal desire. The arche may be an enemy of red humanity, but they still possessed many of the same dreams and aspirations.

"Can we talk to this fellow?" He asked a nearby exobiologist who looked confused more than anything.

"It... he... still shows indication of life." The expert who found himself way out of his depth eventually responded. "Some of our scanners still detect activity that suggests that he is conscious, but we are unclear whether he is still lucid enough to hold a proper conversation."

That sounded good enough to Ves. He turned towards the giant figure and began to convey his words with his voice as well as his Spirituality.

"Greetings. I am Ves Larkinson, the leader of this fleet. You may have heard of me. Know that I am ultimately responsible for your defeat. You did not lose because you were weak. You lost because I am stronger and better prepared."

A moment of silence passed before the injured and exhausted life form deigned to give a response.

"#\$%&@\$@&."

"WE KNOW OF YOU. LARKINSON. THE GREATEST SON OF YOUR TERRIBLE RACE. YOUR COURAGE IS ADMIRABLE, BUT YOUR INVENTIONS THREATEN TO DOOM US ALL. IT IS

REGRETTABLE THAT WE HAVE TO BE YOUR ENEMIES, BUT NOTHING CAN CHANGE THIS. OUR WAR WILL NEVER END UNTIL ONE RACE IS LEFT IN THE OCEAN OF RED."

Neither Ves nor Gloriana needed to resort to translation programs to interpret the alien leader's words.

Ves was able to interpret the defeated alien's words from a spiritual level.

Gloriana had mastered enough of the arche language to understand the alien speech.

This also happened to make communication a lot more convenient.

"Why do we need to be enemies?" Ves suddenly asked. "From what I know, you arche don't fit in with the rest of the major races of this dwarf galaxy. You are pariahs who have lost their homeworlds. Even now, you are still being denied the right to claim your own territories. Don't you hate it that your people are still forced to wander the stars like poor vagrants? Why not work together with us? We may be at war with each other at the moment, but that does not have to stay this way."

Gloriana and several other people looked shocked at Ves.

Seeking peace through diplomacy with the native aliens was still taboo!

Besides, wasn't Ves supposed to be a human supremacist? It was no secret that he opposed the Xenotechnician's ideology.

Ves couldn't help but make a rueful smile behind his helmet.

While all of those assumptions may be true, Ves felt that there may be an opportunity to make life harder for the native aliens.

At the very least, it didn't hurt to try.

If it worked, then that would give red humanity a massive boon to the war effort!

If his attempt at swaying the arche to switch sides came to nothing, then he wouldn't suffer any losses.

Chapter 7478 Humans Are Untrustworthy

Chapter 7478 Humans Are Untrustworthy

If Ves was being honest with himself, his belief in human supremacy had changed.

He no longer possessed the naivete of the past.

While still believed that the human race possessed a lot of superior traits, he was not blind to the fact that other races might not necessarily fall behind.

The Red War had long opened his eyes to the fact that most intelligent alien races deserved respect.

They all had their respective strengths and weaknesses.

If he had to make an honest evaluation, then perhaps the native aliens of the Red Ocean might score lower in terms of culture, society and technological mastery, but these were all surmountable faults.

So long as the alien races learned from their human foes and fixed many of the faults that impeded their civilizations, it was not impossible for them to grow rapidly and experience their own versions of the Age of Conquest!

Ves might despise their present incarnations, but he could not underestimate their future potential.

Among all of the alien races, Ves and most humans harbored relatively less hostility towards the arche.

This elusive race had always maintained a relatively low profile due to their lower population and their penchant for stealth operations.

Even if they had attacked human forces and holdings, they often did so in total secrecy, making it that much harder to lay blame on their feet.

This gave the idea that if red humanity had to pinch its nose and seek alliances with one alien race, it would have much less objections if it did so with the arche.

After all, the amount of human blood spilled by this mysterious race barely mattered compared to the much greater misery inflicted by the orvens, nunsers, jurgens and phase whales!

They just needed an opening.

Ves could worry about the reputational fallout later. He believed that he could overcome the controversy much like he managed to do with the last ones.

Those past experiences had taught him that as long as the benefits exceeded the costs, many people would be willing to accept the new status quo!

The main requirement now was to secure a high-level collaborator of the arche race.

The archecruiser captain definitely qualified. In the nomadic ship-based society that the arche had formed after their exile into space, those who earned the right to command such an impressively large stealth vessel definitely possessed a strong voice.

"#\$%&@%&#."

"I MEAN IT WHEN WE KNOW YOU, LARKINSON. YOUR OWN RACE CALLS YOU THE TONGUE OF THE EVIL GOD. YOUR INFAMY HAS ALREADY SPREAD BEYOND YOUR BORDERS. DESPITE YOUR QUESTIONABLE GODHOOD, YOU HAVE AMPLY DEMONSTRATED YOUR DECEITFULNESS BY SUCCESSFULLY MISDIRECTING HUMAN GODS WHO ARE MUCH MORE POWERFUL THAN YOU TO BEND TO YOUR SELFISH WHIMS. THE ARCHE RACE IS NOT IGNORANT ENOUGH TO FALL FOR YOUR DEVIOUS TRICKS. ANY POSSIBLE AGREEMENT THAT YOU OFFER TO US WILL ONLY CAUSE US TO DEGENERATE INTO YOUR THRALLS."

"..."

"..."

Both Ves and Gloriana reacted with befuddlement after interpreting the heavily injured arche's words.

Ves actually felt offended by the alien's overly negative interpretations of his words and deeds!

Sure, he may have played fast and loose with the truth at times, but he had always tried to be as honest as possible when it came to his work and his public responsibilities!

As far as he knew, he enjoyed an excellent reputation among red humans for being trustworthy and empathic towards the common folk.

His many contributions to society had objectively improved the agency and opportunities for trillions of ordinary red humans!

Even the upper echelon of red humanity enjoyed fantastic benefits in the form of access to superdimensional matter and securing the rights to his advanced Carmine mechs!

Unfortunately, the title that he inadvertently obtained during his initial years as a mech designer still haunted him to this day!

The native aliens could not possibly appreciate all of the good that he had done for his own race. Their biases and inability to understand human nuances caused them to place too much weight on negative rumors and too little weight on positive achievements.

Ves sighed. "I am not the 'evil god' in your imagination. I can be much more reasonable and accommodating in reality. Just give us a chance. If you think that it is harmful to negotiate with me, then I would be happy to put you into contact with our other leaders. Let's face it. A war between our two races will not benefit anyone aside from the major alien races who greedily conquered your territories and turned you into space vagrants in the first place. What has the phase whale race done for your people over all of these years? Why would you possibly band together with your abusers and sacrifice your lives to protect their hegemony over the Red Ocean?"

A swell of contempt radiated from the crippled archeshell mech.

It appeared the alien leader did not think highly of Ves' argument!

"#\$@\$#@#@"

"WE ARE NOT AS EASILY FOOLED AS YOUR HUMAN BRETHEN. OUR RACE MAY BE STRUGGLING IN THE PRESENT, BUT WE SHALL RISE ONCE MORE IN THE FUTURE. THE ORVENS AND THE NUNTERS ARE IN THE ASCENDANCY NOW, BUT THEY WILL INEVITABLY FALL WITH THE PASSING OF TIME. ALL STRONG RACES, AS LONG AS THEY DO NOT DIE OFF COMPLETELY, UNDERGO THIS REPEATING CYCLE. IT IS THE WAY OF THINGS IN THIS GALAXY. OUR RACE ONLY NEEDS TO BE PATIENT AND OUTLAST EVERYONE ELSE IN ORDER TO RISE AGAIN."

What an... overly passive attitude towards their current race's malaise.

Ves found this to be a lazy and disgusting attitude. The arche essentially dedicated that the way to make a comeback was to sit down and lie low until the big boys got into trouble!

This approach of trying to achieve success by waiting for others to make mistakes lacked the boldness that separated truly successful civilizations from failing ones!

"That won't work out so well this time." He argued back. "An alien as well-informed as you should have known about the rise of the mutated voribug race in another corner of this dwarf galaxy. Those pests have suddenly become a lot stronger and more intelligent than we could have imagined. Even now, they are conquering large swathes of territories occupied by all of the races hailing from the Red Ocean. Only our race has managed to hold the line and stop the mutated voribugs from ravaging large swathes of human territories. We originate from a much larger and more diverse galaxy. In our glorious past, we have defeated many strange but powerful alien races by relying on superior technology and strategy. We will vanquish the mutated voribug race in time. I cannot imagine that those inexperienced races who you are familiar with can do the same. The only advantages they can count on is that they have many more territories and resources to squander before they meet their inevitable demise."

The sudden crisis centered around the mutated voribug race was a big wildcard that screwed up everyone else's plans for the Red Ocean.

The space bugs expanded too quickly. Before every race could properly comprehend the threat they were dealing with, the mutated voribugs already took over more territory than the humans had ever claimed since they entered the new frontier on a large scale!

"#\$%&@#@%\$."

"THE THREAT THAT YOU HAVE DESCRIBED IS REAL, BUT THAT IS NO REASON FOR OUR RACE TO SUBMIT TO YOURS. WE ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE RED STARS, AND SO ARE THE OTHERS WHO CLAIM THIS GALAXY AS THEIR ONLY HOME. WE WOULD RATHER FIGHT TOGETHER WITH THE RACES THAT WE KNOW AND UNDERSTAND THAN TO ENTRUST OUR LIVES TO A RACE THAT HAS WIPED OUT COUNTLESS OTHERS AND PROCLAIM THEIR SUPERIORITY OVER ALL. YOU DO NOT BELONG IN THESE STARS. TO ALL OF US, YOU ARE LITTLE DIFFERENT FROM THE VORIBUGS. BOTH OF YOU ARE HIGHLY DESTRUCTIVE PARASITES THAT SEEK TO DRIVE EVERYONE ELSE TO EXTINCTION."

Ouch.

That was a very unflattering comparison.

Ves could see where the arche leader was coming from, though. From the perspective of the natives of the Red Ocean, it was not unfair to consider red humanity as extragalactic invaders who could never be compromised with. Human history already made it clear that this particular race was way too aggressive and arrogant to achieve peaceful coexistence over the long term.

Perhaps that might change as the situation in the Red Ocean continued to deteriorate, but would any of the native alien races truly be willing to take a leap of faith on this matter?

If he was in the place of an alien leader, he would never take the risk of trusting these humans!

"Is that your verdict?" Gloriana interjected. "Are your people truly willing to hide in the dark corners of interstellar space in the hopes of waiting for an opportunity to rise that may never come?"

The archeshell mech made a strange wrenching noise.

"#@#&@#."

"DO NOT ATTEMPT TO CONVINCE ME ANY FURTHER. NO ARCHE SHALL EVER SURRENDER TO A HUMAN. THIS IS OUR COLLECTIVE CONSENSUS. "

The archecruiser captain was incorrect.

Red humanity already managed to turn a number of arche on its side. Hekkel would never become so servile to Gloriana if his race was so absolute on this matter.

Unfortunately, it was one thing to brainwash the rank-and-file members of the arche race.

The challenge of converting high-ranking members of the arche into willing collaborators was much greater!

Their loyalty, principles and stubbornness was so much greater that they could not be reasoned with. Logical and practical arguments alone could not persuade them into lowering their guard.

Since the archecruiser captain clearly refused to cooperate with humans in any way, Ves and Gloriana no longer needed to maintain the pretense of politeness.

The pair nonchalantly dropped their smiles. They abandoned their diplomatic postures and began to assume their mantles as mech designers.

The archeshell mech was no longer a living individual that deserved to be treated with respect in their eyes.

It had become a research specimen that was filled with a myriad of insights that had yet to be uncovered.

"You have looked at it long enough, Gloriana. What do you think of its unique archeshell-based structure?"

His wife crossed her arms. "It has opened my eyes to the intrinsic value of archeshells as primary components for an archemec. I have always known that there are differences in quality and other properties between archeshells and archemetal. The former is the origin. The latter is the derivative. According to my current understanding, the best forms of archemetal have never been able to surpass the best types of archeshells. The latter may be more disordered due to their organic growth processes, but they gain an unknown number of special traits and advantages that we have yet to fully map out. The fact that they can be used to bring a cross between a partial phase lord and an archemec to life is just a small glimpse of their amazing potential."

"Can you replicate this specimen in your own way?" Ves asked next.

His wife paused and thought about it. "Hmmm... possibly. I cannot give you any assurances. I would not only have to conduct a deep study into this specialized subject, but also have to secure a large supply of archeshells. As long as I can meet both of these conditions, I may be able to develop a lesser and more generic version of archeshell mechs. It will doubtlessly offer superior performance compared to the more primitive archemechs that we have designed up to this point. However, the effort will not make up for the results. If we want to achieve a positive balance, then I need to draw out the greater potential of the concept of archeshell mechs. I am afraid that I can only do so by reproducing the unique specimen before us. Only by converting a mech into a partial phase lord will the output justify the input."

In other words, it was not worth it to develop generic archeshell mechs that only offered similar or slightly superior performance compared to normal archemechs.

After all, the latter could be produced fairly easily and consistently with specialized production equipment.

It was also much easier to repair normal archemechs as they did not need whole archeshells as replacement materials.

Yet neither Ves nor Gloriana wanted to give up on the greater promise of archeshell mechs so easily.

Chapter 7479 The Power of Desecration

Chapter 7479 The Power of Desecration

"Is it possible to reproduce the same phenomenon without relying on whole archeshells harvested from these alien individuals?" Ves inquired.

His wife frowned in thought. "Theoretically, it should be possible to do so, but the prerequisites are too great. I have to meet a large number of conditions to make that possible. At this point, our understanding of archetech is too shallow. We have only explored a single corner of this large and promising field. The arche has definitely mastered more, but even they have not managed to uncover the full potential of their unique tech base. We would not only have to catch up to the arche in terms of understanding archetech, but also continue to innovate until we have reached a very high level. This is an effort that will require decades if not centuries of focused research."

That sounded completely unrealistic.

"If that is the case, then that means that if we want to take advantage of the rare and exceptional properties of genuine archeshells, we can only acquire them by prying them off the backs of arche individuals." Ves concluded. "That is troublesome. The arche are not as numerous as the nunsers and puelmers. They are also fiendishly difficult to find. It is unfeasible to capture large amounts of them that are required to turn this into a dedicated industry."

"Archeshells are similar to Mentalist Crystals in this regard." His wife agreed.

That comparison caused Ves' eyes to light up all of a sudden. "Not quite! Mentalist Crystals are impossible to acquire in large numbers because they cannot be farmed with any degree of regularity. They only tend to form randomly within the brains of mutated exobeasts who choose to rely on their smarts instead of brute force to overcome predation. This kind of random process can only be semi-regularly harvested by an organization like the Hunting Association which oversees entire untamed planets. This does not apply to the arche, who are simple biological creatures who don't rely on any strange mutations or random chance to reproduce. The only reason why their numbers are so low is due to lack of living space."

Gloriana understood what he was trying to convey. She began to look intrigued.

"Are you suggesting that we capture enough arche and put them in a controlled environment and treat them like cattle?"

"Why not? If the only purpose is to establish a reliable and consistent means of producing archeshells, then we only need to set up a planet with a habitat that conforms to the physiological needs of the arche race and force the aliens to breed vigorously with each other. We can then proceed to control the growth process of the juvenile arche by cramming different combinations of materials down their throats. The arche have already proven the capacity to produce archeshells with specific properties and abilities by being selective with their diets. We just need to steal their recipes and imitate their methods to industrialize this initiative. We can even develop new varieties of archeshells by experimenting with the input!"

10:09

This sounded promising, but Gloriana had a few misgivings about this proposal.

"It will not be easy to set up this arche breeding farm of yours. We will at least need to dedicate an entire planet to make this a worthwhile effort. Furthermore, we will have to breed millions or at least billions of arche in order to achieve a profitable and meaningful production scale. The greatest impediment to this plan is the timespan of a single breeding cycle. The time it takes for an arche to attain biological maturity from the moment of conception spans more than a decade at the very least. Archeshells grow at an incremental rate. That is part of the reason that makes them so fascinating."

Ves shook his head in disagreement. "You are still thinking within natural boundaries. We do not have to abide by the natural limitations of this race. Technology can solve any problem! Think about it. Our current capabilities allow batch humans to be grown in large numbers. Not only that, we can utilize advanced tech to educate them and turn them into functional adults in a handful of years! The Cybernetic Empire has already extensively developed this tech, and I am sure it is only a

matter of time before the other major players invest in their own batch human programs. Population size is a core source of strength for them all. Do you think it will be difficult for us to adapt the same tech used to produce batch humans on the arche?"

That was a very serious but valid question.

Gloriana could not provide an easy answer. "I honestly do not know. I will have to consult multiple specialists in order to know for certain. I am not that well-versed in biology, and my familiarity with the arche as a species is not deep enough to estimate whether it is possible to compress their growth rate in a tight window. However, if it turns out that it is possible to do so, then your proposal has a lot of merit. High-quality archeshells can never match the strategic value of Mentalist Crystals on a 1-to-1 basis, but it is not impossible for an industry that focuses on the former to overtake the industry that focuses on the latter in terms of total value. The most important requirements are scale and high-quality resource inputs. We would need to work with tens of millions of arche at the beginning and ensure that they are force-fed enough high-quality exotics and hypers to make this effort worthwhile. Oh, and you cannot forget about phasewater either."

As Ves and Gloriana continued to become engrossed in a discussion on how to turn the arche into cattle for red humanity, the crippled alien leader remained well within earshot.

The pair of mech designers did not bother to talk over an encrypted communication channel.

Though the alien leader had not learned how to speak standard human language himself, he still possessed unknown tech or augmentations that allowed him to parse human words.

This meant that he had to tolerate several minutes of hearing two evil humans discuss how to enslave and exploit the members of his race in the cruelest and heartless fashion possible!

As much as he looked down on the lesser members of his own race, the archecruiser captain could not possibly stand the thought of his proud people being reduced to cattle for the purpose of harvesting their archeshells!

At least when he had asked his own crew to sacrifice their blood and archeshells, he had done so for a desperate cause.

Trying to attain godhood through the sacrifice of his fellow arche was a noble act in his eyes.

Though the gambit ultimately failed, that did not diminish the heroism of this attempt.

Yet what these despicable humans thought about doing far exceeded his psychological boundaries!

Letting the arche go extinct sounded much more acceptable than allowing his own people to degenerate into farm animals!

An intense feeling of rejection and revulsion coursed through his mind. This swell in emotions was enough to pull him away from his self-destructive malaise.

Perhaps he shouldn't end his life so soon as he originally planned.

"@\$@&@\$. "

"STOP. DO NOT SPEAK OF VIOLATING THE MEMBERS OF MY RACE. OUR ARCHESHELLS ARE NOT YOURS TO DESECRATE AT WILL. I PROMISE YOU THAT IF YOU TRULY ATTEMPT TO REALIZE YOUR PLAN AS THE TWO OF YOU HAVE DESCRIBED, YOU WILL EARN THE ETERNAL HATRED OF OUR ENTIRE PEOPLE. NOT EVEN THE OTHER RACES FROM OUR GALAXY HAS CONSIDERED SUCH A GREAT EVIL. WE WILL NEVER REST UNTIL WE HAVE KILLED EACH AND EVERY HUMAN THAT WE CAN FIND."

Ves turned towards the crippled entity with a lazy expression. "You have no voice in this matter. We are not scared of you. We are already locked in a bitter conflict against the phase whales and the mutated voribugs among other races. Your threat is trivial in comparison. If you want to persuade us to drop our current plan, then you can only do so by offering concessions that exceed any profit that we can obtain by farming millions of archeshells on an annual basis. Are you willing to consider your initial stance with regards to cooperating with the human race?"

"\$#\$Y\$."

"...I CANNOT SPEAK ON BEHALF OF ALL OF MY PEOPLE. I AM ALSO INCAPABLE OF OFFERING SO MUCH. NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO, YOU CAN NEVER CONVINCE US TO ALLY WITH YOU. HOWEVER, I AM WILLING TO DO WHAT I CAN BY MYSELF TO STOP YOU OR OTHER HUMANS FROM TREATING MY PEOPLE AS CATTLE."

Both Ves and Gloriana smirked when they heard this. The stubborn alien finally conveyed a willingness to negotiate. Though it was still far from the complete surrender that they imagined, it at least represented a step forward.

"We can take small steps at first." Gloriana gently said. "We can talk about more extensive forms of cooperation later once we have stabilized our current situation. For now, we have two immediate demands. First, we want you to behave and stay alive while you remain under our custody. We still want to study you and observe how you have been able to gain so much strength. I can promise you that our investigation methods will not be too invasive or painful. As long as you maintain a cooperative attitude with us, we will reciprocate in kind."

"\$#\$@."

"IF I HAVE REACHED DIVINITY AS I HAD HOPED, I WOULD NEVER ALLOW YOU TO DESECRATE MY DIVINITY BY DISSECTING MY FORM. IT IS GOOD FOR YOU THAT THIS IS NOT THE CASE. MY ASCENSION HAS FAILED. THE STRENGTH I WIELD IS NOTHING IMPRESSIVE COMPARED TO WHAT A PROPER GOD OF THE ARCHE IS CAPABLE OF BRINGING TO BEAR. MY SHELL HAS FAILED TO FUSE IN A SINGLE WHOLE. TRYING TO REPRODUCE IT IS SIMILAR TO TRYING TO COPY A BROKEN SHIP."

"That is not a great concern of ours." Gloriana replied with satisfaction. "Broken ships can be mended. What we care about is progressing our understanding and application of archetech. What your body openly displays already exceeds what we are capable of with our current mastery of your tech base. Your large body offers us a map that can instruct us how to formulate deeper synergies between archemetal and phasewater."

"#\$\$@."

"YOU HAVE STATED A FIRST DEMAND. WHAT IS YOUR SECOND?"

"Ah, we require your cooperation in securing our control of this ship. You should be aware that your vessel is programmed to degrade her systems and ultimately destroy herself when she is left unattended for too long. We do not wish for this to happen, as your ship offers other interesting glimpses on how to apply your distinctive technologies."

"We have been thinking about employing various different solutions to save this ship." Ves added. "One of our ideas was to salvage a high-quality archeshell from your officers and to transplant it onto the back of a friendly and cooperative low-ranked arche soldier. I am sure that there should be at least a handful of members of your race that are willing to collaborate with us in the hopes of preserving their lives."

The giant archeshell mech made a rumbling noise.

"#\$\$@#%."

"THAT IS A CRUEL AND UNNECESSARY PROCEDURE. IT WILL NOT WORK. OUR PROUD SHIP WILL NOT BE DECEIVED SO EASILY BY SUCH A POOR TRICK. I DOUBT THAT YOU WOULD BE ABLE TO GET THIS FAR IN THE FIRST PLACE. NO ARCHE WILL BE ABLE TO SURVIVE THIS TRANSFER. IT CANNOT BE DONE."

"Are you sure about that, alien?"

"@#@&##@."

"AS UNTHINKABLE AS THIS ACT MAY BE, I HAVE HEARD OF... CRIMINALS WHO HAVE ATTEMPTED TO DO SO IN THE PAST. THEIR EXPERIMENTS HAVE NOT PRODUCED ANYTHING ELSE THAN TOTAL FAILURE. DO NOT CONSIDER THIS IDEA ANY FURTHER. YOU WILL ONLY REPEAT THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST."

Ves placed a hand on his hip. "We aren't just going to take your word for it, do you know that? If you truly want to stop us from conducting this little experiment, then cooperate with us and issue the necessary commands that ensures the archecruiser remains in stable condition. Are you willing?"

Chapter 7480 RF Stealth Focus

Chapter 7480 RF Stealth Focus

After a bit of creative intimidation and negotiation, Ves and Gloriana managed to secure the initial compliance of the archecruiser captain.

This saved them a lot of trouble.

With the intervention of the surviving alien leader, Gloriana and her team managed to pause the timers that had been running in the background, thereby stopping all immediate threats that could lead to the destruction of invaluable spoils.

Saint Dise and her ace mech remained close at hand while these interactions took place. Her Saint Kingdom verified that the archecruiser captain did not consciously engage in any falsehood or inauthentic behavior.

He truly cooperated with the humans that managed to defeat and capture him, at least for the time being.

Ves did not think it would be as easy to establish deeper forms of cooperation with this prideful alien leader, but at least he did not try to deprive the humans from the rewards that they deserved.

Gloriana decided to stay longer and take advantage of this opportunity to examine the structure of the archecruiser in person.

"The Red Fleet has already staked a very strong claim on this prize." She told her husband. "I would have preferred that our clan keep this alien ship in our possession, but that is not a realistic wish. We lack the researchers and infrastructure to properly study and decipher her workings in full. While I am confident in my own personal abilities, I cannot study this entire ship in a reasonable amount of time. I also need to dedicate most of my time to designing mechs. This is why we are currently working towards an agreement with the RF that allows them to take over the ship and study her archetech at will in exchange for giving us access to their research results."

"As long as the RF provides enough guarantees that they will uphold that promise, I do not have any strong objections to this deal." Ves said after a moment's thought.

This was nothing new to the Larkinson Clan. He even believed that the combined fleet would capture more technologically advanced prizes in the near future. There was no way the Larkinson Clan's meager R&D capabilities could digest all of these gains. It was better to give them away to various allies in exchange for more immediate and tangible benefits.

The Red Fleet indeed developed a strong interest in the archecruiser.

Commodore Zonrad Reze did not shy away from telling Ves their underlying motivations.

"As you know, the Common Fleet Alliance back in the Milky Way Galaxy had always managed to stay competitive against the Mech Trade Association due to one key reason. Our core assets are all mobile. While we may have built a large amount of fixed orbit gas harvesting stations, repair yards and recruiting stations, those are all peripheral installations that will never threaten our core existence when destroyed. The Milky Way is big enough that if the CFA ever falls out with the MTA, the latter can never spend enough time and energy to hunt down each and every CFA warfleet. There are too many of them, and they can spread out across an entire galaxy."

"I am aware of the CFA's survival strategy." Ves responded. "Now that I think about it, if the RF attempts to do the same in the Red Ocean, it will be a lot harder to pull off. The Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy is much smaller in volume so it takes much less effort to sweep every star system. Its stellar geography is also simpler and contains fewer anomalous regions that can be used as hiding places. Phase lords and phase whales are also really good at sniffing out pocket spaces considering that they are masters at creating them. Simply trying to spread out and hide in remote areas won't work in the new frontier."

"Exactly. This is why we have taken inspiration from the arche. This stubborn race has abandoned much of its research into other technologies in order to create a strong competitive advantage in stealth technologies. This is a risky strategic decision that has obviously paid off for them, as the arche are still able to guarantee the survival of their race despite being disliked by every other major alien race. If the worst case scenarios for red humanity come to pass one day, then we may need to employ a number of contingency solutions in order to survive the dark days ahead. Imitating the arche is a viable idea, especially since there is solid proof that it works."

"For now, at least." Ves retorted. "Technology can always be overcome by better technology. Besides, the operating environment for the arche has changed since the Great Severing. The introduction of exotic radiation has opened up many new methods of detection, some of which can definitely bypass whatever technological superiority the arche have mastered."

The secret hybrid AI smiled. "The RF is not blind to that fact. Together with the RC, we have worked hard to demystify the new phenomena. We have invested heavily into developing our own expertise in hyper technology and E-technology. Our focus is different from that of the RA. Whereas the mechers still remain obsessed with trying to help people ascend to the nebulous status of godhood, we have prioritized efforts to make advanced solutions more accessible. We must make stealth ships more affordable and practical."

"And you can do this by learning lessons from the archecruiser?"

"We do not want to obtain and study the archecruiser in order to produce straightforward copies of it, Ves. We still believe that widespread adoption of unadapted or lightly adapted alien technology will eventually lead us astray. No. We simply wish to decipher the universal scientific principles and solutions that the arche have employed in their own works and adopt them for ourselves if they prove to be of use. That is different from what your wife has begun to do as of late. Your archemechs are interesting from an engineering standpoint, but the serious tradeoffs mean that it is only practical for your Larkinson Clan. The RF builds and operates many more ships. At our scale, expediency and cost efficiency are more important than trying to aim for the absolute best."

"What about your dreadnoughts?"

"Even dreadnoughts are products of compromise, Ves." The RF officer grimly smiled. "There are those within my ranks that still think of them as huge resource sinks. They demand a disproportionate share of high-grade resources, maintenance costs and R&D support for their quantity. This is considered a waste to some fleeters, but the truth is that the situation could have been so much worse."

They talked a bit more before ending the call. Ves was satisfied with what he learned. He gained enough of an understanding of what the RF wanted to acquire from the captured archecruiser.

He thought about whether it might be a good idea to convert some if not all of the naval assets of the Larkinson Clan into stealth vessels.

"It's too costly." He quickly shook his head.

The Larkinson Clan did not have the shipyards and technologies required to build so many stealth ships or add stealth capability to its existing stock of starships.

Perhaps it might be possible to raise a brand new squadron of fleet that comprised entirely of stealth vessels, but they could only accommodate a fraction of the population of the clan.

Besides, investing in so many stealth ships was investing in loss mitigation. Ves could understand the prudence of this approach, but it would divert valuable resources away from making the Larkinson Clan grow stronger and more successful in the future.

It was essentially a choice between doubling down on success or hedging against failure.

A more prudent decision maker would invest in the latter while a bolder leader would go for the former.

Ves did not need to hesitate much to determine his own preference. Casella Ingvar should also align with his ideas. As the current matriarch of the Larkinson Clan, she should understand him well enough to make the correct decision.

At least he hoped that it was the case.

The situation was much different for the Red Fleet. It made a lot more sense for the fleeters to invest at least a part of its resources into raising a serious stealth fleet.

"Will the Red Fleet also use those stealth ships as more than secret refuges?"

The projection of Commodore Reze smiled. "Yes. In our opinion, the arche could have inflicted much more damage to our industries and logistical network if they allocated more sabotage missions to their stealth ships. For whatever reasons, they are rather reluctant in doing their best to fight this war. We are not so restrained. As long as our own stealth applications match the level of that of the arche, our stealth ships can ravage many industrial star systems occupied by the major alien races. Only the most well-defended centers that are protected by large sensor networks or occupied by vigilant phase lords can prevent such attacks. Tonnage is an important variable. The larger our stealth ships, the more damage they can inflict when left to their own devices."

The Red Fleet already operated many stealth ships that lurked behind enemy lines, but they overwhelmingly consisted of frigate-sized vessels that could only carry a limited amount of missiles, which were usually their only serious armaments.

While they might possess a number of gun turrets, their firepower was too limited to inflict large-scale destruction in a short time frame.

That was very frustrating because stealth ships were usually too fragile to expose themselves to the enemy for too long. They needed to launch their blows quickly and leave shortly afterwards in order to evade interception.

The arche stealth ship doctrine therefore gave the Red Fleet a very reliable blueprint to adopt when trying to conduct their own sabotage operations.

Ves knew that this could make a huge difference in the war effort once the fleeters managed to get this ambitious program up and running.

Even if the new wave of stealth vessels could not completely demolish entire industrial centers like the current combined fleet, they could still destroy lots of large and strategically important industrial facilities that would take precious years to rebuild!

As long as their scale was great enough, it would be enough to put an end to the relentless assaults on human-occupied space!

The conversation ended quickly after they discussed the more specific arrangements relating to the operation and transfer of the archecruiser.

There was no guarantee that the captive archecruiser captain would continue to prevent his ship from self-destructing.

The RF therefore organized and sent a small task force in a hurry in order to put the large alien vessel in a strong form of stasis as soon as possible.

The ship just needed to last long enough for the task force to arrive.

"Will your special captive remain compliant?" The RF commodore seriously asked.

Ves shrugged. "I am not sure. Personally, I am not optimistic. He can only make promises in his personal capacity, but he has already made it clear that he is not able or willing to negotiate on behalf of his entire race. Achieving a lasting concord between us and the arche is out of the question. The only reason why he is preserving his ship and allowing our researchers to study his people's tech is because I have made a personal promise not to mistreat the arche."

Zonrad Reze threw a knowing look at the mech designer. "That must have been a serious concession for an inquisitive man such as yourself. The alien commanding officer can most definitely feel proud for restraining you. Yet it sounds strange. From what we have learned about the arche, they are famously paranoid about letting other races take possession of their ships. Their stealth technology is literally their lifesaver. Even if this alien leader has become mentally impaired due to his strange transformation, he still exhibits enough rationality to conduct negotiations. If this is the case, why would he allow humans to study his people's best and most strategically important technologies at our leisure?"

That... was an important question.

Chapter 7481 Initial Report on Woodsap Mechs

Chapter 7481 Initial Report on Woodsap Mechs

The commodore of the Red Fleet pointed out an important inconsistency.

His questioning forced Ves to rethink the situation.

What motives drove the archecruiser captain?

On one hand, his speech made it clear that the alien leader was a loyal patriot of his beleaguered people.

The arche had managed to survive and preserve their society after being driven from their planets because they showed the capacity to unite and work towards their common goals. Collectivism was not an ideal to them. It had become a necessity now that they had become worse off than many other races.

For this reason, their people held an especially dim view on selfishness and individualism. It was taboo in their society to pursue interests at the cost of making life worse for other arche. This should have been a universal principle for both low and high-ranking arche.

Yet this archecruiser captain also voiced beliefs and convictions that flagrantly defied the collective interests of his race.

From preventing the self-destruction of his invaluable archecruiser to compelling so many of his own crew to sacrifice their blood and archeshells to fuel his failed ascension, it became clear that this individual was more complex than his position.

What was his name?

What was his lineage?

What was his place in arche society?

How did he come to become the captain of this archecruiser?

All of these questions and more lingered in Ves' mind.

He suddenly began to imagine more outlandish scenarios that suggested that this entire encounter may have been a conspiracy from the start.

Perhaps a cell of the Cosmopolitan Movement had schemed this meeting between the two races.

Perhaps the arche secretly wanted to form a somewhat clandestine connection with the humans or the Larkinson Clan in particular.

Perhaps the other major alien races had become so fed up by their arche 'comrades' that they purposefully drove the latter into a trap!

Whatever the case, now that Ves had begun to think about these possibilities, he could not entirely dismiss them out of hand.

That did not mean he intended to waste his time on investigating this matter in person.

He was a mech designer, not a detective!

"I will pass on my concerns to our matriarch and intelligence director." Ves eventually told his old 'friend'. "As intriguing as this possible mystery sounds, it is best to leave this case to the

professionals. I am only interested in the overall direction of the current campaign and stuff that is relevant to mechs."

The commodore nodded. "That is a wise outlook. I can tell you that our own truth seekers have begun to shift more attention towards the arche. We are harboring increasing suspicions towards this enigmatic race. What we know about them is mostly derived from the other major alien races. We do not have enough information that comes directly from the arche. That opens up the possibility that we are basing our entire strategy towards this race on inaccuracies or deliberate misinformation."

That sounded very probable to Ves. He wondered what the arche still held back from everyone else.

"Please let us know if you find anything alarming."

"We will, depending on the situation."

Once Ves wrapped up every problem about the archecruiser that demanded his personal attention, he was finally ready to return to the Tarrasque.

Before he left, Gloriana held him back for one brief exchange.

"By the way, Ves, do you need Lucky for anything important?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "Why?"

"In the event that the archecruiser captain decided to end his cooperation with us, we need a backup solution in order to preserve our prize. I want to prepare one of the proposals that you came up with before."

"You mean... you want Lucky to eat an entire archeshell belonging to the most senior officer that you can find?"

"Yes."

"This idea has a very low chance of working." Ves shared his own thoughts. "Even if Lucky's body has already converted into archemetal, something as big and elaborate as archeshells are all unique and irreplaceable. Eating the shell piece by piece will destroy at least some of those essential properties. I highly doubt that Lucky possesses the capacity to reproduce those specific traits."

"You may be right, but we do not have any alternatives if you leave aside the proposal to transplant high-quality archeshells onto the bodies of low-ranked arche." Gloriana plainly replied. "I am willing to take my chances with Lucky. Perhaps he will be able to make it work. We still do not understand the working principles of his core systems. What I can state is that they are based on technologies that far surpass anything else we have come into contact with. I half-suspect that he is a product of the far future that an unknown party has somehow managed to send back in time for unclear purposes."

Ves actually entertained this particular suspicion more than once. There was no way a mechanical cat like Lucky could be a product from the Age of Mechs or the Age of Conquest!

Even if human high technology had already reached unimaginable heights during those ages, Ves highly doubted that they could have stuffed so many ridiculous features in such an incredibly tiny physical form!

With the advantage of hindsight, Ves strongly believed that Lucky may have been a superdimensional product from the start!

If this was the case, then it made a lot more sense that Lucky had been built in the future where humanity's grasp on superdimensional technology was far greater than if he was a product of the past where superdimensional matter was practically nonexistent in the Milky Way.

Ves inwardly shook his head.

There was no point spending so much time on this mystery. He did not have enough information to form any definite conclusions. Speculations alone did not provide much benefits.

"You can have Lucky if you can find him and bring him over to your ship, Gloriana. He's probably keeping our daughter Andraste company I think. However, Lucky has often expressed an intense dislike towards eating organic matter. Technically speaking, archeshells fall into this category. Despite the structural similarities between archeshells and archemetal, the former is conceptually and physically defined as a form of biomatter, similar to keratin-based objects such as hair, nails or horns. This means that you will face an uphill battle if you want to force the gem cat to take a single bite out of an archeshell, let alone the whole thing."

His wife did not look discouraged. "Lucky will obey if he knows what is best for him. I have my own methods of persuasion."

"What if it doesn't yield the results that we are hoping for?" Ves asked.

"Then I will accept that result. This is a low-probability event in the first place. Failure is to be expected. Any other result will be a pleasant surprise."

"I see."

Gloriana had big plans in the days she had left before the archecruiser would finally be sent back to the human side of the border.

She did not intend to waste any further time on explaining her actions to her husband. She simply made a shoo-ing motion before turning away.

Ves left her to her own devices and transferred back to the Tarrasque.

After he returned to the familiar RA cruiser, he finally devoted the rest of his day towards his primary interest.

The performance of the prototype Woodsap mechs.

He paid a visit to Alexa's workplace in order to ask her to take on the special biomechs.

Though she carried numerous heavy responsibilities, Ves had asked her to assist with monitoring the performance of the Woodsap mechs and note down any critiques she might have.

As his direct disciple, Alexa understood living mechs on a deeper level than his wife and many other mech designers.

Yet she also possessed her own thoughts and ideas, thereby causing her perspective to be different enough for her to notice details that Ves might have missed.

Alexa proved her dependability by presenting him with a fairly extensive preliminary report. She transmitted the document which contained a lot of relevant data points.

"They have made a strong first impression." She began as a projection appeared beside her that displayed a few clips at an accelerated rate. "As you can see, the Woodsap mechs have chased after relatively isolated squadrons of phasefighters. In every skirmish, they denied many forms of external assistance, which included help from nearby friendly units as well as Casella's Command Field. They have sincerely tried to rely on their merits to perform on the battlefield, which also includes refraining from connecting to the fleet's shared communication channels and sensor data feeds."

Ves continued to parse through the data. "I noticed that the Woodsap mechs overwhelmingly preferred to engage in ranged combat. They have yet to employ their blades in a serious engagement."

"That is true." Alexa responded. "That is the nature of most skirmishes between enemy strike craft. Alien phasefighter pilots have learned many times that they are at a horrible disadvantage when caught by mechs at close range. They will do their utmost to maintain at least a minimum distance from our forces. For this reason, the mobility of their craft has improved on an incremental basis over time. While our Woodsap mechs are not slow by any means, there are no light mech configurations among them, so it is still a challenge for them to catch up to speeding phasefighters. They can only get relatively close by utilizing coordinated dogfighting tactics."

The initial results highlighted a notable weakness to his Woodsap mechs. Due to the necessity of including a number of essential systems and components responsible for making the biomechs so enduring, it was incredibly difficult for Ves to slim down its design too much.

This minimum capacity requirement placed an invisible ceiling on mobility. Unless Ves was willing to sacrifice a lot of good stuff, there was no way to make a Woodsap mech as fast as a genuine light skirmisher.

Ves and the Terrans he collaborated with knew about this tradeoff and pretty much accepted it as a necessary evil.

"So my Woodsap mechs won't win any races anytime soon." He said without much emotion. "I notice that even if I account for the mediocre mobility of my Woodsap mechs, they are not moving as fluently and efficiently in space as I had hoped."

"That is not a problem related to the Woodsap mechs themselves, sir. Their specifications indeed allows them to turn faster and perform more advanced maneuvers in space. The real problem lies with the test pilots. They are all norms who used to be trained in pure infantry combat. Expecting

them to adapt to mech combat in spaceborn environments in a matter of months is unrealistic. Mech cadets spend entire years trying to master the art of maneuvering and fighting with mechs in space."

Given how quickly the Woodsap mech pilots managed to reach a combat ready state shortly after interfacing with their living mechs, it was difficult to imagine that each of them had been complete novices a short time ago.

"The Hibiscus System is doing its work." Ves said with an appreciative tone. "Still, it is becoming increasingly more clear that it is not perfect. As much as it allows inexperienced pilots to control their machines as if the latter were their bodies, it also acts like a crutch that makes them overly dependent on this singular solution. These Woodsap mech pilots have never attempted to make any movements that defy the physical limitations of the human form."

The range of motion and turning angles of many mechs including humanoid ones regularly surpassed that of a baseline human body!

A very simple example of this were mechs whose upper bodies could make complete 360 degree turns, just like tank turrets!

Another example were arms that could bend backwards in a manner that would completely break a human's elbows!

Most mech pilots that graduated from relatively good mech academies tended to learn many of the standard ways such mechs could move in a manner that defied common sense!

Chapter 7482 Woodsap Pilot Shortcomings

Chapter 7482 Woodsap Pilot Shortcomings

Ves and Alexa continued to discuss the performance of his Woodsap mechs.

Their initial deployment seemed rough, but most of that could be chalked up to the relative inexperience of their test pilots.

It couldn't be helped. Carmine mechs and Woodsap mechs especially were designed to accommodate norms, not potentates.

No one had ever thought to put norms through formal mech piloting training before the unveiling of Carmine mechs.

Using trained infantry soldiers as priority candidates for pairing with Woodsap mechs may be a convenient stopgap solution, but it ultimately could not bridge the gap between themselves and real mech pilots.

Ves noted several instances where the Woodsap mechs performed suboptimally.

This came in two different forms.

First, the faulty judgment of their pilots caused the Woodsap mechs to make poor decisions.

This ranged from firing their weapon systems at the wrong timing or seeking to pursue the wrong targets.

Second, the pilots occasionally made the best decisions, but still fell short because of their poor execution.

They lacked the training and experience to perform maneuvers tightly or aim their weapons correctly.

It did not help that these Woodsap mech pilots got overwhelmed by the much more complicated variables that they needed to take into account when piloting a biomechanical war machine in a dizzying space environment.

The Woodsap mech pilots would have been much better off if they started to fight on solid land. The simpler environment and greater familiarity with their former training would have allowed them to fight smoother and with less complications.

Unfortunately, the reality was that most battles between red humanity and its alien foes took place in deep space.

Perhaps that might change in the future, but for the time being, pretty much every battle was decided in space.

As long as one side gained orbital superiority over any planet, the remaining defenders that had entrenched themselves underground or underwater could not do much to resist the inevitable alien occupation and eradication efforts.

Guerilla warfare only worked up to a point. So long as the aliens brought in enough forces that specialized in digging out these pockets of resistance, there was no way for these isolated human fighters to endure.

This needed to be changed.

The Terran Alliance already announced the first step in doing so by aspiring to build the so-called Green Belt.

Woodsap mechs happened to play a key role in this radical new plan.

This was why Ves did not mind the apparent lack of skill exhibited by all of these relatively new Woodsap mech pilots.

Their lack of piloting ability may cause them to waste much of the potential of their relatively expensive and high-end biomachines in space, but the story would probably be different on land.

So long as these Woodsap mechs could fight the native aliens on more favorable terrain, their pilots would probably perform much closer to their professional counterparts.

Still, given the continued importance of controlling the orbit of important planets, battles in space would never diminish too much.

"Handing out the equivalent of first-class multipurpose mechs to fresh Woodsap mech pilots seems excessive." Ves remarked as he studied the footage and data longer. "Given their below average performance in utilizing their many weapon systems, it is much better to start with specialized mech archetypes first. I do not know why the Terrans insist on basing most if not all of their Woodsap mechs around multipurpose mechs. They are just making them a lot more expensive without getting their money's worth."

Alexa understood the Terran mindset a little better. "Woodsap mechs are already priced at a higher tier from the start. They exist in contrast to the much cheaper and more disposable Yellow Jackets. The Terran Alliance considers the Arboreal Project to be a prestige project. Since that is the case, the Woodsap mechs must be multipurpose by default. Simplifying them will diminish their apparent worth in the eyes of Terran citizens. People will not be as enthused about piloting them. If norms want to have it easy, they can apply to pilot a Yellow Jacket. Those that seek a true challenge and wish to become equals to the first-class multipurpose mech pilots that they have always looked up to can apply to become a Woodsap mech pilot."

In other words, it had become a matter of pride.

Typical of the Terrans.

Ves scoffed a bit. "When Terrans have to choose between pride and logic, they often favor the former, to the detriment of the latter. If they continue to push through this strategy, a lot of Woodsap mechs will end up getting wasted in the hands of norms who may be adequate soldiers, but unequipped to make the most of a highly advanced war platform. There are good reasons why the selection criteria for the best mech academies of first-rate states are so high. Possessing a genetic aptitude that scores B- or higher is practically mandatory due to the need to pay attention to dozens of different systems at the same time."

First-class multipurpose mech pilots truly deserved their place at the top in the hierarchy of standard mech pilots.

The gap between this group and more general first-class mech pilots was vast.

Not only did the former have to become adept multitaskers, they also had to develop proficiency in utilizing over a dozen different melee and ranged weapon systems.

On top of that, they had to possess considerable intellectual attainments as well. They not only had to know on a certain level how their machines and advanced weapon systems worked in terms of science and engineering, but also learn how to move in zero-g environments and in other strange environments.

Even with expensive augmentations, it took at least 12 to 16 years for a typical first-rate state to convert a 10-year old mech cadet into a fully qualified first-class multipurpose mech pilot.

Expecting Carmine mech pilots to match the performance of these exemplary standard mech pilots was folly from the start.

The Terrans had to know that. They were too smart not to. Yet they still insisted on their decisions.

There had to be more to this wasteful decision than pride. Ves refused to accept that the Terran Alliance would play games when its very own survival was at stake.

"What is really going on?" He asked suspiciously. "There has to be a greater story behind this. What is making the Terrans invest so much more in their Woodsap mechs than is warranted? Why go for the most complicated mech configurations when a simpler rifleman mech configuration could do the job just as well?"

A few seconds passed before Alexa let out a tired sigh. "There are two more considerations in play. One of them is political in nature. The other is based on long-term aspirations."

"Explain them to me, please."

The younger female mech designer leaned against the worktable. "You have already been apprised of the rising conflict between the Green Coalition and the Steel Coalition. The matter that you have brought up is an extension of this rivalry. The Steel Coalition relies heavily on the strength and superiority of orthodox first-class multipurpose mech pilots to maintain its standing. If the Green Coalition wants to gain the upper hand in the Terran political sphere, then it must prove that its own Woodsap mech pilots can rise to the occasion. That is why many of the supporters of the Arboreal Project fixate on multipurpose mech configurations. Woodsap mech pilots are told to adapt or die. Simple as that. Many of them may end up falling due to this very reason, but those that manage to survive this gauntlet are much more likely to possess the qualifications to fight for supremacy."

Politics. Ves did not expect for the Green Coalition to scheme so deeply when it came to developing the individual incarnations of the Arboreal Project.

It sounded stupid to him, but then again he did not have a strong stake in this fight.

The Green Coalition essentially wanted to use Woodsap mech pilots as their pawns in a political chess game.

How many soldiers would get overwhelmed by the complexity of their biomachines and die prematurely because of this strategic direction?

How many Woodsap mech pilots would continue to perform well below their potential simply because they failed to get matched with a more suitable mech configuration?

How much valuable phasewater and other expensive materials would end up going to waste as Woodsap mech after Woodsap mech got blown apart due to questionable judgment and lack of skill?

Ves scratched his head. As a mech designer, he could not stand all of the waste!

"Do you think it will work out for the Green Coalition?"

"Possibly." Alexa said and proceeded to summon a data table from her report. "If you look at the performance metrics of the individual Woodsap mech pilots, you will see that almost all of the 30

elven Woodsap mech pilots have outperformed their human counterparts. Their greater synergies with their battle partners can only partially explain this apparent superiority. Their comprehensive augmentations makes them smarter and allows them to adapt to mech combat at this level considerably faster. I have personally observed their growth during the fighting and ascertained that their proficiency gains are truly considerable."

That should not be a big surprise.

The elves were not dainty figures whose only job was to look pretty.

The Terrans and Gaia partially engineered this new race to excel at piloting Woodsap mechs. It made sense that they became a lot better adapted to complex mech combat.

Perhaps the ceiling of all of these augmentations remained unclear, but their floor had definitely been raised to a much more impressive height!

As long as the data from the elven Woodsap mech pilots continued to maintain the current gap with more normal human Woodsap mech pilots, then the Green Coalition would definitely achieve its political goal!

"I admit that this does look impressive. You talked about two reasons behind the insistence on fielding multipurpose variants of Woodsap mechs. What is the second one, then?"

"Hero creation." Alexa readily answered. "The Terran Alliance as a whole has a high demand for new heroes. Ever since the start of the Red War, many new expert pilots and ace pilots have emerged from its mech armies. Yet due to fighting against so many enemy phase lords, especially ones equipped with Saint Piercers, these heroes have suffered from a considerable amount of attrition. Due to many different reasons, the current balance is slightly negative, which is not a good development. The problem sounds worse when you consider that a significant proportion of casualties consist of older, stronger and more experienced expert pilots and ace pilots. In contrast, all recent breakthroughs produce weak and inexperienced champions."

That indeed sounded like an unfavorable status quo.

It was difficult to limit casualties for these powerful heroes because it was in their nature to go above and beyond normal restrictions.

They owed their strength due to taking risks. Boldness was in their nature. If any of them had any aspirations of becoming a god pilot one day, then they could never afford to show weakness on this front.

This attitude might have been acceptable during humanity's heyday, but now that red humanity had become the underdogs in a war of extinction, all of this excessive risk-taking may end up draining the high-end talent pool in the long term!

"I get it." Ves said. "It is sink or swim again. Woodsap mech pilots are expected to excel under the harshest conditions. Real combat will filter out the losers and the mediocre performers. Those that manage to excel in piloting Woodsap mechs despite their complexity will definitely receive special treatment. Their chances of breaking through and becoming the first in a new wave of non-potentate expert pilots are much higher."

Alexa nodded and smiled. "That is what the Terrans are hoping for. They are developing multiple means to accelerate the growth and progression of the future generations of expert candidates and expert pilots, but what they cannot do is trigger the most crucial breakthroughs in the first place. The Woodsap mech pilots can only rely on themselves for that. Woodsap mechs should therefore be regarded as their crucibles. Does this make sense to you, sir?"

"It does, actually."

Chapter 7483 The Greatest Advantage of Woodsap Mechs

Chapter 7483 The Greatest Advantage of Woodsap Mechs

Ves and Alexa explored the various ways the Woodsap mech pilots showed their lack of competence.

Though expected, they still looked ugly when they showed off their meager skills and their lack of experience on a serious battlefield.

The aliens deployed to fight against the best of the Terran Alliance were no pushovers by any means.

Their answer to first-class multipurpose mechs came in the form of high-end phasefighters that put extra emphasis on a combination of strong transphasic energy shielding, high straight-line mobility and strong initial strike capabilities by carrying deadly transphasic missiles.

The first challenge the 120 experimental Woodsap mechs faced in battle was confronting a dangerous salvo of enemy missiles!

Though expensive in terms of phasewater alone, the native aliens clearly did not care anymore as they had gigantic reserves to spend on the mass production of powerful munitions.

Given the sizes of their fuselages and warheads, the native aliens laced enough phasewater into them to blow apart a modern first-class multipurpose mech's azure energy shield with a single direct hit or a handful of close proximity explosions depending on the configuration!

Once those energy shields got blown apart, the exposed mechs truly came under threat by subsequent missile attacks.

A single direct hit to the torso had a significant chance of crippling an expensive machine!

A mission kill was practically guaranteed if the warhead struck from the rear!

The native aliens would still be able to earn a profit if they managed to take out an extremely expensive first-class multipurpose mech with a somewhat expensive transphasic missile.

As Ves and Alexa rewatched the opening of the very first engagement, the Woodsap mechs indeed got struck by a large swarm of transphasic missiles.

Of course, the biomechs did not make themselves easy to get hit. Their pilots fell back onto their training and dispersed their formation while at the same time shot down as many incoming munitions as possible.

There was no way in hell that their marksmanship could allow them to shoot down all of the missiles by aiming manually, especially when utilizing the integrated armaments installed throughout their entire wooden frames.

They could only entrust the integrated targeting systems to shoot down missile after missile with a variety of relatively low-powered laser beams.

Granted, the Terrans had applied a very advanced and customized version of their exclusive targeting and interception systems to the biomechs of the Arboreal Project.

All of this software was leagues ahead of the versions utilized by the Larkinson Clan. This was just one of many details that put the armed forces of a true star empire far ahead of the rabble.

Ves genuinely looked impressed when the Woodsap mechs managed to intercept 90 percent of the deadly missiles.

That was enough firepower to wipe out at least half of the experimental detachment!

However, both sides already expected that most missiles fired at the other side would never fully make it across.

"The enemy missiles struggled to home in on the Woodsap mechs at first." Alexa remarked. "The integration of Solus Gas into their mech frames might not be able to dampen all of their emissions when their activity levels have raised above a certain threshold, but it is still making their Terran-based ECM systems more effective."

That said, transphasic missiles of this quality would not get fooled so easily. There were no instances where they ended up following nonexistent ghosts in harmless directions. They could all accept active guidance from nearby phasefighters that specialized in this particular mission.

The Woodsap mechs did their best to shoot them all down no matter their guidance.

"It was not a bad idea for these Woodsap mechs to automate their point defenses." Alexa commented as the young women looked appraisingly at the archival footage. "Professional mech pilots that operate their machines under semi-manual control tend to intercept a greater proportion of missiles, but also make mistakes on occasion, so the balance does not usually change all that much. It is only the outliers that are able to change entire outcomes."

In any case, a number of missiles converged and struck over a dozen different Woodsap mechs.

The aliens had programmed their munitions to strike an enemy machine at least several times, thereby raising the chances of taking out an adversary without wasting too many warheads on overkill.

However, such programming often faltered when faced with abnormal situations.

This was one of those exceptions.

The azure energy shield generators installed into the Woodsap mechs did not possess too many notable features. The Terrans did not find it worthwhile to invest too much in strengthening the machine's energy defenses.

The real strength in Woodsap mechs lay in their physical defenses.

That said, the TE Wood used as the main material for the prototype machines was not that much tougher and harder than modern first-class transphasic hyper alloys.

The Woodsap mechs struck by multiple missiles all suffered severe damage to their mech frames.

Fortunately, the test pilots at least ensured that they took as many impacts as possible from the front where their biomechs boasted the thickest armor.

Many hardy layers of transphasic wood got peeled or splintered away in a very short amount of time!

The violent transphasic explosions even managed to dig deeper into the mech frames. More functional biomechanical components became exposed and subsequently suffered severely from the blasts.

At the end, the affected Woodsap mechs either suffered a near-complete loss of frontal armor or became partially crippled!

Under normal circumstances, these heavily damaged machines could no longer make any useful contributions on the battlefield.

Those that could still limp back to their motherships got recalled.

Those that lost the ability to move had to be abandoned entirely!

If the alien phasefighter pilots felt particularly vengeful, then it was not out of the question for their strike craft to swoop in and finish the kills!

In those circumstances, the unfortunate mech pilots would count themselves lucky if they could still eject their cockpits and hope that they could fly away fast enough to evade pursuit!

Fortunately for the test pilots, none of them had to test the integrity of their cockpits.

They also did not have to wait in suspense after the battle to learn whether their broken battle partners could be 'reborn' with the help of the recently introduced hyper keystones.

This was because every damaged biomech, including the most crippled ones, soon began to demonstrate an outright magical capability.

They regenerated on the spot!

Initially, their recovery speed was not particularly fast. The first steps mostly drew on their internal biomass.

By cannibalizing less important armor layers to restore the most essential functional components, the damaged Woodsap mechs quickly managed to control their damage and prevent their conditions from deteriorating any further.

This emergency stabilization measure was just the first step.

Nearby Woodsap mechs approached their wounded brethren and subsequently began to spit out pieces of TE Wood from their own mech frames!

As the biomechs flew closer to each other, the collective wood E energies became more concentrated and active.

This was very important because the wood energies facilitated what happened next!

The pieces of TE Wood directly struck the damaged biomechs, which quickly and seamlessly incorporated the donated biomass into their own structures.

All of this took place in just 30 seconds.

By the time a minute passed, each and every Woodsap mech that previously looked as if they had become lost causes now looked almost as good as new!

It was like witnessing a biomech version of a blood transfusion at a very accelerated rate.

Since a large number of 'healthy' advanced Carmine mechs contributed their biomass to their less fortunate brethren, the overall condition of the former had not deteriorated by much.

At worst, they had lost 5 or so percent of their physical defensive buffer.

So long as they did not get struck by multiple missiles or a large quantity of other attacks in a short amount of time, their slightly depleted armor systems should readily be able to withstand the rigors of battle!

Alexa made another remark. "This regeneration process would not have demanded such a sacrifice if the experimental detachment deployed a couple of Gaia Trees along with the Woodsap mechs. The trees can serve as a much more convenient source of spare TE Wood and other useful forms of biomass. However, the trees are not inherently mobile and possess no active defenses. They are too conspicuous of a target when placed on a busy battlefield. They are primarily meant to be used by planting them en masse on a terrestrial planet or bringing them forward on the exterior of combat carriers under heavy escort."

Ves nodded in understanding. "Even if the native aliens don't know the purpose of Gaia Trees, they are likely to shoot them down anyway, which will cause us to lose many tons of valuable organic material. The Terrans made the right decision to hold them back for this engagement. Besides, I am

glad that my Woodsap mechs gained an opportunity to test their biomass exchange protocols in the field. It performed flawlessly."

"The living mechs themselves deserve credit for facilitating and optimizing the exchange and integration processes, sir. This is one of the few instances where granting control and autonomy to the living biomachines makes sense. Compared to the inexperienced Woodsap mech pilot or unthinking programming code, a second-order or third-order living mech knows exactly what is wrong and can efficiently direct precise quantities of TE Wood and other spare biomass to repair the damage."

This absurd mass recovery stunned the alien pilots, but only for a moment.

It was not unusual for second-class and especially first-class biomechs to regenerate their organic frames in the field.

However, not many had witnessed instances where they witnessed biomechs repairing themselves so quickly and efficiently!

The damaged Woodsap mechs did not even have to retreat to the rear where they could receive assistance from supporting units. They all took care of the damage by relying on their brethren and themselves alone!

The subsequent sequences that took place no longer attracted as much interest from Ves.

The Woodsap mechs fought against the opposing phasefighters and steadily managed to eliminate a third of the enemy craft before the remainder scattered and fled in disarray.

The biomechs did not choose to pursue, both because their mobility could not keep up with the swift enemy craft and because their pilots knew better than to overextend.

Ves began to sum up his overall findings.

"What I have seen so far largely falls in line with my expectations." He said. "It is still very impressive to witness the performance of my work in reality. There are so many details and nuances that deserve a closer examination. The observation that stood out the most is how poorly the test pilots are handling their machines. If they are piloting more ordinary first-class multipurpose mechs, then their utilization rate is so low that they should have never been allowed to enter the cockpit, because the probability of destroying their own machines due to user error is far too great."

"The normal rules do not apply to your Woodsap mechs." Alexa responded with a smile. "The Terrans incorporated the Hibiscus System into the Arboreal Project knowing that practically every new Woodsap mech pilot will start such poor performances. What matters is that this is completely acceptable in this instance because of the inherent resilience and top-class restoration capabilities of their battle partners."

Ves' eyes lit up as she voiced the factor that could truly transform his Woodsap mechs into invaluable assets for the Terran Alliance!

"That is exactly right! These pilots can afford to make mistakes over and over again as long as they don't do something completely idiotic and get blasted apart in an instant! The luxury of piloting an ever-regenerating biomech grants their bonded Carmine pilots a huge amount of leeway for mistakes and experimentation. Who cares whether they begin as bumbling fools. They can take their time to learn how to pilot their biomechs properly, knowing that they can outheal almost any damage they might sustain!"

The fault tolerance of his Woodsap mechs was perhaps their greatest advantage!

Chapter 7484 Adapt or Die

Chapter 7484 Adapt or Die

Out of all of the advanced Carmine mechs that Ves imagined, Woodsap mechs may very well be the most forgiving.

Beginners did not have to be held to a high standard.

They could rely on the Hibiscus System to attain immediate combat effectiveness at the start, and slowly learn the more advanced elements of their craft as they trained and fought.

It may still end up taking 5 years or more for the Woodsap mech pilots to truly approach the level of professional first-class mech pilots.

Even then, Ves found it unlikely for them to be able to close the gap entirely.

Sure, the battlefield may be the most effective teacher, but there were many lessons that required systematic learning as opposed to obtaining ad-hoc insights.

Still, even if Woodsap mech pilots would forever remain rough around the edges, so long as their overall combat effectiveness reached an acceptable standard on average, it didn't matter too much in the end.

Ves was accustomed to this approach.

For example, the Swordmaidens had become the most renowned close combat combatants of the Larkinson Clan without putting as much emphasis on academics.

They proved with their actions that they could produce the best mech pilots without following the same route as the more advanced states and organizations.

Of course, the Swordmaidens made it easier for themselves by dedicating themselves entirely to melee combat.

Woodsap mech pilots faced a much steeper challenge. They needed to gain proficiency in both melee and ranged combat. They needed to be able to wield at least half-a-dozen different weapon systems with enough skill to justify their steep investments.

This was why it was crucial for Woodsap mechs to be able to last long enough for their pilots to rise to the occasion and become truly competent in mech warfare.

Ves raised his arm and called up the data table containing the key performance metrics of all of the test pilots.

He not only swept his gaze on the top performers as well as the bottom performers, but also made comparisons and inferences that went beyond the obvious.

"I see that when it comes to the improvement rate of the test pilots, the recently transformed elves all score the highest on this metric. The delta between their apparent skill before the start of the battle and at the end of it is very high. Even if their learning speed slows down in future engagements, it doesn't matter too much because the most crucial part is to overcome their weakest period as soon as possible. These elves will definitely enjoy bright futures as Woodsap mech pilots so long as they aren't too unlucky. What truly concerns me are the pilots in the bottom percentile. They are not only all human, but they have hardly made any progress during their first real action."

Alexa adopted an expression of concern. "The Terran Alliance has made a great effort to select among the more promising candidates. Before the 120 test pilots had been allowed to bond with their Woodsap mechs, they had undergone multiple testing sessions. Many of their fellow candidates fell out of consideration due to lacking qualifications. The remaining ones are survivors without exception. Even if there are differences between good and bad, the gulf between the bottom percentile and the other underperformers should not be this great. It is clear that there is a small proportion of Woodsap mech pilots that have failed to adapt to their new roles for a time being. Whether this issue will persist in the coming weeks and months remains to be seen."

There was no reason to feel alarmed. This was just the first battle. The bottom performers still had plenty more time to address their issues and pull themselves up so that they could perform decently in the next engagements.

Woodsap mechs were inherently tough and enduring. Their incredible fault tolerance would grant the less talented pilots a lot of opportunities to turn their situation around. It may very well be possible that they were the late bloomers among this cohort. Perhaps they needed a lot more setup before everything clicked together.

Even if they continued to falter and perform below expectations, Ves and the Terrans still had no intentions of intervening. Failure cases still provided a lot of interesting and relevant data. More detailed and informative comparisons could be made by contrasting the performance between the best and the worst.

Still, once their duty came to an end, Ves doubted that the persistent failures would be able to secure a good future.

"What will the Terran Alliance do if any Woodsap mech pilot continues to underperform at an unacceptable level?" Ves asked the former Terran scion. "As far as I know, if such cases happened in a normal unit, the pilot would simply get transferred out of his unit. His mech will simply get passed over to another colleague. That is not possible in this case. Woodsap mechs are bonded to a single pilot for life. The Woodsap Pact is just as strict as the Blood Pact in that regard."

Alexa already had the answer ready. "I have already inquired about this subject. Woodsap pilots are not meant to be inviolable or irreplaceable. The ability to pilot a powerful Woodsap mech is a privilege. It is not a right. The Terran Alliance can grant this privilege or take it away. You are correct that the individual living biomechs are bound to their existing pilots and cannot be transferred to others. The solution to this is simple. If a Woodsap mech has lost its pilot due to death or disqualification, the relevant authority will recycle the biomachine. All of the valuable TE Wood and other valuable materials will be stripped away. The same materials will then be used to construct a brand-new Woodsap mech. They can also be used for other purposes such as facilitating the repairs of heavily-damaged biomechs or be used to promote the growth of Gaia Trees."

"..."

Ves felt a bit repulsed by the Terran Alliance's policies.

This callous treatment of living mechs sounded way too heartless and utilitarian to his ears.

It was very clear that the Terrans as a whole did not fully align with his principle that living mechs deserved almost the same treatment as humans.

Though even Ves knew that it was completely unrealistic to treat living mechs exactly like humans, he still felt that people should at least make a sincere effort.

This was why he felt bad about the future of Woodsap mechs that had the misfortune of bonding themselves to incompetent human partners.

If the latter proved so bad at their jobs that they got kicked out of the service, then their bonded Woodsap mechs had pretty much lost the entire meaning of their existence!

From a rational perspective, the Terran Alliance could not afford to leave expensive materials and units idle.

There was no way the Terran leaders would accept the notion of giving 'orphaned' Woodsap mechs a peaceful retirement or a harmless side job.

A typical Woodsap mech held so much value in their materials alone that it made complete economic sense to break them down and use the recycled materials to construct an identical living mech!

This way, the Terran Alliance lost a liability in the form of an 'unpilotable' Woodsap mech and gained a nearly identical fresh and 'pilot-ready' Woodsap mech in exchange!

This form of waste utilization was not optional for a star empire that was being pressured on all sides.

The Terran Alliance may very well live or die depending on how efficiently it could utilize its resources!

In this regard, Woodsap mechs could not provide unlimited leeway to their pilots.

The latter needed to take their responsibilities seriously and make an honest effort to improve and keep up with everyone else.

Otherwise, if they did not manage to get themselves killed along the way, their superiors would definitely yank them out of their cockpits and ruthlessly recycle their bonded biomechs!

"This is cold, but fair." Ves eventually sighed. "I do not entirely approve, but I am aware that I am in no place to dictate policy to my collaboration partners. I just hope that when our clan adopts Woodsap mechs for our own use, we will still have space to apply a more compassionate policy. Orphaned Carmine mechs should not be broken down for parts and materials without considering the alternatives."

Alexa did not look very optimistic. "It will be difficult to find other justifiable purposes for living mechs that are already locked to individual Carmine mech pilots. If those living machines are loyal to our clan and their fundamental purpose, then they should readily volunteer to get dismantled."

"Perhaps... you are right. There is a difference between willing and forceful dismantling. Perhaps... we can afford to spend a bit of time on modifying the initial Woodsap mechs so that they can better match their individual pilots. Simplifying them and converting them into straightforward ranged mechs or melee mechs should do wonders in raising the compatibility rate."

"That will demand additional time and effort from our mech designers. Perhaps this approach is feasible if you pass off this responsibility to our Novices and Apprentices, but only if they are already first-class mech designers who have minored or majored in biomech design. This can actually serve as a good form of practice."

It was too bad that the structure of his Woodsap mechs was not as malleable as the structure of his Polymetal mechs.

Ves began to think about how much the present implementation of the former contrasted sharply with the future implementation of the latter.

The two couldn't be more different from each other.

One was made out of organic matter and boasted incredible endurance under pressure, but also forced its pilots to adapt to its rigid configuration.

The other was made out of metallic alloys and possessed enormous versatility, but possessed an inherently fragile mech frame that could not endure strong or continuous pressure.

The two advanced Carmine mech concepts did not only differ along these dimensions.

The barrier of entry for a Woodsap mech was much lower than that of a Polymetal mech.

The former was designed from the ground up to be very forgiving and patient to a bonded mech pilot. Woodsap mechs could be repaired quickly and easily on and off the battlefield, so even the worst pilots still had a chance to survive and achieve greatness in the future!

The latter probably featured the highest barrier to entry among all of the 5 elemental Carmine mechs. Polymetal mechs offered their battle partners nearly infinite customization and

individualization options. As long as the smart metal could replicate specific pieces of tech, a single Polymetal mech could easily substitute the role of almost any other machine!

Yet all of that choice demanded a mind and intelligence that understood mechs far beyond the surface level.

Ves did not intend to dumb down his Polymetal mech concept just to accommodate space barbarians.

He intended to introduce Polymetal mechs with the deliberate intent to convert mech designers into fantastic Carmine pilots!

They could easily weaponize their own knowledge and expertise and apply their own mech designs onto the smart metal mechs that could never fail them even if all other mechs had failed in their duty!

Perhaps Ves might still end up programming a collection of standard mech configurations into his Polymetal mechs, but sticking to them without applying any creative upgrades or modifications was a huge waste of their potential!

Ves couldn't help but chuckle.

Pilots needed to adapt to their Woodsap mechs in order to realize their full potential.

In contrast, the Polymetal mechs had to be shaped extensively by their pilots in order to reach their full value!

They existed at completely opposite ends of the spectrum in this regard!

Ves loved the contrast between the two. He looked forward to witnessing which elemental Carmine mech would end up getting right a lot better than the other.

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Chapter 7485 Regional Overview

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After gaining an extensive understanding of the experiences of the Woodsap mech pilots up to this point, Ves felt a bit let down by his own work.

The combination between the Woodsap System and the Hibiscus System promised to convert norms into effective mech pilots in record time.

While that promise still existed, it no longer shined as brightly as before.

Combat effectiveness was a nebulous phrase. It could mean anything. While there were many ways to quantify this variable, the standards of what constituted an 'effective' combatant were mostly arbitrary and therefore subjective.

From the perspective of an average person, all of the Woodsap mech pilots appeared to have reached a level that already made them useful on the battlefield.

Yet those who possess real expertise in mech warfare still found far too many shortcomings to truly consider them reliable mech combatants.

They still needed to undergo a lot more tempering and studying in order to meet all the essential requirements that qualified them for the most important responsibilities.

In that sense, his Woodsap mechs did not differ so much from his other Carmine mechs after all. They all came with a learning curve. They only differed by the length and the angle of their respective curves.

His Woodsap mechs likely possessed the shortest and gentlest curve. It shouldn't take too much time for the Woodsap mech pilots to reach a more acceptable level of proficiency, and the difficulty of reaching it was much lower than in other cases.

However, all of this ease of use came with a price. Woodsap mech pilots would always remain dependent on the crutch that was the Hibiscus System. By not spending any time on learning how to pilot a Carmine mech through more traditional control means, they would always be held back by the limitations of this technological crutch.

They wouldn't be able to make as many fancy and extreme motions as other mech pilots and Carmine mech pilots.

"Is it possible to disable or remove the Hibiscus System from an existing Woodsap mech?" Ves suddenly wondered.

"I am... unsure." Alexa furrowed her brows. "I do not know how the Hibiscus System works in detail. However, what I picked up from studying the schematics is that its footprint is extensive and by no means light. The entire organic mech frame has partially been molded around this control system. Perhaps it is possible to disable it, but its interconnectedness with the rest of the biomech is so great that it will definitely produce unexpected and undesirable malfunctions."

"Hmm, that does not sound safe. We can't conduct this experiment on a prototype mech because of the chance an accident may cause permanent harm to a Woodsap mech pilot. Let's note down the suggestion. If the Terrans are interested in investigating this matter, they can choose to conduct a study themselves."

Ves did not feel much reason to take up this unpleasant burden. He might as well delegate this inconvenient task to his collaboration partners. If anything went wrong, the blame would lay at their feet.

His direct disciple simply nodded and added an annotation to the logs. "Very well. Are there any other issues that you wish to discuss?"

"There are a few more details that deserve greater attention, but we don't have enough data to form solid conclusions. The prototype Woodsap mechs need to undergo more combat in order to rectify this situation. I am especially interested in tracking the growth of both the individual Woodsap mechs as well as their bonded mech pilots over time."

Since he defined his design philosophy as Mutual Growth in Adversity, this aspect mattered more than most. It was the reason why his works existed and why he designed them in this fashion.

If his experimental works failed to produce sufficient growth for both the living mechs as well as their pilots, then what was the point of developing them in the first place?

Ves needed this to succeed. He needed to witness the growth journeys of the first batch of Woodsap mechs and Woodsap mech pilots with his own eyes in order to verify that he could realize his ambitious dream.

"Are you afraid that the Hibiscus System is holding back the growth of the Woodsap mech pilots, thereby inadvertently cutting off their path to godhood?" Alexa softly asked in concern.

He could not deny this guess. "Maybe. I have... often entertained fears about distorting the growth of the users of my products due to making them overly reliant on conveniences. I have always been careful about drawing a line between the responsibilities of a living mech and a mech pilot. The rule of the mech industry has always been that the latter must always be in control. I... admit that I have skirted this line more often than anyone else, but I always hold firm to the belief that the gains outweigh the costs. The problem is that I am not so certain that remains the case with the Hibiscus System."

Was he condemning all future Woodsap mechs to a fate that forever placed them below other Carmine mech pilots in the hierarchy?

This thought tormented him in the back of his mind.

"This is not your responsibility." Alexa tried to console him. "The Terrans decided to implement the Hibiscus System for their own reasons. They know more than you how it works and what the possible implications are. They have already incorporated this possible disadvantage into their calculations. Perhaps to them, Woodsap mechs are mostly needed to provide rapid military relief in the short term. Sacrificing their long-term potential is a worthwhile tradeoff. If necessary, the Terran Alliance may be planning to design a more promising Woodsap mech without the Hibiscus System once the immediate crises have passed."

That made a lot of sense.

Though Ves still felt somewhat bad about it, he knew that red humanity could not afford to neglect current needs for future desires.

The two mech designers eventually wrapped up the meeting. Alexa would continue to monitor the Woodsap mechs as they engaged in various small-scale skirmishes and pay special attention to their individual growth rates.

Several days passed by.

The combined fleet had quickly wrapped up its business in the border system. The nearby garrison planet had only suffered a very short raid before getting bombarded by the Tortuous Scream and numerous human warships.

Though it was impossible to wipe out all traces of alien occupation from the planet in this short window of time, they at least set back its role as a convenient staging point for incursions into human-occupied space.

It would take a considerable amount of time, effort and resources to rebuild all of those facilities again.

Perhaps the native aliens would eventually be able to make everything as good as new after a time, but that was assuming that this damage existed in isolation.

The Larkinsons and the Terrans did not want to leave it like this. They did not come here just to be annoying.

One of the primary objectives of the Nemesis Campaign was to inflict so much damage to the regional infrastructure that it significantly set back efforts to invade and overrun Terran space.

This may have been a good start, but they needed to sustain their current success across many other alien-occupied star systems.

The combined fleet got ready to depart. The various naval squadrons and mech companies that had previously spread out in order to fulfill various patrol, reconnaissance or raiding missions had all been recalled by this time.

Under the command of Saint Commander Casella Ingvar, the many starships smoothly transitioned into FTL travel, much to the relief of the surviving alien soldiers who had never gathered the courage to force another engagement.

Since the combined fleet was traveling behind enemy lines, it needed to chart an unpredictable course in order to evade enemy ambushes.

The first hop in their journey behind enemy space only deposited them into a nearby red dwarf star system.

This conspicuous and resource-poor location held nothing of value. Its only value to the humans was to serve as a more covert launching pad.

Without so many powerful alien assets in the star system, the human forces could reach their next destination without exposing their precise headings to any precise alien sensor systems that may be looking into their direction.

Ves attended a brief meeting held by the Saint Commander deep inside the Tortuous Scream.

Director Calabast first presented her initial findings.

"We have collected a wealth of messy alien data from dozens of crippled or destroyed alien vessels as well as over a hundred different orbital and planetary facilities at our previous location. There is far too much of it that we are unable to examine it all in detail in a short amount of time. We have only been able to skim through the stolen databases and attempt to crack into particularly interesting vaults. One of the choices we have made is to prioritize the decryption and translation of the records that we have obtained from the captured archecruiser. With the help of Gloriana's associates as well as our smart AIs, we have managed to obtain a more extensive understanding of the surrounding star regions."

A projection came to life that depicted a star map centered around the combined fleet's current location.

The delineation between human space and alien space was very obvious.

Ves had seen this map many times before, but the difference was that Calabast had indeed added a lot more information to the alien side.

"While all of this data has not yet been completely verified, we do not think it deviates too much from reality. I can tell you a great deal about the many star systems that the native aliens have occupied, but in the interest of brevity, I would like to highlight three locations of importance."

One star system lit up in red.

"The Hypeh-Tekas System. The archecruiser has recently received a priority navigational notification. The Red Cabal has restricted unauthorized parties from entering this star system. Given the well-known tendencies of the arche to sneak into star systems where they are not welcome, the arche received a specific warning not to defy this directive. There is no explanation. That is suspicious in itself. According to the notes left behind by an officer, the arche speculate that the phase whales may be preparing a major action at this location. We might wish to pay the Hypeh-Tekas System a visit."

Ves felt uncertain about this proposal. A visit may yield nothing useful given the complete lack of solid information. Visiting this place was a complete gamble.

The projection highlighted a second star system that was situated a bit further away from the border.

"Then there is the Eerlie System. One of our possible goals is to find and uproot the site where the cosmopolitans have congregated in alien space. The arche's regular spying activities have uncovered a fairly secretive research institution that is staffed by both cosmopolitan and native alien scientists. They are most probably working to combine the technologies of both races into readily usable applications. Raiding this site will definitely hamper these efforts and allow us to gain a much better idea of what the cosmopolitans are doing in alien space."

Many people seriously doubted that this was the only institution of its kind. The Cosmopolitan Movement was very fractured and decentralized from the start. Destroying the fruits of a single terrorist cell would not significantly harm the progress of other radical cells.

A third location lit up. This one was located much deeper into alien space.

"The last location of importance is the Luuh Gamma System." Calabast said. "We have very little information on this star system because the native aliens that know about it do not dare to record too much about it. We only managed to learn that it is a holy site of sorts. The sacred star system is home to a temple dedicated to the so-called Elder Gods. That is all we truly know. Given how much the phase whales and other major races revere these mythical entities, this temple should definitely be an important site. We may be able to obtain priceless information and spoils if we choose to travel this far."

Chapter 7486 Possible Arche Duplicity

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"Interesting."

Calabast had given the gathered people a slightly better understanding of the alien star region.

The three highlighted star systems were hardly the only sites of importance. The intelligence director merely decided that it was best to mention them first so that the Saint Commander and others could incorporate them into their subsequent planning.

As far as Ves was concerned, all three destinations may be worth a visit, but only if they managed to scout them out in advance.

It was the height of stupidity to enter these special star systems blindly!

Fortunately, the Saint Commander harbored the same thoughts.

She was responsible for leading the combined fleet and making sure that as many soldiers survived the journey as possible.

Casella could not afford to make careless decisions without respecting all of the possible risks and dangers that they might encounter.

"Do we have enough scout vessels on hand to explore these additional sites?"

"No." Calabast shook her head. "Neither our direct assets or third-party scouting vessels are numerous and capable enough to reach all of these star systems and inform us what is taking place while remaining in absolute stealth. It does not help that they are all placed fairly out of the way. We will have to choose to divert scout ships that are already tasked to explore other important locations. All of this will take time. Unless you want to take a chance and go in blind, you must decide fairly soon if you wish to visit any of the three aforementioned star systems during the ongoing campaign."

"..."

Casella could not make an immediate decision based on what little information that Calabast provided.

Ves turned to Andrea Vos. "Can you and your fellow seers gather information about Hypeh-Tekas, Eerlie and Luuh Gamma with your esoteric methods."

The Farseer expected to receive this request. "That is partially what we are here for. We will do our best to scry these star systems, but the distances are so vast that the reliability and veracity of our results may be low. Hyphen-Tekas is the closest, which means we may even be able to uncover secrets that the scouting vessels have overlooked. Luuh Gamma is located so many light-years away that our scrying results will only yield the most superficial signs, much of it will be so garbled with noise that it will be a headache to interpret it all. The latter may also be shielded from scrying due to a special reason, which is all of the religious activity that is taking place over there. Strong faith can repel our attempts."

"Damn. Does that hold even if we move closer over the course of our campaign?"

"Possibly." The female formation master said after a moment. "This is not exact science, and there are too many unknown variables in play. Our lack of experience combined with our superficial frameworks makes it difficult to obtain reliable results even when we operate under more favorable conditions. As much as I believe in my craft, you should never put absolute trust in our work. You should regard us as a supplementary source of information that is more exotic in nature. Our information should always be used to verify intelligence gathered from other sources or vice versa. That is the most prudent way to utilize our output."

That was a very wise rule in general regardless of the nature of the information source.

Even if the Farseer truly lived up to her title and eventually managed to grow into a galaxy-renowned formation master, people should never treat her word alone as gospel!

"Please inform us once you have obtained the initial batch of results, formation master." The Saint Commander said in a commanding tone. "We may ask you to repeat your scryings on these locations multiple times in the next weeks. The shifts in time and place may change enough variables to bring something important to your attention."

"Will do, commander."

Casella Ingvar turned her attention to another woman. "Before we move on from this subject, I want to ask one more question to you, Calabast. How easy did your data specialists manage to retrieve and decrypt the intelligence on the three star systems that you introduced? Do you think that there is anything suspicious about how your attention has been drawn to these supposedly important sites?"

Calabast actually chuckled. "Hehehe. I already guessed that this particular detail would not escape your attention. You are correct to harbor suspicions. I have considered the very same idea from the start. My conclusion? It is very probable that the archship captain or one of his senior officers have seeded the databases of their archship with pertinent intelligence on potential strike targets for the express purpose of directing us towards them. If this is indeed the case, we cannot prove it, because it is not obvious that they have enacted this scheme. I can only state that the possibility exists."

That sounded both troublesome and concerning.

Now that Ves thought about it, the arche may have chosen to pull off an incredibly elaborate scheme to fool the Larkinsons into destroying those places of importance!

He could think of many possible reasons why the arche wanted to set back the plans of their ostensive alien allies by using the humans as their borrowed knife.

After all, it was no secret that the arche still did not like the other major alien races so much.

They were very reluctant bedfellows. The only glue that truly held them together was that they all considered themselves as indigenous to the Red Ocean. They did not really have any other compelling reason to form a united front.

Ves had witnessed this kind of scheming and backstabbing numerous times throughout his career.

He found it very distasteful to witness allies tripping each other up. No wonder the other races always regarded them with caution.

His opinion on the arche had dimmed if the suspicion truly turned out to be true.

Casella frowned in thought as she entertained the idea whether the arche had schemed to use their formidable forces as their cudgel.

"This is problematic. Any intelligence gained from the archecruiser is questionable."

"Perhaps, but that is no reason to dismiss the information entirely." Calabast retorted. "The intelligence obtained from this source has given us important clues about potential objectives that are of interest to us. Whether they are accurate or not is not important. It ultimately does not matter whether the arche wish to collude with us or lead us into a trap. We know where to send our scout vessels now. If they are able to relay observations that match the stolen intelligence, then that is good. If not, then the most we have wasted are opportunities to scout other locations."

She made a good point.

The arche may be scheming to take advantage of red humanity, but so long as the latter benefited from the results, there was not much reason to complain.

Ves recalled his conversation with the archecruiser captain. The contradictions he sensed from the failed god made a lot more sense in this light.

Even if it was not possible for the two races to join forces with each other, that did not necessarily mean that collusion was impossible.

This incident could be treated as a trial. If the arche proved to be 'trustworthy', then it could open the door for subsequent cooperation.

Though Ves did not know how far this could go and whether the arche would still be eager to collude if red humanity ever gained the upper hand, for now both sides had much to gain from a secret accord.

After the meeting, Ves briefly sought out his wife in order to sound out her thoughts.

When he paid a visit to her design lab, she looked upset for not having been able to stay on the archecruiser.

"Do you regret having to say goodbye to the archecruiser so soon? You could have chosen to return to human space under RF escort, you know."

His wife let out a sigh. "I know, but I stand by my previous words when it comes to being a Larkinson. I will not change my plans just because I came across an unusual find so soon in this campaign. Besides, you need supervision. I refuse to move too far away from you. We will face our enemies together, for better or worse."

"I am proud to hear that, honey. By the way, what sort of improvements can I expect now that you have collected a large amount of data and insights from the captured archecruiser?"

Her eyes metaphorically lit up like the Amaranto at full power! "There is so much novelty that I cannot even begin to summarize the gains with you! Much of that is because we have come into contact with so many advanced applications of archetech that we have yet to decipher what half of them can even do. Many blocks of archemetal that we found on that ship have exhibited a functional density that is twice or maybe even thrice as large as the archemetal found on the much more common arche frigates. Do you understand what this means? The arche never tried their best when it came to producing their scout ships. They only put in a genuine effort to stretch their archetech to their limits when building their larger ship classes! Now that we have obtained a large amount of samples of these applications, we should eventually be able to approach the same level of mastery!"

"So does that mean we can free up more capacity in our future archemechs?"

"Yes! We can condense more functions in a smaller volume of archemetal. This should allow us to add more features into a single mech frame than what is typically possible, or strengthen its existing functions far beyond normal levels! If we can combine these gains with my ongoing progress to perfectly combine archetech with superdimensional tech, then it will be possible for us to reach a density rate that vastly exceeds the scope of known and existing forms of archetech! It will no longer be impossible for us to design a machine that performs like a juggernaut but comes with a form factor that is no larger than a typical mech!"

Though the idea sounded exciting, Ves knew that it wouldn't be that quick or easy to reach this destination.

"I suppose the examination of the crippled archeshell mech can facilitate your efforts."

Gloriana nodded again. "That is correct, though I admit that I may need to rely on a large amount of expertise from the RA and RC. Although the archeshell mech does not incorporate any superdimensional matter, its intermediate form contains spatial expressions that exceeds the boundaries of contemporary phasewater technology. You probably understand this more than myself, but a single 'failed' lesser phase lord is a research specimen that is more valuable to us than a hundred 'successful' lesser phase lords."

"That is true." Ves agreed. "I have yet to spend much time on processing my own insights on the archeshell mech, but it is extremely fascinating to obtain such a detailed glimpse on the state of a body that has gotten stuck in a transition between a mortal and a phase lord. I can already tell you that whatever the RC gains from this examination will doubtlessly help to increase the success rate of producing human phase lords going forward." They talked a bit more before Ves brought up the recent speculation surrounding the arche. He wanted to hear her take on the situation.

Gloriana crossed her arms in thought.

"If you want to hear my honest opinion, I do not entirely believe in the notion that the arche has spun an elaborate scheme. That suggests a degree of awareness and foresight that exceeds the normal boundaries of leadership previously demonstrated by the leaders of this race. They only paid immensely to get us to fall for their supposed scheme. An archecruiser is as important as a battleship to the RF. Having just one of them fall into the hands of red humanity is a disaster to their entire race. I find it difficult to imagine that there is any possible way to make up for such an immense strategic loss."

Chapter 7487 Honoring Death

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Gloriana did not seem to be worried about elaborate arche schemes.

Her greater understanding of the captured archecruiser made her much more aware of what red humanity had gained and the arche had lost.

The price the arche had paid was too great if they wanted to mislead the humans into following up on planted intelligence from the very beginning.

She would much rather consider the incident to be the failed outcome of a rogue archecruiser captain's selfish desire to attain godhood.

A single leader went rogue, and thereby created a disaster for his race.

That sounded much simpler and more plausible from her perspective.

"Thank you for your insights." He said as he seriously took her opinion into account. "Where is Lucky, by the way? Did he 'enjoy' his big meal?"

Gloriana curled her lips in amusement. "He has crawled back to Andraste I think. He has been avoiding me as of late. I do not blame him. He did not enjoy the experience of devouring an entire organic archeshell despite the fact that it is materially not that different from fully synthetic archemetal."

"Lucky is weird like that. Did it work, by the way?"

"No." Gloriana shook her head. "Lucky failed to produce a miracle. I have tried to connect him to the archecruiser in multiple different ways, but all of them failed. He has failed to inherit the

correct traits from the archeshell. I wonder whether this happened because he found his meal to be unappetizing. Perhaps we should take his preferences more seriously. The more he desires to eat a metal object, the higher the probability of assimilating its traits."

Ves had never thought about that, but it sounded somewhat logical. Perhaps they had indeed paid too little attention to Lucky's own signals when it came to the selection of his diet.

"We should pay more attention to his desires." He said in thought. "Hopefully, we can put this theory to test once we encounter other samples of advanced alien tech over the course of this campaign."

They discussed a few other matters. Before Ves left to check up on his daughter, his wife gave him a reminder.

"By the way, Saint Isobel Kotin needs to provide her input on the selection of the key resonating material for the Promethea Mark II. Enough time has passed for her to make up her mind. I believe it is best if she discusses her final choice with you. This is a life-changing decision for her. I do not like to pressure her this way, but a Saint is expected to cut through her indecisions with her conviction. If she cannot resolve this singular matter, then she does not deserve to tread further on the path of godhood."

"I agree." Ves nodded. "Saint Isobel has remained idle for too long. She should begin to get ready to become acclimated to combat again. We can't finish her ace mech so soon, but she can still put an effort into raising her mental readiness."

As he left Gloriana's workplace, he sent a message to Isobel that informed her that he would be paying her a visit very soon.

Before he could handle this particular matter, he stopped by the barracks assigned to the Apocalypse Wardens.

The place had lost a lot of liveliness. The Apocalypse Wardens had lost half of their number all of a sudden.

Personnel had already brought out the personal effects of the deceased cultivator soldiers. This caused the place to lose a lot of personality and homeliness. The site became a lot more clinical as a result.

The surviving Apocalypse Wardens still put on a brave face, but it was impossible for them to remain completely unaffected.

This was why they had not been allowed to resume their bodyguard duties. Ves and his immediate family did not urgently need their protection when there were plenty of other soldiers on hand that could fulfill the same responsibilities.

Besides, the Apocalypse Wardens had yet to receive their reinforcements. The RC had already sent out a fast courier ship with replacement soldiers and supplies, but it would still take a while for the vessel to catch up to the combined fleet.

"Welcome to our abode. What brings you here, sir?" A surviving officer stood up and approached Ves.

"I want to check up on you guys as well as my daughter. How combat ready is your unit at the moment?"

"We are still willing and able to fight, sir." The Apocalypse Wardens all sat or stood a little straighter as if they were afraid of making a weak impression. "However, we appreciate that you have given us time to collect our thoughts. We have been reviewing our past action and identified many areas of improvement. Our duel against the archeshell mech has done exactly what we intended. I can tell you that the Apocalypse Wardens back in human space are all grateful for the data that we have transmitted back. Nothing can expose the effectiveness of our doctrines better against a singularly powerful alien opponent than we have done. Our brothers and sisters have not sacrificed their lives in vain."

Ves found it difficult to accept that the price had been worth it. He partially agreed with Gloriana that the Apocalypse Wardens could have been able to make similar gains if they had just been a little more cautious and patient.

Nonetheless, he respected their freedom of choice. He also acknowledged their urgency. If infantry wanted to remain relevant in this day and age, then it needed to develop faster to ensure that mechs did not once again marginalize them to the point where they became completely forgettable.

"So what kind of improvements will we be able to expect from your unit?" Ves asked.

"It is too soon to give you a complete overview, sir. One of the changes that we are strongly considering is the inclusion of combat support personnel. Having a small group of elite soldiers in the field is too constraining. We could have advanced faster or prevented a couple more deaths from happening if we had been accompanied by combat engineers and field medics that could keep up with us. There are those among us who think their inclusion will only slow us down and make everything more complicated, but there are also advocates who think that it is essential for us to have more force multipliers. It would fundamentally change the way we organize and operate."

Being able to maintain a smaller footprint sounded nice, but elite cultivator soldiers were far too precious to lose to attrition.

"I think it is a good idea if you ask me." Ves voiced his own opinion. "The forces that employ your services can surely afford to pay the extra costs. Mechs no go unaccompanied. They are all always dependent on the support of mech technicians, carrier vessels and so on. The same should apply to your unit as well. The more powerful you are, the greater the dependency on a full support structure."

"I shall relay your feedback to our superiors."

The survivors actually expressed a bit of cautious optimism. They believed that they had taken the correct actions. In fact, they had to. Any other thoughts would have made the deaths unnecessary and forced them into an undesirable realization.

Though Ves had his own opinions on the matter, it was not his place to meddle too much with the affairs of the Apocalypse Wardens. He only had the right to do so within his own Phase Lord Department of the Red Collective.

He knew from the reports he occasionally received about the developments of the RC that it hired many people that took their responsibilities a bit more seriously.

The RC had done a good job of forming a cadre of selfless individuals who accepted the calling to serve red humanity as a whole.

Yet it was precisely these kinds of people that tended to sacrifice their lives a bit too eagerly in exchange for abstract gains.

The RC did nothing to discourage this. In fact, it was the opposite. The collies actively promoted this sentiment.

A grand cause helped to unite a large number of people who came from every corner of red humanity. It was not a perfect solution by any means, but so long as the leadership was sincere enough, the lower ranks would follow suit.

The RC was not short of eager recruits that possessed the right propensity for sacrifice. Though its prestige had not yet reached the level of the RA and the RF, the collies still managed to become one of the most desirable employers in the new frontier.

After all, the ongoing wars had disrupted a lot of economies and put a lot of people out of their regular jobs. Many existing sectors based in the hinterland of human space couldn't expand fast enough to absorb all of these excess refugees.

Though Ves found it a little distasteful that the Red Collective preyed on the desperation of all of these displaced people, the latter still had a choice whether to accept the offers.

Many people did so, and subsequently went on to become soldiers, pioneers and possibly even test subjects!

Ves felt a greater urgency to win the Red War.

As long as he managed to drive away the threat of extinction, red humanity could finally breathe easy and postpone the implementation of further desperation measures.

"By the way, how has my daughter reacted to the losses suffered by your unit?"

"She is holding herself quite well for a girl of her age." The officer replied. "Andraste is a child who already understands the meaning and weight of death. I believe that she has accepted our own attitude towards the loss of our brothers and sisters."

"I shall see for myself, then."

When Ves moved on to check up on his daughter in person, the description appeared to be accurate.

Though she did not look as energetic as before, she did not spiral into a depression either.

She simply kept Lucky company while she worked to polish a scuffed piece of superdimensional armor plating.

"Papa! Why are you here?"

"Meow!"

While Andraste looked pleased to see her father coming in, the gem cat reacted very differently!

He jumped into the air before promptly escaping from the compartment, even going as far as to phase straight through the bulkhead!

"Lucky! Come back!"

"It's no use." Ves could only chuckle at his silly cat's frightful reaction. "He must have been afraid that I would forcibly stuff another whole archshell in his tummy."

His daughter looked upset. "Lucky doesn't want to eat anything that comes from anything that is alive. It was mean for mama to force him to eat that stuff."

"You're right." Ves sighed. "After this incident, we concluded that Lucky's taste preferences exist for a reason. I do not rule out the possibility that he can still gain something useful from organic matter, but it is best if he sticks to his preferred diet."

He moved closer and began to sit down next to his daughter. He took a closer look at what appeared to be a separated knee pad from one of the superdimensional armors used by the Apocalypse Wardens.

"You don't need to clean stuff like this by hand." He noted. "We have machines for that, even if they have not been designed to handle superdimensional objects."

Andraste shook her head in response. "I know, but the soldiers like to do it themselves. They don't know how all of their advanced tech works or how to fix it, but they think they can still understand it better if they give it a bit of care. There are some people from within the RC that believe that everything is alive, and that you can nurture them by treating them well just like mech pilots are doing with your living mechs."

"Do you think this piece of armor contains life?" Ves curiously asked.

The little girl shrugged. "I like to think so. You're the expert, papa. Do you think I am right?"

"That is up to you, Andraste."

Chapter 7488 Paths to Power

Chapter 7488 Paths to Power

Due to her companion spirit Yaika and her friendship with Helena, Andraste always possessed a special understanding of death.

Life could never last forever.

Even the most brilliant sparks in the universe had to go out at one point.

People could always resist entropy on a limited scale, but they could never hold out in perpetuity.

At least that was the case for most entities in the universe. Ves did not dare to make any definite statements against the unknowable life forms that had long transcended the power of True Gods and possibly God Kings.

Regardless, as far as he was concerned, he had long harbored a bit of concern about letting his second child become overly familiar with the concept of death at such a young age.

Yet he also knew how much she could benefit from it once she managed to harness its power to her own ends.

Helena, his supposed 'eldest sister', had grown into a powerhouse in her own right back in the Milky Way.

Even though the entire galaxy had deteriorated into wide-spread chaos and anarchy, such conditions only further boosted her advantages, giving her a lot more room for maneuver!

In times of great conflict and bloodshed, those who wielded powers related to such activities often gained the most benefits!

Ves did not envision the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy welcoming peace anytime soon.

Though the new frontier was very different from the old galaxy, both suffered from the same problem.

They had enjoyed a time of relative peace and stability for too long.

The dominant players of both galaxies had remained in power for too long. The hierarchy had become ossified, preventing rising upstarts from overthrowing their betters and realizing their ambitions.

Now that stability had collapsed in both locations, plenty of old fossils became vulnerable! Many newcomers could not resist the opportunity to take advantage of the situation and fight to topple the old powers!

This phenomenon applied on all levels of society and beyond.

From the Terran and the Rubarthan defiance of the Red Two's authority to the mutated voribugs sudden challenge to all of the existing occupants of the Red Ocean, clashes between old powers and rising upstarts happened everywhere!

The damage was enormous. There were far too many incidents where one side or both sides suffered grievous losses.

Aside from the enormous destruction of expensive assets, the loss of life was also astronomical.

Whether these casualties consisted of soldiers or ordinary civilians, they occurred at such a big scale that the stars of both galaxies gradually became stained with blood!

Ves worried whether some of those bloodstains might splatter onto his little girl.

"Don't worry, papa." She softly said as she sat on his lap and leaned her head against his chest. "Helena taught me that deities like herself must remain impartial witnesses to death. Unless the ones we love and know have died, it is not a good idea to care about the life and passing of strangers. They will die anyway. Whether they pass sooner or later is not important. War always amplifies death, but that is not always a bad thing. Excess is bad. Too much life is not good either. If you don't kill the old, the young won't be able to obtain enough room to thrive. Death can be a purifying force. What is happening will ultimately be good for everyone, especially to our own race."

That may be true. The phase whale race and the other major alien races had long carved out the Red Ocean for themselves. Peace could never force them to surrender their living space to red humanity. Only by putting one's life on the line would humans be able to vie for supremacy.

Ves affectionately rubbed his daughter's head. "It is good to hear that you possess such a clear perspective, but I hope you do not take it too far. Losses are inevitable in a war, but you should never lose all of your emotions over it. You are not a god. You are a human, just like your mother and I. Some consider having emotions to be a weakness. I don't agree with that. It is a strength. It is the force that drives humans to excel and serves as the driving force behind the birth of god pilots. Death may be a fundamental cosmic force, but I have long believed that love is stronger than everything else. I hope that you will keep this in mind."

His daughter did not respond with any words. She responded by hugging him tighter.

After enjoying a moment of warmth, Ves eventually sat up. "I have received your reminder about fashioning a more combat capable drone. My time is short, but I think I can put something together that will allow you to contribute more meaningfully in combat."

"What will you make?" Andraste looked up at her father with anticipation.

"I won't say. It will be a surprise. You just need to be patient." Ves teasingly grinned. "I can promise you that you will not feel disappointed."

To be honest, he had not completely locked down his decisions on this matter. He entertained several options, from repurposing one of his old avatar creations to making a brand-new one that was customized for his daughter from the start.

The former was more expedient but would not result in an ideal product.

The latter demanded a lot more time and resources but had a better chance of helping his daughter.

While Ves felt inclined to do the latter, he still needed to find a proper justification to make this choice acceptable.

That was business for later, though. First, he needed to address more important affairs.

After bidding his daughter farewell, he moved to a different section of the Tarrasque.

He had already inquired where he could find a certain cybernetic ace pilot.

Ves found her inside a spare study room.

She sat behind a desk with an active terminal along with a pile of secure data pads.

It seemed that she no longer intended to waste her time on rest and meditation.

When Ves glanced at her reading material, he noted that she developed a strong interest in getting to know her enemies. She sought out records that could tell her about the strengths and weaknesses of native alien homeships, structures and other fixed assets.

This was valuable knowledge. Why attempt to destroy these hardy structures by relying on brute force when you could accomplish the same results with a fraction of the energy by utilizing finesse?

"It looks like you have made up your mind."

Saint Isobel's reconstructed head looked up at him and nodded. "Right. I have witnessed the previous battle from the side. Even if the outcome was never in doubt, what I witnessed back then still opened my eyes. Did you know what I saw?"

"Tell me, Isobel."

"I saw the Minerva shape a large number of warships and mechs into a nearly unbeatable force. However, she can only do so in one or two places at a time. I saw the Dark Zephyr move behind enemy lines with impunity. His speed is unmatched, but the same cannot be said for his ability to deal damage. A pair of superdimensional knives has a very short reach. The Amaranto and the First Sword are unmatched in their ability to kill enemy phase lords from a distance and at close range respectively. While they can kill other stuff, they don't excel in that role by any means."

Ves patiently listened to her as Isobel explained the context of her decision. He could already guess what she was working towards.

"The Larkinson Clan is blessed to obtain the allegiance of numerous powerful ace pilots."

"The credit mostly lies with you." Isobel said with a brief smile. "You gave us more chances than any of us initially deserved. From designing wonderful living mechs to giving us so many

opportunities to do battle, we could have never come so far from our humble roots in the Komodo Star Sector without your constant support and encouragement. While we still had to earn much of our strength through our own willpower and efforts, we do not deny that your support as a mech designer and a leader has made all of the difference. We are all lucky to be in your service."

Hearing that made it all worth it. Ves had indeed invested much into them because he believed in their potential.

"You do not need to shower me with your gratitude. Your ascension is enough of a reward to me and the clan. If you did not show promise by achieving breakthroughs at a prime age, I would not have invested too much of my attention to you. There are plenty of Larkinson mech pilots that have not been able to step on the path of godhood up until this day. For example, I had hoped for years that Melkor would be able to make that critical step, but he never managed to. He has even chosen to give up now in order to pursue a different path to power."

Not every mech pilot possessed the fortitude or luck to achieve a breakthrough as a mech pilot. That was the reality of this profession. Perhaps Melkor might have been able to become an expert candidate eventually if he persisted, but nobody would know the truth now that he had shifted his course.

A pity.

Due to certain changes such as secretly loosening the restrictions imposed by the Red Kingdom, the rate of breakthroughs had steadily risen.

Of course, it was difficult to notice this change in isolation as widespread combat had naturally increased the amount of breakthroughs across red humanity.

"Melkor is an earnest commander. He possesses plenty of drive, but falls short when it comes to his conviction." Isobel softly commented. "Our path is not for everyone. I am happy that he has chosen to pursue a different sort of power. Not everyone needs to bear the same burdens."

"Let's get this discussion back on track." Ves said. "This is about you. Tell me, Isobel. What is your choice?"

"You should have already guessed, Ves. I have decided to make use of Triton-Remose-B for the Promethea Mark II." The saint declared.

Her domain field, though heavily diminished without the benefit of true resonance, flared with heat as she spoke those words.

"The source of fear."

Isobel nodded. "I have made my decision not just for myself, but for the clan and everyone else. The Larkinson Clan already has ace pilots who can kill enemy champions far better than I will be able to manage. Even if I do not want to fall too far behind when it comes to killing enemies of the same level, I refuse to settle for being second-best. Rather than becoming an inferior version of Davia Stark, I want to blaze my own trail and pursue my own path to power. I have chosen to weaponize the power of fear."

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7489 Villain

The Cybernetic ace pilot stood straight as she stared off into the corner of the study room.

Her expression displayed a strong sense of conviction and belief.

After multiple days of wrangling her thoughts, she had finally determined her future direction in life.

Much of the doubt and uncertainty that plagued her mind had disappeared. She had conquered her indecision and finally became ready to move forward.

"I have been thinking." She said. "About my place in the clan. About what I can do better than anyone else. About how I want to be remembered. One of my conclusions is that what I want does not necessarily correlate with what red humanity needs."

Isobel raised her hand. New projections came to life. They all displayed the famous and iconic high-ranking mechs of the Larkinson Clan, from expert mechs such as the Everchanger to powerful ace mechs such as the Minerva.

Though they were incredibly varied, most of them conveyed an uplifting impression, as if they were created to inspire hope.

"When I think about what our clan already has at its disposal, it has many expert pilots and ace pilots who look and act like heroes. Jannzi, Joshua, Dise and Casella are all honorable and noble in their own ways. They are the signboards of our clan. They are the ideals that every other Larkinson strives to become. They are the guiding lights that protect our conscience. When I compare myself to them, I... feel there is not much point in joining their ranks."

"Why do you feel this way, Isobel?"

"It is redundant." The powerful woman quietly responded. "We already have enough bright and shiny heroes among us, and more will definitely come in the future. I do not want to blend in with them. I want to stand out in my own way. To do that, I need to become a different sort of saint, one that does not embody the traditional traits of heroism, but one that deliberately stands in opposition to them. What I want is..."

"Yes...?"

Isobel turned her back to Ves, thereby casting a small shadow that stretched behind her back.

"I want to become the villain of the Larkinson Clan."

"..."

Ves became speechless. This was the first time he heard such an absurd statement. Everyone wanted to become the hero of their own story. Mech pilots practically obsessed over ideals such as honor and righteousness, some more than others!

To state the desire to become a villain represented far more than a whimsical idea.

It was a declaration.

"You will have to explain that to me, Isobel. How do you define a villain and why do you think our clan needs one of your caliber?"

A not-so-innocent smile adorned her usually neutral expression.

"To me, a villain is a criminal and a rule breaker. It is a person who is unconcerned about laws and morality. He or she is willing to do anything and ignore any bottom line in order to get stuff done. A villain does not care about the feelings of others. He or she will gladly bear the infamy and ill repute for undertaking actions that heroes could never bear to do themselves. Villains may not be pleasant, but they are necessary."

Though Ves agreed with most of her arguments, he felt doubtful about the last statement.

Even so, Isobel talked about 'villains' as if it was a necessary role. She was essentially auditioning to become a villain for the Larkinson Clan on the assumption that it needed a saint that did not allow herself to be held back by the shackles of society.

Ves looked serious as he contemplated her words and attitude. He felt that her conviction had taken a dangerous turn.

"While I am no longer in charge of the clan, I can tell you that we do not necessarily need a villain as you say. Strength is essential, but so is control. There are multiple reasons why human society idolizes and deifies those who pilot mechs. One of them is because as long as we hold mech pilots to a higher standard, they will consciously and unconsciously feel obliged to act according to the impression. Honor is a behavior constraint that turns deadly warriors into reliable protectors. Casting aside the protection of this image will result in serious consequences."

"I know."

"You probably figured it out on an intellectual level, but are you truly sure that every part of yourself is okay with this proposed course?" Ves skeptically asked. "Think about it. You will encounter many hindrances. You will be denied honor and recognition. You may even lose friends depending on the severity of your future actions. Your hands will be stained with so much blood that you can never wash away the stink. It will drench your soul and may one day contaminate your willpower. Is this truly your preferred path to godhood?"

Saint Isobel chuckled under her breath. "Preferred? No. Necessary? I think so. That is enough for me. This is not about what I want. It is about what others need from an ace pilot. I have merely chosen to fulfill the vacancy that is most urgent rather than the opposite. Do not think that I am doing this out of a sense of guilt. I am doing this out of a sense of..."

"Of what?"

She paused for a few more seconds. "Purpose. I want to be useful. I cannot fight without a cause. If I am left without direction, I do not think I can make it far in the path to godhood. This is why I need to fulfill a necessary purpose. There may be other ace pilots who want to realize other goals such as spreading justice or making life better for the citizens of a state, but my own motivations are not that specific. I just do want to do what is necessary for the Larkinsons and the rest of red humanity, in that order."

That was a very specific statement. While Ves was glad that she remembered and appreciated the clan that had brought her up, she also conveyed an ominous implication.

If the Larkinsons or at least the ones she cared about ever stood in opposition with other red humans, she would most likely stand with the former!

"We do not demand this level of loyalty from you or any other high-ranking mech pilots." Ves carefully responded. "Each of you are important to the defense of our clan, but not vital. We can afford a bit of slippage. We have already nurtured enough expert pilots and ace pilots that none of you are strictly irreplaceable anymore."

The female ace pilot threw a contemptuous glance in his direction.

"I do not entirely agree with that, Ves. As I have stated before, you have plenty of heroes, but hardly any villains. Perhaps the only ones that can fit the definition of the latter are Zimro Belson and Rosa Orfan, and neither do a good job at it. Zimro and his Phobos have the potential to become an excellent assassin and saboteur, but they are too noble to do everything that is necessary. Whatever is going with Rosa Orfan and her Riot has caused both of them to degenerate into monsters in the skin of an ace mech. She, they, have become villains of the worst sort. They are too unstable to be relied upon in every situation. I suppose they are an excellent choice if you want to create a lot of localized chaos and mayhem, but not much else."

Ves disagreed with her. The Riot Mark III could duel stronger enemy champions and endure a lot of hardships without relying on a heavy defensive configuration.

The D-mech could also break predictions and expectations merely being present on the battlefield.

The Riot Mark III had just begun its new journey. It still had plenty of untapped potential.

Still, Isobel's overall point was not invalid. The Larkinson Clan did not possess a shortage of so-called villains.

"So you think that you can fill a hole in our lineup, is that correct?"

"Yes." She said. "Let the Promethea Mark II and I be your favored choice whenever you need to generate a large amount of fear and destruction. After the last battle, I have watched our warships clumsily try to raze a planet's orbit and surface of alien structures. Those big buildings and fortifications may be static and easy to hit, but they can absorb a lot of firepower depending on the strength of their energy shields and the thickness of their plating. Our fleet doesn't have any battleships aside from the Tortuous Scream, and even she only has a limited amount of big guns that are good at bombardment. I can do the same job at least ten times better. With the help of Triton-Remose-B, maybe 20 times or 30 times better. We could have razed all of that stuff and killed or driven the entrenched aliens away a lot faster if I was at your disposal."

Her estimates might not be precise, but she was most probably correct in the broad strokes.

A Promethea Mark II that could launch energy attacks that easily spread purple flames that could not only consume the toughest energy shields and matter, but also generate lots of fear among aliens in the vicinity could absolutely devastate large amounts of infrastructure with incomparable ease!

Such a powerful ace mech could be deployed a lot faster and more flexible as well.

Unlike battleships that were relatively slow, lumbering and easy to detect from a distance, a modern ace mech, especially one that was impregnated with Solus Gas and flew at low power, could sneak up to an unsuspecting planet and engulf it with firestorms before the defenders could form a proper response!

The Promethea Mark II in this configuration might not become the most effective champion killer, but she would still possess enough strength to be able to evade pursuit from the strong and resist anything weaker.

This perfect combination of exaggerated offensive power, decent defensive properties and relatively good mobility had the potential to turn the Promethea Mark II into a nightmare weapon for alien foes!

"I know this question may sound redundant to you, but I have to ask it anyway." Ves said after taking a deep breath. "Are you sure you are willing to take on this role? Once you take this step, you cannot turn back. Perhaps there are plenty of dramas where villains successfully find redemption and turn into heroes, but I doubt that is possible in reality. There are still ways to act within constraint while wielding the power of fear. You can become the ultimate deterrence of the Larkinson Clan. Weapons of mass destruction are valuable not just for their capacity for indiscriminate destruction, but also for their ability to subjugate the opposition without needing to launch them in reality."

Saint Isobel curled her lips in contempt at this idea. "Deterrence without action is an illusion. It can only last so long. There are plenty of enemies that will never cow to threats alone. Only real action can defeat them in body and in spirit. Let me be the weapon of mass destruction for you and the clan. Everyone will have no choice but to take us seriously once I show that I am readily willing to use this power."

She was correct on a certain level.

Deterrence alone was already useful in its own right, but only up to a point.

For example, many players respected Ves a lot more now that he commanded the loyalty of 300 or so Ascended Giants who did not consider themselves human anymore.

Yet fears of deepening the alienation between these human phase lords and the rest of red humanity prevented Ves from using their awesome strength on rival human groups.

Without demonstrating that the Larkinson Clan was capable of committing terrible acts if its bottom line ever got crossed, there would always be enemies that ignored common threats.

Chapter 7490 Mastering Her Fears

Chapter 7490 Mastering Her Fears

"I have spoken to the other saints of the Larkinson Clan about the benefits of coming into contact with key resonating exotics." Saint Isobel Kotin said as she began to pace around the study room with her hands behind her back. "They all told me that those resonating exotics grant more than a strange new application of power. They can change the way you fight on a more fundamental level. This is what I am aiming for. It is not enough for me to resonate with Triton-Remose-B to a superficial degree. I want to master the power of fear and eventually become so familiar with it that I can generate it without relying on material assistance."

That was an ambitious goal.

Ves looked somewhat approving. "It is not unheard of for high-ranking mech pilots to master resonating abilities to such a degree that they can channel it and other related techniques without needing the resonating materials anymore. However, this requires a serious commitment. You not only need to comprehend the concept of fear at least as well as the concept of fire, but also incorporate it into your soul. This is not only difficult, but dangerous. You will change in ways that you may not be able to accept."

Isobel maintained a determined expression. "Whether I like it or not, as long as it is necessary, I will see this through to the end. I need this, Ves. Not just because I want to weaponize the power of fear, but also because I want to conquer my own fears. I am still afraid, have I told you that? When I burned my own body in order to force a breakthrough, I almost did not go through with it due to my fears and apprehension. That... baptism of fire has left a very deep mark in me. I still hold an aversion towards fire. A part of me is afraid of piloting the Promethea Mark II for the first time. Since you are turning it into a 'Bloodfire mech', I can only form a connection by pushing pure hot fire energy into my body. I fear... that I may not be able to bear the incredible heat again."

"Be confident, Isobel. Forming a Bloodfire Pact will be painful, especially if you want to do so with a mech as powerful as the Promethea Mark II, but she is a machine that is tailor-made to your needs and capabilities. We are doing our best to make her latest iteration as strong as possible without accidentally overwhelming you. Your near-complete cybernetic conversion has already turned you into one of the most fire and heat-resistant individuals in the Red Ocean. The intensity of fire energy circulating through your augmented body will not be able to hurt you too much, especially if you limit the intensity of your combat actions."

Isobel's footsteps briefly halted. "That is unacceptable, Ves. I did not step forward in the path to godhood just to fight with one of my hands tied behind my back. Only absolute power can overcome great resistance. I never want to fight while limiting the spread and heat of my flames. Only by fighting at my best will I be able to earn my qualifications to become a god pilot. One of the more useful lessons that I have learned from my accident is that sometimes the only way to surpass your limits is to push through beyond all reason. That is the point where my own fears threaten to hold me back the most. If I gain better mastery over this feeling, that will not happen anymore."

"That sounds a bit... abstract." Ves furrowed his brows. "Fear is a very normal phenomenon. Not just humans, but also every other species experience fear. It might not be desirable, but it serves as

a useful warning and survival mechanism. Trying to get rid of your fear by 'conquering' it sounds extreme."

"I will not accept being a slave to my own fears!" Isobel shot back in a more heated tone. "You are right that fear is very normal among humans, but I want to become more than that. If I want to make resonance strength grow even further, I need to continue what I have started, which is shedding my mortal frailties in order to bring me closer to godhood. My willpower must become strong, pure and focused."

The female ace pilot possessed strong ideas on what it took for a saint like herself to become a god pilot.

They might not necessarily make sense, but it didn't matter too much.

God pilots were existences that defied logic and rules merely by existing!

So long as their willpower became strong enough, they could override the natural rules with unnatural rules, thereby imposing themselves and their surrounding environments to an alternate universe where fantasy turned into reality!

Knowing that such crazy events had come, Ves did not argue too hard about the flaws in her theory.

What mattered was that she committed to her course despite all of the possible misgivings that they might have.

"While I do not entirely understand or agree with your mindset, I can at least tell that you are serious about this." Ves said with a sigh. "So long as that is the case, we will not deny your choices. We will incorporate Triton-Remose-B into the Promethea Mark II as best as possible so that you can begin to master this concept and its manifestations."

The ace pilot smiled at that. Hearing this boosted her confidence. She grew more certain that in this life-changing junction, she had made the best decision for her career!

Her Saint Kingdom trembled as it underwent subtle changes.

Since Ves was standing nearby, he could feel the overall evolution direction.

Though Isobel had not yet begun her quest to master the power of fear, her domain field already adapted to her latest goal and conviction by laying the groundwork.

Her purple radiance became darker and more ominous.

Despite the brightness of her flames, Ves had the illusion that she had turned her back to the light in order to embrace a nefarious force.

Ves grew a little concerned about that. What Saint Isobel Kotin planned to do could lead to a lot of internal hostility and contradictions.

Still, it did not matter if her logic could not hold in reality.

As long as it made sense in her mind, her willpower could overcome any resistance by relying on brute force!

"Let's talk about more concrete concerns and demands." Ves proposed as he took a step back from those convoluted thoughts. "Now that we have received your selection of a key resonating material, we know much better what we are working towards."

He waved his hand, causing a projection of a fairly detailed sketch of the final version of the Promethea Mark II.

Though it might not match the actual ace mech once she had attained her new form, the projected image at least gave Isobel a much clearer idea on what she would be working with in a few months.

Isobel immediately frowned. "I am not satisfied with this appearance anymore. I am no artist or mech designer, but in my eyes, she looks too much like the original Promethea. I have changed since then, and so has my living mech. I want my ace mech to look more..."

"Menacing? Intimidating? Dangerous?"

She nodded. "Exactly. I am not asking you to overhaul her entire look. I still want my mech to retain the identity of the Promethea. I just want her to come in a more... grown-up and rebellious version of her original self. Does that make sense, sir?"

"We can work with that." Ves readily responded. "It will be challenging to design a new look that precisely fits your requirements. Your instructions are too vague and short on specifics. However, you can trust in our vision and craftsmanship. The intimidating ace mech that we end up may not be a perfect match with the Promethea Mark II in your dreams, but as long as the visual overhaul does its job, the differences should be too important."

Ves began to raise his finger and modify the sketch in real-time. He applied his imagination and his artistic ability to rapidly make changes.

The modified sketch cast the Promethea Mark II in a different light, both figuratively and literally.

Much of her shape and contours remained identical. Ves had only made a few angles sharper and such.

What truly altered the vibe of the sketch were the changes in coating, pose and other relatively small details.

Isobel looked genuinely impressed. "This is far from enough, but you are already working in the right direction. Don't be afraid to go further. I trust that you will make sure that everything will look right in the end. The Promethea Mark II needs to inspire fear no matter the race."

"We can take this a big step further, you know."

The ace pilot gazed into Ves' eyes. Her intuition already hinted to her about what might come next.

"You are talking about doing the same thing you did with the Riot Mark III to my Promethea Mark II, is that correct?"

"You are still as clever as ever." Ves sounded impressed yet again. "You are right. Although the process is dangerous and highly consequential, it can amplify your Promethea Mark II to a whole new level. If you desire more power..."

"No."

That was quick. She did not even give him a chance to explain any further. She immediately rejected him without any hesitation.

Chapter 7491 Second Configuration

Chapter 7491 Second Configuration

"Whatever you did to the Riot Mark III killed the living mech and replaced it with an abominable being." Saint Isobel stated in a clear-minded fashion. "My Promethea Mark II does not deserve this treatment. I am not that hungry for power. If anyone must embrace evil in order to obtain power, then let that be myself. I am a saint. I can bear the consequences. If I am wrong, then let my battle partner be the one that can pull me back from the brink. I want my living mech to remain sober and in control over herself. She can play a far more useful role to me by serving as a friend and a second opinion. I never want to see you turn her into my enemy."

"Understood." Ves replied. "What about applying this treatment to a single weapon or functional module? This way, you can still obtain greater power and a higher intimidation factor, but also be able to retain your original living mech."

"My answer remains the same, sir. I do not want to be burdened with your dark experiments."

Saint Isobel conveyed her will and desire very clearly. She had put real thought behind this possibility.

This left Ves with no room to argue any further.

A part of him felt disappointed about that. Ever since he chose the latest System upgrade track, he still found himself with far too few opportunities to exercise his Demoncasting. He felt it was a bit of a waste to let this feature remain unused for multiple months.

Still, he could not bring himself to defy Isobel's decision. Ves had no choice but to shelve any notion of creating a new D-mech or D-arm.

"Very well. The Promethea Mark II shall remain an honest living ace mech." He said with a conciliatory voice. "What other requests do you have for your upgraded machine?"

Isobel shifted her gaze back to the projected sketch and thought about her wants and needs a little further.

"This rifleman mech configuration looks incredibly high-end, and I am sure that it will be much more powerful than the older one, but... it looks too small and thin for my needs. Since I want to gain the power to raze whole planets with my flames, my ace mech must be able to project much more firepower than what is possible with such a skinny mech frame."

"The Promethea Mark II is designed for active repositioning on the battlefield, just like the original." Ves explained. "Even with better tech and stronger materials, compromises must be made in order to retain enough mobility to outrun powerful enemies, outmaneuver tricky ones and reach distant destinations relatively quickly with the help of a minidrive. I do not think you want to pilot an ace mech that has become so big and clunky that she cannot escape pursuit from enemy phase lords."

Isobel grimaced. "You are right. I don't want to pilot a clunky ace mech against enemy champions that can pose a real threat. I also do not want to be lacking in firepower when I most need it. Why not... try and do both? Didn't you design several sets of mounted wargear years ago? If it is possible, I want you to design two versions of my Promethea Mark II. The base version can stay light and slender to improve our ability to survive on a dangerous battlefield. The expanded version should be the previous one, but wrapped up by mounted wargear that is so big and powerful that we can single-handedly destroy an entire continent's worth of cities by ourselves!"

That was a viable suggestion!

Mounted wargear would indeed solve several problems related to the Promethea Mark II.

At the very least, Isobel would not be forced to make a difficult choice between two configurations. She could retain access to both of them, though she could only ever make use of one at a time.

Even so, this would expand the Promethea Mark II's versatility and usefulness to a very large extent.

It was essentially opening up the choice to convert the ace rifleman mech into a temporary artillery platform!

Ves ran with this suggestion and began to sketch out a very crude interpretation of the mounted wargear.

The parts and components looked exaggeratingly large and thick in proportion to the structure of the ace mech.

He did not hold himself back too much and readily resorted to expanding the wargear in order to fit more components and energy reserves.

In the end, the mounted wargear had completely transformed the look of the Promethea Mark II!

She had become much bigger to the point where people would not be able to recognize her anymore if not for the sight of a familiar rifle and identical colorations.

The mounted wargear version of the Promethea Mark II exceeded the mass and volume of typical heavy artillery mechs.

In fact, if Ves had to classify this configuration if it was built as a single whole, then he would probably be able to call it an ultra-heavy artillery mech configuration!

This was not just because the mounted wargear multiplied the size of the Promethea Mark II by a considerable extent, but also because it also added multiple new weapon systems!

The secondary cannons did not pack too much of a punch, but that was not important. Ves had added them in order to increase the Promethea Mark II's quantity of attacks.

This would make it easier for Saint Isobel to spread her firepower across multiple 'softer' targets or regions.

As for more powerful and resilient enemies, the mounted wargear also possessed a very big gun that looked quite familiar.

Ves had hastily adapted the original concept of the Sun Caster and scaled it up to better fit the mounted wargear!

"Is this the super-special plasma cannon based on the work of the Plasma Shaper?" Isobel asked.

He nodded. "That is right. I originally planned to design the Plasma Shaper as a back or shoulder-mounted weapon system to serve as the Ultimate Module for your ace mech. This is admittedly a clunky design solution even if you can choose to detach this offensive module. However, your latest proposal has caused me to change my mind. While I need to redo a lot of work that I have done before, I think it is ultimately better if I turn the entire mounted wargear into the Ultimate Module. This will not only enhance the performance of all of this hardware in a special fashion, but also scale up the destructive power of your strongest ranged attacks by at least an order of magnitude!"

In other other words, by dedicating much of the capacity of the mounted wargear to enabling and supporting the super-size version of the Sun Caster, the Promethea Mark II in this heavy configuration would be able to output so much firepower that she could probably spread devastation across an entire planet in a single day!

Isobel could not help but become enthralled by this new vision.

However, she was still sober enough to realize that it would not be easy to gain access to all of this firepower.

"What are the downsides?"

"They are relatively straightforward." He said. "The mounted wargear will be very large and massive. Your Promethea Mark II will not be able to dance across the battlefield, so you can only really make use of it under limited circumstances. For example, when our forces have already defeated the main enemy force, or when we have established orbital supremacy above a planet."

"Those conditions are acceptable. I do not mind these limitations."

"The second major disadvantage is that the costs are massive." Ves said. "Designing all of this stuff is not difficult, but it will take up precious time that could be better spent on designing other ace mechs. My wife and I will have to reserve at least 2 whole months just to flesh it out. Then there is

the matter of fabricating the mounted wargear. It will have to be made out of superdimensional matter, which is a problem because the entire ensemble is huge enough to strain our limited reserves. We may even be forced to settle for using hull-grade superdimensional alloys as opposed to the armor-grade superdimensional alloys used to construct the base mech."

Isobel frowned a bit deeper. "I can... accept compromises in defenses as long as the firepower is great enough. Just as you have already said, the Promethea Mark II in this ultra-heavy configuration should never be employed in situations where she can be threatened by serious enemies. I can wait until we have killed or driven away enemy phase lords before bringing out the heavy guns."

"Mmhm. It is good that you can accept these conditions. Different problems require different solutions. For now, my wife and I will focus on completing the core project of upgrading the standalone version of the Promethea Mark II first. If we work quickly enough, we may be able to get it done quickly enough to deploy you against the native aliens who have grown fed up by our presence within their territories."

"What about the mounted wargear?"

"We won't be able to complete that quickly." Ves admitted to her. "It will be lower in priority. You can forget about making use of it during the Nemesis Campaign. It may even take a year or several years before you can finally gain access to this massive boost in firepower."

The ace pilot sighed. "That will be a long wait, but I can bear the delay. The Promethea Mark II by herself should be enough to keep me occupied for a long time. Is there anything else I need to take into account?"

"Shifting the Sun Caster from the mech frame to the mounted wargear is a highly consequential decision. I originally settled for designing a very basic implementation of this high technology in order to meet the tight deadline, but now that I am able to take my time to flesh it out in a much larger platform, I can definitely turn it into an extremely powerful and special addition to your future arsenal. The wait will be worth it. I can guarantee that to you. However, the price that you will need to pay is that your base machine will not have access to any version of the Sun Caster. The normal configuration of your Promethea Mark II will mostly have to do with her handheld energy rifle as her most form of damage output."

"That is nothing new as far as I am concerned. I am already used to that when I fought as a standard mech pilot and an expert pilot. I have not become spoiled just because I have become an ace pilot. If waiting for another year can make the Sun Caster twice as powerful, then I will gladly settle for less for a time. Just be aware that my patience is not unlimited."

"Don't worry. We will not torture you by dangling this upgrade before your nose for as long as a decade. I am sure that we can squeeze enough time in our schedule to complete this side project over the course of a year."

Ves actually felt incredibly relieved by this change. The Sun Caster was truly an extraordinary weapon system in multiple ways. It fundamentally changed the properties of every plasma bolt in ways that he did not fully understand to great effect.

The more time he dedicated to studying and tinkering with this high technology, the more competently he could adapt it to the Promethea Mark II!

The additional time also benefited him in other ways.

He could take advantage of the cutting-edge tech released in the upcoming months that were not available at this moment of time.

He could also monitor the performance of the base version of the Promethea Mark II and take note of all of her actual shortcomings.

This would enable him to design the mounted wargear in a way that more effectively compensated for some of those weaknesses!

Chapter 7492 The Archetech Iceberg

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"So... Saint Isobel wants to pilot a dark and edgy mech."

"I wouldn't describe it that way." Ves said as he leaned against the clean alloy work table. "She wants to pilot a mech that reflects her shift in mindset. The original Promethea has a fine look, but its heroic bearing is a bit too strong for her liking. Now that she deliberately wants to position herself as the Larkinson Clan's villain, she needs to convey the impression of one. It is just like those dramas where degenerated heroes swap out their bright costumes for more ominous looking ones. In this situation, her mech is her costume. This is more than a symbolic change. It is a transition that directly influences her conviction."

Gloriana could not direct her focus on her tinkering with a piece of salvaged advanced archetech anymore. She turned her chair around and looked up at her husband.

"I suppose you did nothing to discourage her from making this immature decision. You must be looking forward to exploring this contrast in themes and adding more variety to our high-end mech roster."

She knew him too well.

"This is her choice to make, Gloriana. Do not forget that we exist to serve mech pilots, not the other way around. Even if mech pilots are overly emotional, have bad logic and possess a very biased and flawed perspective of reality, their needs must still be accommodated to the best of our ability. This is especially the case for ace pilots. It is our responsibility to convert as much of their fanciful ideas into concrete and practical products."

His wife let out a sigh. "I have not forgotten those distinctions. You do not need to remind me as if I am still a young Novice Mech Designer. I am merely... disappointed that Saint Kotin has developed such a strong aversion to the ideal of a heroine. She might not fit this archetype as well as Venerable Joshua or Saint General Ark, but she is still a positive example to many ladies of our

clan. If she has decided to embrace a darker and more ominous persona, then that will have great implications, not just for our minions, but also our public image."

"I know that this will affect many variables, but that is not a reason to avoid it." Ves responded while crossing his arms. "I actually agree with Saint Isobel on most of her points. I think that our clan is too honorable and upright for its own good. This may be an advantage during a time of strong order, but that is already a thing of the past. Now that we are entering an era of prolonged upheaval, we need to sharpen our claws."

"We can do so without having one of our strongest pilots adopting an evil persona, Ves! The Larkinson Clan enjoys a great reputation dividend for maintaining a positive and uplifting image, do you know that? The release and subsequent performance of the Riot Mark III has not been enough to affect that as it is an obvious outlier, but if we shape the Promethea Mark II according to her new demands..."

"You are free to seek her out and persuade her to change her mind."

"...Forget it." She shook her head.

She knew as well as any other mech designer how stubborn high-ranking mech pilots could be once they made up their minds.

On top of that, Saint Isobel Kotin was absolutely not an individual who developed a reputation for making hasty and thoughtless decisions.

Such champions tended to take their time and analyze the problem from multiple angles before settling on what they considered the most optimal choice with absolute confidence!

Now that Gloriana finally brought herself to accept this change, the pair of mech designers began to discuss the other proposed changes.

Many of them irritated her. The Promethea Mark II Project had already reached halfway to completion. Though she did not have to start over from scratch, she still needed to divert her time to redesign a number of sections in order to align with the new vision.

Much of them had to be done in order to accommodate the addition of optional mounted wargear at some point in the future!

Fortunately, these structural changes did not require too much of an overhaul. Gloriana merely had to add mounting sockets to the exterior while making sure the overall mech frame did not suffer excessive physical stresses when merged with a much larger mechanical construct.

"Converting the Sun Caster from an integrated weapon module into the core weapon system of a set of mounted wargear is a large undertaking." Gloriana frowned. "It will be larger and more complex than the Victrix that we designed for the Minerva Mark II. It is good that you told her that we cannot provide the mounted wargear to her right away. We truly do not have the time to address this additional chore. The Lionheart Mark II Project and the Bastion Mark II Project are also important. I do not intend to neglect the demands of Ark Larkinson and Jannzi Larkinson."

"Don't worry. I do not think that Saint Isobel will become too upset if she only receives a 'bare' ace mech at first. The Promethea Mark II is already stuffed with plentiful advancements compared to her old expert mech. New and powerful features such as the Bloodfire System, archetech, superdimensional tech, support link tech, Triton-Remose-B, an ultra-compact cockpit as well as a connection to a new design spirit will be more than enough to keep her busy for a while. It is best if she practices with the Promethea Mark II in her base form first before she makes use of the mounted wargear."

"She needs to learn how to walk before she can run."

"Exactly."

Gloriana looked at the latest sketch of the Promethea Mark II. The addition of the mounted wargear centered around a massive Sun Caster plasma cannon and multiple secondary energy cannons completely changed the look and performance of the entire unit.

"What of the Cryotron energy shotgun concept that we already promised for later?" She questioned. "Will you still design it for her, and do you still intend to turn it into one of your D-arms?"

Ves shrugged. "We haven't spoken about it to be honest. I think it is better to finish the mounted wargear first before anything else. I do not mind it if we end up shoving this idea to the side. However, I think it is still necessary to provide such a weapon to the Promethea Mark II eventually. It is a weapon that is tailor-made for use against the mutated voribugs. This second major threat is not going away anytime soon. We still have time, though."

"I agree. I also believe it is best to leave this project for later. It is not as if the Promethea Mark II in her base form is harmless against the mutated voribugs. We still possess an incomplete understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Red humanity is constantly learning more about the many subspecies produced by the 6 hives."

Gloriana could not help but curl her lips into a mischievous smile when she said those last words.

Ves wondered why.

"In any case, do you think we will be able to complete the Promethea Mark II Project in time despite these changes?"

She paused for a moment before giving a reluctant nod. "This outcome is within the realm of possibility. I cannot provide any greater certainty than that. Our workload has increased, but the removal of the Sun Caster from the base mech frame has also simplified its configuration, so we should be able to manage. To be honest, I am actually looking forward to incorporating some of the more readily applicable solutions that I have recently derived from the archecruiser's impressive structure. I have already managed to figure out half-a-dozens ways to compress more functions in the same volume of archemetal just by copying the homework of the arche shipbuilders."

Of course, this only applied to the most superficial applications of archetech.

The archecruiser still possessed a wealth of ingenious and highly optimized design solutions that required a lot more investigation, analysis and deduction before Gloriana could imitate them in her own works.

Still, the Promethea Mark II would still be able to enjoy a small advantage due to this recent development.

"How will your findings impact your ambition to develop 'Glorianatech'?"

Her expression immediately drooped. "Glimpsing what the arche have done to build the archecruiser has... better informed me to the vastness of my undertaking. When I initially thought that I had found my unique path to realizing my design philosophy, I based much of my assumptions on what I was able to derive from the captured archefrigate. However, I knew much less about the arche and their tech back then. I already accounted for the very real possibility that their more important homeships are more advanced by nature, but I severely underestimated the gaps in quality and complexity. The potential of archetech is much greater than I initially thought, but that has also raised the barrier of converting it into a human version that is fully compatible and easily combined with our civilization's conventional tech base."

In other words, she underestimated the challenge of her undertaking, as usual.

She saw an alien scout vessel and mistakenly thought that it already encapsulated much of the essence of archetech.

Then she encountered a more serious warship of the same alien race and suddenly discovered that she had never come into contact with 'real' archetech until that moment!

The arche were not as 'primitive' and 'underdeveloped' as she thought!

This race had lived for a long time and had lived through multiple ages.

Even if the arche had fallen from their prime and could no longer maintain the splendor of the past, that did not change the fact that they enjoyed a huge accumulation of unique technologies derived from their miraculous archeshells.

A single ambitious mech designer could never decipher and surpass the technological foundation of an entire major race so quickly and easily!

Ves even felt the need to persuade his wife to set aside her current ambition and aim for a more achievable goal.

However, he held himself back.

This was her choice. He trusted her to know what was best for her own life and career.

Besides, he had already inducted her into the System. She might not have been able to earn enough AP at this time, but she still had plenty of years to redeem more enlightenment fruits and improve her overall capabilities. There was no way she would let this challenge stump her for long.

"Will the Lionheart Mark II and the Bastion Mark II benefit from more applications of advanced archetech?" He asked.

"The Lionheart Mark II is too far ahead for that. Its level of archetech will not differ too much from the level of archetech that I intend to incorporate into Promethea Mark II." Gloriana replied while shaking her head. "It will be different for the Bastion Mark II. We do not have to finish the ace heavy space knight so soon, so that gives me much more time to master new design applications. The Bastion's mech frame is also much larger, which makes it much easier to incorporate new solutions that take up a substantial amount of volume. This will likely be the first high-end mech that truly benefits from the gains of studying the archecruiser."

That sounds good. The Bastion Mark II relied much more on her defenses to fulfill her function.

Ves had not forgotten that the Shield of Samar, the Bastion's previous incarnation, had melted in an instant due to her inability to withstand a powerful attack from the Skorpion Kommando.

Even though it was not Jannzi or her living ace mech's fault for being so vulnerable to the enemy high-tier expert mech's trump card, Ves still felt at least partly responsible for this outcome.

He and his wife had been too confident in the Shield of Samar's defenses. They underestimated the means of their enemies and paid the price for their hubris.

Ves hoped to do better this time, and so did Gloriana.

No matter what, the Bastion Mark II must never be in such a quick and sudden fashion!

Chapter 7493 Stealth Interception

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The combined fleet continued to advance deeper into alien space.

That certainly took the native aliens in the region by surprise.

They had become far too accustomed to the notion that red humanity no longer possessed the guts or spare forces to launch a serious incursion into their territories.

Although the Terrans and other human forces occasionally played tricks by sending in scouts and saboteurs, these paltry efforts could never shake their hold on their star systems.

The forces led by the Larkinson Clan were different.

Though the Terran Alliance had not launched an all-out offensive that could shift the entire border back by entire zones, the combined fleet still gathered enough mechs and warships to destroy an extensive amount of infrastructure!

Even if the completion of the Promethea Mark II was still multiple weeks away, the red humans did not need to rely on a miracle mech to tear apart entire space stations and bombard entire cities. At worst, they just had to expend more time and munitions in order to get the job done.

Due to how little the native aliens actually prepared to go on the defensive, the invading humans actually encountered much less resistance than expected.

Once they moved past the border regions, they only encountered sporadic enemy fleets and stationary defenses.

The former all fled upon sighting the now-infamous Premier Fleet and Bluejay Fleet. The native aliens were not stupid or ignorant. Captured intelligence already exposed the fact that the alien fleets in the region already received express warnings not to waste their manpower and assets in a fight that they had no hope of winning.

As long as they did not enjoy an overwhelming advantage in numbers, the alien mobile forces always chose to flee rather than stand their ground!

This was both good and bad news.

On the one hand, it made it easier for red humanity to sweep the underdefended planets that had only been left with static defenses.

On the other hand, the native aliens still managed to preserve a part of their more important combat forces.

Though the Saint Commander always sent out pursuit forces in order to intercept the fleeing enemies and eliminate them before they could flee to safety, they could never catch up to all of the escaping rats in time.

This meant that the scattering native alien fleets could retreat to a central location and amass enough phasefighters and homeships to pose a credible threat to the human invaders.

Despite this escalating threat, Casella Ingvar still decided to split up the combined fleet.

She wanted to take advantage of the relatively thin defenses of most of the star systems that the native aliens had not bothered to heavily fortify.

Though it was still risky to spread apart the assets under her command, she arranged a team of Ascended Giants in each naval detachment.

Though she wanted to keep the human phase lords as a trump card, if the alien enemies tried to ambush a detachment, the Ascended Giants should always prioritize survival over secrecy!

With this extra guarantee, the various detachments proceeded to fan out and sweep through a dozen light to moderate industrial star systems in quick order.

Each of the locations had been scouted in advance. Though the intelligence was not up to date in multiple cases, serious infrastructure never emerged or disappeared overnight.

Few surprises took place during these tense but relatively calm weeks.

The alien fleets continued to act cowardly while the unfortunate soldiers manning the fixed defenses fought to the death despite being abandoned.

Though it was not uncommon for undisciplined or poorly trained alien conscripts to break down and surrender to the human attackers, they never managed to get very far with more fanatically loyal aliens in their vicinity.

Besides, their pathetic efforts never achieved any results. Neither the Larkinsons nor the other forces expressed much interest in taking in any alien captives.

Perhaps the more clandestine organizations might make an exception or two if the surrendering aliens happened to be a senior officer or scientist, but those esteemed individuals tended to be far too patriotic towards their own civilization or species to bend their knees. They were also much more closely monitored.

Whatever the case, the various detachments managed to inflict plenty of destruction, but often failed to harvest much spoils.

They could not afford to linger in any single star system for too long for fear of attracting a massive alien armada.

This was especially the case when their lower numbers massively shrunk their fault tolerance.

While it was reassuring for them to be accompanied by a secret troop of Ascended Giants, they were not invincible by any means!

Even if they managed to squeeze out a victory under desperate circumstances, they would definitely suffer serious casualties in the process!

That was not acceptable. The Nemesis Campaign might put all of them at much greater risk, but the Larkinsons never intended for this to be a suicide run.

They constantly needed to survey their surroundings and measure the risk of every decision and maneuver.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar came under more and more pressure by the day as a consequence.

It was not easy for her to bear ultimate responsibility over the entire campaign.

She had been entrusted with so much decision-making power that she could not pass the blame on anyone else if a catastrophe happened under her watch.

This was why she spent much of her time outside of the cockpit of the Minerva Mark II rather than the other way around.

The time she needed to allocate to actually piloting her living mech and Commandeering the surrounding forces was just a fraction of the time she spent on strategizing!

She did a good job so far, though much of that was because the alien opposition had yet to execute a proper countermove.

There was no way the regional native alien powers would let the insolent human attackers rampage throughout their productive star systems forever!

As the days passed by, the intruding humans noticed increasingly more signs of a coordinated counterattack.

Though the native aliens had difficulty tracking the fast-moving human raiding detachments, they could still read the overall pattern of advancement on a star map. This allowed them to redirect multiple alien fleets and phase lords to locations that were situated ahead of the estimated route.

Human scout ships and other sources of clandestine intelligence usually managed to detect these movements in advance, thereby giving the Saint Commander enough time to make adjustments, but this was not a completely reliable means to evade the enemy's edge.

Sooner or later, the native aliens would succeed and force a confrontation that could not be avoided.

For this reason, the Saint Commander eventually instructed the separate naval detachments to converge onto a central location.

"We have reached the limit of our ability to raid ordinary industrial star systems at acceptable risk levels." The ace commander spoke in the conference chamber. "Time is on the enemy's side. We have inflicted a moderate amount of damage to their infrastructure, but we have yet to land a truly crippling blow to their core operations. Enough time has passed for our scouts and intelligence analysts to direct us towards a truly strategic target."

The central projection came to life. It depicted the local star map that already highlighted numerous possible targets in red.

Many of these destinations looked familiar.

"Let us talk about the 3 star systems that recently came to our attention. Though we have not been able to gather a sufficient amount of information on each of them, we at least learned more about them than before."

The projection zoomed in on the closest priority target.

"First, the Hypeh-Tekas System has indeed proven to be a highly suspicious enemy site. The Red Cabal has prohibited every major alien race including the arche from entering this star system. It is apparent that this is not an empty warning. Upon our request, the Terran Alliance sent one of its stealth frigates to Hypeh-Tekas. The ship entered as quietly as possible and only managed to transmit a single data burst containing a broad, low-resolution multi-spectrum snapshot of the local space. Shortly after that, the Terrans lost contact with the stealth vessel entirely."

"..."

"Impossible."

"Space is big. A ship that has just arrived in the outer system could never have been intercepted so quickly! Even if the native aliens managed to track her route and anticipate her arrival in advance, there is still millions if not billions of kilometers worth of variance when it comes to the arrival coordinates!"

Many people looked shocked. Intercepting a ship that had just transitioned out of FTL travel was an incredibly difficult endeavor!

While it was not impossible to do so by any means, a successful interception right after returning realspace had to meet stiff requirements!

The native aliens might have managed to gather detailed and precise data about the stealth vessel's heading and timing upon entering FTL travel in the previous star system.

However, stealth vessels were expressly designed to make this as difficult as possible!

They shouldn't be detected in the first place aside from the unavoidable emissions generated by a hull entering into the higher dimensions.

Even so, without being able to track the ship in advance, the brief window of emissions alone could not provide enough data to perform accurate calculations.

Enemy sensors also needed to be located close enough from a departing stealth ship in order to distinguish between genuine data and background noise!

This was all incredibly difficult unless the native aliens completely beat the Terran stealth frigate in terms of stealth technology and detection technology!

This did not sound plausible. Even the arche did not perform too much better than the humans unless they secretly deployed a ship that matched or exceeded the specifications of their archecruiser!

Another possible explanation that could explain why the native aliens managed to take out the Terran stealth frigate so quickly after arrival was that a traitor spilled the relevant details to the Red Cabal.

Nobody sitting at the conference table mentioned this possibility, but it had doubtlessly entered their minds.

Grim faces stared at each other. They still maintained trust in each other, but they had begun to question whether one of their subordinates with access to sensitive information had somehow been compromised.

The Second Elf looked especially displeased.

The Terrans were ultimately responsible for the loss of their own ship!

"We do not have enough credible information to explain why this happened." The Saint Commander said as she bypassed any possible problems related to the Terran Alliance. "That does not mean the stealth frigate has failed to yield anything useful for us. We know it is important to

the enemy, though not yet why. We know that the enemy has employed highly effective means to intercept arriving starships, even ones under stealth. We also received a relatively up to date impression of the local space."

The projection changed to show multiple images that interpreted the only data burst from the Terran stealth ship.

Ves and the others frowned as they tried to make sense of the images and data.

"This does not tell us anything notable." He said. "There are no obvious signs that indicate the presence of artificial construction, alien homeships or phase lords. It looks like an empty star system for the most part. The only oddities that I can interpret from this data is a bit of fuzziness close to the star."

The Saint Commander looked grim. "The lack of interesting data is highly suspicious. We believe that the native aliens have taken a considerable amount of effort to hide their true machinations. To put so much effort into evading detection yet proactively intercepting scout ships right after their entry makes it clear that the Red Cabal may very well be working on a project of great importance. For multiple reasons, I have decided to bring together all of our divided assets before entering the Hypeh-Tekas System as a single whole."

This was a big strategic decision!

Whether the Red Cabal was truly working on a grand endeavor or tried to weave an elaborate deception, it would all become clear once the combined fleet entered the mysterious star system in force!

Not everyone welcomed this strategic decision, though.

"What if... you are wrong? What if it is a trap?" Gloriana couldn't help but ask.

Casella did not disregard this possibility.

"There is indeed a possibility that the enemy has hatched an elaborate ruse intended to turn this star system into a trap." The Saint Commander conceded. "I believe that we have enough fault tolerance to manage any threats that may appear. Besides, we are not completely relying on this data alone. We have also consulted another source to tell us what we may encounter."

The ace commander shifted her gaze to the head of the Moloch Squadron.

The Farseer informed the others of her own findings. "We have attempted to scry the Hypeh-Tekas System multiple times in the past week. The growing proximity to this location should have yielded more results, but we have consistently been frustrated by a new and unknown form of obstruction. Somehow, the parties responsible for defending this star system have taken specific countermeasures that are effective at blocking our means of remote observation."

"What?!"

"Are there traitors within the Red Collective?!"

"What if the native aliens have produced their own qi cultivators?!"

Andrea Vos began to smile. "While we cannot say much about the nature of our opposition in the Hypeh-Tekas System, we have partially been able to overcome the blockade. Our methods have proven to be slightly more effective, especially after we began to experiment with our techniques."

"So what have you learned?"

"Not much, to be honest." The formation master admitted. "The only discovery we have made that has a high confidence level is that the Hypeh-Tekas System is steeped with death. A massive quantity of sentient beings have lost their lives in a very short amount of time."

"..."

What did that mean?

Had the native aliens set up a concentration camp for captive humans, only to kill them en masse all of a sudden?

Or did they round up their fellow aliens and kill them off wholesale in a deranged religious frenzy?

Perhaps the Red Cabal and the 13 major alien races tried to take advantage of the Red War to commit genocide on the minor races while everyone else got distracted by the threat posed by red humanity and the mutated voribugs!

One other possibility came to mind.

"Is the Red Cabal... attempting to collude with the so-called deathborn that have recently emerged?" Ves suspiciously asked.

"We do not know." Casella grimly answered. "We cannot rule out the possibility. That is why it is imperative for us to take a look in person."

Chapter 7494 Sharpening Against Death

Chapter 7494 Sharpening Against Death

Nobody seemed to know much about the deathborn.

Many people attempted to come up with explanations why they appeared all of a sudden.

The majority of the population ascribed to the theory that they consisted of the lingering consciousness of deceased sentient beings.

The disclosure of E energy radiation along with other revelations related to human civilization's darker history persuaded a lot of people to believe in the existence of souls.

The deathborn may be what might happen to some of them if they died with lingering regrets or anger.

For whatever reason, their souls failed to move on to the afterlife, and suffered a mysterious punishment that transformed them into malevolent entities.

Every contact between the living and the dead resulted in violence as far as everyone knew.

There was no way to communicate or reason with the deathborn. The latter always tried to attack and suck out the lives of those with intact and honest souls.

This also made it difficult if not impossible to study the deathborn!

This attracted the attention of many parties. If not for the more acute threats posed by the native aliens and the mutated voribugs, the major players would have invested a lot more resources and attention into exploring this mysterious new phenomenon!

For the time being, everyone had set this matter aside for later.

The problem now was that the combined fleet could no longer resort to this convenient approach.

If the Red Cabal truly interacted with the deathborn in a non-hostile manner, then it became imperative for humans to find out what was happening and crash this party!

"We know too little about the deathborn phenomenon." Saint Commander Casella Ingvar stated with a serious expression. "They are a novelty brought by the exposure of exotic radiation from Messier 87. Every documentation that we have about the deathborn describe how dangerous and hostile they are. If there is a chance the Red Cabal is planning to exploit their power against our race, it is our responsibility to uncover this scheme and stop it in its tracks. Be prepared. We may face a brand-new opponent that fights according to very different rules."

Multiple people nodded in acknowledgement.

"Since they are all intangible by nature, purely material attacks have proven to be ineffective against these undead apparitions." Gloriana mentioned after she referenced a report. "Mundane forces have reported significant difficulties in eliminating them. Mundane weapons are not entirely ineffective against them, but their performance varies drastically in different cases. We will have to find out by ourselves whether we are properly equipped to eliminate these deathborn."

Ves maintained his confidence. "From what I can read and guess about the deathborn, we should be far better off than others in this regard. They are probably similar to many of the incorporeal enemies that we have encountered in the past. In fact, I suspect that the so-called 'dark gods' such as the Unending One that we have encountered all the way back in the Nyxian Gap during the previous age may be related to this phenomenon. If this theory is correct, then Casella's Command Field alone will ensure that all of our assets will be able to hurt the deathborn badly. If not, we have many other extraordinary tools at our disposal that can allow us to contend with these undead ghosts."

"Let us not make too many assumptions in advance." The Saint Commander warned Ves and the others. "According to the vague intelligence gathered by our seers, the concentration of death

energy in the Hypeh-Tekas System far exceeds the norm of a typical frontline battlefield. The deathborn are known to feed off the demise of living sentients, so it is highly likely they have evolved into newer and much more powerful forms. We must also not forget about the Red Cabal. If the phase whales or other native aliens have been able to maintain a presence in this star system without getting drawn into a conflict, then they may indeed be colluding with the deathborn. Fighting both kinds of opponents at the same time will test our strength."

She was right. Though nobody wanted to see this particular scenario come true, they may very well be forced into a confrontation between an unlikely coalition between these two drastically different groups!

The uncertainty of it all cast a shadow over this looming incident.

Nobody knew what to expect from the opposition. The lack of intelligence left them in the dark about the enemy's plans, disposition, strength and other vital pieces of information.

Much of the reason why the Larkinsons and other red humans managed to do well so far was due to being so well-informed about what lay ahead.

They never went in blindly if they could help it. They diligently collected data from multiple sources and meticulously analyzed them in order to understand their opposition as best as possible.

For weeks, the native aliens failed to resist these methods. They possessed too many territories. Their strength was too dispersed. They were also divided into multiple major races that all possessed their own egos.

Not even the Red Cabal could solve all of these problems at once. It could only leverage so much power and resources in this region.

That made the Hypeh-Tekas System all the more interesting. Out of all of the possible locations they could choose to guard against human spying, they chose to do so in an 'empty' star system with no existing alien infrastructure!

There was no way the phase whales or whoever else was in charge did all of this in vain!

Once the meeting came to an end, Ves decided to check up on the units that would have to confront a mysterious new group of enemies very soon.

The Saint Commander had just transmitted a new directive to them. Many soldiers expressed confusion at first.

"The deathborn?"

"How are we supposed to fight these rabid ghosts?"

"Are hyper weapons effective against these opponents?"

The lack of familiarity with the deathborn phenomenon generated a lot of questions among the servicemen. It did not help that the Larkinsons did not have access to enough reputable sources of information about these new enemies.

There was hardly any documentation on the more powerful variants that were rumored to exist!

The Larkinsons and other forces essentially had to go in blind. That put them all on edge. Nobody knew whether their weapons could truly pose a threat against the deathborn when they had absorbed a lot more death energy than in previous encounters.

"We fear no ghosts." Saint Dise plainly stated as she sat in front of her inactive ace mech while polishing the blade of her personal greatsword. "I have fought and bested many beasts and monsters. These deathborn are merely the next variety of inhuman creatures on my list. My blades can cut through anything. You made sure of that. If that is not enough to do the job, then my willpower will make sure the deathborn shall regret my coming."

Though Ves respected her confidence, he still remained skeptical about her effectiveness in the coming engagement.

"While I applaud your confidence, please do not take this enemy for granted. My wife and I designed the First Sword Mark III to excel in killing phase lords and other champion units that we are familiar with. The sword fey and the Decapitator are excellent at penetrating through transphasic energy shields and material obstacles. What I am not so certain about is whether they will remain so exaggaratingly effective against intangible opponents, especially ones that are stronger and more mysterious. The deathborn may be based on a completely different paradigm. In other words, they do not play by the same rules."

That caused Saint Dise to frown and take this emerging threat more seriously. "Are you saying that a superdimensional sword will cut through the body of a deathborn without causing any harm?"

"No. Not necessarily." He said. "Superdimensional weapons, especially the high-grade ones, are exceptionally dense in mass, but you can't see it under normal circumstances because much of it is displaced in other dimensions. The higher the grade, the more dimensions involved. It is this relationship that makes superdimensional objects a little more extraordinary than you think. Not all dimensions are normal. There are many that possess special properties, of which some may contribute to causing harm to the deathborn. However, there is so little empirical data on this subject that we do not know the extent of this effect."

"I suppose we will find out soon enough, then." Saint Dise spoke with understanding. "Do you want me to test whether my superdimensional blades are effective against these new enemies?"

"Yes, but only if you can control the situation. Do not put yourself and your battle partner at risk. If you think it is possible, then please try to cut the deathborn with both your sword fey and your greatsword. The former consists of mid-grade superdimensional alloy, which is not the best, but is far more ubiquitous. The latter is made out of weapon-grade superdimensional alloy. It is the best of what red humanity can attain at the moment. It is imperative that we limit testing both those weapons against our new enemies."

"I can do that, Ves. Do I need to refrain from using other powers?"

"Please do so if possible." He confirmed. "Your willpower and the metal E energy that you command are other potential weapons that you can employ against the deathborn. They are probably much more effective against the deathborn since they are also intangible in nature. However, not everyone has access to them, especially in the magnitudes that you have reached. I need data that can be applied to more general situations in order to establish a baseline. So if you can, please swing your blades without any other extraordinary means of empowerment."

That caused the female ace pilot to look troubled. She had become so accustomed to channeling her true resonance through her weapons that she found it difficult to do the opposite.

"I will do my best. I suppose it is an interesting exercise for me. Do I have to hold myself back forever?"

"No. Just long enough to collect enough data. You should try out this approach against each distinct unit type of the deathborn. I am sure that this mysterious opposition will field many units of both low-quality and high-quality variations."

"Are you sure about that, sir? What if the deathborn have all merged together into a single massive ghost monster?"

"Then... only use your bare blades if you think that you can withstand the pressure. Do not take any unnecessary risks."

He could not provide any more guidance than that. They had way too little information to work with. Saint Dise would just have to rely on her judgment.

Chapter 7495 Loathing of the Similar Kind

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Ves continued to wonder whether superdimensional weapons could effectively kill the deathborn.

They were highly lethal weapons against phase leaders and other material opponents, but they were not universal solutions.

He could imagine several circumstances where purely immaterial threats might be able to neutralize powerful superdimensional mechs or warships due to a mismatch in properties!

This seemed like an absurd situation. Superdimensional matter was incredibly powerful but also incredibly scarce.

Many people had developed a strong belief in the omnipotence of this super-grade exotic material for those reasons. They blindly believed that any conceivable adversary, including god mechs, could be slain by relying on superdimensional weapons!

Ves was one of the few people that did not share this belief.

Superdimensional matter possessed amazing properties, but still could not do everything better than many other materials.

Their spiritual properties were quite disappointing for example. They could not match the strength of hyper materials in terms of interacting with E energy. This alone told Ves that superdimensional matter possessed shortcomings.

Of course, nothing prevented an individual from combining the two materials.

The best materials scientists of all of the major players invested much of their time and effort into doing exactly that. They all knew that superdimensional technology represented the future, and in order to draw out its potential, they needed to develop superior alloys that possessed comprehensively better properties!

Even though all superdimensional alloys sacrificed a portion of their multi-dimensional strength in order to obtain other properties, the tradeoffs were worth it in some cases.

Ves would rather make use of a superdimensional alloy that could also leverage the power of E energy than utilizing pure superdimensional matter that only enjoyed superiority in the material realm.

Of all of the high-end mechs in the combined fleet, the First Sword Mark III leaned a lot closer to the latter.

This had been a deliberate design choice at the time.

Ves did not regret this course, but he also recognized that the ace swordsman mech had a greater chance of suffering setbacks if confronted by powerful intangible opponents.

If not for the fact that the Saint Kingdom of an ace mech happened to be extremely effective against most intangible existences, Ves might not even believe it was worth it to deploy the First Sword Mark III in the next encounter!

In any case, once he was done with visiting Saint Dise, he briefly stopped by the tightly guarded compartment reserved for the Riot Mark III.

He apparently came at a good time, as the dangerous D-mech did not show too many signs of losing control.

During the bad periods, the Riot Mark III had a tendency to tear against its restraints and produce energy fluctuations that made everyone in the vicinity feel deeply uncomfortable!

Its powerful superdimensional Chaos Armor rippled and expanded in a messy fashion. Depending on the mood of the perpetually angry Middle Demon, its surface occasionally spawned razor-sharp spikes or deeply disturbing tentacles!

Fortunately, those manifestations rarely persisted. Whenever Saint Orfan managed to regain enough control, she suppressed her new body's mutations and calmed it down as much as possible.

Though Rosa Orfan had lost her human form, she had never truly let go of everything that made her human.

She still identified herself as one, as this was one of her anchors that prevented her from degenerating into a monster!

Right now, the Riot Mark III may appear calm at the moment, but Ves could feel that its situation was quite delicate.

The ace spearman mech seemed like a spring that had been compressed to its limit. Just a single touch could cause it to burst out of control!

Ves slowed his pace and stopped at a much more respectful distance than usual.

"Rosa? Are you... present?"

The Riot Mark III's ominous eyes briefly flashed with red.

"Ves. What... do you want?"

"I wanted to talk about your upcoming mission. Casella should have transmitted the relevant documents to you. Are you prepared to face a new kind of enemy that is different from the ones we have fought before?"

"...Yes. I am not afraid of undead ghosts. I won't... embarrass myself like I did when we fought against that Level 8 Goliath. My strength lends itself better against an enemy that lacks a strong body. I am even looking forward to how well I can destabilize these new opponents. I just don't know whether my Destroyer spear can kill them fast enough."

Ves smiled after hearing that. "I wouldn't be too concerned about whether your tier 3 Destroyer weapon will let you down. According to my own understanding, it should be much more effective than the Decapitator. A superdimensional greatsword may perform fantastic when used against phase leaders, but their ability to damage immaterial opponents is much more questionable. In contrast, Terran Destroyer weapons are all-rounders in this regard. Everything and everyone must seriously guard against the threat posed by Destroyer particles. Perhaps they do not excel in any single job, but their ability to destroy both matter and energy is absolute. The only constraints are quantity and quality. Besides, you also have many other strengths that you can count upon."

Ves had higher hopes on the Riot Mark III for multiple reasons. The powerful D-mech was designed to be a menace against all kinds of opponents. Its effectiveness against the deathborn should be quite good as the latter should definitely be vulnerable to attacks empowered by both true resonance as well as destruction energy.

Furthermore, the Middle Demon that constantly fought to assimilate Saint Rosa Orfan should also play a useful role.

He did not forget that he had managed to 'produce' the Prophet's Bane by forcing many demons to fight for survival in special containers.

Through multiple rounds of screening, this ritualistic form of 'gu cultivation' had produced a violent demon that had proven its ability to defeat a vast number of other intangible entities!

Whether demons were identical to these so-called deathborn remained to be seen. Ves certainly recognized the similarities, but he did not automatically assume that they were exactly the same.

Ancient cultivators had accumulated a considerable amount of lore on demons, though Ves only had access to a fraction of that knowledge.

What he knew about demons did not entirely match with the descriptions of the deathborn that he had read in recent reports.

Ves personally speculated that their origins may be the cause behind their differentiation. The demons of the Milky Way may possess their own characteristics from the deathborn of Messier 87.

What they did happen to share in common was that they were both derived from deceased sentient life forms.

If this was the case, then Ves believed that the deathborn had the ability to grow and evolve to a frightening level, just like their demonic cousins!

Given that the deathborn originated from a much more powerful supergiant galaxy that was capable of generating a high-energy environment, he believed that there was a good chance the deathborn possessed much greater strength and powers, especially in their middle and upper ranks!

Sadly, Ves had yet to obtain solid proof that this was the case, so he could not do more than warn his troops to expect greater complications than usual.

"As powerful as you are, the deathborn may still be able to frustrate you, if not directly, then indirectly." He said. "For example, the deathborn may find that you are too tough and confounding to defeat with ease. They can attempt to entangle you with a handful of powerful units while sending the rest of their ghost army to assault our fleet."

"Traps will not be able to hinder us. We will disrupt and tear apart the enemies who dare to stand in our way. Of this, both of us are in agreement."

Ves raised his eyebrows in surprise. "The two of you... are able to work together?"

"Yes." Saint Orfan's artificially synthesized voice boomed across the compartment. "The demon and I may be enemies, but if there is one thing we can agree upon, we will not allow others to intrude and devour us both. The very existence of these deathborn has attracted the hatred of the demon. It remembers. It will not allow itself to share the fate of many of its previous victims."

That... was an unexpected boon. Ves did not expect for the Prophet's Bane to become so spooked by the similarities between demons and the deathborn that it was willing to compromise with Saint Orfan just to wipe out any deathborn that dared to treat it as prey!

Ves mentally filed this particular trait in the back of his mind. He had learned an important method to gain the compliance of a normally irrational and rebellious Middle Demon.

Perhaps he could set up similar situations in the future if he wanted to transform the Riot Mark III into a more focused and controlled engine of destruction!

"I feel much more reassured if the two of you can temporarily set aside your differences in order to address our real enemies." Ves said with a smile. "Will there be any problems on your end?"

"Do not trust this demon." The ace pilot spoke. "Keep your guard up against my Riot. He may be sincere about eliminating the deathborn, but that does not mean he has become our ally. He has never thrown away his desire to devour me and take over my entire mech. I am still expecting him to launch a surprise attack and try to take me over in mid-battle. I will do my best to resist such a move, but if it actually happens, then do not allow friendly units to approach us. I cannot guarantee their safety."

Chapter 7496 Control Concerns

Chapter 7496 Control Concerns

Ves seriously acknowledged Saint Orfan's warning.

He was already aware that the Riot Mark III must always be guarded against.

It already established a pattern of losing control when the Prophet's Bane took advantage of Saint Orfan's overexertion in the battle against the mutated voribugs!

They had been lucky that the rogue ace mech had not done anything unforgivable at the time.

This was no reason to underestimate the consequences if it happened again in the future.

Though Ves did not regret the decision to convert the Riot Mark III into a D-mech, he grew increasingly dissatisfied with the constant need to stay on guard against his own combat asset.

Commanders such as Casella needed to take the inherent chance of instability and rebellion into account when planning their operations. This added a lot of unnecessary uncertainty which made it more difficult to formulate reliable plans.

The Riot Mark III also could not be allowed to fight too closely to other friendly assets. The probability that the Prophet's Bane would gain control and thrust the tier 3 Destroyer spear into a friendly mech of starship may not be high, but it certainly was not zero!

What also burdened leaders was the need to manage Saint Rosa Orfan's relatively delicate mindstate. She was constantly locked in a struggle against her own demon. This meant that she had never enjoyed a true moment of relaxation since she had become permanently bonded with her own ace mech.

It was only due to losing her frail human body that she could persist for so long!

Yet no matter whether she managed to liberate her will and spirit from her now-redundant corporeal form, a mind that had never known peace in the past few months most certainly became increasingly more warped over time.

Ves had not noticed too many differences at the moment, but he constantly worried about the loss of humanity.

How long would Saint Orfan be able to remember that she was still a human?

He had a feeling that her mentality and self-image would change drastically just a decade later!

Although all ace pilots tended to lose parts of their humanity as they continued to tread onto the path of godhood, they at least relied on their conviction to remember what they were fighting for. This was extremely important as it was one of the main factors that could make them pull through in the end.

"I need to refine my processes."

It became increasingly more clear to Ves that he could not afford to make another unstable and uncontrollable D-mech like the Riot Mark III.

If he ever wanted to convert another machine into a D-mech, then he needed to put greater effort into his work. He had to limit the power of the demon and add more restraining factors to prevent it from going out of control.

Although that would subsequently limit the power expression of the product, Ves would gladly trade a bit of power for a lot more control.

This approach would probably make sense for a lot more cases. Not every ace pilot was as desperate or as willing to throw caution to the wind just to force their own breakthroughs.

He thought back on Isobel's opinion towards the offer of obtaining a D-mech.

The Riot Mark III had most definitely created a bad impression of this new mech category. It tainted their views on such mechs and made them doubt the necessity of paying such a heavy price just to gain additional power.

Ves frowned deeper. Now that he reflected on his decisions, he may have been too hasty when he applied Demoncasting to one of his best and most powerful machines.

Perhaps he should have started from the bottom and experimented with ordinary D-mechs.

He already had a suitable subject in mind, though he was not in a hurry to interrupt present operations in order to engage in another experiment.

"I should finish my present business first."

Several hours passed by as he transferred over to one of the biomechanical combat carriers of the Terran Alliance.

He had visited this ship and several other similar hulls more than once. As the lead developer of the Arboreal Project, it was his duty and responsibility to look over the prototype Woodsap mechs and confirm their conditions first-hand.

The Terran crew members had already grown familiar with his presence. Despite the fact that he was not a Terran, he enjoyed wide permissions and could access almost any database or instruments during his visits.

Ves made use of those privileges as he calmly and methodically conducted deep inspections of a chosen Woodsap mech.

There were too many biomechs in the combined fleet. It was not a good use of his time to look them over one by one.

It also wouldn't be very useful for him to spend just a few minutes on each living biomech before he moved on to the next one.

If he truly wanted to understand the state and the performance characteristics of his Woodsap mechs, then he needed to invest his time and look deeper.

This was why he preferred to conduct periodic deep dives where he devoted an entire session on studying one or two Woodsap mechs.

His selection was not completely random, though. He used the database to identify outliers and casually picked the ones that stood out the most.

Compared to Woodsap mechs that produced average performance, he preferred the ones that deviated significantly from expected values.

These machines could tell him a lot more about the nature of his latest work as they highlighted multiple variables that significantly affected their overall performance.

This time, he had chosen to study the Woodsap mech piloted by the Second Elf himself.

Caracalla Shuku had already arrived before his bonded biomech. The man wore his customized piloting suit but kept his helmet retracted. His unnaturally tall body and his elongated ears immediately distinguished him from the surrounding human crew members.

An invisible barrier existed between the elf leader and the Terran spacers.

The latter did not receive the privilege of transforming into a different variant of the human race. Their strong and distinctive human appearances and behavior contrasted sharply against the elegant and refined demeanor of the elven Woodsap mech pilot.

It seemed as if they belonged to two different civilizations that had been forced to work together due to special circumstances.

Unlike other interactions between mech pilots and the people that service their machines, Caracalla showed absolutely no intention of socializing with the mech technicians that kept his biomech in top form.

Ves looked up at the special Woodsap mech. As the biomech designated for the most important elven mech pilot, the Terrans or rather the Green Coalition had gone above and beyond to ensure he piloted the best possible biomech.

The wooden exterior looked tougher and livelier. The spiritual foundation felt stronger and more active than other machines. Subtle growths and mutations indicated that the Woodsap mech had advanced a bit further beyond the initial blank slate.

"Professor Larkinson." The elf's lyrical voice called. "It is a pleasure to welcome you to our ship again. Is my Rosenstorm to your liking?"

"He is certainly interesting." Ves responded. "I did not expect that you have given him a name already."

"I refrained from doing so because my battle partner had not yet earned the right to bear a unique marker. It is only now that he has fought against many enemies and survived numerous battles that he has proven his strength and reliability. Rosenstorm is very happy now that he has earned this reward."

This was unique among the prototype mech pilots. Many of them initially exhibited caution towards their machines. Even though they had already bonded with them for life, they still couldn't be sure whether their Woodsap mechs were stable and strong enough to fight alongside with for the rest of their careers.

Many of the pilots had since been convinced by their own battle partners. Despite their nature as prototypes, the Woodsap mechs performed so well during the past few weeks that it became difficult to hold on to their doubts.

Ves actually thought that they were being a bit too premature. Many problems did not become apparent in a short amount of time. Just because they fought well enough at the start did not mean they would remain this way after a few months of hard and grueling combat.

Though he felt confident in his own work, his duty as a mech designer told him that he needed to reserve his judgment until the conclusion of the Nemesis Campaign. Only then would he be able to issue a final verdict on the readiness of how Woodsap mechs.

"Rosenstorm is an... evocative name. It certainly stimulates your imagination. I hope that your machine will be able to survive long enough to make it famous throughout the Terran Alliance. Your Rosenstorm most definitely has the potential to evolve into a unique powerhouse. The first signs are already visible to my eyes."

Chapter 7497 Fragile Vanity

Chapter 7497 Fragile Vanity

Unlike metallic mechs, biomechs could never achieve perfect or near-perfect consistency among copies.

Biomechs were grown, not built, so variations tended to occur much more frequently.

However, once biomechs had completed their relatively rapid growth process, their organic forms largely became fixed.

Even if they incurred large amounts of damage and subsequently regenerated back to 'full health', biomechs always tended to return to their initial mature templates as best as possible.

Perhaps older biomechs may still show changes and evolutions over time due to the natural aging of their organic components, deviations from feedstock or receiving particularly serious damage.

In most cases, the biomech pilots and the people that maintained the organic machines tended to view such changes as undesirable.

Maintenance and restoration became more expensive and troublesome. Biomech technicians with lower qualifications could not do their work properly when faced with complex changes and mutations that did not match the templates in their manuals.

The greater the deviation between an existing biomech and the original design, the more the biomech technicians needed to use their brains to properly administer the organic machine.

Not all changes and mutations were entirely benign. They could slow down the biomech, open up additional weak points or cause them to drain their energy reserves faster.

The maintenance crews all needed to use their judgment or the judgment of their superiors in order to determine which mutations could be retained and which ones had to be removed.

What complicated this matter further was that not every change could be removed in a quick and convenient fashion.

Organic mech parts were much more intricately connected with each other than with metallic mechs.

Removing or altering one organic system could negatively affect the rest of the biomech, thereby crippling it outright!

These reasons and more made it impossible to keep any single biomech exactly the same as it aged.

The older a biomech became, the more deviations it accumulated. This caused its value to degrade in the eyes of most people as its maintenance costs rose while its performance remained flat or began to show decline.

Ves found this to be a very terrible circumstance!

Even the Terrans, who possessed a more open-minded perspective towards biotechnology than other groups, had never accepted the notion that aging was a positive attribute for a biomech.

This caused them to value fresh biomechs over aged ones, which was completely upside down as far as he was concerned!

In fact, it was not unheard of for the Terrans to trash their older biomechs because they felt it was not worth the effort to maintain them anymore!

Even if the aged biomechs still retained much of their original strength and developed minor advantages due to their unique quirks, they still could not escape death sentences due to the crime of deviating from the norm.

How awful.

Ves wanted to change this horrible mindset towards older biomechs. He had invested a considerable amount of time to write extra chapters in the manuals. He wanted to convince every Terran that they should treat growth as an asset rather than a liability!

Fortunately, the Terrans had been remarkably quick to accept his arguments.

His prior works had all proven the validity of his arguments. His Woodsap mechs also brought so many new innovations that the people involved in the Arboreal Project had already been predisposed to treat them as completely new products that bore little resemblance to the mechs they worked with in the past.

It also helped that the Terrans carefully selected the biomech technicians for their competence as well as their adaptability.

Each of them took Ves and his design philosophy seriously. They did not blindly employ their usual solutions to remove any mutations that they managed to find. The biomech technicians instead recorded their findings and allowed the Woodsap mechs to retain their individual characteristics.

Though not every Terran could be convinced to value older living mechs over newer ones, these ones at least knew their business. Ves found it delightful to talk shop with them about the differences between his Woodsap mechs and more generic biomechs.

As Ves gazed admiringly at the Rosenstorm, he paid particular attention to the small but highly noticeable rose flowers growing from the front.

Though only two-dozen of these small roses had emerged in recent days, they drastically changed the look and feel of the Woodsap mechs.

Every Woodsap mech came in ebony brown at the beginning. Their bare TE Wood exterior possessed a distinctive bark-like texture, evoking the image of a resilient tree trunk.

However, these Woodsap mechs did not remain bare for long. The longer they existed, the more greenery began to grow and proliferate across their surface. Fresh green leaves began to grow and cover the mech frame, making it seem as if the biomechs were about to transform into trees.

The foliage provided slight benefits to the Woodsap mechs. They not only possessed the capability of absorbing low amounts of energy from radiation, but also strengthened their ability to absorb wood energy from the ambient environment.

The only problem was that they were quite fragile compared to the rest of the mech frame. A single plasma bolt or laser beam could easily light it all on fire, thereby removing all of the aforementioned benefits.

If not for the fact that it was quite easy for the Woodsap mechs to regrow their green leaves after a bit of rest time, many people would have grown more upset about this vulnerability!

Ves had already witnessed instances of Woodsap mechs relying on their azure energy shields to shield their leaf-covered frames from thermal damage. Once their energy defenses were about to break, they even chose to back off so that other mechs could withstand incoming attacks in their stead!

Though Ves found this habit to be a bit questionable. It was one of the other reasons why he felt the need to pay the test pilots a personal visit.

In fact, the Woodsap mech pilot that practiced this behavior the most was the Second Elf himself!

Although the Guardian of the Green lived up to his heritage and performed at the top of his cohort, his behavior had changed recently.

From the moment the first rosebuds appeared on his personal biomech, he instantly reined in his aggression and only allowed himself to remain proactive so long as his azure energy shield remained strong.

As soon as his Woodsap mech took too many blows, he backed off!

This completely neglected the greatest advantage of Woodsap mechs, which was their excellent capacity to endure repeated blows to their organic mech frames!

What was the point of investing so much time, energy and resources to develop a high-regeneration organic structure when the pilots refused to let it do its job?!

"Mr. Shuku." Ves began. "I am aware that you greatly value the roses that your Woodsap mech has grown. I think it adds a lot of personality and uniqueness to your biomachine. You made the right call when you told the biomech technicians not to regard them as undesirable aberrations and cull them from the exterior. However, that does not mean that you should allow vanity to overtake your responsibilities. The point of letting these prototypes loose on the battlefield is to test their comprehensive performance, with a particular focus on their rapid regeneration capabilities under varying degrees of external pressure. What you and a handful of other Woodsap mech pilots have been doing lately is detrimental to your mission. Do you understand what I am saying?"

The tall and slender elf was not a stupid man by any means. As soon as Ves brought up the issue, he immediately realized his mistake.

Caracalla looked contrite. "I understand. I shall... correct my approach towards combat. I just find it regretful to let my beautiful roses burn into ash before they could properly bloom. Is there a way for you to adjust my Rosenstorm so that he can better preserve these flowers?"

Ves rolled his eyes. He did not take this request seriously.

"The purpose of Woodsap mechs is to do combat. To be more specific, I designed them with the explicit intention to withstand lots of damage and regenerate right back to full health. They are not meant to act as delicate flowers that need to be protected in an energy bubble at all times. These flowers and such might look pretty, and they also do a remarkable job of attracting more wood energy, but those are not good reasons to forsake the primary purpose of a combat mech."

"..."

"Flowers are inherently temporal and short-lived." He told the elf his own interpretation. "Instead of trying to fight against nature, it is better to play along with the natural order. Woodsap mechs were never designed to be tough and unbreakable. In fact, they are designed to break down frequently, only to get back up just as quickly. The same principle should apply to their flowers. Your roses may burn or wither in the next battle, but a new set of roses will appear the next day. It doesn't matter how often this cycle repeats. Perhaps your Rosenstorm might grow a different set of flowers. Perhaps they will become increasingly stronger and more resilient as time goes by. It is not impossible for this to happen. As long as your emotions and desires are strong enough, your thinking pattern can direct the growth trajectory of your Woodsap mech."

The Second Elf pulled himself out of his slump. "I have read that this is the case in the documentation, but none of the examples come close to this case."

Ves smiled. "Woodsap mechs are deeply personal to each and every pilot that has bonded to them. Customization and personalisation has always been in the back of my mind when I worked on the Arboreal Project. Theoretically, every Woodsap mech possesses the potential to grow and evolve into different shapes over time. They can grow taller and slender without significantly impairing the performance of most of their bioparts. They can also grow thicker and tougher as long as the conditions are right. If you love roses so much that you want to turn them into a core component of your personal biomech, then you should keep your obsession alive. As long as your desires remain strong and consistent, the growth of your machine will reflect your intent in some way."

This was possibly one of the best advantages of working with biomechs.

Unlike conventional mechs that could not change their mech frames on an autonomous basis, organic mechs could truly change or mutate without requiring any serious external intervention!

The only other mechs that could come close to biomechs in this regard were smart metal mechs, D-mechs and other machines with advanced repair systems.

However, Ves never counted them in the same category as true biomechs. The latter was just so much better predisposed towards gradual growth and evolution.

He actually found it a bit surprising that the Terrans and other biotech enthusiasts never designed biomechs that explicitly took advantage of this powerful trait.

They always made the mistake of applying the paradigms of metallic mechs onto biomechs.

The compulsion to standardize mechs and procedures had stifled the growth potential of these beautiful and dangerous organic constructs.

Ves intended to change all of that. He did not want people like Caracalla Shuku to consider Woodsap mechs as rigid and unchanging biomachines.

Change should be considered an inherent feature of biomechs as far as he was concerned!

Chapter 7498 Darlings of Nature

Chapter 7498 Darlings of Nature

Woodsap mechs represented a new direction for Ves.

They were not only his first elemental Carmine mechs, but also his first proper living biomechs.

The latter alone deserved his attention. He had deliberately shaped the products of the Arboreal Project into vessels that embraced both material and spiritual forms of growth.

From his perspective, all freshly grown Woodsap mechs were equivalent to babies. They started off as blank slates. Even when they initially bond with their Woodsap mech pilots, they only gained the beginnings of a personality.

Real growth only took place across a span of many months and years. So long as the individual Woodsap mechs and their bonded pilots survived the ordeals ahead, the biomachines had the potential to spawn all sorts of mutations, many of which even he could have never anticipated!

Anything was possible. Ves had his own ways of shaping wood energy to produce certain results, but he had never explored it in depth. He could never map out the full range of possibilities when it came to the evolution of his Woodsap mechs.

Many factors could affect their evolutionary trajectory. The most important ones were the enemies the Woodsap mechs fought and the mentality of their pilots.

Persistent contact with the same types of hostile entities stimulated directional mutations that should make it easier for the Woodsap mechs to fight against them in the future.

His products somewhat resembled mutated beasts in this regard. Of course, the latter evolved much faster due to unknown reasons. Ves had yet to be able to replicate the ridiculous growth rates of talented mutated beasts and calamity beasts. They appeared to play by their own set of rules.

Nonetheless, even if the physical growth rate of his Woodsap mechs lagged behind, Ves did not care too much as long as the trajectory maintained an upward trend.

If a powerful mech pilot such as General Axelar Streon could accompany his Ouroboros for multiple generations, then so could Woodsap mech pilots!

Even if the ongoing wars placed a very high premium on short-term gains over long-term ones, Ves was not willing to compromise the integrity of his Woodsap mech concept just to compress their growth cycle.

Trees tended to grow at considerably slower rates than animals. There were exceptions, of course, but he was not willing to add his Woodsap mechs to that list.

They had no need for haste. What truly made trees strong was their patience and willingness to accumulate over lengthy periods.

These attitudes broadly aligned with the concepts related to the wood E energy attribute.

Though Ves did not treat these concepts as gospel, he deliberately designed his Woodsap mechs as the physical embodiment of the wood element. It made little sense to create a divide. He could leave that for future mech design projects.

"Have you read the latest files on the deathborn that we will probably fight in our next mission."

"I have, professor." The Second Elf responded with a serious expression. "There is not much verified information in the reports. I know little of what to expect from these new enemies, if they are even present. The prospect of fighting them does not instill much enthusiasm. These deathborn are too enigmatic. I am not even certain whether they should be treated as a credible threat."

"It is true that we have little information about the deathborn, but that is exactly the reason why we must enter the Hypeh-Tekas System and find out their details first-hand. If our suspicions about the presence of a great amount of deathborn as well as Red Cabal shenanigans are correct, we will probably have to fend off these undead ghosts. I fear that the properties of these particular entities make it so that conventional armaments have little to no effect against them. Perhaps only true resonance, powerful superdimensional weapons or certain types of hyper weapons can inflict effective damage against these strange beings."

Caracalla Shuku narrowed his elven eyes. "If that is the case, our Woodsap mechs ought to be able to resist them more effectively than other standard mechs."

"That is what I believe. Compared to the Omega Thresher and the other first-class multipurpose mechs at our disposal, I am convinced that my Woodsap mechs are the most effective counter against the deathborn and similar entities. The Rosenstorm and his many brothers and sisters incorporate some of the most advanced and innovative hyper technology and E-technology applications. My Woodsap mechs are a small generation ahead of earlier products by my reckoning. This is a strong advantage and one that will serve you and your fellow colleagues extremely well in the coming days. However, that is not the only reason why I am optimistic about the performance of your unit."

"Our biomechs are a celebration of life and technology. Perhaps... they can serve as the antithesis of death."

"That is my hope." Ves confirmed the elf's guess. "Barring external factors such as warship cover and Casella's Command Field, I am highly certain that our Woodsap mechs can clear out the deathborn at a strong advantage. This is due to the E energy attribute relationships. Woodsap mechs primarily manipulate wood energy, but they are also working with a bit of life energy. This and more should give you the tools you need to overpower the most deathborn."

The elven mech pilot furrowed his brows in thought. He did not look as optimistic as Ves.

"I find it dangerous to make this assumption when we have yet to meet with the supposed deathborn. While I am willing to partially believe in your theory, I do not think it is that straightforward. You already said yourself that our Woodsap mechs do not primarily channel life energy. If we are confronted by beings that are steeped in higher quantities and concentrations of death energy, I do not think it will be easy to dispel their foulness. What if our new enemies contaminate our Woodsap mechs instead?"

That was a serious possibility.

Which side managed to gain the upper hand depended on far too many variables. The quantity and quality of energy pools were the most important ones.

Life and death stood at the opposite ends of a spectrum.

Neither of them possessed absolute superiority over their opposing element.

Which one managed to claim supremacy over the other depended on other factors.

"Try your best to avoid unwinnable situations." Ves responded. "While it is important to test the performance of our Woodsap mechs against a variety of opponents under typical conditions, that does not mean that you have to commit suicide just to obtain better data. The Saint Commander will likely do her best to give you an opportunity to have a clean fight with a comparable group of deathborn. However, since we lack so much information on the enemy, her planning is not perfect. You must remain vigilant and be ready to withdraw or struggle if the situation has deteriorated."

The Second Elf nodded. "My men and I shall take your words into consideration. If mastery over wood and life energy can play a decisive role in our fight against the deathborn, then my fellow elves and I should be particularly well-suited to combat the new scourge. Compared to the human test pilots in our cohort, my elves and I can already manipulate these energies better than others."

Ves did not need to observe any proof to know that this was an absolutely true statement. Each and every elf had undergone a mysterious sublimation that changed on a physical as well as ethereal level.

They had traded away some of the messy qualities that defined humanity in order to strengthen their affinity with wood, earth, life and other related elements.

Elves had given up much, but also gained a lot as a consequence.

Even without engaging in auxiliary qi cultivation, elves actively absorbed and 'digested' wood energy at an impressive rate!

This new race appeared to be the darlings of nature. If this form of passive cultivation persisted for a couple of years, they might be able to perform serious abilities that humans could only attain through bitter cultivation!

Ves expected nothing less from life forms that had been transformed by supping from the Grail of Rebirth.

Most of the elves probably did not know the enormous value of the small amount of universal life energy that had been responsible for fueling their transformation!

Ves still winced at the thought at how much universal life energy Gaia had been willing to commit to propagating her blessed race.

He could have made use of all of that universal life energy in so many different ways.

From strengthening his companion spirit to speeding up the growth of his living mechs, universal life energy was like a universal accelerant that could promote any form of life!

He inwardly sighed. Gaia still refused to engage with her progenitor directly. Why was she ungrateful? She would rather scheme with the Terrans than collaborate with her own maker.

Perhaps he needed to win her trust. He hoped that his work on the Arboreal Project would help with creating a bridge between himself and the young True God.

Ves recognized that it would probably help a lot if he also built a strong relationship between himself and the elven race.

The First Elf and the Second Elf were both individuals of importance. They received the greatest amount of favor from Gaia, and likely attracted her attention even now. It became imperative to get into their good graces for that reason alone. As long as they developed a good impression of him, Gaia should also follow suit.

Chapter 7499 Entering the Jaws of Death

Chapter 7499 Entering the Jaws of Death

The combined fleet finally arrived in the ominous Hypeh-Tekas System.

The Saint Commander almost decided not to go through with this risky venture due to the continued inability to glean any useful intelligence from this restricted star system.

Just as the different detachments of the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet converged at a star system that was located only a few light-years away from their mission location, all forms of remote observation failed to yield any results.

"Optical sensors and other long-distance sensors have failed to register anything of importance. The light that has traveled to our current location is several years out of date. We are observing a long-range snapshot of what the Hypeh-Tekas System used to be just after the Great Severing. The Red Cabal had yet to turn this location into a restricted area. We can only rely on our more exotic non-lightspeed sensor systems to determine that the present situation at this site has changed. We have detected... unusual distortions. However, the signal-to-noise ratio is so bad that we cannot derive any definite conclusions from this unreliable set of data."

In contrast to the RA and RF officers and scientists who relied on high-tech instruments to determine what was taking place in the adjacent star system, the seers who hailed from the RC could share a bit of actual substance.

"Now that we have traveled as close to the Hypeh-Tekas System as we can before actually entering it, we have slightly been able to refine our scryings." The Farseer explained to Casella. "We are much more certain about our conclusion that we are actively being obstructed by the other side. We are convinced of this as the resistance is too systematic for it to be a natural phenomenon. It appears that the Red Cabal, the deathborn or another group not only possesses the relevant knowledge, but are actively making use of it to blind our senses."

That had worrying implications. The native aliens did not have a cultivator tradition, so they shouldn't be proficient in these kinds of arts.

There was a good chance that cultivators loyal to the Cosmopolitan Movement may have lent the Red Cabal a hand!

That was not the only possible explanation, though.

"Who do you think is responsible?"

"We truly cannot say. We cannot even tell you whether the obstructions are technological or mystical in nature. The only means of obtaining the answers is to launch an incursion into the Hypeh-Tekas System and see for ourselves. If we can record and analyze the opposing side's solutions at close proximity, we will be able to develop countermeasures that should help us the next time we encounter similar blockages."

"Have you been able to ascertain other details, Andrea?"

The Farseer paused for a few seconds. "The Hypeh-Tekas System is steeped in death, and not just in a figurative manner. If we choose to venture forward, then we must be prepared to guard your lives well. The boundary between life and death may be thinner than anywhere else in the new frontier. It is not healthy for human beings with weaker souls to expose themselves to such an environment over a prolonged period of time. If the concentration of death energy is higher, then it can potentially drain their lifespans."

That sounded quite concerning!

The Saint Commander frowned. "Is this the reason why the crew of the Terran stealth frigate failed to maintain contact after their initial burst transmission?"

"The possibility exists. There may be other reasons behind the quick elimination, but your theory is plausible."

"Then it is of great importance that we guard against this lethal effect. Are you able to deploy any countermeasures?"

"That is what we have been working on in the past week." Andrea Vos replied. "We have been working together with the Terrans to plant at least one Gaia Tree in every starship. We cannot vouch for their effectiveness, but they should at least provide a light amount of protection. Living

mechs and most particularly Woodsap mechs should also be effective in repelling unpleasant energies. However, we believe that the most powerful forms of protection will come in the form of your Command Field and the Saint Kingdoms of other ace pilots."

Casella could already think of that herself. "That may be true, but we will all be strained if we have to sustain our domain fields for days on end. It is better if we can rely on the Gaia Trees and possibly the Woodsap mechs to cover all of our naval assets. We must never put our hopes behind protection that only has a single point of failure. It would be even better if we can deploy a third solution."

"My fellow formation masters and I are already working on that." The head of the Moloch Squadron said with a smile. "We are in the process of developing a makeshift defensive spell array that should counteract an environment that is saturated with death energy by generating the opposing element. We cannot make any promises regarding its effectiveness, but if it works, we hope it will provide sufficient protection to an entire fleet as long as its starships do not disperse too much."

That sounded like a promising solution, but only if it actually worked.

"How soon will you and your men be able to complete this new formation?"

"Not in time before we are scheduled to arrive. However, this is not entirely detrimental to our work. If we are able to experience the actual environment inside the Hypeh-Tekas System, we will finally know what we are dealing with. We can incorporate much more targeted and effective measures into our defensive qi formation. Once we finally deploy it, the protection that it can offer will surely be satisfactory."

The delay in time was unpleasant. Saint Commander Casella could not judge whether it was better to postpone their mission to cobble a more rudimentary solution together.

In the end, she decided to move now rather than later with the hope of developing a more effective countermeasure.

Casella did not know why, but her intuition told her that they would all come into contact with something unfathomable at their next destination.

Rather than put her hopes behind a half-baked solution, it may be better to take a risk in order to obtain a more targeted and effective means of protection.

With those thoughts in mind, Casella issued the fateful order, thereby bringing the Larkinsons and other elite personnel right into the jaws of death!

During the tense and relatively brief period of hours in FTL travel, the various soldiers, servicemen and civilians felt little different than before.

At most, a vague weight seemed to press onto their souls. The closer the distance, the heavier and more substantial this invisible burden became.

Yet from the moment all of the starships of the combined fleet exited from FTL travel at the same time, they immediately lost their breaths as this metaphorical weight seemed to become stronger by at least several orders of magnitude!

"Ah!"

"My heart!"

"Emergency!"

A large amount of personnel spread across dozens of starships experienced severe discomfort right away!

Despite the Gaia Trees planted on their respective ships, these vitality-filled bioproducts could not offer strong protection, especially in the more distant sections of larger hulls.

Most of the people who became debilitated at the start were indeed stationed at these distant and less protected locations.

However, there were also a handful of people who experienced the same soul-crushing weight that were situated a hundred meters or less from a Gaia Tree!

Regardless of what was happening, rescue personnel immediately picked the distressed men and women up and brought them right next to the Gaia Trees or other potent sources of life!

"It is working! I can breathe again."

"Miiiaaow!"

"Miow miow miow!"

"Whoa. Our cats are coming as well."

It was not just the humans that got affected by the oppressive environment of the Hypeh-Tekas System.

The cats that made themselves home in the Larkinson-owned vessels seemed to be sensitive towards it as well, though strangely not as badly as the most vulnerable humans.

All of them were able to move to the Gaia Trees by themselves, thereby avoiding any trouble for their human owners and partners.

Several minutes passed as the various crews addressed the most immediate problems.

This also gave them enough time to ascertain the conditions of this highly unusual star system.

"Well, the seers are correct." Ves said over the command channel. "The Hypeh-Tekas System is indeed drenched in death energy. What I find the most remarkable is how it has become so ubiquitous that the anomalous energy field apparently has a diameter of well over 10 AUs! This is

ridiculous! Most God Kingdoms cannot even cover so much distance! There is so much of it that I cannot imagine how the Red Cabal has managed to produce so much. Even if the phase whales have slaughtered tens of billions of humans or native aliens, it is impossible to produce so much death energy, let alone make it stick around!"

Formation Master Andrea Vos shared her own observations. "This is an unnatural environment. No ordinary means can create the conditions that we are being subjected to. While we need more time to fully understand what we have come into contact with, we can share our preliminary conclusions. The first and most important is that we are fairly certain that this extremely large field of death energy is a deliberate outcome. We are even willing to bet that a foreign but highly profound grand qi formation is responsible."

"What?! Are you sure?"

"No other possibilities can provide a satisfactory explanation, sir." The qi cultivator responded. "A spell array at the scale of at least several AUs is the most probable cause according to our own analysis. Whether the formation is human or alien in origin remains unclear. All we can state is that the methods and application of the opposing side is incredibly profound. We are not dealing with amateurs. They know their craft even better than us. This means that our adversaries may have implemented other spell arrays that produce different effects."

That sounded bad. Really bad.

Chapter 7500 Hostile Environment

Chapter 7500 Hostile Environment

The Hypeh-Tekas System did not welcome the combined fleet.

At first, the surrounding miasma of death and negativity pressed upon the souls of the human crew members.

Just staying on the edge of the star system already made these people feel uncomfortable!

Yet this turned out to be the least of their problems.

Only a little over 10 minutes passed before the soldiers began to report another alarming development.

"Ghosts!"

"Ah, I am under attack!"

"How are they getting inside?!"

"Damn! My knife passes right through their bodies!"

"How are you able to shoot them down!?"

"Use hyper weapons!"

"If you have a companion spirit, now is the time to test its strength!"

Various shades and apparitions flew through the hulls of various starships and launched attacks at any humans in sight.

As long as they could get close enough to their prey, they could drain the souls out of people's bodies!

However, most of the soldiers hadn't been completely caught off-guard. The deathborn may have been a relatively obscure phenomenon, but red humanity still possessed a few records about their properties.

Though these vaguely humanoid ghosts had shown a near-complete disregard for material obstacles, many forms of hyper technology and E energy manipulation could still pose a threat against their existence!

After the initial panic and confusion had passed, the soldiers quickly got their act together.

They swung their hyper blades through the bodies of the ghosts, causing their already-weak intangible forms to disperse almost immediately.

Others raised their rifles or brought their integrated armaments online and opened fire at low power.

The soldiers quickly learned that material firepower made very little difference. It was the hyper technology incorporated in their firearms that truly made a difference.

It only took a little bit of testing to understand that the most efficient way of clearing out the ghosts while keeping collateral damage to a minimum was to employ hyper laser weapons.

Though almost all infantry-grade laser weapons in the combined fleet also happened to be transphasic, this particular property brought more disadvantages than advantages.

Transphasic attacks had a much greater chance of endangering other people and damaging sensitive equipment!

However, it was very difficult to retool them into non-transphasic weapons, so most soldiers had little choice but to aim their weapons carefully and make sure that there was nothing important behind their targets.

Large amounts of hyper transphasic laser beams therefore seared the bulkheads on almost every ship of the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet!

The Larkinsons, Terrans, mechers, fleeters and collies all struggled to carve out safe spaces within their starships.

Tens of thousands of ghosts broke down and turned into messy energies in a short amount of time.

However, more of them arrived from every direction!

Minutes passed as the soldiers kept trying to assail the humans. Their human or alien-like expressions displayed mindless hunger and ferocity. It seemed that whatever thinking processes governed their behavior solely fixated on killing and devouring the living!

The good news was that these weak but extremely numerous deathborn completely ignored the sensitive and expensive hardware around them. It was not as if they could inflict much effective damage against all of the first-class parts if they wanted to. Everything was built according to the highest specifications of human civilization, which meant that they were shielded and hardened against a variety of different attacks!

However, this also meant that every human unceasingly attracted ghosts to themselves. Their souls and vitality seemed like the most delectable nectar to these weak and starved ghosts. They completely gave into their feral instincts and converged upon the living beings like moths to a flame!

If not for the fact that it was mostly the soldiers stationed closer to the exterior of the hulls that attracted most of the deathborn in the first place, the service members working deeper inside the starships would have faced endless harassment as well!

Though the former were able to hold out quite well so far, the tide of deathborn remained unending.

"They are coming from all around us! I suspect that this entire star system may be riddled with deathborn!"

"That is impossible! It would take much more slaughter to produce so many of them! A large concentration of deathborn must have been stationed here in order to intercept new arrivals. That means that they are not unending."

"Well, it sure looks like it, because we have been killing them for over 10 minutes non-stop and the tide has yet to taper off! If this surge of attacks does not subside, we will begin to suffer losses!"

As well-trained as these soldiers may be, they had never been trained to fight such a massive horde of intangible life forms.

Their hyper laser weapons and other hyper armaments may have given them the capital to fend the ghosts off, but none of these weapons had been designed for this specific purpose.

It was quite inefficient for them to clear out the deathborn with weapons that packed a much greater punch in the material realm than the ethereal realm!

"We need to employ solutions on a large scale if we want to keep everyone safe!"

It was at this time that the mechs attempted to disperse the ghosts.

The Omega Threshers resting inside the bunkers came to life and began to fire their diverse weapon systems at the ghosts and dark miasma surrounding their positions.

Each powerful Omega Laser Cannon managed to sear through at least thousands of ghosts in a straight line!

The Larkinsons had procured the latest generation of Omega Threshers, which meant that they were all models that incorporated hyper technology from a previous small generation.

Even if the application of hyper technology was already outdated by the standards of the present, they still channeled enough E energy to inflict effective damage to the deathborn, especially when they were already vulnerable to infantry-scale hyper attacks!

In contrast to the Omega Laser Cannons, the other armaments of the Omega Threshers proved much less effective.

Their wrist-mounted hyper plasma sweeper cannons could disperse ghosts, but these weapons consumed so much energy that the cost of using them against such weak targets was extremely cost ineffective.

What was worse was that their mid-ranged Phase Disintegrator Cannons inflicted almost no damage to the intangible bodies of the ghosts!

This shouldn't have been a surprise, as both weapons mostly relied on affecting their targets in the material realm.

Plasma weapons did not receive that much of a power boost from hyper technology. They always relied on inflicting massive amounts of thermal damage in order to destroy their targets.

While the deathborn did show signs of having an aversion to heat, it was not realistic to cook them to death!

"The luminar crystal cannons mounted on the Tortuous Scream are ripping through the ghosts like a hot knife through butter!"

This turned out to be the most effective weapon to employ against the deathborn swarming from every direction in space.

The Tortuous Scream had only briefly opened fire with her primary gun emplacements, but quickly shut them down again.

It was overkill to rely on the huge battleship-grade cannons to clear out all of the deathborn!

Not even a battleship could withstand the consumption of all of her primary armaments opening fire for so long!

The converted alien battleship needed to save her large caliber firepower for more worthy targets.

Fortunately, the modified Omega Threshers served their current purpose well enough. Their Omega Laser Cannons had been designed with persistent use, so they could easily keep firing low-powered energy beams for half a day without requiring intensive maintenance.

Even so, the hundreds of Omega Threshers stationed on the Tortuous Scream and throughout the rest of the Premier Fleet could never stem the tide of deathborn all by themselves!

The other first-class multipurpose mechs such as the Dracoloid also could not make much of a difference.

Sure, their formidable first-class gauss guns and plasma guns were all weapons designed to overcome tough transphasic energy shields or thick transphasic armor belts. They all packed a punch, which also meant that they tended to exhaust themselves quickly if they continuously fired their weapons!

Even their signature flamethrowers could only burn for so long before the fuel reserves of the Dracoloids ran dry!

Under normal circumstances, the Dracoloids infamously replenished their 'fuel tanks' by biting into their prey and devouring chunks of powerful exotic matter!

With the help of a powerful internal material processing system, the Dracoloids could convert some of the ingested materials into makeshift fuel, enabling them to spray out more exotic flames!

Yet this cycle became completely invalid in the current situation.

The Dracoloids could not dig their teeth into prey that did not possess a material form from the start!

The intangible deathborn could at most be killed by the hyper materials incorporated into the teeth, but it was far too inefficient to rely on this method to kill the deathborn all around.

All of this meant that the Dracoloids fared much worse than the Omega Thresher under the current circumstances!

"These deathborn are everywhere! They are constantly trying to drill inside my mech!"

Strangely enough, while the deathborn only had to expend a moderate amount of effort to pass through the hulls of different starships, they experienced much greater obstruction when they attempted to phase through the structures of every mech!

No matter whether they were conventional metallic mechs such as the Dracoloid or living biomechs like the Rosenstorm, each of them were able to keep the deathborn at bay and protect their pilots.

This was especially the case for the prototype Woodsap mechs, which attracted far more deathborn than other targets, but also demonstrated much greater effectiveness in destroying these ghosts!

"The defenses of all of our standard mechs are holding out so far."

That did not surprise numerous people.

"Mechs are effectively a fusion between a human and a purpose-built war machine." Ves described. "When the former interfaces with the latter, they not only cover each other's weaknesses, but also

fortify some of their existing strengths. Their spirits are no longer vulnerable and exposed. They can combine forces with the spiritual foundations of their own machines. The results will be even better if we fielded any of the RA's exclusive true mechs."

"Most of the mech pilots are still reporting elevated strain and pressure. Their resistance may be better, but it is not endless. We will have to pull them back before they wear out entirely."

Ves sighed after hearing that. "I feared that would be the case."

True mechs would have been able to persist much longer against this kind of threat.

The Red Association had been known to field true mechs, but Ves had yet to encounter them in the wild.

The mechers were too stingy with them. They treated true mechs as their trump cards and tried to preserve the secrets of their signature complete neural interfaces as much as possible!

As far as Ves knew, the RA had not assigned any true mechs to the Bluejay Fleet, which meant that it was a complete fantasy to see them in action today.

Enough time had passed for him to understand the nature of the so-called deathborn a lot better than before.

Previously, he could only rely on third-hand information to gain an impression of these ghosts.

Now that he was able to observe them up close with his own senses, he finally managed to prove and disprove his guesses!

"These deathborn are similar to demons, but they are not identical."

This conclusion fell in line with his guesswork. It was like looking at cousins who shared at least some relation but clearly grew into distinctively different directions.

Demons did not spawn easily. They were lower in number, but each of them also tended to pose a greater threat on an individual basis.

Not so for the deathborn. The threshold to their formation was apparently a lot lower. This meant that they could spawn in much greater numbers, though every entity was much weaker as a consequence!

Another peculiarity was that the deathborn did not show much if any hostility towards each other.

In the absence of greater prey, they probably refrained from attacking each other, which was very different from demons, who did not hesitate to devour their own kin in order to evolve into greater forms!