

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7511 Energy Field Warfare

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"We're saved!"

Though more than a few people privately grumbled about the delay, each of them still felt grateful that their powerful Saint Commander finally came to the rescue!

Even without moving away from her central position, the Minerva Mark II was able to assert a fairly strong claim on the space occupied by the combined fleet.

Within her expansive domain field, it became a lot more difficult for hostile presences to have their way inside the defensive perimeter!

The local space immediately grew less oppressive. Casella's presence and willpower never felt as reassuring as this moment. Amplified by the true resonance generated with her ace command mech, her domain field brought back the light in a pocket that was being threatened by darkness!

The warships of the combined fleet showed greater coordination and less panic. The mechs fought more boldly and did not relent in their efforts to rescue the missing assets.

Yet just as the Command Field was about to press back the dark miasma even further and create more space for the combined fleet, the adversary quickly responded to this development.

Ves and other sensitive individuals noticed it first. They felt a huge buildup of negative energies just beyond the barrier!

The dark miasma churned and roiled as if multiple invisible spoons tried to stir it all up. The strong rotational forces that appeared in four cardinal directions significantly changed the impact of the environment on Casella's Saint Kingdom as well as the strained defensive spell array.

The expansion of the Minerva Mark II's Command Field slowed down. Though it was still strong enough to push outwards, it had clearly encountered greater resistance than before!

Yet that was clearly not the extent of the enemy's response. The 4 separate 'cyclones' somehow resonated with each other in a mysterious way. Ves widened his eyes as his companion spirit vaguely sensed that they were not separate actions, but multiple components tied together in a greater whole!

All of the quantitative changes ultimately began to produce a qualitative change!

The surrounding dark miasma that had been caught up in the cyclones no longer exhibited as much lethargy and passivity as before.

As they got caught up in the rotational forces, the death energy seemed to become more active. Whatever the unseen aliens were doing caused the negative energies to become imbued with unknown properties!

Once empowered by this strange and indecipherable process, the activated energies crashed into the defensive barriers with unnatural power!

This time, they managed to push back the expanding Command Field!

"What?!"

"How can an ace commander's domain field be repelled by low-grade death energy?!"

Although their unseen opponents had utilized special means to increase the concentration and directionality of the dark miasma, that still did not explain how it had suddenly become a lot more effective at suppressing Casella's willpower!

Ves quickly narrowed his eyes as he let Blinky observe the gargantuan flow of energies. He quickly noticed a few important patterns.

He reported his findings over the command channel.

"Those energy vortices are not natural. They are actively being generated by the enemy! Not only that, but they are perfectly synced together! I think... that the enemy has deployed a qi formation that happens to be effective in suppressing our Command Field! We are caught up in a clash between energy fields."

This was a mode of warfare that Ves and the other humans had barely touched upon in previous battles.

As the changes brought by exotic radiation continued to change the rules, competition between energy fields would likely become more and more common over time.

The Red Collective had already proven the effectiveness of qi formations at the start of the Age of Dawn.

It was unreasonable to believe that the deathborn, who originated from a much larger and more powerful galaxy, did not know how to manipulate E energy in the same way!

Ves already expected for the mysterious deathborn leader to employ spell arrays of their own. If the Moloch Squadron under the farseer could find a way to develop a spell array that utilized death energy as its fuel, then the ones who have mastered the power of the death attribute to a much greater degree most definitely had a much more sophisticated arsenal at their disposal!

Yet even if he accounted for this possibility, he did not dare to imagine that the enemy's response was strong enough to suppress an ace commander's domain field to this degree!

"The enemy is not ignorant of our capabilities." Casella Ingvar immediately concluded. "I cannot sense the invisible hand that is directing this play, but I can feel the effects. I have to expend a lot more willpower and effort to prevent my Command Field from collapsing further. The quantity of death energy crashing into our direction has increased, and the harm they cause has grown stronger as well. I cannot Commandeer or Enfeoff as many mechs either. So long as the energy vortices remain in place, I need to direct most of my power and energy into holding the line. If I withdraw my strength, the defensive spell array alone will not be able to maintain our bubble of safety."

"The Saint Commander is most likely correct." The Farseer shared her own expert opinion. "We have not been able to sample the activated energies in person, but our remote observations and methods have revealed that they have gained a remarkably powerful 'erosion effect'. The enemy's qi formation is exquisite. It is able to amplify and direct the dark miasma to such a great extent that it is clearly not a quick and easy endeavor. The enemy invested a large amount of resources into developing this partial counter."

Ves frowned deeper. He hated it when the enemy was intelligent for once.

The Red Cabal and their new deathborn collaborators both possessed at least a superficial understanding of the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet.

The hostile aliens knew about Saint Commander Casella Ingvar and the game-changing properties of her signature Command Field.

How could they not? The Larkinsons never kept it secret, nor did they had any intention of using it sparingly as if it was a precious trump card.

The Larkinsons had harvested many benefits through their liberal use of Casella's Command Field.

However, they had used it so often in front of enemies that hardly any of its parameters remained hidden to this day!

Previously, the Larkinsons never showed too much concern about this exposure because it was not as if the enemy could do anything to counter it directly.

The Red Cabal and the major alien races possessed extensive mastery in phasewater technology, but their accumulation in the more ethereal branches of technology was too shallow!

Yet this weakness did not apply to the deathborn.

Even if Ves speculated that the natives of Messier 87 did not have any experience with dealing with the power of an ace pilot and an ace mech, they still understood how to manipulate extraordinary energies a lot better than the louts of the Red Ocean!

Therefore, when faced with a Command Field, the deathborn skillfully cobbled together a qi formation in a completely distant and alien dwarf galaxy.

"We have gotten caught up in a new form of warfare." Ves made a realization. "Energy field warfare is centered around the competition between opposing energy fields. The side that is able to achieve dominance in this arena will be able to control the battlefield much more effectively. This

is devastating for the losing side. Casella's Command Field strengthened all of our forces to the extent where we can fight against 10 times our number without suffering serious casualties. Now, the enemy is trying to turn the tables. If their death energy formation can completely collapse our own energy fields, then we will all be driven to the brink of collapse!"

Energy field warfare!

This was a new concept that previously had little relevance to humans aside from the occasional clashes between high-ranking mech pilots.

Only ace pilots used to have a lot of experience with this as their Saint Kingdoms often tried to gain ground over each other.

Yet now that both humans as well as aliens began to explore and master the power of qi formations, Saint Kingdoms no longer held a monopoly on this aspect of warfare anymore!

Ves and other leaders already realized the many implications behind this inevitable development.

Unfortunately, while many people based in the rear had the luxury of theorizing on this emerging trend, the soldiers on the ground could not afford to wait so long!

They needed to take action immediately!

"Farseer!" Ves barked. "We need to disable or dismantle the enemy death energy formation as quickly as possible! What are your suggestions?!"

Andrea Vos felt flustered after being put on the spot. "We have too little information. We need to scout the enemy's arrangement. We... we need to send out a unit and approach one of the energy vortices."

They needed to take a look up close!

Chapter 7512 Into Darkness

Chapter 7512 Into Darkness

Take a look up close.

That was not as simple as it sounded.

"The enemy 'formation anchors' may be positioned right outside of our protective bubble, but the difference is as vast as the difference between heaven and hell." Ves said after a brief pause.

"Almost none of our people can withstand the attacks of so many deathborn. They also won't be able to last too long against the dark miasma, especially now that the enemy death energy formation has imbued it with enhanced erosion characteristics."

That latter part made a jaunt into enemy territory a lot more dangerous than before!

The Saint Commander only had a limited amount of options at her disposal.

"Ves, how do you think your Woodsap mechs or Ascended Giants would fare if they leave the protection of our energy fields?"

"Not good." He immediately judged. "In both cases, their resistance mainly comes from their strong vitality. My Woodsap mechs should be able to endure for a few minutes at most. The problem is that every second of exposure will rapidly wear down their energy and possibly their material reserves. They can take a quick peek, but that is all. As for my Ascended Giants, they should be able to endure greater pressure due to the buffer provided by their true bodies, but I am concerned that the deathborn are able to target their souls directly. You should know as well as I do that typical phase lords are strong in body but weak in spirit."

None of the two options sounded ideal. Sending either of them out meant expecting casualties, especially given how the enemy had studied the Larkinsons.

Who knew how many solutions the native aliens and the deathborn had prepared!

"Send me out, Casella." Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson requested on his own accord.

"Reconnaissance is one of my main responsibilities. My Saint Kingdom is not as diluted as your Command Field. The opposing energy fields can only suppress its range at most. It will never be able to threaten my ace mech himself. Once I have found what the aliens or deathborn are up to, I can immediately proceed with sabotaging whatever they are doing."

Sending out the ace mechs right away sounded like the right move, but it was exactly because of this reason that the Saint Commander felt more reluctant.

From what she had observed of the enemy, she knew that she was dealing with an intelligent and knowledgeable opponent.

Sending out a single ace mech into a highly disadvantageous environment sounded risky.

What if the Dark Zephyr Mark III got caught in a trap and needed to be rescued?

Should the Larkinsons send out their other ace mechs?

Perhaps they would be next to fall into a trap!

The Hypeh-Tekas System presented so many uncertainties that no one knew the extent of the dangers here. Their enemies clearly made preparations. The question now was whether they were extensive enough to endanger everyone.

The Saint Commander could not afford to deliberate on her decisions for too long.

"We are suffering from a lack of intelligence. The enemy does not, at least not to the same extent. We urgently need to regain parity with our opponents. That said, we will not do so by recklessly sending out our best. Tusa, you and your battle partner must continue to patrol our interior. We need you to remain on guard against sneak attacks. The enemy leader may be trying to feint us in order to attack us at an unexpected angle. That is what I would do if I was in its place."

Saint Tusa clearly did not like this command, but he understood its necessity. "Fine."

The Dark Zephyr Mark III may fare best when venturing behind enemy lines, but his speed made him almost just as valuable in a defensive capacity.

He also served as an excellent patroller and first responder. No covert activities could escape the notice of his Saint Kingdom, and the ace light skirmisher's mobility allowed him to sweep a greater volume of space than other individual units.

"Mr. Shuku." The Saint Commander addressed the elven Terran leader next. "Form 4 squads and send them towards all 4 energy cyclones in order to gather intelligence. Do not get bogged down, and do not take undue risks. Your only mission is to make enough observations so our experts can decipher the enemy's methods. If you can catch sight of any strong or unusual enemy deployments, then that is good, but not essential."

"Understood." The Second Elf succinctly replied. "Maintaining communications inside the dark miasma will be difficult if not impossible. There is a chance that the enemy may eliminate one or several squads without giving the latter enough time to bring back their findings."

"I am aware, but I have already prepared a response. Go now and execute my orders."

None of the Terran mech pilots objected to this sudden and incredibly risky assignment. Their Woodsap mechs were more special than the conventional first-class multipurpose mechs. It made sense for them to undertake greater responsibilities.

Four squads quickly began to fly towards the energy vortices. Each of them seemed small and inconsequential, yet the biomechs all exuded a sense of strength and vitality that contrasted sharply against the ominous background!

The Woodsap mechs had already been topped off beforehand. Each of them operated with close to full reserves. Though that did not necessarily make them invincible, it should at least afford them precious time in hostile territory!

The Rosenstorm did not evade this assignment. Caracalla Shuku was not the sort of leader who was willing to stay in the rear while letting his fellow elves and other Terrans endure all of the danger and hardships.

If he wanted the elves to rise in the Terran Alliance, then he needed to lead by example.

"Five minutes." He instructed. "That is our limit. Regardless of what happens, you must suspend whatever you are doing and return to safety. I do not know whether our mechs will be able to last this long, but we will presume all is lost if you fail to return after the deadline."

After giving a few more quick instructions, the Rosenstorm and a company's worth of precious prototype Woodsap mechs plunged into the dark miasma in four different directions!

The biomechs immediately came under assault!

Their azure energy shields came online and partially weakened the strong flows of negative energies.

Though the protection they offered was very limited, their energy consumption nonetheless skyrocketed, making this a very costly endeavor!

This was another reason why Caracalla Shuku wanted to keep this reconnaissance mission short.

The physical defenses of the Woodsap mechs fared worse. Whatever energies got past the azure energy shield began to make contact with the organic mech frames.

The TE Wood was able to resist the enhanced erosion effect of the activated death energies fairly well.

They hardly showed any signs of damage or exhaustion.

Yet all of this came at a greater price. The Woodsap mech pilots could feel the skyrocketing drain to their machines. Their bonded partners were forced to expend large amounts of wood energy and life energy just to resist the hostile environment!

Normally, this shouldn't have been a problem, because Woodsap mechs were designed to replenish their reserves by siphoning additional energies from E energy radiation or other external sources such as Gaia Trees or the native flora of nearby lifebearing planets.

Unfortunately, none of these sources were available at this time. The hostile energy fields prevented the Woodsap mechs from leveraging one of their greatest advantages!

That meant that each of them were reduced to relying on their own internal resources. This was one of the worst-case scenarios for these Woodsap mechs.

If not for the fact that other mechs would fare worse under the same circumstances, the Saint Commander would have never assigned this mission to the new Terran mechs!

Shortly after the four squads plunged into hostile territory, the prototype Woodsap mechs found themselves blinded by the environment.

The dark miasma blocked or interfered with their sensor systems so well that they were unable to detect any of the friendly mechs or warships they had left behind!

This was extremely dangerous. If not for the fairly strong spiritual sensitivity of the living Woodsap mechs themselves, they would have lost their sense of direction at this time!

Even so, it became a lot more difficult to navigate this dark and murky environment.

"Strange. Where are the deathborn? Our biomechs should have come under heavy assault, yet not a single one has attempted to launch an attack."

"They are close." An elven Woodsap mech pilot said. "I can feel their hunger and desire. They hate the living, and nothing is more alive than our partners."

The implications were concerning.

"The only reason why they are holding back despite their insatiable greed towards life is... because they are being held back by their leaders."

"..."

A minute passed as the squads continued to fly deeper without any developments.

"Wait." Caracalla Shuku frowned. "We should have traveled far enough to approach the eye of one of the energy vortices already, yet we have encountered nothing so far. This is unusual. I am afraid... we are already caught in a trap! Our enemy is tampering with our perception!"

For whatever reason, they hadn't noticed this glaring discrepancy, and that made this whole situation more alarming!

"We need to break whatever net the enemy has cast on us! Form a battle network on my command!"

The Woodsap mechs instantly rearranged their formation until their wood energies began to harmonize with each other!

Even if the squad was fairly small, the prototype biomechs possessed enough vitality to fuel a temporary state of empowerment!

Chapter 7513 The Strongest Energy Field

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"Ves."

"Hm? What's up, Gloriana?"

"Why are we letting our Woodsap mechs outside of the protective range of our defensive spell array and Saint Kingdom? I am aware of the need to test the performance of your latest work under a variety of conditions, but this falls well outside reasonable and expected conditions. Are you not afraid that you have thrown away the lives of those test pilots and prototype mechs? If the Second Elf falls so soon, then the Terrans and particularly the elves among them will suffer a terrible setback."

Ves looked up from the tactical map that displayed all of the movements of all friendly units currently within reach.

The projected map very clearly did not show the up to date positions of the Woodsap mechs sent on a reconnaissance mission.

They only showed the outlines of their last known coordinates before they plunged into the dark miasma.

"I admit that sending them out blind is indeed a highly risky gambit." He responded to his wife. "However, what these deathborn are doing will not remain isolated. Now that they have gained a foothold in our dwarf galaxy, they will only become more and more common over time. Red humanity will have no choice but to confront them on the battlefield, just as is the case with the mutated voribugs. In this context, knowing how our Woodsap mechs perform when operating in this kind of highly adverse environment can make a huge difference. It will determine whether the Terrans will invest more resources and manpower into producing more of my works."

"That is assuming that this test will yield a positive result." Gloriana pointed out the obvious fault line in his plan. "There is an absolute gap in power between the Woodsap mechs and the enemies that surround us. If they weren't living Woodsap mechs, then they would have succumbed within a minute or two. Yet even if they are biomechs that are filled with wood energy and life energy, that does not mean they can last much longer in a hostile environment. Their energy reserves are finite. There is only so much that these organic mechs can carry. I seriously doubt they can last 5 whole minutes."

Ves' expression grew strained. "To be honest, I do not disagree with you. Setting it as the deadline may be wishful thinking on my part. Nonetheless, I still have hope. Mr. Shuku and his subordinates have not rejected their latest assignment either. They believe in their own strength. Since that is the case, I am more than willing to take a chance. I know my work well enough that it has the potential to endure the adverse circumstances long enough to complete their tasks and return intact, though not without suffering a few losses depending on the opposition."

"What if there is an enemy phase lord lying in ambush out there? Such an opponent can quickly crush the Woodsap mechs, especially now that the latter can no longer draw strength from Casella's Command Field."

Ves shrugged. "Then the squad in question has suffered a stroke of bad fortune. My Woodsap mechs can do many things, but confronting a native alien phase lord by themselves falls well outside of reasonable expectations."

Nobody knew what was lurking out there, which was why it became necessary to send out these scouts in the first place.

Even if all 4 squads got annihilated without being given the chance to bring back any sort of useful intelligence, then that constituted a useful development in itself!

It was this presumption of sacrifice that made Ves feel a little sorrowful at seeing them go. He did not regret this action, but that did not mean he could remain heartless at the loss of all of those valuable Woodsap mechs and Woodsap mech pilots.

"If I had a choice, I would have sent out the Dark Zephyr Mark III already. He is faster than anyone and can survive far greater ordeals."

"The Saint Commander was right to hold Tusa back." Ves disagreed with his wife. "Casella suspects that we are dealing with a competent, capable and well-informed opponent this time. We cannot take our advantages for granted. Unless we have confirmed that the enemy has not prepared a specific counter against our ace mechs, then trying to fulfill the same mission with less strategic assets is imperative."

Gloriana found it difficult to believe that this was the case. Sure, the deathborn was able to produce enormous numbers of themselves, but they are all incredibly weak. They only pose an elevated threat because of their high numbers and their obvious synergies with the dark miasma. Other than that, the deathborn are all fodder from the perspective of a powerful ace pilot. Tusa's willpower should be more than strong enough to form an impregnable defense against intangible assaults."

"No offense, honey, but that sounds like pure hubris to me. We are already making way too many dangerous assumptions. Yours is so much bigger than others. Have you actually taken a look outside with your naked eyes?"

"No. Where are you going with this, Ves?"

Ves energetically thrust his arm in a random direction! "All of the deathborn we have been dealing with so far only consist of the bottom existences among this M87 race! If they are anything like the demons that I have been working with, then they most definitely have higher variations among them. They should have deathborn that are able to reach the level of a cultivator of the first major cultivation rank. Their numbers may not be as exaggerated, but there is a qualitative difference in strength. There is also the possibility that they have already managed to raise or restore the deathborn of the second major cultivation rank. That roughly puts them on par with the likes of the Goliaths of the mutated voribugs, and you should still remember how much we struggled against these giant insects!"

"So... the reason why we should not send out our ace mechs is because of the small possibility of encountering deathborn variants that are strong enough to challenge our best champions?"

"Yes. If our Woodsap mechs have the bad luck to bump into one of them, then all we have lost is an expensive but ultimately replaceable mech unit. If one of our precious ace mechs encounter the more powerful deathborn variants, then our potential losses may be far greater. The support we can provide is limited so long as there is so much dark miasma in the way."

Gloriana paused for a moment. "Alright. I accept your explanation. Be that as it may, we cannot afford to keep our ace mechs idle for so long."

"Casella has already sent out the First Sword Mark III towards the breach in an attempt to plug the gaps and rescue our missing vessels. Look."

The Saint Commander's iconic Command Field had done much to relieve the pressure on the defensive spell array.

However, its diluted nature made it very difficult to push back any concentrated effort by the enemy to claim a region of space.

Saint Dise did not care for this. Her ace swordsman mech flew straight towards the dark and misty bulge and stimulated her domain field to its strongest state!

A Saint Kingdom that evoked impressions of swords, sharpness and metal collided against the dark miasma and the deathborn that were lurking inside.

Both immediately experienced a strong form of repulsion and rejection that could not be evaded!

"BEGONE, FOUL UNDEAD."

Though their attributes did not specialize in purification or exorcism, the domineering willpower of a genuine ace pilot was not a force that the current forces of darkness could contend with in a direct collision!

The more the First Sword Mark III flew forward, the more dark miasma got dispelled or displaced.

In this new arena of energy field warfare, humans could hardly imagine any energy field that was more powerful than the domain fields of ace pilots and god pilots!

The powerful saints and gods of this extraordinary profession had demonstrated their reality-defying capabilities many times during the last age.

The new age did not impair or invalidate their strength in the slightest!

In fact, they gained greater relevance and appreciation for their broad versatility. They could pose a strong threat against both corporeal and intangible opponents.

The First Sword Mark III did not even have to swing her Decapitator once or dispatch her superdimensional sword fey. Her superior domain field alone was enough to clear up a lot of polluted space!

Yet as the ace mech continued to move forward, the first missing ship finally reappeared.

"That.. that is the Geirne Fis! That is an RF destroyer!"

The condition of the ship had deteriorated by an enormous extent.

It was as if it had not only aged for 500 years straight without receiving any maintenance, but it also looked dead and desolate in a way that could not be described.

Ves could feel more keenly than anyone else that this once-proud and modern RF destroyer had lost much if not all of her life.

No lights flickered.

The ship did not transmit any signals, even routine or automated ones.

The Geirne Fis had only been engulfed by the dark miasma for a couple of minutes, but it had already undergone a complete transformation!

"Saint Dise, can you... detect any activity inside the warship?"

The First Sword Mark III slowed down her advance and flew close enough to envelop the entire hull in her sharp and metallic Saint Kingdom.

"...Nothing. I sense no life. Only the absence of it. There are only bones inside."

Chapter 7514 Primitive Formation

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What happened to the Geirne Fis made Ves even more vigilant towards the enemy.

Ordinary deathborn could never strip the RF destroyer of all life in such a short amount of time.

Even if they operated under activated death energy that had gained enhanced erosion capabilities, the shift was way too dramatic!

"Be careful!" He transmitted over the command channel. "There must be a powerful enemy or enemies lurking near us! If they can ruin a destroyer like the Geirne Fis in such a short amount of time, then they can probably do the same to a cruiser or a battleship. This is not a feat that can be done by any ordinary deathborn."

Though the presence of more powerful variants of deathborn had not been confirmed, Ves was 99 percent certain that they had already arrived!

An invisible form of pressure descended over the entire combined fleet as everyone had to take this unknown threat into account.

The continued lack of information on this new type of adversary continued to generate a lot of apprehension.

Dangerous shadows lurked behind the dark curtain. Like patient hunters, they had made sure to stay out of sight. The longer they remained hidden, the more the humans feared their eventual pounce.

Ves did not feel good about this at all. He had worked hard to climb up the ladder and build his own power base so that he could transform from prey to predator.

All of the years he spent on building the Larkinson Clan and growing his relationships with organizations such as the Red Association should have firmly allowed him to grasp the initiative in every fight.

Yet this unexpected encounter with an entirely new race and civilization from M87 made him feel as if he had regressed.

Due to the enemy's dominant energy fields, the deathborn possessed most of the cards. They held all of the initiative. They could attack, hide or retreat at their leisure.

The fact that they had chosen to launch an attack while the combined fleet was still in transit to the inner system suggested that the deathborn most likely possessed the strength to contend with the invading humans!

While there was a possibility that he was overestimating how much power the deathborn could bring to bear in this fight, Ves would rather err on the side of caution in this case.

Saint Jannzi Larkinson, who had been observing the battle from an observer's seat in the bridge of the Tarrasque, managed to make this deduction as well.

She frowned as she gazed at the local plot. Her nature as a defender made her aware of how certain key vessels appeared awfully vulnerable to enemy attacks. The new ace pilot deeply wished that the Design Department had already repaired and upgraded her precious Bastion.

"Saint Commander." She softly spoke. "My... intuition tells me that our enemies are not trying to chip away at our forces. That is too marginal for them. I would rather believe that they are targeting our core assets, most notably the Tarrasque or the Tortuous Scream. If I was in command of their forces, I would try to draw away our ace mechs and other assets to create an opening to launch an overwhelming strike at one of our most important leaders or ships. They want to weaken us as much as possible before we arrive at the doorstep of one of their bases."

"Noted." Casella responded. "I have already envisioned this potential scenario, but your feedback has adjusted my appraisal of the likelihood that our alien adversaries are indeed preparing a decapitation strike. Please be assured that I have already put contingencies in place."

"Perhaps it would be more prudent to deploy the Fiery Axe and her Ascended Giants in advance." Ves suggested as the leader of the Phase Lord Department. "If the deathborn have made the decision to bring out their best, then we should do so as well."

The Saint Commander evidently disagreed. "Patience. We must be vigilant towards the enemy, but not impatient. We are not yet certain whether this is a ploy to expose all of our trump cards in vain. The Ascended Giants must remain on standby. I would prefer not to reveal them before we have arrived in orbit of Hypeh-Tekas II. Once we have reached this destination, then the human phase lords can do much more damage than in an empty patch of space."

He could understand her reasoning.

The Ascended Giants possessed a lot of destructive potential.

They might not be as good as the upcoming Promethea Mark II when it came to wrecking infrastructure, but they were numerous!

The combined fleet would definitely need their strength if they wanted to ruin whatever grand scheme the deathborn had implemented on this critical planet.

If they exposed all of their Ascended Giants in advance, then the native aliens and the deathborn would definitely be able to adjust their defenses and prepare more countermeasures.

This was the problem with challenging intelligent and observant opponents!

Ves really did not want to give the deathborn enough time to prepare their own versions of anti-phase lord armaments.

Such solutions probably bypassed the powerful true bodies of the Ascended Giants in order to target their relatively weak spiritualities directly!

Though Ves was hopeful that their superdimensional raiments could provide at least some measure of protection against intangible attacks, he would rather not put this assumption to the test!

"I hope that you will eventually decide to field our giant friends from the Red Collective sooner rather than later." Jannzi said as she still disagreed with the Saint Commander's considerations. "What is the point of bringing along so many well-equipped human phase lords when you are too reluctant to make use of them? They should be the ones to protect our vulnerable ships and crew, not the other way around."

It was clear to both Ves and Casella that Jannzi felt frustrated beyond belief that she could not take to the field herself and take action to protect vulnerable assets from enemy attacks.

Though Ves truly wanted to get her back in the saddle, he and his wife still needed to finalize the Promethea Mark II before they could work on the Bastion Mark II Project!

While he thought about how to find shortcuts that could accelerate his design work, the First Sword Mark III continued to displace more dark miasma.

The ace mech had moved deeper to the point where the dark energies returned to the space that she had previously visited.

The sight looked a bit surreal.

The deeper the First Sword Mark III ventured into the compromised part of space, the more glaring her Saint Kingdom became.

It was as if a bubble of sharp reality had forcibly imposed itself inside a cloud of darkness!

While Saint Dise carefully sought to track down the other human starships that had gone missing, the Woodsap mechs that had ventured well outside of the protective range of Casella's Command Field all seemed lost and adrift!

The squad lead by the Second Elf was the first that deduced that they may have been wandering in circles.

The deathborn must have employed some sort of sorcery of qi formation that erased their sense of direction!

"Form a battle network!" Caracalla Shuku roared! "If the power of mortals cannot break the spell, then let the power of our goddess pierce through this veil!"

Ves had not deprived the users of his Woodsap mechs from forming a battle network.

He no longer considered this ability to be an exclusive trump card.

The Red Collective had conducted extensive research of all manner of qi formations.

Battle networks no longer became a mystery to them. They could replicate this once-exclusive method themselves, though it was a lot more cumbersome to do so with non-living mechs.

Nonetheless, seeing as the collies had managed to deduce the principles by themselves, Ves saw no reason to treasure his battle networks so highly anymore.

While he was not willing to give it away to the public for free, he still felt they could add even more value to his elemental Carmine mechs.

Thus, the Woodsap mechs and mech pilots began to form a primitive formation all by themselves.

Despite the lack of training and unfamiliarity with battle networks, the Woodsap mech pilots all knew what to do practically by instinct.

The living biomechs had been designed with this purpose in mind. They took care of much of the details, allowing their human pilots to focus on synchronizing their thoughts and emotions around a unifying pillar.

To the Terran test pilots, the strongest subject that could unite them in mind and spirit was Gaia.

This was especially the case for the elves among them, who had literally ingested the universal life energy supplied by the Mother of Earth!

The dark miasma that had become ubiquitous in the Hypeh-Tekas System may have dampened all of their connections to the female ancestral spirit to the point the connections became inert, but their coordinated efforts to call upon the power of the goddess still yielded a result.

The battle network did not succeed in prying open a gap in the blockade.

The participants were way too weak for that, and their numbers were not enough to accomplish any grand feats either.

What they did manage to do was to stimulate the dormant seeds and traces that Gaia had left upon their bodies and spirits!

Caracalla Shuku and the other elves in the squad felt this most acutely!

Each of them had the illusion that a seed had sprouted in the depths of their soul. This foreign seed did not feel threatening at all, because they all instinctively felt that a piece of Gaia had taken root!

Chapter 7515 Facsimile of Divinity

Chapter 7515 Facsimile of Divinity

Due to many limitations and shortcomings, the battle network formed by a squad of Woodsap mechs could not produce any drastic results.

Yet that did not mean it was useless.

The biomechs and their pilots all prayed towards Gaia, their deity and patron.

This produced many reactions. One of them was the activation of aspects that previously remained dormant.

All of the Woodsap mechs carried a tiny part of Gaia within their spiritual foundations. The latter served as their design spirit, which meant that each of them had been exposed to her divine power.

This produced consequences. One of them was that the biomechs had been permanently marked by Gaia. Another way of looking at it was that they had all been contaminated by a powerful entity.

Now, the Terran pilots deliberately tried to stimulate it in order to draw out its power!

This was difficult, as there was not much of it to begin with. The environment cut them off the source, so they had no choice but to work with what little they had at their disposal.

The only way to further stimulate and amplify this extraordinary energy was to supply it with fuel.

Therefore, none of the pilots or living mechs hesitated when they channeled their energies into Gaia's remnant traces.

The latter began to inflate and gain greater weight in the local area due to a strong influx of wood energy and life energy!

Though the drain on their energy reserves had multiplied by a considerable degree, everyone thought it was worth it as the aspect of Gaia grew stronger!

All of this effort converged upon the central organic machine.

The Rosenstorm seemed to bloom brighter than the other biomechs.

The roses that had grown across the torso and limbs became more vivid and colorful. The overall wooden exterior also began mold and shift into a more feminine profile.

What was most remarkable was that the head slowly started to take on the visage that harkened back to Gaia herself!

It was as if the squad of Woodsap mechs had successfully summoned their goddess!

Unfortunately, the reality fell short of this outcome.

The dark miasma interfered with their connections to their deity too well to summon her to this hostile location.

What they had done was merely concentrate all of the aspects of Gaia that could moved into the Rosenstorm.

This weakened the others, but it was for a good cause because they temporarily elevated the Rosenstorm into a derivative of their goddess!

For a few seconds, it seemed as if the Rosenstorm had truly transformed into a derived aspect or even descendant of Gaia.

The beautiful biomech could even assume the identity of the Goddess of the Roses, if only barely due to the small trace of divinity exuding from the organic mech frame.

The biomech's altered face even began to show a semblance of life and consciousness.

It was as if the Woodsap mechs and mech pilots had accidentally given birth to a brand-new deity!

Unfortunately, this extraordinary glimpse only lasted for another second before disappearing.

The Woodsap mechs and their pilots had exerted themselves too much. They failed to maintain their special state and ultimately broke their synchronized state.

The battle network fell apart.

Their collective degenerated into individual pieces again.

The Second Elf winced as he felt an ache and an emptiness in his head. He had borne the greatest pressure due to his living mech serving as the focal point of the battle network.

That was harder and more draining than he thought.

The hostile environment exerted far too much pressure. In that brief instance where he became touched by divinity, he briefly felt as if he had turned himself and his bonded partner into a lighthouse in a very oppressive night.

Still, the lighthouse had managed to do its job.

It had lit up the night skies and formed a beacon for a few crucial seconds.

Combined with the indescribable divine guidance that he had somehow acquired, the Terran pilots had successfully pierced through the veil that falsified their perception of the outside environment!

The dark miasma no longer appeared as calm and directionless as before.

It had gained a lot more volatility.

The nearest energy vortex became visible again. The Terrans could finally navigate their way towards the eye of the storm.

They also figured out why they had yet to encounter any deathborn up until this point.

"Careful, sir. Our optical sensors have managed to detect a large concentration of deathborn in the middle of that vortex. They must be there for a reason."

The Second Elf nodded in agreement. "Proceed forward. Our time is short and our energy reserves have already halved. We must take action no matter the enemies in our way."

The squad of Woodsap mechs ventured deeper into the dark miasma. The biomechs faced stronger miasma winds.

Though they did not impart any physical force, their erosive properties still tried to compromise the living frames and burn as much of their wood energy as possible!

The latter was the most serious threat, as the Woodsap mechs relied heavily on their E energy reserves to maintain their effectiveness in this difficult environment.

More than a few Woodsap mech pilots believed that it would have been better for them if they turned around in order to resupply, but the rest of them knew that it was absolutely necessary for them to complete their mission.

Caracalla Shuku guessed that the other three squads had encountered the same veil of misdirection.

It was an excellent and subtle way to lead the human mechs astray, causing them to ultimately run out of E energy and thereby forcing them to endure the full brunt of the dark miasma with much less special protections!

Perhaps their squad leaders may have gotten the bright idea to form a battle network as well, but whether they could pull it off successfully remained to be seen.

The elven leader attributed most of his success to his favored status as Gaia's second representative as opposed to talent or skill.

His other colleagues did not possess this rare advantage. Perhaps the elves among them may be able to perform close enough to succeed, but he did not have absolute certainty.

That only strengthened his determination to see this to the end. If he and his men were the only ones that could make a difference, then they had to take action even if they ended up suffering serious losses!

After enduring a brutal flight where the biomechs got battered by increasingly faster and more violent erosive miasma, they finally managed to enter a pocket of relative calm!

Though the interior of the energy vortex was not completely calm and empty by any means, it at least did not force the Woodsap mechs to drain their already limited reserves.

What they encountered now that they had come close enough to get a good look surprised all of the Terran pilots.

The army of deathborn in front of them no longer looked crazed and mindless as before.

Though they had not appeared to have gotten smarter or more aware, they all formed into very neat and precise ranks.

The deathborn remained completely still regardless of what species they originated from. Human ghosts stood alongside jureg or nunser ghosts without expressing any hint of fear or fury.

To see this mixed bag of deathborn display so much discipline and control threw Caracalla and his fellow Woodsap mech pilots off-guard.

The army looked much scarier despite the fact that their numbers were not as overwhelming in this instance!

Yet what the deathborn were facing attracted even more attention.

"I believe we have encountered our first deathborn of a higher rank." A human Woodsap mech pilot commented. "He looks taller and definitely more intelligent than the fodder."

No one would ever be able to mistake this powerful deathborn entity for the more weaker ones that ranked at the bottom.

The orven-derived deathborn was taller and his form was slightly less translucent. He carried a rigid sense of alien authority that made it clear that he was the source behind this controlled display.

Caracalla could even sense the deathborn leader's considerable strength!

Yet despite the high status of this new variant of deathborn, the elven Woodsap mech pilot doubted that he had stumbled upon the genuine mastermind and powerhouse.

The deathborn 'officer' did not possess the strength to challenge any of the human ace mechs head-on. He did not even appear to possess the strength to create 4 formidable energy vortices, let alone a single one!

The true role of this officer entity soon became clear as the Woodsap mechs finally managed to observe what this disciplined army was guarding.

"That... ominous gray pillar resembles a formation anchor. See how the surrounding dark miasma is affected by this object. This must be the source behind the energy vortex. We have to destroy it immediately, sir!"

Though the prospect of confronting this strange army sounded daunting, none of the Terran pilots turned back at this time!

Chapter 7516 Roused Up

Chapter 7516 Roused Up

A moment of stagnation ensued just after the Woodsap mech squad stumbled upon the deathborn army.

Fortunately, the latter did not take action for whatever reason.

Its officer figure most definitely noticed the intrusion of human biomechs. He had to be able to do so because the living organic machines were way too conspicuous in the sea of negative energies.

Yet the fact that the deathborn did not proactively dispatch all or just a part of his army to the human intruders seemed unusual.

The Terran mech pilots were not stupid by any means. They all took notice of this and formed a few conclusions.

"The 'officer' does not enjoy a large degree of autonomy." One test pilot said. "He can only respond when specific conditions are met. I believe that we will come under attack as soon as we launch a strike or come within a certain distance."

"This is proof that the deathborn possess a strict hierarchy where obedience is absolute. This is probably the only way for them to control their unruly and irrational minions. We can deduce the existence of at least one more leader above this officer class."

"This deathborn army's objective is clear." The Second Elf stated. "It is assigned to guard the central pillar that most definitely acts as the formation pillar for the energy vortex formation that is currently assailing our fleet."

"Great! Now that we have made it this far, we can finally take it out! Let's open fire, sir! The pillar is completely static. Our ranged armaments can bombard it from this distance with ease!"

"Denied! Hold your fire!"

"What? Why are you hesitating? Let us attack and get this done with, sir!"

"Have you forgotten your mission, Dawson?! Our primary objective is to scout the enemy arrangements around this energy vortex. We have just fulfilled it. The Saint Commander did not oblige us to sabotage the deathborn's arrangement."

"As much as I look up to the Larkinson Clan's ace commander, we are Terrans! We have our own judgment and answer to our own chain of command! I see no reason why we would back off when the thing that is making everyone miserable has already been locked on by our targeting systems!"

"Dawson! You fool! Do not be misled by the enemy's current display. They have already fooled us once. They can easily do it again! I smell a trap here. You may not know how spell arrays work, but I have approached the members of the Red Collective to inquire about this subject in the not-so-distant past. They have told me that every serious qi formation tries its best to hide the formation anchors once they are active. This is a basic necessity as enemies would otherwise be able to target these static objects with ease. There is no reason for the deathborn to openly display this 'formation anchor' unless it is a decoy or bait!"

The deathborn had already demonstrated their capacity for utilizing strategy and deception on the battlefield.

They were clearly intelligent opponents that still possessed enough foresight and rationality at the top to employ clever tactics and strategies.

Caracalla Shuku therefore believed it was absolutely taboo to look down on his adversary!

They may be aliens, but they were not stupid!

Therefore, a seemingly 'easy' and 'straightforward' opportunity to destroy one of the enemy's formation anchors did not fill him with joy.

It raised his suspicion.

The more he looked at the formation anchor and its guards, the lower his willingness to plunge ahead and take needless risks.

"Turn back. We must return to the fleet and relay our findings."

"For Gaia's sake! You are making a serious mistake, sir! By the time we return, the deathborn would have already swallowed a quarter or maybe half of our fleet! The more time we waste, the more humans will get killed! We have more than enough firepower to get this done! Those deathborn may look intimidating, but it is all for show. Their bodies are not corporeal and cannot inflict much harm on our living mechs!"

"That is a dangerous assumption. Even if we can fend off the regular deathborn for a time, the enemy officer is different."

"Then we should ignore and keep our distance from the deathborn officer!"

"Mr. Shuku, I agree with Dawson." Another Terran pilot spoke up. "We all volunteered to become warriors, not scouts. Woodsap mechs like ours are designed to fight the enemy head-on and endure whatever they throw at us. Instead of chickening out, we should fulfill our original purpose and smash the deathborn and their precious formation anchor. I will not accept any cowardly actions!"

The Second Elf felt a burst of rage welling up in his head!

"HOW DARE YOU! I AM YOUR SUPERIOR, AND AND ELF NO LESS! HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN YOUR TRAINING!? WE ARE SOLDIERS, NOT BARBARIANS! AS TERRANS, WE HAVE A DUTY TO UPHOLD THE HONOR OF OUR NATION! BOTH OF YOU ARE FAILING TO DO SO BY QUESTIONING YOUR ORDERS IN THE MIDDLE OF A HOSTILE BATTLEFIELD! CEASE YOUR PRATTING AND FALL IN LINE, OR I WILL PERSONALLY REVOKE YOUR PILOTING QUALIFICATIONS AND HAVE OUR PERSONNEL RECYCLE YOUR PRECIOUS WOODSAP MECHS! I WILL NEVER TOLERATE ANY ACTS OF DISOBEDIENCE AND DEFIANCE FROM THE TROOPS UNDER MY COMMAND!"

It shouldn't have been necessary for the Terran scion-turned-leader to issue such a strong rebuke!

They were all elites who had undergone rigorous training! Most of them also had enough field experience to understand the importance of maintaining discipline and respecting the chain of command.

The Terrans always prided themselves for fielding the most professional and disciplined military units out of the entire human race.

They possessed the oldest traditions and the most rigorous set of rules and regulations that had kept them alive for many millenia.

Their rivals and adversaries often criticized the Terrans for being such a stickler for rules and traditions that they had practically turned into fossils, but they were probably just jealous or whatever.

Perhaps the Larkinsons could get away with greater degrees of informality and doubting the judgment of their superiors, but that was absolutely not a common phenomenon in any professional Terran military unit!

This thought suddenly triggered an acute realization in the Second Elf's mind.

Much of his anger and fury at being questioned by his subordinates crumbled apart now that he began to think critically on what just happened.

His eyes widened as a very strong suspicion came to mind!

"WAIT! We managed to neutralize a single trap earlier, but that does not stop us from falling into another trap! Do you not realize how unusual it is for you to waste so many precious seconds on arguing against your direct superior? Regulations clearly state that such behavior belongs in the conference room, not the battlefield! Snap out of it and back away! We will not launch any attacks when the deathborn are deliberately pushing you to do so for their own purposes!"

A very brief pause followed before Dawson spoke again. "I... have HAD ENOUGH OF YOU, ELF! I HAVE BEEN BOTTLING THIS UP FOR SO LONG, BUT I DON'T CARE ANYMORE! HOW DARE YOU BOSS US AROUND?! YOU ARE NOT HUMAN! YOU ARE AN ELF, A TRAITOR WHO HAS REJECTED HIS ORIGINAL RACE! YOU ARE JUST COSMOPOLITANS IN THE MAKING. I FIGURED OUT YOUR PLANS. YOU AND YOUR FELLOW 'ELVES' ARE POSING YOURSELF OFF AS HUMANS LONG ENOUGH TO INFILTRATE OUR LEADERSHIP AND TAKE OVER THE LEVERS OF POWER. ONCE YOU HAVE GAINED CONTROL OF THE TERRAN ALLIANCE, YOU WILL FORCE EVERY CITIZEN TO CONVERT INTO ELVES, THEREBY ERASING EVERY CONNECTION TO OUR PROUD HUMAN LEGACY!"

What?!

The Second Elf along with a few other Terran mech pilots reacted with complete shock at hearing this. If they previously suspected that the deathborn sneakily tried to influence their emotions to the detriment of the Terrans, then Dawson's latest outburst definitely cemented this idea!

Dawson not only went on a crazy anti-elf tangent in one of the worst possible times, he even directed his Woodsap mech to turn around and point all of the barrels of his integrated armaments towards the Rosenstorm!

"ENOUGH NONSENSE! I WANTED TO DO THIS SINCE DAY 1, BUT IT IS NEVER TOO LATE TO EXTERMINATE A RAT WITHIN OUR TERRAN SOCIETY! TAKE THIS, YOU FILTHY ELF!"

The Woodsap mech actually opened fire at the Rosenstorm!

Though the latter quickly relied on his azure energy shield to withstand the initial salvo of transphasic hyper attacks, the fact that one friendly Terran biomech actually dared to fire on another still shocked multiple soldiers!

Multiple, but not all!

To the Second Elf's shock and dismay, several other Woodsap mechs actually joined up with Dawson and pointed their armaments at the Rosenstorm as well!

"DEATH TO ELVENKIND!"

Three more human Terran Woodsap mech pilots hesitated no further and launched simultaneous strikes at the Rosenstorm!

The fact that they still showed a strong degree of coordination indicated that they had not completely lost their minds.

Yet the fact that they staged this idiotic rebellion anyway showed that something had gone terribly wrong!

Chapter 7517 Terrans Are Not Afraid Of Sacrifice

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Before the squad of Woodsap mechs had even begun to fight the deathborn properly, a disaster had occurred!

Half of the Woodsap mech pilots had lost their minds!

Outside factors had magnified the paranoia and misgivings they held against the elves and certain other grievances, causing them to completely lose sight of the bigger picture!

This produced catastrophic consequences!

The Second Elf still couldn't believe that his brothers-in-arms would lose so much perspective that they actually dared to turn their weapons against their own side!

"WAKE UP! YOU ARE BEING BRAINWASHED BY THE DEATHBORN! WE ARE ALL TERRANS! DO NOT OPEN FIRE AGAINST YOUR OWN BROTHERS!"

Despite his pleas, the maddened pilots completely disregarded his message and fought back even harder!

"ELVES AND THE HUMANS WHO HAVE BETRAYED THEIR OWN RACE MUST DIE!"

The fight started off chaotic, as it did not immediately become clear who had become bewitched by the enemy's unfathomable means.

However, they soon figured out which ones had become enthralled by the enemy's invisible scheme and which ones retained their wits.

The latter fell into a disadvantage due to losing the initiative and fell into indecision.

Even the Second Elf had not made up his mind whether to launch a full counterattack!

"Sir!" One of the other elven mech pilots spoke up! "Our energy reserves were already half-depleted from the start, and this fight is causing us to drain them even faster! We cannot afford to stay on the defensive. We need to strike back properly if we want to survive!"

"Don't kill them, please! Our brothers and sisters are mesmerised, not fallen! They can still be saved!"

The Second Elf would have dearly liked to snap his maddened subordinates out of their brainwashed state, but he completely lacked the means to accomplish this feat!

There was no time to figure out a good solution. As much as he hated it, Caracalla Shuku issued the only order that made sense from his perspective.

"Retreat." He said with a sigh. "Do not fight if you can avoid it. Do so if you have no other choice. Forget about attacking the deathborn. It is impossible for us to accomplish anything in our current condition. The only objective that matters is returning to the fleet with the intelligence that we have gathered. I also believe that as long as we manage to lure our mesmerized comrades back to friendly space, they can recover their sanity again. Above all else, remember that your survival is more important than theirs."

His remaining soldiers felt relieved after hearing this. While it was a cowardly act to prioritize withdrawal over fighting, none of them wanted to fight their fellow Woodsap mech pilots to the death!

The withdrawal began immediately.

Half of the Woodsap mechs that had already suffered a number of hits began to fly straight back towards the presumed location of the combined fleet.

The biomachines turned their backs on the neat formation of deathborn and the alien formation anchor without any regrets.

While the normal Woodsap mechs made good way, the compromised Woodsap mechs did not allow their presumed enemies to depart without a challenge!

The latter immediately started a pursuit and began to assail their targets with continuous firepower!

The azure energy shields did not last long. A few loyal Woodsap mechs already began to incur damage to their mech frames and most particularly their flight systems!

This caused their situation to deteriorate even further!

All mech pilots, even the newer ones that had recently become Woodsap mech pilots, learned that in this kind of situation, the mech that was being pursued always suffered a disadvantage.

Mechs always had to avoid situations where they presented their weakest side to the enemy.

A pursuit just happened to be one of the scenarios that could not prevent this from happening.

Though the Woodsap mechs were designed to be resilient and enduring, the flight system's inherent vulnerabilities could not be erased so easily.

The brainwashed Woodsap mech pilots may have forgotten how to distinguish between friends and enemies, but they somehow retained almost all of their combat skills and acumen!

With the ease of control provided by the Hibiscus System, the compromised Woodsap mech pilots managed to land their shots fairly easily.

Three Woodsap mechs suffered a drop in their acceleration rate, causing them to fall behind and make it even harder to shrug off the pursuers!

The pilots of the three biomachines made a spontaneous decision at the same time. They only spent a few seconds on communicating between themselves in order to confirm they were of the same mind.

They soon commanded their organic machines to turn around on their own initiative.

The mobility-impaired Woodsap mechs no longer sought to flee, but instead confronted the compromised biomechs in order to hinder their pursuit as best as possible!

"What are you doing?! I did not order you to engage in a rear guard action! Turn around this instant and resume your flight!"

"It is hopeless, sir! I am sorry for disobeying your instructions, but Terrans like us are not afraid of sacrifice! If we can keep our mad colleagues occupied, then that should be enough to help you return to the fleet intact! You can request the Saint Commander to send reinforcements to us after that. We will do our best to last as long as possible before rescue arrives! Now go!"

As much as the young elf wanted to tell his disobedient subordinates to give up on their foolhardy intentions, the situation was too precarious to indulge in any doubts.

Decisiveness trumped indecision.

Caracalla Shuku had learned that it was often, but not always, better to make a suboptimal decision and see it through the end than to repeatedly change your mind!

There was definitely no room for exceptions in this case.

The Second Elf suppressed his growing doubts and misgivings and continued to lead his Rosenstorm and his remaining two followers back to the combined fleet.

It felt dishonorable to leave his remaining brethren to fight and die against a numerically superior force of compromised Woodsap mechs, but partial annihilation was better than total annihilation!

The mission had to come first.

They could not afford to let all of this sacrifice go in vain.

Time passed by at an uncertain rate.

The lack of distinguishing marks within the dark miasma made it a little more difficult to keep track of the passage of time.

Even though every Woodsap mech possessed their own precision timers, Caracalla Shuku no longer dared to place blind trust in his bonded partner's performance.

He had witnessed too many perplexing setbacks today. The enemy proved way more capable than he initially thought. Their means of attack were varied and indirect, making it difficult to figure out whether they had already fallen victim again!

"Maintain your focus and keep your mental barriers up. Do not assume that we have left the danger zone."

Seconds passed.

The pursuit had stalled for the moment.

Though the rearguard did not have numbers on their side, they still posed enough of a threat to hinder the pursuit of the compromised biomechs.

Even if the latter only got stalled for a dozen seconds or so, that was enough to give the Rosenstorm and the other two loyal biomechs enough of a headstart to maintain relative safety!

Still, the Second Elf and his remaining soldiers did not dare to relax. The pursuers had already begun to split up their forces.

If their guess was not wrong, then 2 or 3 compromised biomechs were still pressing to catch up and complete their supposed goal!

Fortunately, the loyal biomechs did not have to flee much further before they returned to the safe pocket of space occupied by the combined fleet.

Caracalla Shuku loudly sighed in relief as soon as his Rosenstorm and the other two Woodsap mechs flew out of the dark miasma and received the protection of Casella's Command Field again.

They could feel the strong and reassuring willpower of the Larkinson Clan's ace commander sweeping over their minds and spiritualities with sharp focus.

"Report." The Saint Commander ordered even though she must have already gathered enough clues to build a fairly accurate picture.

Nonetheless, the Second Elf did not dare to be negligent on a matter of such importance. He first transmitted his bonded partner's data logs. He then proceeded to give a very brief summary of what had happened.

The Saint Commander only paused for a few seconds before making up her mind.

"Understood. The opposition that you have encountered is... weaker, but also much more tricky than we foresaw. Now that we have tentatively confirmed that no obviously powerful alien champions or armies are lurking at the energy vortices, we must begin to take action."

The Dark Zephyr Mark III made the first move.

The Second Elf's remaining subordinates needed rescue, and no better was suited for this task than the fastest mech in the combined fleet!

"I will have your men back in a jiffy!"

"Godspeed, Saint Tusa."

Chapter 7518 Foreign Heritage

Chapter 7518 Foreign Heritage

Casella Ingvar did not limit her actions to sending out the Dark Zephyr Mark III.

She also made use of the Victrix for the first time since the start of this encounter.

The magnificent mechanical owl proudly launched from the Tortuous Scream and quickly accelerated towards the energy vortex on the opposite side!

"The Dark Zephyr is swift enough to rescue several squads in quick succession, but I have still decided to dispatch my Victrix as a precaution."

"Thank you... Saint Commander." The exhausted Caracalla Shuku expressed his sincere gratitude for this gesture. "You do not have to go so far to risk such a valuable asset. We are all Terran soldiers. We are never afraid of sacrifice."

"It is what you deserve. The sensor data that you have brought back is not nearly enough to give us a complete picture of the surrounding environment, but it contains enough clues for me to narrow down what kind of adversary we are truly dealing with. It is becoming increasingly more clear that the deathborn we are confronted with are not solely beings of low intelligence."

Sending out the Ultimate Module of the Minerva Mark II by herself was a considerable risk.

The large owl construct may be made out of superdimensional matter and possess a limited range of armaments by herself, but she could only fight as well as a decent expert mech at most.

What truly made her special was that she effectively served as a remote relay for Casella's Command Field.

This became obvious as soon as the Victrix blazed her way to the perimeter of the Minerva Mark II's Command Field.

The dark miasma had no choice but to retreat and give way to the sharp and technologically advanced owl.

Neither the Saint Commander nor many other Larkinsons expressed surprise at this magical sight.

The Victrix did not pause or slow down at all and continued to fly further and further away from the combined fleet.

Eventually, the living command fell out of sight as her extended Command Field no longer overlapped with the Minerva Mark II's original domain field.

Soon enough, the remnants of the other squads returned under the escort of the Dark Zephyr Mark III and the Victrix.

The hearts of many Terran soldiers fell when the squads all returned with less than their original numbers.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III initially managed to retrieve just 4 more damaged and depleted Woodsap mechs out of the Second Elf's original squad.

This meant that in total, Caracalla Shuku lost 5 of his subordinates and their precious prototype Woodsap mechs to the enemy.

The Victrix had better luck and returned with 8 Woodsap mechs.

Evidently, internal conflict broke out a little later due to the absence of a prominent elf such as Caracalla.

The Dark Zephyr and the Victrix did not pause once they had made their first retrievals and quickly flew towards the other 2 energy vortices.

The outcome was considerably worse this time.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III happened to be fast enough to retrieve 3 damaged biomechs, of which 1 of them had to be carried by the ace light skirmisher.

It was clear that if Saint Tusa arrived a little later, there might not be enough to bring back even operational Woodsap mech!

As for the Victrix's second excursion, the superdimensional owl remained out of sight for several more minutes until she returned empty-handed.

Whatever mishap had befallen the fourth squad had apparently led to its complete defeat and possible annihilation.

This outcome came as a serious blow to the Terran detachment. They had sent out a company's worth of Woodsap mechs with the confidence that the new biomachines were strong and special enough to endure whatever the deathborn threw in their direction.

Their core assumption turned out to be terribly wrong.

Still, if people such as Ves or the Saint Commander had to be absolutely honest, then they would rather risk the lives of Terran soldiers than anyone actually important.

"At least it is not a total loss." Ves remarked. "The partial retrieval of the Woodsap mechs and the subsequent rescue action have given us enough data on what is going on outside of our Command Field."

While it was regrettable that so few organic machines returned from their reconnaissance mission, the ones that survived this ordeal could at least regenerate back to completion without any complications.

This was what they were made for, basically.

The remaining Terran mech pilots did not get scared after they learned what had happened to their comrades.

They became furious!

Their hatred of the deathborn immediately spiked!

They wanted to be a part of the first wave of counterattacks against this new and unfathomable enemy!

"The deathborn are abominations to all life! We are irreconcilable enemies! There can be no peace between the two of us! We must slay them now before they manage to proliferate across our stars!"

"Kill the deathborn! I do not believe that the dead cannot be slain a second time!"

"Their mind games are deadly, but the Larkinson Clan's Saint Commander is not a joke. As long as we operate within the presence of her Victrix, no hallucination will be able to fool us again!"

As much as Casella admired their fighting spirit and desire for revenge, she did not indulge in their aggression right away.

"So what did you guys figure out on your end?" Ves asked as he parsed through the sensor logs. "I am not sure what caused the Terran pilots to lose their wits to the point they fired their weapons against their own side. Is this also a function of the enemy's qi formation?"

Andrea Vos, their resident authority on this subject, supplied her opinions first.

"I would have preferred it if the mech squads flew closer in order to record the enemy formation anchors in greater detail. The fidelity of the sensor data is not fine-grained enough to fully decipher and possibly reverse engineer the enemy's methods. What I can tell you with greater certainty is that the formation anchors are designed and built in accordance with theories and techniques that are largely unfamiliar to the traditions known to the Red Collective."

"Does that mean they are M87 in origin?"

"That possibility is likely, but not absolute. It cannot be ruled out that we are dealing with a very obscure offshoot of the Five Scrolls Compact, or that the Red Cabal independently developed these formation arts themselves. However, these alternative scenarios are so unlikely that it is enough to keep them at the back of our minds. My general conclusion is that we are confronted by enemies that possess a rich but parallel heritage of formation arts. To be more specific, their ability to harness and direct death energy is so many times more advanced than ours that we are like children in front of adults."

That was to be expected. No one expressed much surprise at this evaluation.

"What else have you learned, Farseer?"

"Much. Just a surface observation has already taught us three little tricks that we can use to implement small upgrades to our defensive spell array. I am absolutely certain that we can learn much more if we manage to retrieve a fully intact alien formation anchor. There are many hints on the surface that suggest the existence of brand-new theories and paradigms that introduce new or much more sophisticated methods of generating extraordinary energy fields."

The formation master's tone did not hide her growing fascination for the deathborn's formation arts.

Humans often advanced their mastery of technology by stealing from aliens.

This was merely the latest instance where humans saw that an alien race managed to do something better, and wanted to master this new power for themselves!

"What else?"

"We are not entirely certain about our next conclusion, but... we also suspect that the deathborn have failed to adapt their qi formation to local circumstances. It is as if we are dealing with a cheap imitation of an original product. I believe this to be true because the apparent effects of the spell array are quite underwhelming from the sophistication of their arts."

She voiced an opinion that happened to align with one of Ves's own conclusions.

"I concur." He said. "The craftsmanship of the formation anchors is... ordinary and uninspired. They were rigidly reproduced according to a static blueprint or a very formulaic set of instructions. The reasons why this product underperformed is because the deathborn have failed to adapt it to the parameters of the Red Ocean. In this medium-energy environment, the availability of hyper materials and other strange materials is paltry compared to what you can find in M87. In addition, exotic radiation is much more diluted this far out from the center of the supermassive galaxy. It is normal to produce substandard results in this situation."

Ves and several other leaders felt more relieved after making this realization.

Their adversary was not omnipotent, or so far above them in power that resistance was futile.

"This is no reason to look down on the deathborn." Casella warned everyone. "From what we have learned, our alien adversaries are sophisticated but severely limited by distance and lack of adaptation. This means we are put in a similar position of native inhabitants that have come into contact with the first wave of expeditionary forces originating from a distant but higher civilization. I should not tell you how frightening it is to fight a war of civilizations from the 'native' side."

She was very much correct on this front!

Many times in the past, human civilization often managed to vanquish their alien rivals by exploiting the differences in intelligence, cunning, efficiency as well as technological mastery.

Yet now that red humans had fallen into orbit of M87's monstrous energy environment, they had unquestionably turned into prey for the much larger and more powerful civilizations from the golden galaxy!

Chapter 7519 Playing Our Own Game

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The time had come for the human intruders to break down the current impasse.

Yet how they should go about solving the problem was a delicate matter.

They had managed to make a lot of scattered observations, but the bigger picture still remained woefully incomplete.

The data that they had gathered up to this point only clarified a few points, but brought up a lot of new ones as well.

It was very easy for commanders to get lost in this mixed sea of clarity and ignorance.

Every incomplete pattern hinted at a greater conclusion, yet these hints never represented the absolute truth.

Too many variables remained obscured behind the fog of war for any of them to figure out the true strategy employed by their adversaries.

If they had more time, then the combined fleet could have spent more time on conducting reconnaissance and performing detailed analysis on all of the gathered data.

Unfortunately, time was very much against their side.

They were stranded in a miasma-filled star system that had fallen under the control of the mysterious deathborn.

This not only meant that they were burning through scarce resources at a much higher rate than usual, but with each day that passed, enemy reinforcements might arrive from afar.

The red humans needed to cut through the fog and put an end to the schemes of the hostile aliens.

Whatever the deathborn were up to, many people doubted that the results would benefit human civilization!

This placed Saint Commander Casella Ingvar in a very difficult position.

She had never been put into a situation as pivotal as now.

Depending on the scope and investment of the enemy's plans, her judgment may very well shake the course of history of the Red Ocean and all of the races that inhabited it in the present and future!

To be put in such a focal node of galactic historical progression could break any lesser human individual.

Of course, an ace commander would never fail to discharge her responsibilities in such a situation.

Her willpower, though different from a regular ace pilot, was still strong in its own right.

In fact, Casella believed that out of every mortal or saint in the combined fleet, only she had the greatest chance to make the right decision at this historical junction.

Because she was confident in her ability to strategize better than anyone else.

Time was not their side.

She could not waste too many minutes on tedious analysis and reflection. She had to absorb all of the data and conclusions currently on hand and formulate a response right away.

"We are caught in a trap." She quickly summarized her thoughts. "Yet the true pitfalls are not obvious. The deployment of the energy vortices has not only caused us to become stuck in place, but also threatens to engulf our fleet in an incremental fashion through creating and exploiting faults in our energy fields. We must break them if we want to stabilize our fleet and resume our movement. Remaining static is a dead end."

By this time, the First Sword Mark III had already swept the miasma-filled space created by the initial breach.

None of the ships that fell out of sight made it out intact.

The ace swordsman mech only encountered several more ships that had undergone such rapid erosion that it looked as if their hulls had been rusting for thousands if not tens of thousands of years without receiving any maintenance!

No forms of life had been detected either. The bodies of all human crew members had simply disappeared.

What everyone found even more ominous was that the First Sword Mark III failed to find the outermost ships.

Though they only consisted of relatively small and ordinary vessels, the fact that they did not even leave behind a heavily-aged hull was highly disconcerting!

It became clear to everyone that they could not allow their fleet to become exposed to the erosion-enhanced dark miasma again.

No matter what was responsible for neutralizing those vessels, the red humans needed to break the enemy's death energy formation at all cost!

"What are we waiting for, then?" Gloriana impatiently asked. "Since the Dark Zephyr and the Victrix managed to get in and out without encountering serious opposition, then it should be safe enough to dispatch several of our ace mechs to destroy or retrieve the enemy formation anchors. They are right there for the taking!"

Ves smacked his gauntleted palm on his face. He wanted to call his wife an idiot, though he wisely chose to reconsider that impulsive decision.

"Honey, have you ever considered that this may be exactly what the enemy wants? It is too obvious of an invitation! Perhaps the deathborn have shown far greater forbearance than you thought. Normal spell arrays do a good job of hiding their formation anchors. That is not the case with the deathborn. Even if you can blame this on skipping the necessary adaptation process, who knows whether the enemy deliberately repurposed this shortcoming into bait. No weaknesses are absolute. A good commander can often transform traditional vulnerabilities into clever stratagems."

"I strongly agree, Ves." Casella backed him up. "There is no certainty that the most obvious course of action will cause us to fall to the enemy's ruse, but the consequences are too great. My intuition cannot detect any powerful threats in the vicinity, but my judgment tells me that the deathborn would never commit to an ambush if their goal was merely to delay our approach. Even without any solid proof, I believe we are absolutely at risk of losing our ace mechs or even our flagship if we recklessly choose to split our forces. It is times like these when it is all the more important to keep our assets together."

Gloriana frowned after she heard this. "Your words make sense, but how does that solve the problem? If we do not dispatch our ace mechs, we will not be able to eliminate the enemy's formation anchors. That leaves us stuck in a situation that is continually deteriorating. Stagnation does not equate to progress. We need to be proactive."

The Saint Commander actually nodded in agreement. "We will indeed take action, but not in the way you expect. The enemy commander thinks itself clever by forcing us to send out one of our ace

mechs or a force of Knights and Barons escorted by my Victrix. I dare say that if we choose to do so, these isolated units will suffer severe damage or complete annihilation. If we send out too much core assets, then the enemy's core forces will strike at our underdefended fleet instead. If neither of these options are acceptable, then we can simply choose to stay put, which is not actually a solution at all because it will only cause us to deplete our resources in vain."

"Since that is the case, why not dispatch a strong strike force while simultaneously reinforcing our fleet's perimeter defenses by deploying all of our Ascended Giants? I understand that not showing your hand is important, but now that the enemy has backed us in a corner, we no longer have the luxury to keep our trump cards hidden."

The Saint Commander finally grinned for the first time in a while. "We do not have to go that far, madame. Exposing all of our giants will only grant the enemy an intelligence victory. It might not be as obviously damaging as losing our core units, but it will definitely come to haunt us in the decisive battle to come. No. I refuse to play the enemy commander's game. The proper way to address this matter is to make use of our own advantages, especially the ones that our opposition does not fully understand."

"What... have you decided to do, Casella?" Ves curiously asked.

"Saint Davia Stark has already received her orders. The Amaranto Mark III is preparing to open fire directly onto one of the three enemy formation anchors that we have scouted."

Ves and several other leaders switched to a live feed that displayed the Amaranto Mark III.

It turned out that while they had been talking, the ace marksman mech had been quietly redeploying before slowly accumulating more energy with her Instrument of Vengeance!

"Is that... even possible?" Ves asked with serious doubt in his voice. "Although the formation anchors should not be placed too far from our current coordinates, all of the empowered dark miasma in the way still generates a lot of interference. It also goes beyond blocking our sensors. The dark miasma has always possessed a weak spatial interference effect, but now that it has been enhanced by the active spell array, the strengthened erosion trait also acts on the local space, causing it to bend and oscillate in strange and unpredictable ways. Trying to draw a straight trajectory from the Amaranto Mark III and the targeted formation anchor will result in a squiggly line when observed from the side!"

In other words, the fabric of spacetime had long become disordered with the activation of the death energy formation!

It was a pipedream to expect that a single straight-line energy beam could accurately hit a target in the distance, even if it maintained a relatively static position!

Chapter 7520 Mapping the Distortions

Chapter 7520 Mapping the Distortions

The Saint Commander claimed to have read their enemy's intentions.

She refused to split her core assets, fearing that doing so would play into the opposing commander's machinations.

Yet keeping all of her units close at hand vastly limited her options.

Despite these conditions, she still had faith in the combined fleet's ability to resolve its current predicament.

Many people began to pay close attention to the Amaranto Mark III.

The ace marksman mech had fought in enough battles after her most recent upgrade that she had built up an impressive track record.

Saint Davia Stark had cemented herself as one of the most accurate and dependable snipers of her rank!

Although there were a number of senior ace pilots of different major powers that managed to achieve comparable hit rates at even greater ranges, nobody in her generation had managed to become her equal.

When it came to quick or instant takedowns at longer ranges, she and her battle partner were by far the best choice!

However, the Amaranto Mark III was not effective in every situation.

The current environment could easily be regarded as suboptimal for an ace marksman mech.

Visibility was extremely poor outside of the perimeter of the enemy fleet.

The fabric of reality had become distorted due to the abundance of destabilizing exotic energies.

The enemy spell array produced a range of effects, and the human analysts did not dare to claim they had mapped them out in full.

Other powerful enemy units with unfathomable abilities most definitely lurked within the darkness.

All of these conditions and more made it unfeasible for a marksman mech to successfully land a straight shot at a fairly distant target.

"Will this even work?" Gloriana skeptically felt the need to ask. "The spacetime distortions outside of the protective bubble of Casella's Command Field and the defensive spell array are not too strong, but they are not weak either. What matters more is the distance between the Amaranto and the target. The greater the range, the greater the distortions. It is already difficult to calculate a precise and accurate targeting solution on a relatively static object that is obscured by so much dark miasma."

"Davia's Stark willpower is strong. The Amaranto's full-powered shot will not bend easily in the face of all of the distortions that you have mentioned." Ves had a little more faith in the Saint Commander's decision.

His wife did not accept this argument. "That may be true, but this will not help much with target acquisition. In order to land her shot, she will need to pinpoint the enemy formation anchor under very poor conditions. All of the Amaranto's firepower will go to waste if her aim is off by a fraction of a degree. I do not believe that Davia's intuition and her other qualities as a saint can compensate for all of these variables. That is asking for too much. Even miracles have to be grounded in reality in order to occur."

She raised a good point. Extraordinary willpower could help keep the energy beam straight, but it did not offer as much assistance when it came to trying to home in on the target.

Ves already figured out how to solve this particular issue.

"The Amaranto Mark III is not alone. Have you noticed how the smart AIs of the Tortuous Scream along with the processing banks of other starships are being tasked to help with the calculations?"

"Hm?"

Under the coordination of the Minerva Mark II, the Tortuous Scream and several other larger warships such as the Tarrasque and the Babylon Excavator all pooled their processing power together to perform extremely intensive calculations!

All of the processors allocated to this priority task began to construct an extremely large and complex mathematical model of the distortions produced by the activated energy fields controlled by the opposition!

This was not a simple endeavor in the slightest.

The model had to be constructed based on a huge amount of raw data input.

These primarily came from the many sensor systems of the mechs and ships of the combined fleet.

Much of it was limited in value. They only provided a limited perspective of all of the distortions and energy currents in the local environment.

What truly enriched the database was the input provided by the surviving Woodsap mechs!

Even if only a handful of them had made it back, they at least managed to deliver a lot of new data on the behavior of the hostile energy field and many other relevant variables well outside of the range of familiar territory.

Of course, all of this data put together did not come close to providing the red humans with a complete picture of the surrounding space.

This was why the high-tech processors of all of those first-class warships had to work hard. They needed to fill up the gaps by making a huge number of 'educated guesses'!

Ves did not even begin to think about the astronomical amount of calculations needed to produce a virtual map of the surrounding distortions.

He found it difficult to imagine that any human aside from a literal Star Designer could construct a fairly 'accurate' and 'reliable' mathematical model without the use of first-class processor clusters!

Not even Gloriana with her Mentalyst Crystal fragment-based cranial implant set could muster up the minimum amount of pure processor power needed to perform an insane amount of number crunching!

Fortunately, the smart AIs of the combined fleet had no need to draw upon her relatively meager amount of processing powers, nor did they have to borrow her human creativity and ingenuity.

The smart AIs themselves could already fill this essential gap.

As one of the flagship products of the Red Fleet in the new age, the smart AIs possessed genuine life and sentience.

That made a huge difference in situations like these because they could adequately find solutions or improve existing ones by drawing upon their intangible qualities.

For example, Stella of the STAR WATCHER template took charge of the work. Her programming specialized in navigation and space surveys. She was practically made for this task!

Yet in order to anticipate unexpected variables and solve certain problems that lacked obvious solutions, Aria of the STARVING ARTIST template also involved herself in the work.

In fact, Aria held the highest authority inside the Tortuous Scream's SF-O2 Smart AI Data Processing Center!

This was a deliberate decision that reflected the Larkinson Clan's culture of valuing creativity over certainty.

The latter may provide more accurate solutions in situations where every variable had been accounted for, but performed much more poorly in situations with lots of uncertainty.

The current conditions precisely aligned with the latter scenario, hence why Aria was in her element at the moment!

Most of the red humans could not see or feel the huge amount of calculations taking place.

The mathematical model slowly took shape despite the lack of input. Aria and Stella had been forced to make so many guesses and assumptions that the reliability of their results could never be guaranteed.

Yet it was the best that they could come up with at this time.

A new projection came to life in front of Ves and other leaders.

They depicted a much more dynamic map of the surrounding space.

Translucent energy lines flowed in many different directions. These lines represented some of the many chaotic distortions that the model had mapped out at this time.

What was important was that it not only tried to map out the situation in real-time, but could also be used to predict the changes that would take place a second or two in advance!

Of course, trying to do the latter rapidly compromised the reliability of the output.

The further they tried to predict the distortions that would take place in the future, the greater the chance of being led astray!

Fortunately for the combined fleet, Saint Stark did not need to map out the distortions so far ahead.

The Instrument of Vengeance was a powerful transphasic hyper luminal crystal weapon that could shoot out an energy beam at light-speed or a significant fraction of it depending on its configuration.

Under the current circumstances, the difference between the two was slight.

Although the Woodsap mechs failed to analyze the enemy formation anchors in full, they still managed to collect enough data to conclude that the latter was made out of relatively normal alloys.

They did not have reasons to believe that the deathborn had incorporated much if any superdimensional matter into their formation anchors.

This meant that a resonance-empowered shot from the Instrument of Vengeance should definitely be able to burn a gap through the entire structure!

What mattered more was target acquisition.

After the smart AIs had done the heavy lifting, they began their attempts to provide accurate targeting data to the Amaranto Mark III.

There was no need to dump the full model along with all of the raw data into the ace mech. Aria and Stella merely provided the most condensed output to the living mech, knowing that the Amaranto Mark III needed nothing more to do her work!

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