

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7501 Unfriendly Miasma

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The Hypeh-Tekas System was hell.

No.

That was not the right description for it. An unknown party had somehow pulled the underworld into the material realm at this particular location.

The dead roamed among the living.

Not only that, but the former unceasingly sought to attack the latter!

Their ravenous hunger for life and their unceasing aggression towards those not of their own kind caused them to assault the human interlopers with no regard for their own survival!

Over half an hour passed with no discernable change in pattern.

The deathborn continued to converge from every direction and attack the first human life form that got in their way.

They phased right through transphasic hull plating and thick meters-long alloy structures as if they did not even exist.

Active azure energy shields seemed to be a little more effective in hindering their advance, but that was only because the relatively weak hyper technology component was the only reason why it worked in the first place.

They were only able to slow down and block the advance of a fraction of the deathborn arriving from afar.

"This cannot go on." Admiral Gori Tensen concluded. "We have already tested dozens of different attempts to block the deathborn and push back this miasma. None of our existing technologies at our disposal has proven effective and cost-efficient enough to protect our mechs and naval assets in a stable, reliable and sustainable manner."

There were a small number of solutions that proved partially effective, but they were either so unstable or so prohibitively costly in resource consumption that they could not be relied upon for the entire duration of their stay in this befouled star system.

"Our warships are operating at reduced effectiveness due to the constant harassment of the deathborn and the oppressive nature of the surrounding 'miasma'." Commodore Zonrad Reze said. "Our most important stations are still reliably manned, but reducing or outright removing the staffing at the outer stations of our vessels will impair the performance of our weapon systems, external defensive systems, sensor systems, damage control systems and so much more."

"I thought your RA warships are highly automated."

"That is true, but what you may not be aware of is that our more extreme automation levels must only be used in the direst of emergencies. There are too many safeguards and restrictions applied to our core systems to prevent any chance of our AIs going out of control and abusing our technology against the human race. The same measures that are protecting us from getting betrayed by our own tech is stifling our ability to properly harness our automation. Our specialists and I are in the process of temporarily deactivating some of these restraints, but that will take valuable time. Until then, we will not be adequately able to defend ourselves against more direct threats."

"The Tortuous Scream doesn't suffer from those problems. The orvens who originally designed and built her did not incorporate so much excessive safety restrictions. We have also applied our own custom software and hardware on top of the original alien systems, so we can still fire her primary gun batteries without too many problems. What is even better is that all of her bunker mechs also remain nearly fully operational. The deathborn and the dark miasma do not pose as much of a threat to a piloted mech."

Right now, the combined fleet was in a relatively precarious condition.

The carriers and warships of the Larkinson Clan, the Red Three and the Terrans were all operating at reduced effectiveness due to the hostile environment.

The mechs on the other hand seemed to be able to tolerate the current circumstances much better.

While the mech pilots proved very vulnerable to the hostile environment outside of their cockpits, once they interfaced with their machines, they were completely different.

Even if the protection was not as ideal as they would like, they still enjoyed enough protection and even counterattack potential to form an effective barrier against the unfriendly elements in the surrounding area!

"Saint Commander." Admiral Gori Tensen turned his attention to the leader of the combined fleet. "We have let this situation drag on long enough. We have made enough observations and collected enough data to know what we are working with. Our men and women are still bravely resisting the deathborn and the miasma they have spawned from, but their struggle shall falter within another hour. We can wait until most of our soldiers have reached their limits, but that will cut down our safety margin to an undesirable level. Please intervene before that happens."

The Saint Commander had not spoken much since they first entered the star system.

She had been content in allowing the officers under her to utilize their own judgment and take individual action.

Everyone knew why she refrained from taking action. If the officers and soldiers encountered any problems and chose to call on her assistance as the first resort, then they had gone horribly astray.

The rank-and-file soldiers and other personnel should never place their hopes on a higher authority. They needed to solve their problems by themselves.

Only when they failed to make any progress could they justifiably seek assistance from above.

Right now, the combined fleet may still have a bit of time before reaching its limit, but as long as no other solution was in sight, then it may be a better idea for the ace commander to take action now rather than leave it all at the last possible minute.

"Formation Master Andrea Vos." Casella addressed the representative of the Red Collective. "Please explain your results. What have you learned?"

"We have learned much, Saint Commander, but we still need time to sift through all of the noise and analyze the patterns." The Farseer responded. "We should be ready to provide you with a proper briefing in 3 to 6 hours. We will be able to work on applying our new insights and findings into our incomplete defensive spell array. If nothing unexpected occurs, we should be able to complete it within 2 or 3 days. Once we deploy the newly fabricated formation anchors, the resulting qi formation can provide us with moderate protection against the hostile variables of our current environment."

The waiting period sounded a bit long, but Casella knew that the collies had already done their best to speed up their timeline. They were suffering just as much as the rest!

"Will this spell array remain stable? Can it endure a stronger load? What resources does it consume in order to maintain its activity?"

The female formation master's expression grew more severe. "The basic framework and underlying theories of our spell array are not completely verified, so we cannot guarantee that it will work according to our expectations. Even if it does work without any apparent complications, the stability of a hastily designed and built qi formation can never be too high. I do not expect to encounter too many problems within a week of continuous operation. After that, we must be ready to repair or replace the formation anchors at any moment. We have enough hyper materials and other high-grade resources at our disposal to construct multiple redundant formation anchors, but there is still a limit. If the environment has not reverted to normal parameters, then I advise you to limit our stay in this unfriendly star system to just 2 weeks."

That sounded like a generous period, but multiple officers suspected that they might have to stick around longer in order to complete their objectives in this strategic location!

"If this defensive spell array can only shield us against the most direct attacks of the local space, then we will still be subjected to numerous handicaps." The RA commodore said in a less than pleased tone. "The miasma is not a purely ethereal phenomenon. It is still interfering with the operation of our long-range sensor and scanning systems. While we are not completely blind anymore as before, the amount of noise generated by the miasma is so great that we can barely observe the star at the center of this system. What is even more concerning is that the miasma is also affecting the spatial environment in a way that makes it impossible for our warships to engage in warp travel."

"Your superdrives are too weak." The Fiery Axe scoffed. "This 'miasma' indeed makes it more troublesome to form a warp bubble, but my Ascended Giants are not troubled! We can still warp through space, though we will probably travel slower than usual."

Starships equipped with warp drives and lesser phase lords both possessed the ability to engage in warp travel, but they did so through slightly different means.

Warp drives and super drives were both purely technological creations that had been designed and programmed to operate under a range of known spatial environments.

When faced with risk factors such as a warp interdiction field or simply an unstable spacetime environment, the drives simply refused to work because they could not properly control for all of the risks.

The story was different for phase leaders!

Their ability to engage in warp travel was biological in nature. It was also a core part of their essence, which meant that they were able to control this capability in a much more flexible and controlled manner.

Chapter 7502 Temporary Relief

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The virtual meeting briefly paused when the Saint Commander chose to take action.

Casella had already remained on standby inside her ace mech.

The Minerva Mark II, which remained embedded into the bridge of the Tortuous Scream, suddenly came to life!

A vast Command Field sprung up and rapidly expanded in each direction!

As this expansive domain field unfolded from the center of the combined fleet, the dark miasma immediately got repulsed!

Much of the harmful energies dissipated or got pushed away as if they were nothing but harmless smoke.

The deathborn that continuously infiltrated the human starships and attacked the nearest sources of life all uttered wordless screams before the Command Field repulsed them as well!

Everyone relaxed now that they had fallen under the protection of an ace commander's reassuring manifestation of willpower.

They could finally take a break and relax now that they no longer had to be on guard for a ghost attack.

The Saint Commander did not look pleased, though.

"Deploying my Command Field in this hostile environment is more strenuous than doing it in normal space." She informed the other leaders with her empowered voice. "It is as if I am trying to maintain a pocket of air at the bottom of an ocean. The dark miasma is constantly pressing my domain from all sides. I can endure it for the time being, but I will not be able to maintain it for as long as I want."

"How long can you last, commander?"

"Perhaps... 8 to 10 hours. After that, I need a complete rest in order to regain my strength."

Multiple faces frowned. This may sound like a generous period, but it could hardly give them enough time to accomplish anything aside from fleeing the Hypeh-Tekas System.

"We need to use this time to prepare other stopgap measures." Gloriana stated. "The 'defensive spell array' that is currently under development will still take 3 or 4 days to reach completion. Before that time, we must learn how to adapt to this hostile environment in our own ways. I refuse to believe that we are unable to solve this problem. If we cannot adequately resolve this matter, then we are not qualified to spoil the Red Cabal's latest scheme. Sensor readings suggest that the concentration of dark miasma is higher in the inner system."

She made a good point.

The artificial environment generated by the adversary was but the first test that the humans had to overcome.

There were so many competent problem solvers in the combined fleet that they should definitely be able to fight back against the dark miasma.

Even without relying on any fancy qi formations, Ves was still confident he could deal with this problem in his own way!

"Defense alone will not get us anywhere." The Saint Commander stated. "We must also think about achieving our objectives. We cannot afford to linger at the edge of this star system. Our fleet must begin to move towards the inner system as soon as it is safe enough to do so. I do not believe that the enemy is ignorant about our arrival. They have done so much to defend this location that they must have other measures in place to repel unwanted visitors. Instead of allowing them to attack us at their leisure, we must take the fight to them so that we can destroy the source of all of this miasma."

The dark miasma that engulfed the entire Hypeh-Tekas System not only blocked long-range observations, but also hindered all forms of warp travel!

However, the second effect did not apply evenly to everything and everyone.

Though none of the Ascended Giants had taken the initiative to deploy into space and test out their powers in person, they could still instinctively feel and judge whether they could safely engage in warp travel under the current conditions.

This was one of their many transcendent biological advantages!

Though multiple people maintained a considerable degree of skepticism towards the judgment of the Ascended Giants, Ves readily believed in the Fiery Axe's words.

He happened to be a lesser phase lord himself, so he knew first-hand that she was correct.

He was also a mech designer who possessed a shallow understanding of warp drive technology.

This meant that he roughly understood how things worked on both ends.

The warp travel capabilities of a phase leader may not necessarily outperform a modern superdrive in all aspects, but the former definitely enjoyed a few unusual advantages!

"The miasma is not particularly intense, but it is so widespread in this star system that it is generating weak to moderate disturbances at the macro level." Ves briefly explained. "To put it more simply, if the spacetime topography of the Hypeh-Tekas System originally resembled a still lake, now it has turned into an ocean that is being affected by a storm. Our high-quality superdrives may be designed to navigate through rough waters, but not this kind. It will probably take weeks or months of study and analysis to upgrade our superdrives to reliably engage in warp travel under the current circumstances, and that only applies to the current intensity. It is highly likely that the concentration of miasma will be higher in the inner system."

That was bad news to everyone. Unless they managed to cut off the source that produced all of this dark miasma, the mobility of their starships would remain impaired!

Fortunately, it was not as if they became stranded without the ability to generate warp bubbles around their starships.

Humanity spent millennia relying on conventional propulsion systems for intrasystem travel. Warp drives and superdrives only became widespread after the Phasewater Generation.

As far as everyone was concerned, they merely had to shift their perspectives back to the previous age.

Instead of taking hours to reach a planet located deep within the inner system, they now had to spend several days traversing the same distance.

Even without any spatial warping effects, all of the starships of the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet were already fast by themselves. A fleet operating behind enemy lines could neglect the importance of mobility!

There was one exception, though.

"The Tortuous Scream is more affected by the current limitations than any other hull." Ves suddenly realized. "As one of the few capital ships in our combined fleet, this one is particularly handicapped because of her much greater mass and bulk. Her propulsion system is powerful, but not enough. Previously, we could always count on our flagship to keep up with the rest of our ships by relying on her oversized superdrive."

This was how the Larkinsons originally compensated for the converted orven battleship's disappointing mobility.

By replacing her technologically inferior alien superluminal travel system with a vastly superior and advanced human superdrive, the Tortuous Scream became as 'fast' as a modern human light cruiser so long as she was able to generate her powerful warp bubble!

However, once she encountered a strong enough warp interdiction field or other forms of spatial disturbances, she immediately lost this key advantage!

The Saint Commander could not possibly be blind to this fault.

"If necessary, we can assign other ships to tow the Tortuous Scream."

Commodore Zonrad Reze immediately frowned when he heard that. "Towing is... barely feasible, but the differences in mass between the Tortuous Scream and most of our other ships are enormous. It would either take dozens of combat carriers or a handful of our largest vessels to make this work. All of the vessels involved will endure strain, causing them to accumulate damage over time depending on the pulling forces and duration. What is more concerning is their vulnerability when they are under attack. All of the ships that are tethered together will turn into easy targets that are unable to flee with ease."

That did not sound good, but what choice did they have?

No one wanted to split up the combined fleet. Leaving behind the Tortuous Scream along with a bunch of escort units would only make it easier for the enemy to defeat them in detail.

This was especially the case when the enemy put so much effort into engulfing the Hypeh-Tekas System in dark miasma!

While the humans remained largely blind, the enemy most likely retained the ability to detect and observe others from afar.

It would be easy for the latter to strike at the weaknesses of the former with precision!

Though nobody liked it, they all agreed that it was better to tow the Tortuous Scream along rather than leave her behind or adjust to her much slower acceleration rate.

"Now that we have determined how we should traverse the local space, where should we actually go?" Ves asked.

Director Calabast spoke up at that point. "We have combined the observations made by our sensor arrays with the information provided by our seers. Neither of these sources have been able to find out much in detail, but they still managed to point out two significant hotspots."

She activated a projection that displayed a top-down view of the system map. "The Hypeh-Tekas System centers around a red dwarf star. Even if no human surveyor has ever explored this location, we still know much about the properties of the star by looking into the databases of the native aliens. The archival data matches the observations that we made a few days ago. It is only

after we arrived in this star system and became exposed to the much more recent light radiated by the star that we found out that it has grown weaker than usual, and not by a small amount."

"Have you taken the interference from dark miasma into account?" Gloriana critically asked.

"We did." Calabast responded. "The hostile environment has made our data less reliable, but it has not stopped us from making our calculations completely useless. The numbers have just become a lot fuzzier than usual. We currently estimate that the red dwarf star has dimmed by 8 to 17 percent."

"What?! That much?!" Ves gasped with shock!

When it comes to stars, even a 0.1 percent difference in luminosity in a short amount of time represented a massive shift!

"That does not sound right." Gloriana frowned. "Stars may occasionally experience minor shifts due to the formation of sunspots and other phenomena, but never to a large extent. Red dwarf stars are also known to be among the stablest and most boring of their kind. Once they have passed their energetic youthful phase, they burn low and slow, so much so that it takes at least a hundred billion years just to reach the next phase of their life cycle. It is statistically impossible for them to experience drastic changes in this short amount of time. Our universe is not even old enough for every red dwarf star to reach old age!"

"Since natural causes can be ruled out, we can only assume that the weakening of the red dwarf star is due to external intervention." Ves concluded. "The enemy is killing the local star. We need to find out why."

Chapter 7503 Difficult Descent

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Nobody knew what the aliens were up to in the inner system, but the combined fleet had very little choice about the matter.

The humans could either venture forward, stay in place or turn around and escape as quickly as possible.

The Larkinsons were no cowards, and their allies possessed just as much courage.

The second option only wasted more time while the third option was unacceptable in their eyes.

They had invested so much time and effort to reach this restricted star system. To turn around just after they had taken a single glimpse from a remote position would mean they got very little out of this diversion aside from collecting a bit of first-hand information.

That was far from enough to justify this venture!

Though everyone became increasingly more aware that proceeding forward would plunge all of them into danger, they still resolved to confront the threat head-on rather than take the more prudent course of action.

They were all soldiers of red humanity. They suppressed their individual desires in order to think about how they could best serve the greater good of their race and civilization.

Whatever the Red Cabal had been doing in this star system was obviously of great importance.

It might even have the potential to affect the balance of war in the region!

Faced with the increasingly more likely possibility that the native aliens were in the process of hatching a scheme that could potentially give them the edge they needed to break through the Terran Alliance's borders, the humans felt obligated to investigate this matter to the end.

At first, the journey proceeded fairly calmly, if slowly.

The dark cloud hanging right over everyone's heads had temporarily been shoved away.

The Minerva Mark II continued to project her enormous Command Field in every direction.

Although this domain field was not as powerful as a proper Saint Kingdom, its range was far greater. This granted the many mechs and starships of the combined fleet complete protection against the dark miasma and the irrational deathborn hiding within.

However, the Command Field did not unfold at its maximum range, but kept itself as contained as possible, thereby forcing all of the human carriers and warships to compress their formations and risk collisions.

Casella's willpower was not infinite or inexhaustible.

The smaller her domain field, the longer she could maintain her current state.

A larger domain field also exposed it to greater pressure from the environment.

Her burden would grow exponentially if she kept trying to expand her Command Field!

Even at her present state, she could still feel her willpower being worn out at a faster rate than usual due to the constant need to resist the increasingly more hostile environment.

"You need to implement alternative solutions quickly, Ves." The Saint Commander privately communicated with the former patriarch. "The dark miasma's concentration is rising the further we move towards the center of the star system. The amount of deathborn attacking the edge of my Command Field is also rising. I may not be able to last as long as I initially projected."

Ves frowned. "I see. That is... not good news. We should be ready to relieve your burden, though. Even if you have to cut your session short by 2 or so hours, our stopgap solutions should be ready for deployment at that time. It will be rough, but it doesn't matter as long as we can hold out for at least 2 more days. Should we slow down our advance even further?"

"No. The inability to engage in warp travel has already hampered our mobility. The poor visibility and increasing risks of venturing deeper into hostile territory are not sufficient reasons to slow us down even further. The more time we surrender to our adversaries, the more time they have to prepare for our arrival. We absolutely cannot give them the opportunity to complete their welcome package."

Ves reluctantly agreed. Though he still feared the possibility of crashing head-first into a major threat, Casella indeed made a good point about giving the enemy too much time.

"By the way, the seers managed to gather more information now that we are making our way inwards. They have not only confirmed that the red dwarf star at the center has been weakening at a highly accelerated rate, but that one of the planets in the inner system has become a focal point of death energy."

"That does not tell me much. What is your interpretation, Ves?"

He did not immediately respond.

To be honest, he barely knew anything about the oddities in this star system.

Too much of it did not have any relation to his existing knowledge base.

That did not mean he had to rely on himself to provide the answers.

"I cannot tell you much that I am confident about, but I know someone who possesses much greater expertise in these kinds of matters. Let me call her over. Give me a minute."

Mrow.

His companion spirit surged out of his head. The intangible purple cat with streaks of lights running through his fur appeared a little bit more listless than usual.

Blinky was not having a good time ever since they arrived in this star system.

Normally, Blinky's routine task was to absorb ambient E energy radiation in order to grow and expand the Blinkyverse.

It took an astronomical amount of E energy radiation to advance the internal universe to the next stage of its evolution.

This was never supposed to be a quick job.

Ves had willingly chosen to give up on expediency in order to aim for much greater payoff.

He was willing to wait for decades if not centuries in order to accumulate the power of his Blinkyverse step by step until it had turned into one of the greatest wellsprings of power!

However, that dream was still too distant for Blinky's present cultivation.

In his current condition, he could never create a zone of safety as large as Casella's Command Field!

Not only was he unable to contribute to the safety of the combined fleet, he also could not absorb the ambient energies that had saturated the Hypeh-Tekas System.

Ves had always considered the act of absorbing E energy radiation to be low risk.

Even if it was originally 'owned' by the heavenly authority of Messier 87, the supermassive galaxy watched over so many subjects that it could never spare so much attention to an insignificant human ant like himself!

However, absorbing the death E energy and other negative energies mixed with it sounded much more dangerous!

Even if the Blinkyverse technically possessed the property of accommodating every variation of E energy, Ves did not dare to allow his companion spirit to suck in a single mote of death E energy.

He did not have any solid proof of this assertion, but he strongly suspected that the death energy had fallen under the control of an unfathomable entity.

He would never allow himself to create a glaring opening within the Blinkyverse by letting his companion spirit absorb tainted energy!

Even if the death energy did not possess the ability to turn into a trojan horse of sorts, he still did not think it was wise to absorb any of it. The source was highly suspect and most likely corrupted to the point that it could distort the development of the Blinkyverse.

Therefore, Ves felt it was better for Blinky to abstain from cultivating and engage in fasting for a time.

"I'm sorry, buddy, but I will have to ask you to exert yourself."

Mrow...

Blinky did not like it, but because he was Ves' other personality, he could not possibly refuse this request.

The Star Cat froze for a time before his intangible form started to morph into a different shape.

Soon enough, Blinky had completed the process that enabled the descent of a friendly spirit from afar!

A miniature lady with a lovely lotus in her hair hovered just beside Ves and made a disgusted expression.

"Ugh. This space is worse than you have described." Helena's temporary avatar spoke. "I do not envy you for having to navigate through this field of desecration and resentment. If not for your

ace commander's protection, I would have wanted to withdraw my presence immediately. It is already difficult enough for me to maintain this connection under these conditions."

"I thought that you would have felt more comfortable in a negative energy environment." Ves remarked with a hint of confusion.

"You know nothing, little brother. This is not a natural place of death! This is the outcome of a deliberate act of desecrating life! These 'deathborn' as you have called them are not kin to me and my subjects. We may share a few traits, but they are completely foreign in all other ways! They do not have the slightest instinct or reason to subject themselves to my authority. In fact, I can already feel that they are under the thrall of another master."

The mention of a supposed master alarmed both Ves and the Saint Commander!

"What can you tell us about this master?"

Chapter 7504 Foreign Deity

Chapter 7504 Foreign Deity

Helena's miniature form floated in front of Ves as if she was just a pixie.

However, her gloomy demeanor along with her strong affinity for death made her seem anything but adorable.

This Daughter of Death should have felt at home in a star system that had become saturated with the power of her primary element, but the truth was different from what Ves imagined.

Why did she feel out of place in the Hypeh-Tekas System?

It was because another master had already claimed it as his or her own domain.

"I cannot tell you much about the individual who holds all of the power of death in its grip in this star system." The descended woman said. "Whoever he is, he is either a god or something close to it. The only reason why I am still able to manifest here is because we are fairly distant from his place of power. That will change the closer you are to the planet, moon or other place that he has established his base. His extended domain will only be stronger to the point where he can repel all foreign influences, including my own. Any existing connections will not break, but... they will be dampened to the point where hardly anything gets through. You should not expect to obtain any help from your design spirits at that point."

That was bad news. Though the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet did not make use of as many living mechs as the second-class forces of the Larkinson Clan, a number of important machines still depended on the power granted by his design spirits.

If the blockade described by Helena truly came into effect if they ventured deeper into the inner system, then the prototype Woodsap mechs would no longer be able to enjoy the grace of Gaia.

This impaired their combat effectiveness a bit more than usual due to their stronger dependence on her influence.

The elven Woodsap mechs would especially suffer a lot!

Furthermore, his high-ranking mechs also took advantage of different design spirits to pull off feats that could not be employed through regular means.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III maintained a connection to Trisk. The Amaranto Mark III borrowed the light of the Illustrious One. The First Sword Mark III sharpened her blade and fortified her armor by accepting the grace of Qilanxo. The Minerva Mark II augmented her multitasking capabilities with the help of Titania.

Though the ace mechs still remained powerful without the enhancements provided by these design spirits, their absence would still be felt in different ways.

The only living mech that had completely forsaken its design spirit was the Riot Mark III!

"Wait." Ves suddenly thought of another factor. "Will my ace mechs be able to forcibly maintain their connection to their respective design spirits due to the resistance generated by extraordinary willpower?"

Helena looked uncertain. "I am not sure. I am no expert on these matters, but my guess is that even if your ace pilots are able to resist the enemy death god's domain, it will be much more difficult or strenuous to maintain the connections. It may not be worth it. We can help somewhat on our end, but because we are trying to intrude into a domain that is in the grip of a powerful foe, most of our efforts will go to waste."

The dark miasma, which probably acted as the manifestation of this mysterious adversary's domain, had already demonstrated many troublesome properties.

From pressuring the souls of all human servicemen to blocking long-ranged sensor and communication systems, this vast and mysterious energy field reminded Ves of the God Kingdoms that god pilots used to effect change on a massive level!

Though the current hostile domain was nowhere near as strong as a genuine God Kingdom, its massive range already said much about the strength of its progenitor!

"Helena." The Saint Commander spoke directly. "We need to know more about this supposed 'death god'. You referred to it as 'he'. How do you know the responsible party is a male?"

"I can feel it, my dear Saint Commander. It is subtle. If I was not a death god myself, I would not be able to extract the nuances from the surrounding domain. I admit that the opposing deity knows his craft and has a fairly good grasp on his power. He has removed or obscured many of the traits that could have exposed many secrets about him. Yet because we share so much in common, I am still able to read between the lines and remove some of the tampering."

Ves leaned forward. "What have you learned, Helena? Can you tell me if we are dealing with a genuine True God?"

"The answer to that question is not simple. To be honest, I have detected a few signs that point out that the death god has truly mastered the power of death on par with my mother and other True Gods. Despite that, this domain feels remarkably... underpowered even when accounting for the range. I have managed to deduce one possible explanation that can explain all of these signs."

"And that is...?"

"You are likely dealing with a True God, but one whose power is shackled or restricted for whatever reason." Helena shared her most crucial insight. "Much of what is happening in this star system is likely based on his deep and extensive knowledge. However, he is not able to channel his full might in this star system at this time. That might change in the future, but for now, he is not as big of a threat as you feared."

A restricted True God. That still sounded scary, but also a lot more manageable as well.

Ves was not unaccustomed to fighting handicapped gods. He still remembered his first encounter with an alien God King from Messier 87. Perhaps a similar situation had arisen in the Hypeh-Texas System.

"It has become apparent to me that the cultivators of Messier 87 possess the means to project their power and awareness across unimaginable distances. If it is possible for one powerful alien entity to do so across hundreds of thousands of light-years, then it is inconceivable for other alien powerhouses to possess similar abilities."

The Saint Commander made her own conclusion. "The deathborn have only arisen since the Great Severing. I used to think that they were merely the consequence of leaving the dead unattended while they are continuously exposed to exotic radiation. Yet what if the deathborn comprises far more than mobs of mindless ghosts? What if they possess higher forms, ones that have not gained greater power, but also greater intelligence? If they have developed in a galaxy as large as M87 from the start, they must have developed similar to the mutated voribugs. I fear that the deathborn may have developed a rich and sophisticated civilization in that distant galaxy. Now that the Red Ocean has suddenly entered their reach, their gods have cast their gazes in our direction. The current situation... may be one of their attempts at extending their reach into our dwarf galaxy."

"..."

Casella may have made a lot of assumptions when she shared this particular theory, but Ves found it way too compelling to dismiss it out of hand!

Even if the Saint Commander got a few details wrong, the overall story sounded way too logical to be too far from the truth!

Helena frowned the deepest. "I cannot corroborate your theory, Casella, but I am inclined to believe it. It would explain much how a True God is unable to channel his power here. He is too far away. The weak deathborn that have been born locally up until this point can only do so much. The only means of strengthening his grasp on this star system is to employ other means."

"Our seers and formation masters have a strong suspicion that this mysterious death god has employed large formations in this star system."

"That is most likely true. I am not familiar with the qi formations that the other death god has employed, but I can probably infer that he has deployed at least two. The largest and most powerful one is likely centered around the star. This... may be the reason why he has been able to expand his domain all the way to the outer system. Beneath this is a weaker but still fairly potent formation that is centered at another location in the inner system. I can point out the direction for you, but not much more. I cannot describe what it is doing. You will have to find out for yourself."

When Helena pointed her finger in a very precise direction, Ves consulted a database and quickly ascertained that she was likely casting her senses towards a planet in the inner system.

"Our objectives seem clear." He said. "The native aliens are up to something big. We need to visit the planet and the red dwarf star and do whatever we can to smash these formations."

Chapter 7505 The Importance of Self-Contained Reserves

Chapter 7505 The Importance of Self-Contained Reserves

Ves felt grateful for Helena's insights.

He just found it a pity that she was not able to provide more substantial assistance in the coming confrontation against this supposed foreign death god.

Both Ves and Casella felt deeply disturbed by the apparent truth that the native aliens from a much more powerful supergalaxy had already begun their incursion into the Red Ocean!

This was way too fast!

As far as Ves was aware of, the Subjugation King's powerful invasion fleet was still several decades away from arrival.

This provided him with a lot of relief. Much could change within a span of half a century. Ves would definitely be able to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer by that time. Red humanity could also develop very quickly, from inventing groundbreaking technologies to conquering lots of alien-occupied territories.

Even if it was not realistic for any god pilot to achieve a major breakthrough, they could still use the time available to them to develop their strength and upgrade their god mechs with superdimensional alloys and other wonder technologies!

If all of that failed to reassure Ves that he could escape the pursuit of the incredibly powerful alien God King, he could still take advantage of all of the development time to find a way to bring himself and his family back to the Milky Way Galaxy!

Yet now that he discovered that the mysterious and unfathomable deathborn had already begun their 'invasion' of the Red Ocean in secret, he became a lot more alarmed!

Who knew what the deathborn could do once they managed to gain a foothold in the new frontier!

Even if their actual powerhouses could not cross the unimaginable amount of distance between M87 and the Red Ocean, just projecting a fraction of their power and consciousness to the latter was enough for them to change the galactic landscape!

"If Helena's analysis of the phenomena in this star system is accurate, this mission has become more vital than ever." The Saint Commander stated with a grimmer expression than usual. "There is a distinct possibility that the Red Cabal and the deathborn have not only made contact with each other, but also forged an agreement between their two civilizations. This poses an extreme threat to red humanity. Some of the most important shortcomings of the native aliens are their shallow traditions and their lack of expertise in E energy manipulation. The deathborn, who originate from a supermassive galaxy that most likely developed an enormous amount of practice and technology related to harnessing the abundant amount of E energy radiation, can bestow all kinds of extraordinary methods to the phase whales and other aliens."

The mere possibility of a pan-galactic alliance between the natives of M87 and the Red Ocean was enough to frighten the likes of Star Designers!

Ves felt a lot more pressured than before!

Who knew that this random decision to explore a restricted alien star system would inadvertently cause them to stumble upon such an enormous secret!?

While they had yet to prove the validity of all of these assumptions, the variables lined up far too well!

Helene could sense the growing apprehension from the two Larkinsons.

"Do not feel too concerned. It is not that easy to reach beyond the stars and project your presence here. I am only able to do so because my little brother played a key role in bringing me to life. Even then, I am only able to channel a fraction of my power, and that is only if you maintain your distance from the inner system. The deathborn or whoever has set up the formations in this star system most definitely possess their own ingenious methods, but they are also subject to the same constraints. If it was that easy for True Gods to cross hundreds of thousands of light-years in an instant, then they would have spread throughout the entire cosmos by this time."

"That sounds logical." Ves agreed and began to calm down. "From the intelligence that we have gathered so far, the timeline behind this secret development is not that long. The Red Cabal and the deathborn have not spent enough time to complete more than a handful of projects. While the current conditions in the Hypeh-Tekas System are troublesome, I do not believe that our enemies have built up all of their defenses. We have arrived in a sensitive period of time where they are still in the buildup phase. We have a fleeting opportunity to come in, smash everything apart and salvage anything that is useful."

The Saint Commander nodded, though she did not look as certain.

"Let us not give in to hubris. The defenders are most definitely aware of us. Even if they can only rely on two spell arrays, their enormous scale alone speaks much about the competence of our new

and familiar adversaries. We still do not know how many forces and champions the Red Cabal deployed in this star system."

That was the most concerning part about this mission. Sending out scout vessels would just get them killed under the current circumstances. The interference produced by increasingly more concentrated dark miasma also rendered most forms of long-ranged observations useless.

The only way to find out what the aliens were up to was to bring the entire combined fleet to the enemy strongholds all at once!

This was extremely risky because if the enemy's strength vastly exceeded that of the humans, then the latter would inevitably suffer heavy losses!

Yet despite the growing risks, none of them thought about aborting their mission and running away.

They had already committed to traveling deeper into the inner system. Turning around at this point would only mean they wasted a lot of time while also giving the enemy a better opportunity to chase the fleeing humans at their heels!

The harsh truth was that the combined fleet had already fallen into a sunk cost fallacy of sorts. The deeper they ventured into the Hypeh-Tekas System, the more they felt compelled to see this matter through the end no matter the danger!

The private meeting ended shortly after that. Their latest realizations brought a heightened sense of urgency. Instead of wasting so much time on meetings and debates, they were better off doing something more productive in the little time available.

To Ves, that meant working on solutions that could help his forces resist the harmful effects of dark miasma and deathborn attacks.

Of all of the mechs employed by the combined fleet, his Woodsap mechs required the least amount of help.

Their affinity towards life was strong enough to repel the power of death.

The only problem was that doing so in an adverse environment drastically increased their consumption of E energy.

This became more problematic as they continued to approach the enemy positions.

The deeper they ventured into the unknown death god's domain, the greater the difficulty of absorbing ambient E energy radiation!

All of the death E energy spreading through the local space actively repulsed E energy with positive or opposing attributes.

It also made it a lot more difficult for the Woodsap mechs to absorb E energy radiation as they found it difficult to separate harmful energies from benign energies.

In short, it became increasingly more unsafe for the Woodsap mechs to sustain their activities by recklessly absorbing E energy radiation from the environment!

The Second Elf did not react well to this explanation. "Does that mean that our Woodsap mechs will starve on the battlefield?"

"Not necessarily." Ves responded. "My elemental Carmine mechs are not supposed to be that easy to counter. All I am saying is that absorbing E energy from the surrounding space is not a viable option anymore. That does not forbid you from turning to more reliable sources of wood and life E energies. Don't we have a generous reserve of Gaia Trees? Each of them are specifically designed to supplement your Woodsap mech's consumption of both TE Wood and essential E energies. Once the formation masters have brought their defensive spell array online, we do not have to rely on the Gaia Trees to protect our fleet from the harmful environment. We can put most of them at your disposal so that your unit can sustain itself by drawing upon this organic reserve."

Caracalla Shuku looked relieved. Though they did not have an endless amount of Gaia Trees on hand, they definitely had enough of them to sustain an hour or maybe two hours of intensive combat!

"Wait. Those Gaia Trees do not have any inherent self-defense capabilities. They will be vulnerable to the enemy once we deploy them in the open."

"That is true, but we don't have to deploy the Gaia Trees in the open. It should be enough to temporarily relocate them into the hangar bays of your combat carriers. This way, if a Woodsap mech has become severely damaged or depleted, it simply needs to return to its mothership in order to get back to full strength."

Chapter 7506 Untested Hyper Keystones

Chapter 7506 Untested Hyper Keystones

In the face of the debilitating conditions of the Hypeh-Tekas System, Ves felt gratified that his latest works could take care of themselves a lot better than other products.

While the power of death was prevalent throughout the local space, his Woodsap mechs possessed enough vitality and other advantages to retain their combat effectiveness for a time.

They were almost tailor-made to fight under these adverse circumstances. The greatest source of strength of a Woodsap mech was its ability to sustain itself.

Out of all of his planned elemental Carmine mechs, none of them could endure continuous setbacks as well as his Woodsap mechs!

As long as they did not suffer a single overwhelming blow, they could always find ways to restore themselves again.

No matter whether the enemy inflicted lots of damage to their organic mech frames or forced them to drastically increase their energy expenditure, his proud biomechs only needed to draw strength from each other or from any other organism to undo all of the consumption.

Of course, Ves did not blindly assume that his Woodsap mechs would be able to operate perfectly under adverse circumstances.

In the hours that passed since the combined fleet entered the Hypeh-Tekas System and began to move towards the inner system, the concentration of dark miasma had grown.

The quantity of deathborn in the periphery also grew by a steady rate.

If both of these trends held, then that meant that once the combined fleet arrived at the first priority site, the human mechs and warships would definitely face an unimaginable degree of external pressure!

Ves did not dare to assume that his Woodsap mechs could endure such punishing conditions without the protection of Casella's Command Field.

The Second Elf did not want to give up so easily, though.

"The Saint Commander's willpower is precious. She should not squander her power to protect our Woodsap mechs. We will manage somehow. If there are any missions that require her to split up her forces, then we will readily accept such an assignment. What we have discovered in this star system may be the first, but most definitely not the last time the Red Cabal has colluded with this new extragalactic menace. The Terran Alliance does not have the ace commanders to spare for every future encounter against these deathborn. We must rely on more accessible assets such as our Woodsap mechs to hold the line against a threat that can directly phase through the defenses of our starships and devour the souls of our unprotected spacers."

The Terran scion-turned-elf possessed a much broader perspective of the bigger picture than most of his fellow Woodsap mech pilots. He had been appointed their leader for good reasons.

"While I am proud of my works, please do not overestimate them." Ves cautiously warned. "They can only function well so long as you can sustain their consumption. The First Law of Thermodynamics still applies. My Woodsap mechs cannot magically create energy out of nothing. Any significant depletion of structural integrity of energy can only be made up for by draining another source of materials and vitality. I am afraid that the coming fight will be so draining that you will use up your Gaia Trees in no time. After that, there will be very few sources that your Woodsap mechs can draw upon."

The elven leader nodded with a serious expression. "We are already aware of these limitations. We are not resigned to this. Our staff and I are already working on finding alternate sources of life. We do not believe that there is no life at all in the heart of enemy territory. If there is truly nothing for us to find, then we still have a last resort. Many of my fellow Woodsap mech pilots have already agreed to let us cannibalize their bonded partners. They intend to go much further than stripping non-essential parts from their mech frames. Only by sacrificing their entire biomass and almost all of their energy reserves will we be able to reallocate resources in the most effective way possible."

"What?!"

That sounded outrageous to Ves! While he designed his Woodsap mechs with the ability to donate their own TE Wood and wood energy to other friendly machines, it was only supposed to be an emergency measure.

To go as far as to sacrifice entire biomechs just to bring other organic machines back to fighting conditions sounded a lot more extreme!

Ves could not imagine that these living mechs that had only come to life a month ago would willingly sacrifice themselves.

He found it even more perplexing that the carefully selected test pilots would also agree to end their careers prematurely.

How could they possibly be willing to cut short their dreams of becoming a genuine mech pilot?!

However, Ves soon realized that this may not be as painful of a sacrifice as he initially thought.

"Wait." Ves narrowed his eyes. "Are you counting on my recently developed hyper keystones to give those sacrificed Woodsap mechs a chance to make a comeback?"

The tall and slender elf smiled in response. "Yes. This auxiliary technology is the guarantee that we shall rely upon to give our noble brothers and sisters a chance to regain their power. As long as your hyper keystones work as advertised, the Woodsap mechs that have selflessly sacrificed themselves shall return in full honor after the conclusion of this campaign."

Ves hadn't really paid too much attention to his hyper keystones after their inclusion in his 7th generation living mechs.

That was mostly because the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet did not field any standard living mechs at this point.

Many of his older second-class mainstays had yet to be upgraded to contemporary standards, so hyper keystones did not see much use over the old expeditionary fleet.

Ketis, who still presided over the latter, never shared any news about hyper keystones, mostly because the expeditionary fleet had become so good that it never suffered massive losses.

Even after it had lost the protection of its ace mechs, the remaining expert mechs and other mech units had reached a very high level of veterancy.

Combined with good leadership, excellent logistics, superior intelligence gathering capabilities and other accumulated advantages, Ves had very little concern that the second-class Larkinsons would suffer a massive loss at the less intensive frontlines in the border regions.

This also deprived him of an opportunity to witness the effectiveness of his hyper keystones at a large scale.

He therefore harbored a considerable amount of doubt about the effectiveness of his hyper keystones under actual field conditions.

It was already bad enough to rely on them on a typical battlefield.

The current environment was much worse than normal!

"If those Woodsap mechs decide to sacrifice themselves to replenish the consumption of other biomechs, then they should do so inside your combat carriers whenever possible." Ves reminded the Terran elf. "Doing this right at the enemy's doorstep will leave the cockpit extremely vulnerable. I am not sure whether it can survive the adverse environment long enough to safely return."

"We know. We will try to avoid this scenario, but we can make no promises. If we are forced to resort to this option, then we will not do so in vain."

The conversation ended not too long after that. Ves found it very difficult to make any suggestions that the clever Terrans hadn't already considered.

When he continued his little tour, his mood remained somber.

The prospect of suffering serious losses among the Woodsap mechs left a heavy shadow on his heart.

He did not want his latest and most promising line of living mechs to suffer such a serious setback so soon.

Yet if the mission called for it, the Terran soldiers would not hesitate to sacrifice themselves for the good of the Terran Alliance.

As Ves continued to inspect the preparations made by the people in charge of the other mechs in the combined fleet, he found himself a bit disappointed by their lack of effectiveness.

The eclectic group of qi cultivators from the Red Collective's Moloch Squadron dug deep into their archives and selected all sorts of esoteric methods to increase a mech's resistance against the darkness.

From carving runes whose meanings were not entirely clear onto the armor plating to dousing the machines with processed 'holy water', many of the solutions did not inspire that much confidence.

Even if a handful of them did work out a lot better than expected, their scope and scale were far too limited to protect all of the mechs and warships of the combined fleet.

They could only count on large-scale systematic solutions to provide strong and broad-enough protection.

Casella's Command Field and the defensive spell array that was currently under development both promised to provide relief, but with deep limitations.

Ves still did not feel comfortable with such a thin safety margin.

Was there nothing else that they could do?

He even approached Jovy Armalon to ask whether the Red Association would agree to install complete neural interfaces into the mechs of the Bluejay Fleet.

Surely, it shouldn't be too troublesome to convert its existing stock of RA mechs into true mechs, right?

Unfortunately, Jovy shook his head.

"If it was that simple, we would have begun the conversion process already. We cannot deploy our true mechs in this battle. It is not a matter of capability. We mastered the technology a long time ago. What is truly holding us back is permission. Headquarters have denied our request. We are not allowed to employ this restricted tech."

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Chapter 7507 New Spell Array

Chapter 7507 New Spell Array

"..."

Ves did not respond to Jovy's explanation with words. He simply directed a meaningful stare at his mecher friend.

For his part, Jovy Armalon still possessed enough decency to express shame at the decision made by his superiors.

"I cannot help it, Ves. True mechs are the Association's strategic assets. We are reluctant to reveal them to the native aliens so soon and in such a haphazard manner. The calculus is similar to the one that you have used to justify the decision to hold back your Ascended Giants. If it is not absolutely necessary, then it is better not to expose a trump card in advance."

While that explanation may have worked for regular individuals, Ves possessed a far greater perspective than others!

"Oh, come on, Jovy! This is exactly the kind of situation that true mechs are designed to address!" He hissed back. "Everything that I have heard about true mechs makes it clear that the pilots are so deeply connected with their machines that they apparently take on the properties of insensitive objects rather than sensitive people. Supposedly, this allows them to become 'immune' to many of the threats that directly act on their souls. If that is true, then they should at least be highly resistant towards the dark miasma and the deathborn lurking within!"

The RA Senior Mech Designer sighed. "As I have mentioned earlier, it is not that simple. I cannot claim to possess a complete understanding of the rationale behind the rejection, but I can make a few guesses. This is a first contact scenario. We should never make it a habit to expose our best assets in the beginning. If we can handle the deathborn without resorting to exceptional measures, then that is for the best. If not, then the lessons we learn during this mission will go on to

contribute a more targeted response, one that doesn't necessarily have to be centered around true mechs."

Ves possessed enough perspective to understand the logic behind this argument. It did not put his combined fleet in a good position, but it was ultimately the most rational choice for red humanity as a whole.

"I am very glad to hear that the Red Association values me so much that they are willing to let me initiate first contact with an undoubtedly hostile and violent race from Messier 87." He not-so-sarcastically said.

Jovy reached out and patted Ves' shoulder. "Do not sound so upset. Ordinarily, the RA and the RF would have insisted on taking over command of the combined fleet as soon as it became clear that we are potentially initiating contact with an extra-galactic alien powerhouse. However, your tier 2 galactic citizenship grants you the strongest privilege to represent our race and civilization out of every human in this star system. You are still in charge. Instead of complaining about factors outside of your control, you should cherish the ones that are already in your grasp. Many people would kill to be in your position."

The mecher was right.

In a situation as historically important as this, it was always better to hold the reins in your own hands even if he was not the most qualified leader available.

It was a lot better than subjecting himself to the authority of untrustworthy individuals who never had his best interests at heart.

"While all of that sounds nice, you are just trying to distract me from the fact that we are not allowed to deploy true mechs in this battle." Ves shifted his attention back to the true matter at hand. "While I can understand your arguments, it still feels as if you guys aren't taking this matter seriously enough."

"You are wrong about that, Ves. Some of our highest leaders are paying personal attention to this ongoing affair. You should be able to guess their identities. They would have preferred to act more directly, but the distance combined with the rising interference from the dark miasma prevents them from doing so. We are operating well behind enemy lines at this time. This makes our situation much more delicate than normal. There is no backup or safe retreat for us. If we suffer a painful defeat, then we will definitely leave a large amount of debris behind. If the aliens of the Red Ocean and the deathborn manage to salvage enough of our true mechs, then they may be able to develop targeted countermeasures. Even if that is not possible in the short term, they will still be able to figure out what they are dealing with, allowing them to adjust their tactics in advance."

That did not sound like a particularly strong excuse. So what if true mechs fell into the enemy's hands? It was not as if they could employ mechs themselves. It shouldn't be particularly difficult to figure out how they worked in principle, but Ves felt that the RA was overestimating the native aliens in their R&D capabilities.

Nonetheless, Ves inwardly sighed and abandoned this line of discussion. He proceeded to talk about other matters.

"To be honest, we do not have much confidence in our mitigation solutions." Jovy said with a somber expression. "You are not the only person who wishes that we can convert our existing machines into true mechs. The stopgap solutions that we have devised in cooperation with the Red Collective should mitigate the harm that our mechs and pilots will endure, but I do not dare to expect too much from them. In my opinion, the best way to prevent short and long-term harm to our assets is to limit their field time."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "You mean you want to let our mechs deploy into space for an hour or so before recalling them back to their motherships."

The RA mech designer nodded. "Half an hour is a safer and more appropriate interval according to our estimations. You are correct about the rest. Much will also depend on the effectiveness of the defensive spell array that the collies are just about to activate and how the enemy will respond. We cannot rely entirely on our warships to solve every problem."

"We'll just see, then."

More than an hour later, the formation masters of the Moloch Squadron in cooperation with engineers and other technical personnel managed to complete their project in record time.

It had taken a bit of time, but they managed to fabricate the half-mech-sized formation anchors in a hurry.

Multiple teams of qi cultivators conducted last-minute inspections on them. Due to the haste in their production, they had slipped up multiple times.

Formation Master Andrea Vos supervised the inspection process in person.

When Ves arrived in the hall, he took a deep look at the formation anchors and managed to understand the gist of their structure.

He knew how spell arrays worked in broad strokes. He roughly understood their principles, but lacked the comprehension and mastery to devise qi formations, particularly ones like these!

Ves genuinely admired the formation masters of the Red Collective.

They had managed to learn a very difficult discipline in a very short amount of time!

Even if they could attribute most of their blazing progress to their superior augmentations, each formation master used to achieve a lot of success in their previous academic fields.

All of that knowledge did not become useless when they chose to pursue a career as a formation master.

In fact, given how many qi formations were intrinsically tied to their environments, a deep understanding of the rules that governed reality granted them a considerable head-start in this new field!

Ves could already spot numerous signs that the collies leveraged their existing understanding of modern sciences into their work.

He doubted that the formation masters would have been able to deliver a usable product so quickly without relying on these shortcuts.

"So what is the verdict?" He asked. "Can we expect to obtain relief from the hostile environment?"

The Farseer frowned as she stared deeply at the formation anchors. "I... cannot say. Theoretically, these formation anchors should be able to work as expected. However, their power has limitations. Even if they work adequately for now, we cannot blindly rely on the defensive spell array once we are close enough to the target planet."

At least the collies did not overpromise.

"Once we activate the spell array, will we have to station mechs or warships at every formation anchor in order to protect them from enemy attacks?"

"That will not be necessary, sir. Most spell arrays have ways of hiding the formation anchors that sustain them once they are active. This is especially the case when it comes to defensive ones, as the enemy will always try to destroy the formation anchors above all other priorities."

That sounded convenient, but Ves did not dare to put too much faith in them. "Will the enemy be able to track them down and expose them somehow?"

Andrea Vos shrugged. "I genuinely cannot answer that question. It will depend on whether the enemy forces possess the right expertise and are willing to take action."

"Even if the phase leaders of the Red Cabal know far too little about qi formations, I bet the story is different for the deathborn." Ves responded. "Aliens who are rooted in a high-energy environment will have definitely developed many sophisticated ways to manipulate E energy radiation. Aside from that, they should also know how to break existing qi formations as well."

"Then our forces should prepare to foil the hostile aliens if they attempt to target the constructs that are supposed to maintain our new spell array."

The discussion continued as mechs carefully lifted the formation anchors by their purpose-built handles and carefully brought them out into space.

Positioning them required a lot of care, though Andrea Vos did not need to take control of this delicate operation in person.

The other formation masters possessed enough understanding of how the new spell array worked to be able to provide accurate instructions to the porter mechs.

Once all of the formation anchors had been placed in the precise coordinates relative to the flagship of the combined fleet, the Farseer herself finally took hold of the master control disk.

"We are ready."

Chapter 7508 Initial Relief

Chapter 7508 Initial Relief

The master control disk did not look all that impressive.

It looked like an ordinary medallion disk at first. The only sign that distinguished it from ordinary objects were the hyper gems embedded onto its upper surface.

These gems possessed a subtle glow. E energies circulated between them in a simple but somewhat profound pattern.

Though Ves possessed a slight understanding of qi formations, he found himself unable to decipher any of the elements of the control artifact.

He could only tell that it had been made with a very different approach from his own.

In the eyes of an artisan, the formation disk lacked any sense of personal style or craftsmanship. The designers adopted a no-frills approach and cut down every possible unnecessary element.

Ves was not a fan of the utilitarian approach, but he understood the rationale behind this design choice.

The formation masters had been forced to work in haste. They could not afford to spend any thought on artistry and symbolism. Adding more complications to a rushed work came with very considerable risks.

This was why the formation masters under the Farseer ended up producing a set of formation tools that relied almost entirely on calculated lines and simple geometric shapes to do the required job and nothing more.

It became clear to Ves that the formation masters did not even bother to empower or activate their qi formation with the help of a ritual.

None of the ritualists of the Moloch Squadron had been invited to take part in the activation process.

This made sense as rituals often behaved like double-edged swords. They introduced a lot of new variables, many of which could never be completely controlled.

On a good day, a successful ritual had the potential to supercharge a qi formation!

On a bad day, the same ritual could end up sparking an accident that could cause the spell array to fizzle out in an instant!

While the Red Collective did not ignore the power of rituals, it was clear that this was a situation where the formation masters did not think the added uncertainty was worth the potential payoff.

"All of the necessary conditions are met." Andrea Vos said as she methodically pressed her fingers on the gems embedded into the formation artifact. Some of them lit up while others stayed dim. "I have received confirmation that each formation anchor has reached the right coordinates.

Deviations in positioning are within tolerance. Checks have confirmed the presence of pre-resonance reactions. All formation anchors have passed all of the tests, particularly the ones related to their adaptation to the adverse environment. The only point of concern at this point is their longevity. We do not know how precisely long they will last before they wear out due to the harsh circumstances and their less-than-meticulous construction."

Her words weighed heavily on the others. They were all about to entrust much of their safety and wellbeing to the functioning of the newly developed spell array.

It was not exactly comforting to hear that even the makers of this qi formation did not possess a good grasp on their own work.

Nonetheless, they had to take a chance because they did not have the luxury to proceed without the protection of this essential solution.

"Proceed with the activation." Ves spoke as he continued to direct his senses towards the flow of energies around his position.

Many people had been waiting for this moment. They had all endured varying degrees of stress as the combined fleet continued to make its way deeper into the star system.

Casella had an especially rough time. She had to stretch out her Command Field for sessions that stretched on for half a day before crashing into bed. Then, when she woke up, she had to go right back to it again in order to provide a strong measure of safety and stability to the rest of her forces.

The ace commander certainly put her endurance to the test. Though she had worn out her willpower quite badly in the past few days, she also grew from this spontaneous exercise.

"Activating now."

The Farseer pressed her finger against the surface of the largest and most central gem and began to inject her spiritual energy in distinct patterns and intensities.

Ves had the illusion that she was transmitting a complicated line of programming code into the spiritual version of a handheld computer.

The gems all began to blink or light up in rapid succession. Many of them glowed brighter, as if indicating that they had truly come online at this time.

Ves and a few other sensitive individuals felt it first.

The air had changed.

An invisible layer of pressure receded as the fleet-scale spell array gradually came into effect.

The dark miasma that constantly sought to engulf the human invaders with the power of death failed to find purchase in the combined fleet.

Seconds passed as many humans finally felt a true sense of normalcy.

Though the Saint Commander had done her best to coddle them whenever she was able to project her Command Field, not everyone felt comfortable with enduring her constant presence.

Humans liked safety, but they also valued their privacy. They could never endure the feeling of being monitored by a judgmental ace commander. What if they did something that she did not approve of? Would she punish them directly, or note down their transgressions and exact retribution later?

While Ves felt that the Saint Commander could never become so bored as to micromanage the affairs of rank-and-file soldiers, the latter could never shake off the fear and suspicion associated with close surveillance.

Therefore, the successful activation of the defensive spell array truly made the soldiers relax for the first time in several days.

"Finally!"

"I feel great again."

"I hope this new defensive measure can stay online for the rest of our stay in this star system."

Many people already started to celebrate despite the fact that nobody knew whether the new spell array was able to run stably.

Several formation masters and engineers crowded around the Farseer in order to share their observations and opinions. Their expressions signified that they did not dare to take this initial success for granted.

Ves slowly walked up to the crowd. "What are the results? Can we count on your work to keep us protected?"

One of the formation masters serving under Andrea Vos responded first. "The experimental spell array is operating slightly below expected parameters. Our calculations are largely sound, but there are discrepancies in the data. The intensity of the dark miasma at this distance from the red dwarf star is higher than what our model initially suggested. The boundary of the spell array is therefore weaker than it should. We believe that problems at the edge have already begun to occur. Any mech or starship that is located close to the divide between protected and unprotected space is exposed to greater danger."

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"Are you saying that the spell array was not designed to endure this kind of pressure and has already begun to leak?"

"The defensive qi formation's condition is still good." The Farseer said as she finally looked up from her glowing formation disk. "It could have been much worse. It may have begun to flicker at this time. Since there are no signs of that happening in the short or medium term, we can provisionally trust that it will continue to provide protection going forward. As we have mentioned earlier, the greatest limitation is the poor durability of the formation anchors. Even if they have disappeared from sight, they still exist, just not in a place that we can see with the naked eyes. While they remain hidden, they are still processing large amounts of E energy radiation."

"What sort of E energy?" Ves curiously asked.

Formation Master Andrea Vos smiled back at him. "Death energy of course. This far into the star system has already thinned the concentration of normal E energy radiation to a minimum. Much of the radiance from Messier 87 simply cannot move through a large and increasingly more dense field of death energy. The negative energies that comprise the dark miasma are constantly absorbing, corrupting or displacing E energy of opposing attributes. This means we cannot count on conventional qi formations to activate and power a qi formation. We are also precluded from drawing upon any other external source of energy such as Gaia. Death energy is the only choice."

Ves had managed to deduce this as well, but that did not automatically mean that playing with death energy was the only viable option.

He had several misgivings about this design choice!

"Are you not afraid of the possibility that all of this death energy has an owner?" Ves asked the leading formation master. "What if the deathborn leader yanks all of this death energy away, thereby causing your qi formation to run out of juice?"

Andrea Vos smirked in response. "Then that will relieve us in another way. We can shut down our defensive spell array before it runs out of fuel with little burden as we do not have to rely on it anymore. If the dark miasma presses in on our fleet once again, we can activate it once again."

"That does not sound healthy for the formation anchors. Can they endure several cycles of activation and deactivation?"

"To be honest, we do not have any solid expectations, sir. According to my own judgment, our formation anchors should be able to endure at least half-a-dozen cycles. After that, the wear and tear may have eroded the constructs to the point where minor glitches and faults may occur."

None of that sounded comforting.

"So if we want to maximize the longevity of this defensive spell array, we should try to keep it online as long as possible, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir. This spell array was made for constant operation."

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Chapter 7509 Flawed Work

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The activation of the new defensive spell array successfully freed most of the human servicemen from the dangers of the outside environment.

An invisible protective bubble had formed around the entire combined fleet.

Within this fairly generous sphere, the dark miasma found no purchase anymore. They could get in no matter how persistently they pressed against the newly appeared boundary.

The weak but extremely numerous deathborn also found themselves kicked out. Though they tried their damnest best to claw and bash their way through the barrier, only for nothing to happen.

"You're a lifesaver, Andrea. I don't need the protection, but almost all of the soldiers do. They will be able to sleep easier and prepare for the upcoming battle with greater confidence."

"I would not celebrate so soon if I was in your place, Ves." The female formation master softly replied.

That caused Ves to drop his smile. "What is the issue?"

"On the surface, the defensive spell array is working as intended. However, our adversaries have not given up on trying to attack us. Even as we speak, millions of deathborn are constantly trying to claw their way past the boundary. Their ceaseless attacks put more pressure on our qi formation. This has multiple consequences, of which the most concerning is the increased wear and tear on the formation anchors."

"I was meaning to ask you about this." He said with a frown. "From my understanding, formation anchors are supposed to be quite durable. They should easily be able to last on a scale of years, decades or even centuries. How come your latest work can only last for a few weeks at most? Is it just because of the rushed design phase and the lack of fitting materials?"

Andrea Vos looked at Ves with a measured expression. "The design is flawed. That is unavoidable. The limited selection of materials in our fleet is another hindrance. What truly bothers my colleagues and I is the source of energy that sustains our qi formation."

"Ah. I was wondering about that as well." Ves said. "It is quite remarkable that you guys are already able to defend against this corrosive energy by using it as your fuel source. However, your tone suggests that your method is not as perfect as you wish."

"Correct. Our databases contain many references on how to harness the power of common attributes such as fire and lightning. We do not have as many records or research on the less common ones such as the death attribute. This is a shortcoming of the Red Collective, and one that must be corrected as soon as possible."

"I don't blame you guys. As far as I know, the only reliable way to produce death energy is to kill a lot of sentient beings in the same location. That is not something you can do lightly against fellow human beings. The only ones you can kill without fault are aliens, but they won't go down lightly. It is a lot of trouble to prepare any experiments related to death energy on a dangerous battlefield. Not many researchers possess the courage and drive to apply for them. Most will want to remain safely in the rear where the dangers of the Red War have a hard time reaching their positions."

A contemptuous expression appeared on her face. "There are many qi cultivators within the Collective that ascribe to the theory that we must be more active with using the powers that we have gained through our efforts. Only by practising what we have learned in real scenarios will we be able to leave a mark in the fabric of reality, causing us to gain more weight relative to other beings. I happen to ascribe to this theory as well. I am happy to serve alongside you as you are the living embodiment of a human that has single-handedly changed all of our lives."

That sounded very familiar to Ves. "Are you referring to the Myth Reproduction Theory?"

"Yes. It originally emerged as a way to explain the difficulties of ace pilots trying to bridge the enormous divide to godhood, but we believe it applies to all cultivators regardless of their methods. Trying to play it safe and remain confined within your lab may allow my more risk-averse colleagues to deepen and expand their foundations, but I believe that persistent lack of action will only solidify their current states, thereby making it increasingly harder for them to break through and achieve major progress in the future."

That was exactly what Ves thought as well about mech pilots and mech designers!

He had read many biographies of god pilots and Star Designers during his younger years.

It was very rare for these gods in human forms to live uneventful lives.

Many of them experienced legendary journeys.

In fact, the ones that did not have a noteworthy story probably did a lot of exciting stuff, but managed to keep the details secret from the public!

Whatever the case, Ves was glad to hear that Andrea agreed with his philosophy.

"Now that you and the Moloch Squadron have served with me for a while now, have you noticed any differences between your group and that of your colleagues in the rear?"

"Possibly." The female cultivator responded with a modest smile. "I know that many of the formation masters that have opted to stay behind have expanded their knowledge and refined their existing methods to a greater degree than myself. In contrast, I have made substantially greater progress in accelerating my qi cultivation. My practical capabilities have also improved by a strong degree. I am quite certain that none of my colleagues back in the rear could have designed and deployed the defensive spell array under the current circumstances. Their chances of failure are

greater, and they would need at least twice or thrice as much time to complete the same amount of steps."

Ves looked impressed. "That does sound like a huge improvement. I hope that you will be able to distinguish yourself even better in the future."

"Thank you, sir, but let us get back to the original topic." She said. "As much as I am proud of my capabilities, my understanding and familiarity of death E energy has not reached a satisfactory level. We had to make inferences based on limited contact and convoluted theories from ancient records. Even with the assistance of a think tank of the Red Collective, we had to make far too many assumptions in the process of designing our defensive spell array. Even if we have managed to achieve a relatively high hit rate, that is still very short of the ideal state. The formation anchors that are responsible for diverting and shaping some of the energies from the dark miasma were never meant to last forever, but if we had optimised it further, it should have been able to last a month even when subjected to increased pressure."

"What exactly is wrong with the formation anchors?" Ves asked.

"There are too many reasons to mention, but one of the ones I am concerned about is that our qi formation is largely designed to defend against static and consistent forces. It works better if the dark miasma and the deathborn maintain constant activity and only gradually change their activities. The situation becomes much less optimistic when there are larger shifts. For example, if the deathborn become more organized and launch concentrated attacks, then the qi formation will now be able to endure nearly as well. There is a chance that the bubble will deform, thereby putting assets that were previously safe in acute danger. Strong shifts also induce greater stresses on the components of the formation anchor, causing their more fragile and vulnerable components to wear down much faster than normal. None of this is ideal."

"You did the best you could under the circumstances. You said so yourself. I am highly familiar with the compromise that you need to make if you have to do everything in a hurry under field conditions."

The Farseer still looks upset. "You do not need to console me, sir. I am merely irritated because my latest work is grating on my professionalism. If we had been granted much more time, we would have been able to take additional variables and changes into account. If we had access to more suitable materials that are much more resistant against death energy, our formation anchors would not be wearing down so quickly."

"You can always dream about enjoying ideal conditions, but these fantasies never come true. In my opinion, it is pointless to think in this direction. What I enjoy a lot more is trying to get the most from the least. The true test of a craftsman is how to create a masterwork under highly restrictive circumstances. If you can navigate through all of the limitations and exceed everyone's expectations, then you have proven yourself to be a true master."

"Then it is clear that I am still far from reaching that standard." The Farseer sighed.

Chapter 7510 Coordinated Deathborn

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Though Ves did not fault Andrea Vos and the other formation masters for producing a flawed work, nobody could ignore the consequences of this outcome.

Less than an hour passed in relative peace and safety before the first major incident occurred.

One of Formation Master Andrea Vos' fears had come true.

The deathborn no longer mindlessly assailed the protective bubble from all sides at a constant rate.

Instead, they showed increasing signs of organization. While most of them still kept up the pressure from all sides, the controller in the shadows had secretly grouped up tens of millions of them before launching them all like a giant ballista!

Alarms rang throughout all of the ships as the invisible boundary bulged inward!

The deathborn had launched such a strong push that the ships positioned closest to the anomalous changes suddenly became engulfed by the tide of darkness!

They had unexpectedly lost the protection of the defensive spell array!

This was not all.

The sudden assault did more than deform the protective barrier. It also exposed everyone else to a wave of negative emotions.

Abrupt feelings of hatred, envy, fear and so on briefly surged within the minds of most humans.

Only the strongest and most disciplined among them successfully shrugged off this unnatural influence.

The rest remained paralyzed for a moment!

Dozen or so seconds passed before the invisible wave of negativity receded somewhat, but not entirely.

"The deathborn has created a significant flaw in our defensive spell array!" A formation master hastily reported. "It is impossible to restore the barrier from our end unless our enemies have halted their offensive!"

"We need to push the deathborn back as soon as possible! Do not let them expand their initial gains!"

The human soldiers never fully let down their guard since they entered the Hypeh-Tekas System.

Though they enjoyed a bit more rest ever since the defensive spell array became active, they still maintained a necessary amount of caution.

That happened to serve them well as plenty of mechs on standby had been able to deploy within minutes since the start of the latest incident.

The warships also began to take action. Many spacers that had previously remained on standby quickly manned their stations and began to perform the necessary steps to open fire.

Large caliber cannons soon began to launch careful volleys of energy beams and projectiles at the 'breach'.

However, the sensor systems reported few discernable results!

All of the attacks sank right into the dark miasma before disappearing entirely.

Aside from temporarily dispersing a few crowds of deathborn, the warship-grade attacks failed to inflict any meaningful harm!

"Cease fire! Some of our ships are trapped inside this dark cloud! Our intangible foes don't care about our firepower, but the same cannot be said for our own side! Wait for the Saint Commander's instructions!"

The opposing side happened to time their surprise attack well. The Saint Commander had gone off duty and begun to enjoy her rest.

Though she had opted to stay inside the cockpit of the Minerva Mark II to guard against situations like these, she still needed a bit of time to wake up and bring her ace mech fully online.

Before she could deploy her Command Field, everyone else needed to pick up the slack and hold back the enemy incursion as much as possible!

The problem was that they lacked the means to repel the deathborn by themselves!

The warships proved to be ineffective.

The mechs performed barely better.

The Dracoloids and the Omega Threshers sent out by the Premier Fleet attempted to beat back the dark miasma and slay the deathborn with their diverse arsenal of weapons.

While they managed to kill scores of deathborn with every shot, the enemy numbers were so great that a few hundred mechs could never exterminate so many enemies in a short amount of time!

Besides, even if the mechs managed to clear away the deathborn, they could do little against the dark miasma!

Only one mech model possessed this particular ability.

When the nearest squad prototype Woodsap mechs finally flew close to the ongoing breach, their strong vitality and abundant reserve of wood energy immediately created a stark contrast.

The ominous atmosphere suddenly graced the arrival of a beacon of hope.

Even though the Woodsap mechs could no longer draw from Gaia's strength, a semblance of her touch and power still lingered through their organic frames.

It was as if every Woodsap mech was a seed from the great mother tree.

Though small and weak in transcendent power, they still stood head and shoulders above every other standard mech!

"The deathborn... are being restrained by the new biomechs!"

Something had changed since last time.

Previously, the Woodsap mechs demonstrated their ability to restrain and repel the deathborn, but the effect was not so strong at the time.

They had adapted since then. The Woodsap mechs exerted themselves more strenuously. They not only formed a small battle network with each other, they also squeezed their reserves of wood energy, which they had been stockpiling beforehand!

The newly arrived prototypes also harnessed the limited quantities of wood energy and life energy in the immediate environment, though it did not seem to make much of a difference!

As more and more Woodsap mechs launched from their motherships and arrived at the breach, they surrounded the protruding dark cloud from multiple directions and sought to push it back as much as possible!

It was working to an extent.

The new mechs proved to be more effective than their metallic counterparts in everything. All of their shots not only killed more deathborn, but also dispersed the nearby dark miasma more effectively!

Yet despite their relative success, they ultimately proved inadequate for the task.

"We don't have enough Woodsap mechs!"

A Woodsap mech could make a substantial difference in a small incident, but a larger one such as this demanded a lot more strength or numbers!

They only made a bit of progress before they hit a wall.

At that point, no matter how much they tried to push back the enemy intrusion, the other side quickly replenished the losses.

This resulted in a new equilibrium where the problem had only become slightly less threatening than before.

That was far from enough to solve the current threat or rescue the lost starships!

"Damnit! I thought that since the protective energy field had gone up, we would be done with this nonsense!"

"That defensive spell array is the only reason why we were able to contain the threat to this extent. Without it, the dark miasma would have engulfed our entire fleet!"

Many people began to cast doubt on the effectiveness of the active qi formation, but the collies responsible for setting it up felt unjustly blamed.

They had done their best to produce a work that could keep them safe under stable conditions, but to expect the same result under less ideal circumstances was way too unrealistic!

The fundamental problem was that the defensive spell array that they relied upon to keep them safe possessed limited resources and solutions.

The formation masters and other qi cultivators scrambled to plug the gaps and make adjustments to the changing situation.

Formation Master Andrea Vos personally held the formation artifact and periodically pressed her fingers against a few gems. She injected one instruction after another in order to alter the parameters of the active spell array.

"Andrea!" Ves called her out over a private communication channel. "What is the status of the defensive spell array?!"

"It was faltering, but we managed to stop the deterioration through our active management." The Farseer quickly explained. "An unattended spell array would have failed now due to their inability to adapt to dynamic changes. One attended by formation masters such as myself can marshal its resources much more efficiently. Currently, my subordinates and I are constantly monitoring the movements of the opposing side in order to respond to them as best as possible. We are also working to repair the existing faults, but we are not able to make progress due to the disparity between us and the deathborn. We managed to make an important deduction about the latter."

"What did you discover?" He asked.

"This attack... is organized." She said. "Though we have yet to obtain irrefutable proof, the remarkable obedience and coordination of the participating deathborn indicates that they are being subjugated by a leader, most likely a stronger variant of this intangible species."

Ves already came up with the same suspicion. A bunch of mindless and irrational deathborn could never show so much organization by themselves!

"Is it... the deathborn True God?"

"I cannot say, sir. I feel that this is not the case. Whoever is commanding this swarm of deathborn is likely a superior, but not too much or else we would have detected its presence by this time. From the manner and timing of the enemy's movements, I have reasons to believe that the enemy

commander may be floating closer to our fleet. If your forces can seek out and eliminate this deathborn commander, there is a chance for the deathborn to lose their coordination."

Ves' eyes lit up! It would be convenient if they could make this happen!

"Please pass on your suggestion to the Saint Commander! Hopefully we can deal with this matter as easily as you think."

The Saint Commander would likely dispatch an ace mech or two to plunge into the dark miasma and hunt down this mysterious deathborn commander.

Half a minute passed before Casella finally made her move.

Starting from the Tortuous Scream, an iconic Command Field rapidly expanded outwards and bestowed the protection of true resonance to every mech or warship!

The Command Field did much to repel the darkness.

Together with the effects of the active defensive spell array, Casella's willpower pushed back the incursion and pushed millions of deathborn back!