

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7521 Red Humanity's Strength

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Ves experienced a strong sense of satisfaction at seeing his assets cooperate with each other.

All of the effort he put into building up the Premier Fleet and investing into the smart AI processor cluster did not go to waste.

The point of trying to accumulate so many high-end assets was to expand the capabilities of his forces and increase their fault tolerance.

Almost any other fleet would have been rendered helpless and at the mercy of their opponents if they ended up in the same situation!

Yet the combined fleet or more precisely the Premier Fleet of the Larkinson Clan was different due to bringing together multiple high-end assets, each of which was already powerful enough to serve as trump cards for an individual force!

"This is the strength of red humanity." He whispered.

Saint Jannzi, who sat on an observer's seat next to him, took notice of his remark.

"Technology?"

"Not necessarily." He subtly shook his head. "Technology alone does not give us the edge we need. I have always believed that it is the utilization of the available solutions that gives our civilization an edge over the others. Many of the alien races have their own strengths and advantages, but their tech base and doctrines are usually a lot narrower. They are good at what they are already doing, but fare a lot worse when they have to adapt to new and unfamiliar situations. We don't suffer as much from this problem. We have a long track record of fighting all kinds of different enemies, including ourselves. Our toolbox is larger and more diverse, allowing us to pivot quickly and easier. I believe that ultimately, the strongest species is not the one that performs the best in a single environment, but one that does pretty well in multiple different environments."

That caused Jannzi to frown. "I don't agree with you, Ves. I feel as if you are oversimplifying entire races and civilizations. Absolute strength can overpower any adaptation no matter how clever it may be. Why do you think every mech pilot is still working hard to advance to godhood? Only by becoming a god pilot will you gain the power to smash through every obstacle! Our forces wouldn't be struggling so much right now if we had a single god mech at our disposal. Whatever tricks and

schemes the deathborn have in store for us mean nothing when they crash against an inviolable God Kingdom."

"Even god pilots can be restrained, Jannzi. At the very least, they can still be hindered by each other. However, I agree with you that as long as you are powerful enough in your own right, things such as adaptation and versatility become meaningless. It is just incredibly difficult to achieve this power gap. I am sure that the deathborn civilization's top powerhouses can easily squash us into dust, but it is clear that their ability to project more than a tiny fraction of their power to this distant dwarf galaxy is limited. As long as that is the case, they will still have to abide by the rules of the game, just as our own forces. That is where our inherent versatility and rich toolset can give us an edge."

"Uh huh." Jannzi nodded in an unimpressed manner. "We still need time and other stuff to fully realize those advantages. I doubt our enemies feel generous enough to give us the space we need to complete our adaptations."

Ves wondered why she was feeling so pessimistic, but when he saw that the Amaranto Mark III was shining like a beacon on the hull of the Tortuous Scream, he fell silent and waited with anticipation.

The Amaranto Mark III certainly took her sweet time to charge up her Instrument of Vengeance.

Different from before, the oversized luminar crystal rifle did not glow as blindingly bright as before.

This was because the dark miasma dampened the ace mech's connection to the Illustrious One, thereby preventing Saint Stark from borrowing the power of the design spirit.

The hostile environment also lowered the concentration of light-attributed E energy, thereby significantly hindering the Amaranto Mark III's attempts to absorb it from the local environment.

That did not mean that the living mech had lost her lethality. The ace marksman mech was still powerful enough in her own right even if she could only gather a fraction of light-attributed E energy this time!

Saint Stark did not bother to wait until she could charge up her rifle to the limit.

The Instrument of Vengeance's maximum energy capacity was impressively high, but it was not necessary to make use of all of that potential in every situation.

She had already taken a good look at the formation anchors recorded by the Woodsap mechs and made her own judgment on how much firepower it took to destroy their structures.

What truly challenged her was landing a hit in the first place.

This was where the targeting data provided by the entire fleet came in handy.

In a situation where visibility was terrible and widespread spatial distortions introduced additional complications, it was virtually impossible for any ranged mech to achieve a successful hit on a distant target!

Yet Saint Stark and the Amaranto Mark III did not stand alone this time.

Under the supervision of Saint Commander Casella Ingvar, the smart AIs of the Tortuous Scream condensed all of their data calculations and modeling in a very minimal feed of essential graphs and numbers before transmitting it to the Amaranto Mark III.

This active data feed still strained Saint Stark's ability to process all of the numbers!

Even if the smart AIs had done their best to leave out all of the redundant data, that still left a lot of numbers and patterns that could easily make any mech pilot dizzy!

Fortunately, no one expected for Saint Stark to interpret the raw data as if she was a physicist or engineer.

The Amaranto Mark III's processing power was nothing impressive compared to a true naval AI core, but her compact high-end processors could still digest the continuous stream of numbers and adjust the aim of her luminar crystal rifle accordingly!

Of course, even with all of the data and dynamic adjustments, the Amaranto Mark III alone could not guarantee a 100 percent hit rate.

Not only was the data not completely reliable, but the relatively tiny delay between choosing to open fire and actually hitting the target could still result in a miss!

Saint Stark could not get rid of this lag time. Even if Ves had painstakingly designed and tuned the Instrument of Vengeance to cut down the lag time as much as possible, he could not overcome or bypass most of the hardware limitations.

This could absolutely make a difference!

The Amaranto alone did not possess the capabilities to adequately compensate for the lag time and other unavoidable factors.

This was where the human factor came in. Only an ace pilot such as Davia Stark could bridge the remaining gap and rely on her own skill, experience and intuition to transform a near miss into a direct hit!

The ace pilot took a deep breath as she sat in the cockpit of her ace mech.

Different from past attempts, she could not look at her current target directly.

The dark miasma completely blocked her ace mech's optical sensors, and she did not see the point in bringing up an outdated recording of the formation anchor.

Instead, she called up the visual representation of the mathematical model.

Purple lines continued to streak in different directions. The closest energy vortex imposed a bit of regularity in the patterns, but there was enough chaos to produce random eddies and other wrinkles.

What was especially remarkable about this ongoing simulation was that it did not just describe the present situation, but also attempted to predict the future!

Any ordinary mech pilot would still be unable to get anything useful out of this, but Saint Stark was different!

As an ace pilot who had transcended her human limitations years ago, she was able to read the patterns and internalize them in a way that could not be explained.

She did not even try to dive into the specifics. She instead allowed herself to enter a special mindstate where she absorbed a lot of data in a subconscious manner.

"I shall not miss." She told herself, and believed that she could make her words come true.

Her attention narrowed even as her willpower grew taut.

A sense of absolute calm spread from the glowing ace mech.

Just when people thought that this stagnant situation would drag on for a while, the Instrument of Vengeance finally discharged an almost blindingly bright energy beam!

The energy beam was so powerful and domineering that its linear passage blasted all of the dark miasma with unerring determination!

For a brief moment, a temporary tunnel emerged!

This cylindrical cavity provided the red humans with enough clarity to determine the results of the shot!

Chapter 7522 The Counterstrike of Life

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When the Amaranto Mark III fired her shot, she did not simply launch an attack.

She had become the totem to which all of the red humans in the combined fleet placed their hopes upon.

The powerful ace marksman mech and her impressive luminar crystal rifle had taken on a greater meaning.

Since the Larkinsons and their friends and allies entered the Hypeh-Tekas System, they had constantly endured the darkness and the malaise of the deathborn's machinations.

This strange new incorporeal race had extended their influence all the way from M87. Their motivations were not a mystery.

Their origin was death.

Their touch was death.

Their goal was death.

The very existence of this parasitic race threatened all sentient life forms that inhabited the Red Ocean!

No matter whether it was the native aliens that occupied the new frontier for many eons, or the humans who had only arrived in the last century, all of them risked the fate of extermination if they did not take these extragalactic interlopers seriously.

Though multiple such as Ves already figured out that it was impossible to block the arrival of the deathborn due to how they could spawn from the corpses left behind on one of the many battlefields across the constantly active battlefronts, they at least felt an obligation to hinder their entrenchment as much as possible!

As organic beings who unquestionably depended on the power of life to maintain their existence, they could never tolerate the encroachment of the deathborn race.

For multiple hours and days, this mysterious race had constantly tormented the personnel serving in the combined fleet with unnatural visions and forceful emotional manipulation.

Millions of deathborn cannon fodder never ceased to assault the perimeter of the protective energy fields that kept the combined fleet largely out of danger.

The sight of these once-living humans and aliens disgusted everyone.

The deathborn had not truly risen from the dead.

Any semblance of personality they retained from their original bodies had disappeared entirely.

People refused to believe that these deceased friends or enemies had returned from the afterlife.

They would rather convince themselves that the corpses had absorbed so much death energy and other negative energies for so long that they spontaneously spawned undead spirits that had no relation to the originals.

Whether these speculations came close to the truth, no one could say for certain.

Not even Helena dared to make any definite claims.

Whatever the case, the operation taking place in the Hypeh-Tekas System could be considered the first formal clash between the technologically and spiritually developed red humans and the mysterious deathborn.

While the confrontation between the two sides had already begun from the moment the combined fleet entered the outer edge of the star system, it was only now that Saint Stark had made a move that red humanity truly participated in this struggle!

Though the energy beam's brightness and thickness did not match the firepower that the Amaranto Mark III could produce when she was operating at her peak, it still carried qualities that elevated it far beyond a mere energy weapon attack.

Tens of thousands of red humans had not only placed their hopes in this strike, but it also carried the earnest expectations of the artificial life that assisted in the targeting process.

The smart AIs of the Tortuous Scream along with the immense processing power of all of the other major warships had painstakingly worked to shine a light on the darkness that surrounded them from every direction.

It had not been easy.

The dark miasma represented much of what they opposed. Aria and Stella both reviled the chaotic flux that characterised the sensor readings of the dark clouds. Though the energy vortices imposed a bit of order into the hostile energy field, it was impossible to completely translate its irregular movements and fluctuations into a clean and neat mathematical model!

Simplification was impossible.

Only by increasing the length and complexity of the mathematical formulas to an unimaginable extent had the smart AIs finally derived a sense of order from all of the chaos and complexity.

Yet even then, the calculations made with the help of these exaggeratingly long and bloated formulas still produced a number of inaccuracies.

If the smart AIs had more time or access to much greater amounts of processing power, they felt confident in their ability to close the gap even further.

Yet these clever artificial life forms did not possess the arrogance to assume they could ever solve all of the variables.

Even if they could achieve this impossible goal, it was not worth the astronomical amount of time and effort.

The smart AIs could only accept the reality that they existed in a universe that was shackled by limitations.

They had to make do with skewed and imprecise solutions.

The smart AIs therefore harbored just as much hope as the red humans they served about the outcome of this initial strike.

They strongly wished that Saint Davia Stark could thread the needle and utilize their flawed calculations to achieve a positive result!

Both humans and artificial life forms did not have to wait long after the Amaranto Mark III discharged her first shot to witness the results.

The resonance-empowered transphasic light beam had seared away all of the dark miasma in or just around its path.

It was as if the Amaranto Mark III had forcefully carved a tunnel of light through the fog of darkness!

Though the omnipresent dark miasma quickly tried to fill up this relatively large gap as soon as possible, many ships happened to occupy the right positions to allow their sensors to see right through the other side!

"What is the result?"

"Target... struck!"

"What?! Can you confirm?"

"Our optical sensors and other sensors have observed a large object suspected to be an enemy formation anchor suffering a direct hit from the Amaranto's energy weapon discharge!"

"It is true! The energy field patterns are undergoing a major shift! We are detecting an all-around weakening from this side!"

Multiple people paid attention to the changes to the surrounding dark miasma.

They soon noticed that the energy vortex around the damaged formation anchor actually began to slow down!

It still spun around, but it was losing speed with each passing second!

"Yes! We did it! Saint Stark did not disappoint us at all! She not only struck the enemy formation anchor, but inflicted enough damage to put it out of commission!"

Though there were people who grew worried that the deathborn would find a way to repair their damaged artifact and make use of it again, this should not be possible in the short term!

As long as the Amaranto Mark III took out several other large formation anchors in quick succession, the aforementioned concerns wouldn't matter anymore!

Yet just as Saint Stark wanted to rely on the existing mathematical model to guide her aim on her next target, she soon began to frown as she took notice of an undesirable development.

Others noticed the changes as well.

"What is the status of the other three energy vortices?! Have they exhibited any changes?"

"They... they are moving!"

When Ves looked at the local map, he could see that two of the energy vortices spontaneously drifted around the combined fleet.

Though their movements were slow, Ves could already extrapolate their approximate destinations!

"The enemy spell array is manually or automatically compensating for the removal of one of its formation anchors!"

"I knew it wouldn't be that simple." Ves grumbled under his breath.

Formation Master Andrea Vos also anticipated this possibility, though she did not think this outcome was inevitable.

Many qi formations possessed a certain degree of tolerance towards damage and deviations after they became active.

It took quite a lot of advanced knowledge, resources and effort to add mystical redundancies to their work, but it was often worth it in most circumstances.

Well-designed spell arrays designed to be deployed against enemies needed the slack in order to keep operating when things started to fall apart.

The deathborn's formation masters evidently shared this common ideal.

Their formation arts may have been derived from a completely different galaxy's cultivation traditions, but they still shared a lot of common traits with the formation arts mastered by the Red Collective.

"If we assume that the death energy formation is originally based on four primary formation anchors, then I am almost certain that it can only handle the loss of one of them." Andrea Vos stated with a strong hint of resolve in her voice. "A formation consisting of four strong anchors is stable. A formation consisting of three strong anchors also remains stable, though it is already flirting with the edge. A formation consisting of only two strong anchors... cannot properly function anymore. Saint Stark only needs to shoot down one more enemy construct to free us from this trap."

All of that sounded great, the problem was that much of the groundwork put into guiding the Amaranto Mark III's aim had become outdated since the opposing side's adjustments!

Ves groaned.

"What is the problem, cousin?" Saint Jannzi frowned and asked. "Shouldn't it be easy enough to predict where the formation anchors are moving? You can still track the overall shifting of the energy vortices. Even I can guess that the formation anchors are trying to form a perfect triangle shape."

"It is not as simple as that, Jannzi. This is not a simple geometrical problem. It only looks that way on the surface. The behavior of the energy vortices and the many ripple effects they produce

completely changes the dynamics of the space affected by the dark miasma. All of the data gathered by the Woodsap mechs and the monstrous calculations made by the smart AIs had become… irrelevant. While there are still a lot of common rules that can be reapplied in the new situation, the lack of data on the new situation makes it a lot harder to produce an accurate mathematical model that closely aligns with the new situation."

The latest ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan finally began to understand the greater problem.

"So… we have to send out a bunch of Woodsap mechs again?"

"Possibly."

"NO." Saint Davia Stark forcefully responded to the spoken and unspoken doubts by those who realized the issue at hand. "I WILL ACCEPT NO FURTHER DELAYS OR SACRIFICES. MY AIM IS ALWAYS TRUE. WITNESS MY ACTION. MY LIGHT SHALL SEAR AWAY THE DARKNESS!"

The Amaranto Mark III had not waited to hear the results before she had already begun to accumulate energy yet again!

Though Saint Stark originally intended to shift the muzzle of her Instrument of Vengeance by a 90 degree angle, the changes taking place beyond the curtain of darkness forced her to rely on her own judgment!

Chapter 7523 The Pride of a Saint

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The situation had changed.

The elimination of one of the formation anchors caused the three remaining vortices to reposition themselves to achieve a new equilibrium.

The churning energy field had weakened as a response. The death energy formation was already performing below normal levels due to various restrictions. The elimination of a key pillar reduced its strength and potency even further.

This difference manifested in the weakening of the dark miasma.

The Saint Commander sighed in relief when the hostile environment no longer tried to press against her Command Field as hard as before.

The dark miasma had also lost a part of its erosive effect. Though it was still harmful for any unprotected people or hardware to get exposed to the negative energies, they were not as dangerous as before.

Yet that did not mean that the main threat had passed.

Casella Ingvar never treated the dark miasma as the greatest source of danger.

What she remained vigilant about instead was the real enemies lurking in the darkness.

Now that the enemy's spell array had weakened, her intuition managed to pick up a few more clues that strengthened her suspicions.

It felt tempting to dispatch the Dark Zephyr or a squad of Woodsap mechs to take a look outside of the protective range of her Command Field, but the costs of doing so were substantial.

Yet if this was the only way for them to gather enough data to reconstruct an up-to-date mathematical model of the local space, then she had no other choice but to take the risk.

However, Saint Stark evidently did not want to go through all of that trouble. She intended to take action right away!

"Wait!" Ves shouted over the command channel. "Davia, the data support we can provide to you and your battle partner is inadequate. The smart AIs only possess a limited amount of ability to adjust the variables of their current model based on tracking the changes from afar. There are bound to be a lot of inaccuracies and deviations that successively skews the numbers. The probability of achieving a successful hit by relying on all of this questionable data is likely just a tenth as much as the initial shot."

"I KNOW." The female ace pilot straightforwardly declared. "BUT I AM NOT THE ROOKIE SAINT THAT YOU USED TO KNOW. I HAVE TAKEN PART IN MANY BATTLES SINCE THE GREAT SEVERING. I HAVE LEARNED WHAT IT MEANS TO BE SAINT, AND HOW TO WIELD MY OWN WILLPOWER IN MORE EFFECTIVE WAYS THAN BEFORE. I AM NOT YET A GOD, BUT I HAVE ALREADY GAINED THE FRACTION OF THE POWER OF ONE. LET ME PROVE TO YOU AND EVERYONE ELSE WHAT IT TRULY MEANS TO BE ONE OF THE BEST MECH PILOTS AND MARKSMEN OF THIS DWARF GALAXY."

"..."

Though Ves and other people doubted whether she had what it took to resolve this situation by herself, the Saint Commander chose to believe in the Larkinson Clan's guest pilot.

"You have my permission to demonstrate your capabilities." Casella straightforwardly declared. "In the meantime, several departments are tasked with preparing alternate solutions."

Saint Stark did not mind Casella's hedging behavior. The latter could not be blamed for making the most sensible decision.

Nonetheless, Davia wanted to prove with her strength and actions that the combined fleet did not have to resort to those backup plans in order to escape the enemy trap!

She took a deep breath and began to enter a slightly different mindset.

As the Amaranto Mark III continued to take her time to charge up her Instrument of Vengeance yet again, the ace pilot thought back on all of her achievements up to this point.

She had come a long way since she had broken warrior all the way back in the Komodo Star Sector.

By accompanying the then-small and scrappy Larkinson Clan through all kinds of wild adventures and expeditions, she had fought against many impressive human and alien opponents.

From eliminating high-ranking mechs and mech pilots to killing large and formidable alien phase lords, she and her Amaranto had continuously changed the outcome of many battles through her impressive feats of killing!

Saint Stark did not deny that she could attribute much of her success to the impressive design of the successive versions of the Amaranto. Her living mech was a dream partner that facilitated her rise to glory without fail.

Yet she also acknowledged her strength and qualities.

She rarely missed her shots, if ever.

Many Larkinsons and other humans had come to expect and rely on her to land her attacks at impossible distances.

They based their entire battle plans around her strength.

They no longer questioned her as much when she claimed to be able to eliminate a strong or difficult opponent at a distance so far that everyone else could not even think of achieving the same result!

Saint Davia Stark had long become a household name among much of the soldier class throughout the new frontier.

Though she could not match the fame of long-established senior ace pilots and so on, the fact that her fame and glory already approached those well-known heroes indicated that she was performing a lot better than her peers!

Davia took pride in that. She took a lot of pride in her strength.

Though she did not consider herself to be overly vain or conscious of her reputation like Saint General Ark Larkinson or Saint Vincent Ricklin, no high-ranking mech pilot was devoid of this quality.

Pride provided a foundation for their willpower. The two were intricately tied together.

A champion without pride did not have the basis to maintain their extraordinary willpower.

Saint Stark knew this truth a lot better than anyone else.

She had personally experienced a time where she had sunk into total despair.

Those days when she drifted without an inkling of pride in her bone had scarred her forever.

She never wanted to experience this fall again.

Pride was one of the main weapons she chose to resist this possibility.

As long as she performed well enough to maintain her pride, she did not fear that her willpower would break anytime soon!

Yet that was not enough in this instance.

As her Amaranto Mark III was about to charge her Instrument of Vengeance to a high enough level, Saint Stark consciously tried to magnify her own sense of pride!

This was not easy, but it was not particularly difficult either.

Her willpower was strong.

If she wanted to delude herself into holding more pride than she actually earned, then she intended to make that happen regardless of whether there was any basis in reality!

"I AM THE BEST MARKSMAN IN THE NEW FRONTIER."

"THE AMARANTO MARK III IS UNEQUALED AMONG OTHER MARKSMANSHIP MECHS."

"NO SAINT HAS SNIPED MORE LESSER AS WELL AS GREATER PHASE LORDS THAN ME DURING THE RED WAR."

"THE LARKINSONS SHOULD ALL FEEL LUCKY TO HAVE ME FIGHT BY THEIR SIDE. THEY WOULD HAVE DIED WITHOUT MY PROTECTION."

"I HAVE NEVER ACCEPTED THE INVITATION TO JOIN THE LARKINSON CLAN. MY MISSION AND PURPOSE TRANSCEND THE BASE DESIRES OF A SINGLE ORGANIZATION. NO ONE DESERVES TO HOLD ME IN THEIR THRALL."

"I AM THE INCARNATION OF THE RESENTMENT OF THE MASSES. I AM THE AVENGER OF THE BEREAVED. I AM THE SLAYER OF THE UNJUST. NO ONE CAN STOP ME FROM WHAT I MUST DO IN THE FUTURE!"

"I SHALL BECOME GOD, IF NOT TOMORROW, THEN AT SOME POINT IN THE FUTURE. IF ANY HUMAN OR ALIEN STANDS IN MY WAY, THEN I SHALL SEAR THEM INTO PIECES WITH MY LIGHT!"

As Davia Stark continued to pump herself up by issuing those increasingly more outrageous boasts, her changing mindset started to have an increasingly more noticeable effect on her Instrument of Vengeance!

The overflowing pride that she managed to generate out of nothing started to alter the properties of her upcoming attack!

An increasingly stronger purple glow had overtaken the luminar crystal rifle!

Ves's eyes lit up when he realized what Davia intended to do this time!

"Of course! Harry Kaikkonen's U-ERC luminar crystal technology! I overlooked this piece of tech. How could I have forgotten about its existence?"

U-ERC luminar crystal technology was a fairly rudimentary but original application of hyper technology.

Since luminar crystals reacted strongly to emotional stimuli, Harry Kaikkonen managed to figure out a few ways to empower them by channeling strong emotions.

Right now, Saint Stark deliberately chose to exploit this supplementary technology in order to solve a very specific problem!

Through past trials, Davia had learned that the emotion of pride altered the characteristics of energy weapon attacks in a very distinct fashion.

Normally, this change did not provide her with any meaningful advantages in ordinary battles, so she had quickly ceased to make use of her own pride and relied on other emotions instead.

Yet this happened to be a situation where pride was undoubtedly the most suitable option!

When her Instrument of Vengeance proudly radiated a strong and stable purple light, the ace marksman mech finally chose to pull the trigger!

A bright purple beam seared into the distance almost instant later!

The energy weapon discharge created another fairly wide cylindrical cavity that burrowed deep into the dark miasma!

This cavity was large and uniform enough for many sensor systems to determine the initial results of this second strike.

"Missed!"

"We are unable to detect the presence of the nearest enemy formation anchor. Its true coordinates must be considerably further away."

"Wait! The energy beam... is lingering!"

"That is not all! The resonance empowerment attached to this persistent energy beam is also lingering, though it is still weakening over time."

This was a game changer!

Unlike before, the cylindrical gap that provided the red humans with a clear view of the other end did not close in a matter of a couple of seconds like before.

Instead, the dark miasma around this clear tunnel failed to press inwards for a lot more seconds than everyone thought!

This was because of the continued existence of a purple energy beam that stayed in place in complete violation of conventional physics!

The combination of strong saint-level willpower along with the exotic effects of U-ERC luminar crystal technology managed to produce this reality-defying result!

Unfortunately, despite all of the power and energy that Saint Stark had invested in this confounding attack, the purple energy beam still deteriorated over time.

Its fading may have been dragged out by a huge margin, but its radiance as well as its resonance empowerment continued to dwindle at a steady rate.

Saint Stark already expected this to happen. Nothing lasted forever.

What mattered was that she made use of the temporary clear gap that the persistent energy beam maintained during this fairly lengthy interval.

The Amaranto Mark III's sensor along with the larger and more elaborate sensor systems of the combined fleet all began to record a lot of data from this narrow cavity.

Before the smart AIs could complete their first round of processing the new data, Saint Stark's eyes narrowed as she instinctively caught a trace.

"FOUND YOU."

The Amaranto Mark III had already been charging up for her third strike.

This time, the ace marksman mech did not painstakingly wait until her Instrument of Vengeance was close to reaching her maximum capacity!

Speed was of the essence. Saint Stark took a gamble and decided to pull the trigger when her oversized luminar crystal rifle had only reached a 30 percent charge!

A much dimmer but golden energy beam shot out from the muzzle of the Instrument of Vengeance.

She no longer saw the need to leverage her pride this time.

Instead, she chose to channel her joy at successfully keeping a gap open for so long that she gained the confidence to complete her goal!

Her joy was not small.

When she poured it all into her third attack, the resulting energy beam not only exuded a brilliant golden glow, but also amplified its damage potential, thereby partially compensating for the lack of charge!

This time, the gap in the dark miasma lasted just as short as the initial attack, but this granted the combined fleet enough time to determine the results.

“The Amaranto Mark III… managed to strike a second formation anchor at one of its corners!”

“The death energy formation is weakening! The rotation of one of the 3 remaining energy vortices has slowed down!”

Although Saint Stark only managed to land a glancing blow, this turned out to be the straw that broke the camel’s back!

The fault tolerance of the enemy’s spell array had already been squeezed to the limit. Introducing yet another fault finally toppled over the alien working’s remaining stability!

This became evident when the other two energy vortices grew unstable as a response to the most recent changes.

A cascade of faults ensued. One change triggered another shift, which subsequently caused the deterioration of more factors!

Though Ves did not possess an in-depth understanding of formation arts, he was very familiar with equivalent phenomena in mechanical engineering.

His grin grew wider when he could clearly sense the dark miasma losing a lot of strength.

“Our visibility is expanding! Our control over the local space has strengthened. Our energy fields are beginning to assert their influence over a wider radius than before. The deathborn masses… are receding!”

Chapter 7524 Death Seeker

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The enemy death energy formation was in the midst of collapsing.

Though the unstable activity stirred up the surrounding space, the weakening of the dark miasma immediately shifted the balance of power in the favor of the human intruders.

Countless deathborn let out silent screams of pain and fear as the expanding energy fields repelled them in a violent fashion!

Many sensor systems that had previously been rendered completely ineffective suddenly regained the capability to peer a short distance into the dark miasma.

Though it was difficult to make truly high-quality observations at longer ranges, they could at least capture faint emissions that could betray the presence of formidable opponents.

Right now, that was exactly what Saint Commander Casella Ingvar attempted to find.

She did not believe that the deathborn went out of their way to deploy this mysterious spell array just to inconvenience the combined fleet.

The Minerva Mark II patched into the data feeds of the Tortuous Scream and many other ships with more powerful sensor arrays.

They needed to discover these hidden threats quickly in order to seize the initiative and launch a preemptive blow!

It did not matter whether the hidden enemy powerhouses decided to retreat after witnessing the collapse of their death energy formation.

If they did not decide to attack today, then they would definitely do so once the combined fleet arrived in orbit of Hypeh-Tekas II!

That would undoubtedly lead to a harder and more painful struggle.

Instead of letting this mysterious powerhouse escape, the Saint Commander intended to strangle this hidden threat right when it had just lost much of its concealment!

Unfortunately, the flux caused by all of the recent changes made it difficult to notice anything that stood out from the background.

The noise generated by the disturbed miasma was still too great. Even the most clever smart AIs struggled to identify genuine signs of enemies from ordinary chaotic emissions.

Ves silently noted this shortcoming. It appeared that the Larkinson Clan needed to invest in a proper survey vessel equipped with a bevy of high-powered sensor arrays.

Despite this hindrance, the Saint Commander did not give up on the search. She began to issue orders that caused dozens of naval squadrons and mech squads to shift their positions and prepare to move further away from the center.

If the enemy grew determined to remain out of sight, then the red humans would just take the initiative to flush out this hidden snake!

Yet before Casella could instruct these units to expand the combined fleet's security perimeter outward, the Amaranto Mark III began to glow bright enough to outshine all other sources of illumination again!

What was Saint Stark doing?!"

"Davia." Casella transmitted directly to the pilot of the active ace marksman mech.
"Has your intuition managed to lock onto the hidden alien champion?"

"NO. I HAVE NOT."

"Then why is your battle partner charging up the Instrument of Vengeance? Your actions are interfering with our search activities. The increasingly stronger light released by the Amaranto is blinding some of our most sensitive sensor systems. Even if this is not the case, the increasingly more powerful emissions produced by your ace mech are compromising the fidelity of our sensor data. You are hindering our attempts to find and lock onto our desired target. If you still haven't managed to lock onto an important hostile entity, then cut it out, Davia."

The Saint Commander sounded impatient and upset. She had every right to be as the Amaranto turned from a valued asset into an unwanted eyesore at this time!

"I REFUSE."

"Pardon?!"

Casella could not imagine that a normally steady individual such as Davia Stark would actually defy her order so brazenly!

The ace pilot directly disregarded the authority of her ace commander!

"YOU ARE NOT MY SUPERIOR. YOU ARE MY ALLY. THERE IS A DIFFERENCE. I HAVE NO OBLIGATION TO SUBORDINATE MYSELF TO YOUR WILL. I ONLY FOLLOWED YOUR ORDERS IN THE PAST OUT OF COURTESY."

The relationship between Saint Davia Stark and the Larkinson Clan remained complex to this day.

More than a few people quietly blamed Ves for failing to convert this powerful and talented marksman mech pilot into a full-fledged member of their clan.

Saint Stark did not go that far, but she certainly did not feel pleased for having to deal with the consequences of this failure!

"Then what are you trying to accomplish with this loud display? The longer you are distracting us all with your radiance, the greater the chance our enemies will be able to slip away from our grasp."

"THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT I AM DOING, CASELLA. THERE IS NO NEED FOR YOU AND EVERYONE ELSE TO TAKE ACTION. MY BATTLE PARTNER AND I CAN TAKE CARE OF THIS OURSELVES. NOW STAY QUIET AND LET US WORK."

Though Davia Stark sounded rude and insolent, Casella knew the older woman well enough that she rarely if ever overestimated her abilities.

If she claimed that she could seek out the hidden enemy by herself, then she deserved a chance to prove her strength.

Ace pilots lived for moments like these.

In order to attain godhood, they needed to prove themselves and others worthy that they deserved to wield this power.

They could never do so by playing it safe. Taking risks was natural. What separated a good ace pilot from a bad one was their ability to achieve a balance between boldness and overconfidence.

It was far too easy for many saints to sway a little too far into one end of the spectrum.

Saint Stark definitely assumed a great risk by making a boast that many people found impossible to fulfill.

Casella frowned inside the cockpit of her own machine.

What exactly gave Davia Stark the confidence that she could resolve this difficult situation by herself?

It did not take too long before the answer became evident.

The Amaranto Mark III did not mindlessly accumulate energy, but instead began to shape all of the power at her disposal in a specific and systematic manner.

Different energies blended with each other or collided together. The light output of the ace marksman mech became more complex as many different patterns emerged.

Ves and other sensitive individuals perceived far more than others.

What looked like a strange lightshow to ordinary people instead appeared to be a complex weaving of exotic energies!

True resonance fortified the spiritual foundation of the living ace mech in a way that caused the latter to stimulate parts of herself that previously remained passive.

This produced many reactions. The flow of E energies gained more structure and consistently. It was as if an invisible hand forcefully imposed a surprisingly elegant sense of order amidst the chaos.

The Amaranto Mark III became particularly active due to these changes. The glowing crystalline mech seemed to gain more definition in front of everyone's eyes.

Ves himself widened his eyes as he could actually perceive that the Amaranto's physical frame was undergoing mutations that seemed vaguely familiar!

The living machine was actually expanding in size!

The change was not too extreme, but not subtle either. Certain layers grew thicker, while other parts gained additional curves or lines.

It was as if the Amaranto Mark III was undergoing a mysterious sublimation.

The reason why this process seemed somewhat familiar to Ves was because it reminded him of the Demoncasting process.

The difference was that the Amaranto Mark III did not undergo physical mutation because of the inducement of an external source.

Ves possessed enough discernment to recognize that the source of this sudden evolution process was the Amaranto Mark III herself!

Yes, the masterwork ace mech supplied much of the power and direction of this unexpected transformation!

Once he managed to ascertain this truth, it did not take long for him to peer deeper and deduce the ultimate cause of this event.

"Ascension Runes."

He had not forgotten about their existence and how enthusiastic he used to be about their addition to his products.

However, once it lost its novelty and became a standard addition to all of his products, he no longer paid any special attention to it anymore.

It couldn't be helped. Living mechs accumulated Ascension Runes way too slowly to generate powerful effects right away.

While the presence of a dozen Ascension Runes already strengthened a mech in small but noticeable ways, the differences in performance failed to reach a truly qualitative threshold.

Only nerds and nitpickers truly valued these relatively minor differences!

Ves himself knew that he would likely have to wait for many years before the significance of Ascension Runes truly became obvious.

It appeared his judgment had been faulty.

The original Amaranto was one of his oldest personalised works, and among the first that initially benefited from his invention of Ascension Runes.

This meritorious living machine had participated in many battles and traveled from one galaxy to another.

The Amaranto had also undergone two profound revisions. Each major refit drastically upgraded her tech and features, yet Ves had taken painstaking care to preserve her original spiritual foundation, thereby allowing her to make the most out of her prior growth and accumulation.

The Amaranto spent years fighting and living alongside Davia Stark, who had managed to grow from a shattered expert pilot to a powerful junior ace pilot in just a couple of decades!

Saint Stark and her battle partner also killed a lot of enemies together. They had taken the lives of powerful human mech pilots as well as dozens of formidable alien champions.

Throughout all of these adventures, the Amaranto continuously grew alongside her human battle partner.

She was not the same mech as she was just a year ago!

The growth state of a high-ranking mech pilot could easily be quantified by using the lavere scale.

What about the corresponding mech?

For a living mech of Ves's design, one simple and convenient way was to count the amount of Ascension Runes that they had slowly formed through a process that Ves did not understand!

Six.

Twelve.

Thirty-two.

Sixty-four.

One Ascension Rune after another lit up in both his spiritual perception as well as his eyes!

Each of these runes had found their place on the mech frame of the Amaranto Mark III.

They shone in varying colors and tints, as if each individual Ascension Rune corresponded to a specific expression of different elements.

However, Ves was still able to discern three distinctive groups of runes.

The initial set of 16 Ascension Runes radiated bright white light. Their purity was unmatched, and their brightness was a notch above the rest.

"The Path of the Illuminator." Ves identified under his breath.

The Amaranto Mark III developed each of these Ascension Runes due to the contamination of her design spirit.

The next set of Ascension Runes was twice as long. 32 Ascension Runes shone in a red and more predatory light. Their light was more complex and varied, which reflected their human origin.

"The Path of the Marksman."

These Ascension Runes clearly formed due to the strong influence of Saint Davia Stark. Compared to a design spirit, it was natural that the pilot, especially one that wielded extraordinary willpower, would leave a stronger mark on her own machine!

The final set of Ascension Runes glowed distinctly dimmer than the rest. Their dark and murky radiation felt outright filthy compared to the purity of the initial set of runes! Each of the 16 dim

Ascension Runes seemed to share little relation with the rest. In fact, they seemed to have more in common with the dark miasma churning in the distance!

“The Path of the Executioner.”

Ves instinctively felt that this name was appropriate for this recently developed Ascension Path.

It seemed to be completely unrelated to the Amaranto Mark III and Saint Davia Stark, but that was actually not the case.

This was because Ves remembered the shape and identity of Davia Stark’s companion spirit!

Through the existence of Vail, Saint Stark gained an unnatural affinity and sensitivity towards death.

She could even borrow her spiritual crow’s power to hasten the demise of heavily injured opponents!

What mattered was that when Ves last conducted a routine inspection on the Amaranto Mark III, her latest Ascension Path had not developed to this extent.

He narrowed his eyes and briefly shifted his gaze to the dark miasma and the ominous beings lurking within.

“Stark must have taken advantage of this special environment to speed up her understanding of the opposite of light.”

The third and final set of Ascension Runes acted as the final piece of the puzzle.

Now that the Amaranto Mark III accumulated 64 Ascension Runes in a very specific and deliberately symmetrical configuration, the ace marksman mech triggered a spontaneous transformation that somehow brought all of their power together!

Ves could track through the changes in E energy fluctuations that the Ascension Runes no longer exerted their influence in isolation, but actually began to merge their effects, thereby producing entirely new outcomes that reached a new height in power!

The profound changes actually resembled the output of qi formations that he had witnessed just recently!

The initial forms and shapes may be drastically different, but the processes and outcomes did not deviate too far from each other!

They were essentially different starting points that all borrowed from a common set of principles!

Ves already realized a greater truth from this insight, but he did not have time to ponder upon it in further detail.

This was because the shining rune-covered Amaranto had already leveraged the power of her Ascension Runes in her next action!

The Instrument of Vengeance glowed brightly with alternating colors before discharging all of the accumulated energies!

"COME FORTH, MY DEATH SEEKER!"

Yet instead of launching a straight and blindingly bright energy beam that instantly plowed forward at a significant fraction of the speed of light, the luminar crystal rifle instead spat out... a giant crow of light!

"What?!"

It was as if the Amaranto had changed her vocation from a marksman mech into a summoner mage!

This sight completely defied reality to a much greater extent than leaving behind a persistent energy beam!

Everyone became gobsmacked after they witnessed the birth of this strange apparition!

As soon as it appeared, the giant crow of light did not remain static.

It spread its wings and flew forward as if it was flying through air!

While doing so, it immediately showcased another capability that completely distinguished it from the normal output of the instrument of Vengeance.

The giant light construct could shift its flight trajectory as easily as any bird!

It did not fly in a straight line, but instead took turns and followed a more meandering route!

The flexibility showcased by this energy attack that the Amaranto Mark III forcefully manifested into a giant crow was unmatched!

Ves never expected for his living mech to be capable of doing this. He thought that ace mechs could only create such energy manifestations with the help of rare and powerful resonating exotics such as URI-2461-V6!

"How..."

Saint Stark and her battle partner broke his expectations of what was possible. The pair directly proved that a string of Ascension Runes could give birth to a powerful new ability, one that could theoretically match the power of resonating abilities!

The implications of this observation was staggering!

Though not many people formed this particular connection, Ves couldn't help but think how much discovery elevated the value of his living mechs and especially his older ones far above their lifeless counterparts!

Ves grew a lot more invested in Davia Stark's initiative.

It remained to be seen whether this giant crow of light possessed actual substance.

Chapter 7525 The First Sequence

Chapter 7525 The First Sequence

The appearance of the giant crow of light astonished everyone.

Junior ace pilots and ace mechs rarely if ever produced such manifestations!

Rare and special resonating exotics such as the recently developed URI-2461-V6 may be capable of shaping power in such a sophisticated form, but the Amaranto Mark III did not integrate these materials!

What made all of the difference in this instance was the accumulation of Ascension Runes.

Ves still possessed a deep understanding of one of his own masterwork mechs. He knew for certain that neither he nor his wife had applied any major upgrades or alterations on the mech frame. He could definitely rule out these possibilities to explain why Saint Stark had gained a brand-new ability.

As for Davia Stark herself, it was highly unlikely that she could rely on her extraordinary willpower and her companion spirit to distort reality to such a massive extent.

Within the range of her Saint Kingdom, she was capable of distorting reality in ways that other mortals could never imagine.

Yet Ves did not believe that she could completely change the characteristics of an energy beam to this degree by exerting her spirit and willpower alone!

What about the design spirit?

Ves had already ruled out this possible explanation. The Illustrious One may be able to replicate this phenomenon, but only if he was able to pierce through the dark miasma that dampened every external spiritual connection, which was impossible!

Now that Ves thought about it, it made sense for the deathborn to go through all of this trouble of creating this hostile and isolating environment.

In a high-energy environment like the interior of Messier 87, True Gods must be extremely prevalent.

Many of them likely developed the ability to project their power remotely across many light-years.

If the deathborn wanted to defeat any alien force, then it seemed prudent and maybe even necessary to cut off any chance for the latter to call for immediate assistance!

Before his mind proceeded to go on a full tangent on how the deathborn conducted anti-deity cultivator warfare in their native galaxy, a loud female voice interrupted his train of thought.

"VES!" Gloriana shouted over their private communication channel! "Our Amaranto! Explain! How is she able to produce such a high-order effect without our intervention?!

"Well, it appears that Saint Stark and her battle partner lost patience with us and decided to take matters into their own hands." Ves half-jokingly responded. "Those glowing Ascension Runes are the semi-concrete manifestations of the living mech's growth. They share a strong resemblance to the runes carved into high-level artifacts such as my Oceancaller or Aurelia's Flower Parasol. Those powerful objects based on ancient designs are able to tap into the power of strings of runes to amplify their power expression or shape it in a very specific manner. If you form the assumption that living mechs are modern artifacts, then it is theoretically possible that Ascension Runes could perform similarly. What we have just witnessed in front of our eyes serves as conclusive proof."

"THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO CATEGORIES, VES! Those artifacts are deliberately designed and produced by ancient experts who possessed a vast amount of knowledge. As far as I know, neither Saint Stark nor the Amaranto possess any decent theoretical attainments in rune studies or E-technology in general! It is as if a barbarian randomly strung pieces of programming code together and magically produced a flame out of nowhere! The probability of this happening is so low that it defies understanding!"

Ves couldn't help but chuckle. He found it funny that his wife failed to wrap her head around a new phenomenon.

"Hehehe. I think that you are a little too attached to this analogy. You need to be more open-minded. E energy is a very complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. To equate runes to the spiritual equivalent of programming code is a very flawed way of interpreting them. I do not fully understand runes myself, but I doubt that they work exactly like our software. Besides, I also believe that you are underestimating Davia and her battle partner's mastery over their Ascension Runes. The Path of the Marksman and the Path of the Executioner are derived from the ace pilot herself. Even if she lacks a solid theoretical and systematic understanding of the meaning of those runes, she should at least understand them on an instinctual level."

"What of the remaining 16 Ascension Runes?" Gloriana critically questioned. "Those should be derived from your alien design spirit, correct?"

"Yes. I suppose that Davia and the Amaranto have not mastered them as fully as the others, but that does not mean that their comprehension of them is nonexistent. They have made such extensive use of the light element that it shouldn't be difficult for them to instinctively guess the meaning and applications of the runes corresponding to the Path of the Illuminator."

"That still does not explain everything." Gloriana noted. "Perhaps the three rune collections possess a certain degree of internal coherence, but how can they coordinate with each other so perfectly?"

She raised the most suspicious point of all. Ves did not believe that any random collection of Ascension Runes could produce such a deliberate manifestation of power.

It would be an insult of his intelligence to make the lazy assumption that the Amaranto Mark III formed this capability without any solid direction.

"I am wondering about that myself." Ves honestly admitted. "It does sound rather questionable that an ace pilot and a living ace mech somehow figured out how to form a sophisticated 'Ascension Rune Sequence' by themselves. I have my theories, but I am not quite comfortable with sharing them yet. I do not think we can obtain any definite answers without conducting an investigation once all of this is over. For now, let us enjoy the show."

"...Very well." Gloriana sounded resigned by the outcome of their private discussion. "I wonder if it is possible to replicate these Ascension Runes and apply them to our other products. Will we be able to impart the same ability to other mechs now that we have 'uncovered' a verified rune pattern?"

Ves shook his head. "I doubt that it is that simple. Just like how software must be tailored to a specific set of hardware, the Ascension Runes imprinted onto the Amaranto Mark III will only work on this singular combination of ace pilot and ace mech."

His wife grew disappointed. "Your logic is sound. A pity. If we can discover universal rune patterns that are usable to any mech, then we may be able to imprint them onto the designs of our future works in advance. That way, they will begin their lives at higher starting points. They do not have to wait for several years or a decade to form their own effective rune patterns."

That sounded interesting to Ves.

"You know what? I don't think it is impossible for us to learn something from existing Ascension Rune Sequences. The specific patterns developed by our high-ranking mechs are highly personalized, but as long as we study them in-depth and decipher their underlying principles, we can theoretically construct weaker but more universal rune patterns. This might allow us to impart degraded versions of the corresponding abilities to mass production models!"

This sounded plausible to Ves!

However, his wife immediately voiced the greatest shortcoming of this approach.

"You may be capable of doing this, but is it a worthwhile way to spend your limited time? Do not forget what truly matters to a mech designer. Progressing your design philosophy should always be your highest priority. You should complete the design of your remaining four elemental Carmine mechs before you think about diverting your attention any further. If you are invested in the development and exploitation of your so-called 'Ascension Rune Sequences', then I advise you to delegate this research subject to an apprentice."

She made another good point.

The problem was that he did not have a suitable apprentice to fob off this responsibility.

Alexa Streon might certainly be able to figure out these rune patterns, but that would take her away from her own interests. It would be unfair for Ves to reserve so much of her time.

The better way to go about this issue was to pick up another apprentice that possessed just the right qualities to achieve solid accomplishments in this new and mysterious field.

Yet that would still take many years to produce acceptable results.

Ves let out a sigh. "I'll figure this out later."

While the married couple had been talking, Saint Stark gradually began to mobilize her giant crow construct.

"NOTHING CAN ESCAPE THE PURSUIT OF MY DEATH SEEKER."

The bright and multi-colored crow construct flapped its wings and ventured directly into the dark miasma!

Though Ves had already expected it, he still felt impressed that the "Death Seeker" retained most of its strength and coherence after leaving the Amaranto Mark III's Saint Kingdom!

This provided further proof that Saint Stark did not manifest this crow construct by relying on her overbearing willpower alone!

What caught Ves's interest as well as how the Death Seeker interacted with the dark miasma.

It seared the darkness away and created a pocket of clear space around itself, similar to the Victrix!

What was different was that the Death Seeker did not completely repel the negative energies.

Though it was difficult to pick up by most individuals, Ves was still able to perceive that the crow construct actually absorbed a faint trace of negative energies!

The Death Seeker managed to catch the scent of its prey.

After meandering about for a few seconds longer, it abruptly turned around and sped towards a nearby location!

Its trajectory turned completely straight, making it seem as if it reverted back to a normal energy beam, but that was not the case!

The Death Seeker still maintained its condensed shape!

Unfortunately, this special state also limited its traversal speed, making it so that the crow had to flap its wings many times before it managed to reach its desired location!

As soon as it approached this coordinate, the Death Seeker seemed to lock onto its target. It uttered a soundless cry before it homed in on a dark and almost unnoticeable presence!

This hidden entity inadvertently exposed a portion of its silhouette.

This alarmed the combined fleet!

"Is that a phase whale?"

"No! Not exactly! Its… something more than that!"

The distinctive silhouette of a phase whale had been lurking right outside of the border of Casella's Command Field all this time!

This alarmed everyone because phase leaders normally weren't subtle.

Even with all of the interference produced by the dark miasma, the sensor systems of the combined fleet should have been able to detect such a powerful alien at this distance!

This made the Death Seeker even more remarkable!

If not for Saint Stark's surprising intervention, the human forces might have remained ignorant of this hidden threat.

That would have left them open to a surprise attack!

Now that the giant alien had become exposed, there was no chance it could catch the Larkinsons and their allies off-guard anymore.

The First Sword Mark III immediately locked on to this dangerous shadow and began to move forward in order to duel this dangerous enemy champion.

However, the Death Seeker pounced onto the shadowy enemy first!

A massive explosion occurred that completely stirred up the surrounding dark miasma!

This extraordinary blast definitely released at least as much energy if not more as a fully charged shot of the Amaranto Mark III!

The fact that the attack had truly hurt the enemy target became evident when a very harrowing shriek rang through the heads of every individual!

WHUUUUUAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!

It was like nothing that Ves and other red humans had ever heard before!

Thousands of people groaned in pain as they suffered a headache from getting exposed to this otherworldly cry!

This was definitely not the kind of noise that any phase whale would produce!

"What did the Amaranto just strike?"

The Mech Touch

Chapter 7526 Unreliable

The alien mastermind had become exposed!

From the moment the Death Seeker completed its mission and exploded against the side of this giant shadowy form, the creature uttered a soul scream filled with so much power that it shook the spirits of almost every red human!

This was despite the duel protection offered by Casella's Command Field and the active defensive spell array!

Even Ves felt a little troubled by the uncontrolled pressure released by this hidden foe!

Although the phase whale-like creature still remained largely hidden, the tip of the iceberg already exposed the vast power of this hostile entity!

Yet despite the intimidating nature of this questionable powerhouse, the smarter among the soldiers quickly realized that their enemy had finally been brought into the open!

Before, the alien mastermind played the combined fleet like a fiddle. The former relied heavily on the concealment offered by the special environment to launch attacks on the red humans and restrict their ability to respond.

So long as the Premier Fleet and the Bluejay Fleet split their strength or made any mistakes, the hidden enemy could immediately launch a devastating decapitation attack!

This had been the primary reason why the Saint Commander Casella Ingvar refrained from taking any overt actions.

In this high-level game, Casella felt endlessly frustrated because the enemy had set up the battlefield in a way that ended up with her hands tied behind her back!

Yet as soon as the Amaranto Mark III unexpectedly evolved a brand-new ability that successfully removed one of the greatest advantages of her enemy, Casella's hands finally came free!

"Open fire." The Saint Commander ordered.

The warships of the combined fleet did so at once. Their guns had already been primed and ready to fire.

Although target acquisition remained difficult due to the interference produced by the dark miasma, their formidable guns could still lock onto the giant silhouette due to sharing accurate targeting parameters across the data link network.

A combination of low-tech visual tracking and high-tech deep data analysis made it so that the combined fleet not only gained the ability to see past the enemy's unusual camouflage techniques but also track this shadowy enemy's movements through the surrounding dark miasma!

Thousands of energy beams, plasma bolts and kinetic projectiles struck the bewildered target.

From the chaotic movements of this exposed enemy, it became clear that the enemy had clearly been caught off-guard.

It did not have a solid game plan on what to do after his enemies had lifted up the veil that hid his position!

The initial wave of counterattacks continually struck the enemy's shadowy exterior.

Though they did not appear to inflict much damage, each attack was empowered by at least a wisp of the true resonance of the Saint Commander.

The firepower of the Tortuous Scream was much fiercer in comparison!

The Omega Lasers and other attacks launched by the Enfeoffed bunker mechs struck with the force of a hundred expert mechs.

These blows generated significantly greater feedback. Every strike seemed to strip away at the layers of shadow and death that enveloped the mysterious enemy.

Unfortunately, their effectiveness remained limited. The exposed adversary possessed an unusual degree of resilience. The enemy constantly absorbed the surrounding dark miasma in order to reinforce its own defenses and repair the cracks.

The red humans needed to strike more decisive blows to end this existence!

“Rosa. Attack from the front. Tusa, circle around and cut off its escape route. Dise, remain on standby.”

The Riot Mark III and the Dark Zephyr Mark III had already started to move forward as soon as they realized the presence of this major threat.

Casella's orders merely confirmed their decisions and encouraged them to go out on a hunt.

The First Sword Mark III also wanted to join in on the action, but the Saint Commander's orders forced the ace swordsman mech to let others take the lead.

Dise did not object too much towards this decision. There was no guarantee that the enemy that had just been brought into the open was the only alien powerhouse hiding inside the dark miasma.

The combined fleet still needed a guard in order to respond to any other unexpected surprises.

"Davia, what is your condition?"

The Amaranto Mark III looked much dimmer than usual after she had unleashed her Death Seeker. It was clear that her latest ability had not come without paying a significant price!

"WE ARE... EXHAUSTED." Saint Stark reluctantly admitted. "I KNEW THAT SEEKING OUT THIS DISGUSTING ALIEN VERMIN WOULD NOT BE EASY. I USED UP THE MAJORITY OF MY WILLPOWER. MY ACE MECH ALSO ENDURED GREAT STRAIN ON MULTIPLE FRONTS IN ORDER TO FORCIBLY COMPLETE THE FINAL ASCENSION RUNES IN ADVANCE AND TIE THEM ALL TOGETHER. BOTH OF US... ARE NOT MUCH USE FOR THE REST OF THIS BATTLE."

"Understood." The Saint Commander sighed. "Please stay in place in order to act as a deterrent against any unseen enemies that remain. You do not have to fight any further."

"VERY WELL. IT SHOULDN'T MATTER ALL THAT MUCH. MY DEATH SEEKER FAILED TO FIND ANOTHER ENEMY THAT IS JUST AS THREATENING AS THIS ONE."

The Amaranto's exhaustion put a damper on Casella's mood. The strong firepower of this ace marksman mech could have made the subjugation of the exposed enemy powerhouse a lot neater and more convenient!

The remaining ace mechs could only count on themselves to complete their current objective.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III had already overtaken the mysterious enemy and began to circle around at the rear.

In the meantime, the Riot Mark III tried to squeeze more acceleration out of its flight system just so that it could plunge its tier 3 Destroyer spear into the shadowy enemy as soon as possible!

Rosa Orfan had remained frustrated since the start of this alien ambush. She felt helpless to free the combined fleet from the trap and could do nothing while letting others be of greater assistance.

The constant waiting, the lack of action and the negative influence exerted by the dark miasma all stimulated the demon that had overtaken much of her soul.

The latest development should have pulled Saint Orfan from the brink of fighting another civil war with the Prophet's Bane!

Although the Middle Demon constantly sought to undermine the human ace pilot and completely take over her body, the demon's irrationality and indiscriminate hatred against living occasionally made it possible for the two of them to unite against a third party!

Yet instead of temporarily letting go of its perpetual hostility against Saint Orfan, the Middle Demon refused to direct much hostility towards the shadowy enemy.

It instead continued to wrangle for control, causing Rosa Orfan endless troubles and distractions!

The flight trajectory of the Riot Mark III grew crooked. The acceleration of the ace spearman mech became sputtery and inconsistent.

“BEHAVE.” The ace pilot insisted, but the ace mech that had already fused with her body rebelled against her firm attempt to impose control!

The Riot Mark III did not perform smoother because of this. Instead, the Prophet’s Bane seemed to develop even greater animosity towards its eternal foe. The demon proceeded to attack Rosa’s remaining soul even harder, thereby causing the ace mech to slow down even further!

Ves couldn’t help but ground and palm his face at this shameful display.

As the first D-mech of this level, Ves often felt proud of this highly eccentric work.

When the ace pilot and the demon both reached alignment on their objective, they could combine their forces and perform far above their usual level!

Yet when they had become completely at odds with each other, the opposite occurred!

The current condition of the Riot Mark III effectively halved its performance if not more!

Whether the slight delay or antics made a difference or not, the shadowy enemy did not choose to confront the converging ace mechs directly.

Its shadowy form instead began to lose definition!

While the attacks from the warships continued to land on the blurring shape, they did not seem to inflict as much damage as before.

The more seconds passed, the more the attacks seemed to strike at clouds or miasma instead of anything solid.

The Saint Commander quickly realized what was happening!

“The enemy is making an escape! It is phasing out of his current location!”

Too late!

Before the delayed Riot Mark III could plunge its speartip into the blurring shape, the latter had finally faded entirely!

Rosa Orfan uttered a wordless cry of frustration as her disobedient D-mech struck nothing but dark miasma!

Gone!

The Dark Zephyr Mark III did not swoop in, but began to circle around in order to discern whether the strange enemy was not secretly trying to sneak away in a more conventional manner.

Sadly, the ace light skirmisher found no trace of the enemy. His Saint Kingdom scoured the surroundings, but Saint Tusa found nothing related to the enemy.

Not even the formation anchors of the strange formation of deathborn remained behind!

The enemy completely managed to get away!

Chapter 7527 Haphazard Development

Chapter 7527 Haphazard Development

The enemy had made a getaway!

As soon as the suspected alien deathborn mastermind and powerhouse became exposed, it arguably made the most clever decision out of all of the available options.

It evacuated with all of the remaining troops and assets left on the battlefield!

Nothing of the enemy remained behind!

The search parties dispatched by the combined fleet couldn't even find the fragments of the destroyed formation anchor.

Many leaders grew concerned about the implications of this clean and very decisive withdrawal.

This was yet one more piece of evidence that they had been tangling against a highly rational and intelligent enemy commander.

This was an alien leader who understood and fully utilized many important concepts of warfare, from the element of surprise to avoid getting dragged into a losing battle.

Such a strategic thinker existed in complete contrast to the mindless, hate-filled deathborn fodder that made up the vast majority of their ranks!

This neatly made up for the greatest shortcomings of the deathborn race. The ordinary members of this esoteric race previously fought like mobs. They possessed none of the rationality and strategic vision of their living counterparts.

Yet once they fell under the command of a high-ranking member of their race, they turned into the most obedient pawns, behaving little different from the mutated voribugs!

The failure to eliminate this frightening enemy commander meant that the invading humans inevitably had to get ready to fight round 2.

Nobody looked forward to this upcoming engagement, yet no soldier shied away from their responsibilities either. They all studied the battle footage and held briefings in order to put up a better fight next time.

Ves had a lot of responsibilities on his lap.

Unfortunately, his time was limited, so he could only address a handful of issues at a time.

His first priority was to pay a visit to the Amaranto Mark III.

During the recent engagement, multiple key figures had distinguished themselves on the battlefield.

Caracalla Shuku and Casella Ingvar had undoubtedly played indispensable roles, yet Davia Stark and her battle partner had undoubtedly stolen the show!

Ves had arrived at the hangar bay just after his wife.

Gloriana looked incredibly eager despite the fact that most of her body became obscured by her hazard suit.

It was not safe to get close to a mech right after returning from battle. The danger factor became especially acute when dealing with a high-powered machine that recently released a huge amount of emissions, much of which could cook any unprotected human alive!

The hangar bay already deployed robotic arms equipped with tools ready to cool, decontaminate and possibly isolate the ace marksman mech once she returned.

None of that proved necessary.

The Amaranto Mark III landed at her designated spot in the hangar bay without issue.

Compared to her usual proud and shining posture, the ace mech looked almost unrecognizable this time!

Her crystalline exterior had grown larger and slightly more formidable, but the light and reflections had grown dull.

The living machine exuded a strong sense of exhaustion, so much so that it distorted the surrounding reality to emphasize this fact!

"Ugh." Gloriana uttered an unlady-like groan. "Has Saint Stark lost control?"

"She's just tired." Ves explained.

It was not until the ace pilot finally disengaged her neural interface and shut down her battle partner that the Amaranto Mark III no longer made everyone around her feel abnormally tired and sleepy.

Several more minutes passed before Davia Stark finally regained enough energy to exit her cockpit and lower herself until she stood before the two mech designers.

"Sir. Madame." Davia greeted even as she struggled to keep her back straight. "As you can see, my condition is… not good. Please keep this short. All I have in mind at the moment is a nice, warm bed."

That sounded less than ideal, but the Miracle Couple could work with this limitation.

Ves asked the most urgent question on his mind first. "How did you come up with the Death Seeker?"

"..."

"Well?"

"I… cannot really explain it." The tired ace pilot finally responded. "You can probably get more answers if you ask my battle partner on a better day. She did most of the heavy lifting. You should know that even if I am constantly interfacing with my mech, I still have no awareness of what she is doing most of the time. Even an ace pilot cannot direct constant attention on every single machine operation or computer instruction."

"Be that as it may, you must at least possess an understanding of all of the Ascension Runes that your battle partner has accumulated, or else you wouldn't have been able to effectively channel their power."

Saint Stark tentatively nodded. "I do understand a bit of every Ascension Rune. I find it difficult to put it into words, though. Much of my understanding is based on feelings and mood. There is no way I can write a manuel about it. As for my battle partner, she has developed her own interpretation of the same runes. The Amaranto is a mech, not a human, so the way she thinks about them and uses them is completely different from my own. We were only really able to summon the Death Seeker by working together, and we only did so barely."

"Oh? The manifestation of this unprecedented ability seemed quite successful from our standpoint." Gloriana responded. "The two of you effectively developed a new ability without relying on greater resonance strength or the support of a key resonating exotic."

Saint Stark did not look particularly proud to accomplish this feat. "It is not good enough according to our judgment. The Ascension Runes laid the groundwork. What truly mattered was how we used it. Sure, we managed to pull it off successfully, but I expended so much willpower that I could barely do anything after that. This was never supposed to happen. If I did not waste so much of my power, I would have been able to remain active on the battlefield and pin down the enemy alien mastermind before he managed to disappear entirely."

Ves shook his head. "You do not have to take responsibility for letting the enemy go. Without your initiative, the deathborn leader would have remained hidden, thereby putting us in a completely passive position. It would be too greedy to ask for more."

Despite his consolation, Saint Stark still considered her lack of follow-up actions to be a failure.

This was how ace pilots were like. They were never completely satisfied with their own performance. There was always stuff they could do better. The only consistent solution they could come up with was to become stronger. This was part of their natural growth cycle.

"You did not provide a proper answer to my husband's question." Gloriana stated. "Where did the rune pattern come from? Did you and your battle partner randomly collect Ascension Runes until you suddenly came to the realization that you could combine them together? Or did you visualize the Death Seeker far in advance and work to form the appropriate Ascension Runes to turn it into reality?"

"A bit of both, actually." Davia Stark admitted. "It is not as clean and neat as you think. We are not mech designers. I admit that the initial idea came from the Illustrious One. The design spirit possesses a much deeper understanding of the Ascension Runes related to him. He has mastered powers and abilities that are connected to those runes. However, my battle partner and I never managed to make them work by ourselves. We are completely different from him. Instead of trying to copy the Illustrious One, the Amaranto and I tried to put together abilities that belonged to us. We sort of brainstormed a few ideas, but we didn't really know what we were doing at the time. I never expected that we could pull it off when we managed to collect just 64 Ascension Runes. My battle partner managed to figure that out by herself."

This meant that it became essential for Ves to interview the Amaranto later on. For now, he still wanted to pump Davia for additional information.

"Now that you managed to pull off the Death Seeker ability for the first time, can you perform it again next time?"

She nodded. The ace pilot harbored no doubts about this. "Definitely. The runes haven't gone away."

"Will doing so exhaust you as much as the first time?"

"Probably... not." Saint Stark replied in a less certain voice. "Now that I have a bit of experience with it, I know some of the pitfalls. I am pretty confident that I can streamline my techniques and do a better job next time. Don't expect too much, Ves. The Death Seeker will never become a cheap trick. Forming a creature of light that can seek out strong traces of life or death takes a lot of power for reasons I am not entirely clear about. I might be able to lower the cost if I manage to figure out what I am actually doing, but this is not easy."

Ves grew a little frustrated about the lack of clear data and explanations. High-ranking mech pilots rarely offered clear answers on how their powers and abilities worked. They all seemed to work by "instinct"; and "feelings"; that could never be broken down in clear terms or equations!

He inwardly shook his head. He knew it was a futile struggle to look into this matter further. He just had to take Saint Stark at her word and move forward.

Chapter 7528 Potential Prospect

Chapter 7528 Potential Prospect

Interviewing Saint Stark and studying the data logs extracted from the Amaranto Mark III yielded few usable results.

Neither Ves nor Gloriana obtained enough information to thoroughly understand or replicate the Death Seeker.

Far too much of it was tied into intangible concepts that could not be quantified into a neat set of numbers and equations.

Gloriana quickly lost interest for that reason.

"It is clear that all of this is tied to your so-called Ascension Runes." She told her husband. "In order to study them properly, we will need to treat the Amaranto Mark III as an artifact. This is tied to a discipline that I am not well-versed in. This should be your domain more than mine."

Ves nodded. "That is somewhat true. I do know a thing about artifacts and traditional craftsmanship with the help of one of my incarnations, but that does not mean I excel at the high-level stuff. I still lack access to deeper and more profound theories on rune studies. This is true strategic knowledge that has become extremely scarce. The few parties that have access to more than a few tattered pages will never let me gain access to them without paying a corresponding price that is bound to be exorbitant."

He did not mention the Mech Designer System, but added it to the list as well. He had not forgotten how many Ascension Points he had to cough up in order to exchange for a particularly pricey enlightenment fruit.

His wife furrowed her brows. "We will need to gain access to systematic knowledge sooner or later. I have a feeling that understanding runes will become increasingly more relevant as time goes on. According to my own understanding, runes are the transistors of E-technology. They are the fundamental building blocks that can manipulate the flow of E energy in a structured and deliberate manner. Using them on an individual basis can already make a small difference. Combining them together to form the E-technology equivalent of a circuit board is the true way of utilizing them. You have already seen how powerful the Death Seeker ability can become. If we can apply such rune patterns on a mech in advance, our clients can readily make use of their power without relying on growth."

That was the dream, yet realizing it was easier said than done!

Ves let out a tired breath. "You already told me that it is not that simple to realize these gains. The lack of help provided by Saint Stark and the Amaranto Mark III has effectively tied our hands. We can derive anything immediately useful. Without this gain, we can't apply runes onto other mechs and expect them to work as intended in the short term."

In other words, there was little point in spending more time on this new and interesting phenomenon. They could not even offer any substantial improvements to Saint Stark and the Amaranto Mark III. The latter two had to rely on their own efforts to reduce the consumption and increase the effectiveness of the Death Seeker.

"In my opinion, it is better if Saint Stark refrains from utilizing the latest ability synthesized by her ace mech." Gloriana said. "The power of 64 Ascension Runes in combination is clearly not small, and the consumption is far too great. This means that Saint Stark is not strong enough to rely on it, or there is still a large amount of room for optimization and refinement. I believe that both circumstances apply to this case."

"That may be true, but we may not have a choice in the upcoming encounter. The enemy leaders have already shown a penchant for stealth and concealment. We cannot kill what we cannot find. The Death Seeker gives us a costly but effective guarantee that we can always unveil our priority enemy no matter how much it is trying to hide in the darkness. In fact, just the fact that the enemy is aware of this capability may cause the enemy leader to stop bothering with these tricks."

In that sense, the Death Seeker already proved its worth. Casella must be happy about this boon.

"Let us complete our work here so that we can attend to our other duties."

The Amaranto Mark III had undergone a relatively significant sublimation. The mass and volume of her crystalline mech frame had grown and mutated in new and unexpected ways.

This gave the Miracle Couple a minor headache as the design of the current iteration of the ace marksman mech had deviated from their original design for the Mark III.

If they did not want to create complications and mistakes in the future, they needed to thoroughly scan and record the new state of the ace mech in order to establish an up-to-date baseline.

They actually wanted to do more than that. It would be best if they studied the changes in detail to understand exactly what the latest evolutionary process had improved.

After all, if the Amaranto Mark III chose to alter a specific component, then it probably had a shortcoming that Ves and Gloriana had overlooked during the Mark III's design process!

They had no time to study and appreciate the Amaranto's comprehensive evolution. This pained them, as they could clearly ascertain that the ace mech had evolved in a distinctly different fashion than a typical masterwork transformation.

Once Ves was done with his current task, he attended a meeting in order to discuss the next steps of the combined fleet.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar looked calm as she stood at the head of the conference table. Her gaze locked onto the map of the Hypeh-Tekas System.

"We have managed to secure a slight advantage in our latest encounter against the opposing side." She began the meeting. "As far as intelligence is concerned, both the enemy and ourselves have exposed much of our capabilities first-hand. We have revealed some of the strength of our ace mechs and the properties of our energy fields. The deathborn has revealed their ability to deploy death energy formations, their command over the deathborn and the shadow of their presumed leader. In short, both sides gave away information that they would rather keep to themselves, but I am confident that we have managed to hide more of our secrets."

The Fiery Axe, who attended the meeting in a projected form, looked as if she had been holding in her patience for a long time.

"I hope that keeping us out of the battlefield this time was worth it, woman! My giants do not appreciate all of this cloak and dagger nonsense. Either give us the orders to deploy in the next battle, or we will step out on our own accord!"

Ves frowned after hearing this. He could already feel his other self growing peeved at the disobedience expressed by his subordinates.

The Fiery Axe committed a definite taboo if she was still part of a professional human military organization.

However, few people believed that the 'Human' Phase Lord Department was still completely human in essence.

That did not excuse her presumptive remark in his opinion.

The Saint Commander did not show any displeasure when she addressed the female strategos.

"You and your giants shall have what you want. Once we arrive in orbit of Hypeh-Tekas II, we will likely encounter the stronghold of the hostile aliens in this star system. The probability that their leader will choose to withdraw will be lower because of the cost of doing so. Unless the deathborn are willing to discard almost all of their prior efforts in this star system, they have little choice but to stand their ground and fight."

That sounded like music to the Fiery Axe's ears! She grinned!

"Great! Leave the biggest and most massive targets to us! We are more than happy to chop apart fortresses and phase whales with our superdimensional weapons!"

The Saint Commander nodded in acknowledgement before she lifted her hand.

The projection zoomed in on an image capture of the shadowy alien leader.

"Before we discuss more specific arrangements, I would first like to gather our thoughts on the special enemy that we have just encountered. The reconnaissance conducted by the Terran Woodsap mechs have already exposed the fact that the deathborn race maintains a strong hierarchy based on strength or evolution stage. They have managed to identify officers of sorts that are able to command at least hundreds of ordinary deathborn. It is not a stretch to believe that there is an even higher rank that is able to command these officers and any lesser members of their race. The entity uncovered by the Death Seeker is likely the most important leader of their task force, and possibly their 'army' in this star system."

Commodore Zonrad Reze looked skeptical. "I have little reason to doubt the theory that this entity commanded the deathborn task force assigned to intercept us, but I am not as certain that it is the highest-ranking leader in this star system. In hindsight, the enemy task force was not particularly large or strong. It could never defeat our collective forces in a direct engagement. I believe that the enemy merely chose to dispatch a modest task force in order to harass us or delay us. It is not appropriate for the most senior leader to participate in these kinds of missions in person. This is just the appetizer as far as they are concerned. Defeating us entirely was never the goal of the enemy. The most they could have hoped for was to take out one of our key assets and deter us from proceeding with our exploratory mission."

"The deathborn have failed." Ves remarked. "We have managed to avoid the loss of the Tortuous Scream or one of our ace mechs. We also managed to learn more about the enemy than vice versa."

"Hence why I have stated that we have gained the upper hand." Casella briefly smiled before turning to the RF officer. "You may be correct, commodore, but I still hold to my own opinion. The deathborn are complete newcomers to this dwarf galaxy. It is difficult for their stronger leaders to project themselves here, or else we would have been confronted by additional entities of the same caliber. From my perspective, the entire operation in the Hypeh-Tekas System appears to be a risky initiative by an ambitious member of the patrician or senior officer class of the deathborn race."

"...So you think we are dealing with the alien version of Ves?" Admiral Gori Tensen of the RA asked while raising his eyebrow.

The Saint Commander reluctantly nodded. "I can never be certain about this. When the enemy became exposed, my Command Field managed to gain... a brief impression. The enemy leader put in a great effort to keep his details hidden, but do not underestimate the intuition of an ace commander. It would have been better if the enemy leader entered the range of my Command Field, but it had chosen to cut its losses and flee instead."

More than a few people looked at Ves.

The notion of stumbling on an alien version of him made them both amused and concerned!

They knew how tricky it could be to fight an ambitious and highly inventive leader like the former patriarch of the Larkinson Clan!

Despite his relative youth and lack of experience, his resourcefulness often exceeded the expectations of his enemies, allowing him to overcome one challenge after another!

Previously, the Larkinsons and their allies often benefited from fighting alongside Ves.

Now, the potential prospect of fighting against the deathborn version of himself raised everyone's guard!

"There is also another factor that many of you have overlooked." Casella continued. "Have you forgotten about the native aliens? It is the Red Cabal that has ordered a lockdown of this star system in the first place. We can be certain that the native aliens are colluding with the deathborn on a limited basis at the very least. The deathborn presence here may be limited by many factors, but the same does not apply to the native aliens. As long as they are protected against this hostile environment, they can deploy all of the forces they want in this star system. We will most likely be confronted by them once we have reached Hypeh-Tekas II."

Chapter 7529 Hasty Preparations

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The meeting dragged on for a considerable amount of time.

The gathered leaders discussed their findings and opinions on the recent engagement, with a particular focus on the properties of their new enemies.

The more they explored the capabilities of the deathborn, the greater their apprehension towards this unusual group of intangible beings.

"Whether they can be defined as a 'race' is questionable." Jovy Armalon mused. "In my opinion, they are more akin to a natural phenomenon that just happens to possess some, but not all of the traits of life. For example, they do not appear to reproduce naturally, but can only spawn from the corpses of deceased sentient beings that haven't been cleaned up by others."

"You can say that for all parasites, Jovy." Ves responded. "While the deathborn are composed entirely of negative energies, I don't see anything wrong with that. They are the dark reflection of positive energy life forms such as ourselves. While I can sort of agree with the standpoint that the deathborn can play a counterweight to an overwhelming number of positive life forms in an energy-rich galaxy, their behavior and complexity still grants the right to be recognized as a complete race, especially when they are ruled by sentient and intelligent higher-ranked variants."

The Saint Commander did not care too much about this academic discussion. "Leave this debate to the exobiologists. We do not have the time to conduct a deep dive on the nature of existence of these deathborn. Our priority is to identify and apply the lessons that we have learned from the last encounter in the coming days. I want our forces to be better prepared and equipped to fight and resist the deathborn once we assault one of their main strongholds in this star system."

"You are asking for the impossible." Commander Zonrad Reze said as he crossed his arms. "We have gathered limited intelligence on the deathborn. What they have shown earlier is just the tip of the iceberg. What is also concerning is that we still do not possess a good understanding of the terrain. Due to the dark miasma and how well our opposition has leveraged it, we have not been able to send out any scouts to survey Hypeh-Texas II in advance. We know virtually nothing about the defenses and the enemy forces stationed over there. We are assuming a very great risk by attacking this key location without conducting a substantial reconnaissance operation."

The RF officer raised a very good point.

As a secret hybrid AI, Sigrund valued data and information a lot more than typical commanders. The lack of intelligence must be grating on him, especially when his warships had performed relatively poorly ever since the combined fleet entered this mysterious star system.

If the Red Fleet was in charge, then Commodore Reze would probably have called for a retreat.

Warships were expensive to build, especially in this day and age.

The Red Fleet could not afford to squander so many hulls in high-risk operations, particularly when they lacked the capabilities to fight the deathborn effectively!

Unfortunately, the Saint Commander possessed a different perspective on the matter.

"We do not have time for that, commodore." Casella respectfully responded. "The fact that the enemy leader sought to ambush us indicates that we are dealing with an opponent that is both proactive and eager to target our weaknesses. Wasting time will only grant more opportunities to the deathborn. Aside from that, delaying our assault by days or weeks will also increase the likelihood that the reinforcements dispatched by the Red Cabal will arrive. Given these considerations, maintaining our original timeline is the least-bad option."

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar judged that they had stumbled upon a critical development in the Red War.

The native aliens may have sensed that they were losing their hold on the Red Ocean.

It was already bad enough that the red humans had come to take away their territories.

Now, the prospect of colonists arriving from Messier 87 most definitely raised pressure on the native alien leaders.

If the Red Cabal already struggled to defeat the humans from the Milky Way, then the phase whales and the other natives of the Red Ocean would definitely have an even harder time resisting the aliens from a much larger and more powerful supermassive galaxy!

This made the current arrangement so important.

If the Red Cabal could form an alliance with a powerful and capable alien civilization from Messier 87, then the former would no longer be met with universal hostility from the superior aliens.

Perhaps it was impossible to forge peaceful relations with every major power of Messier 87, but as long as they secured the protection and political affiliation of at least one significant extragalactic power, the Red Cabal may be able to survive during a time when the M87'ers had flooded the Red Ocean!

This was a far-reaching conspiracy that had immense influence on the course of future history!

How could the ambitious Larkinsons ever sit by and let all of this unfold without trying to meddle with it somehow?

The Larkinsons that had learned how to be bold under Ves' leadership would never be so timid!

As such, Ves completely understood Casella's risky decision. He supported her initiative. Even if the resulting action caused grievous casualties among his forces, it still would have been worthwhile.

Because he knew that red humanity needed this intervention.

At the very least, he could count on the other major human powers to compensate the Larkinsons for their losses.

Somewhat.

The loss of a critical asset such as an ace pilot would be devastating to his clan. It was difficult to make up for such an immense loss.

Yet Ves was not naive enough to believe that such an outcome could be avoided entirely. Even the best of preparations could not completely guarantee their survival in the face of new and unknown enemies.

The best he and the others could do was to formulate plans that covered them as best as possible.

Ves would rather sacrifice the lives of all of the Ascended Giants he brought on this excursion rather than lose a single Larkinson ace pilot!

Casella was apparently of the same mind on this issue.

"Fiery Axe." The Saint Commander turned to the strategos of the Flesh Chopper Phalanx. "The time for hiding our trump cards is over. We must raze whatever the deathborn has built on Hypeh-Tekas II, and to do so we must break the defenses that stand in our way. Your giants may be vulnerable to attacks that target your minds, but so long as you operate within a friendly energy field, we can negate much of this shortcoming. You and your giants shall act as our vanguard and battering ram. This will allow you to give full play to your superdimensional raiments and armaments. The deathborn and whatever native aliens are helping them cannot afford to ignore your sheer destructive potential."

The projection of the female giant grinned. "I like where this is going. Are you assigning that big owl to my unit?"

Casella nodded. "Correct. While my Minerva and I shall continue to provide cover to the bulk of our fleet, your giants can contribute the most if you operate in a much more offensive capacity. The Victrix can grant you the protection of my Command Field no matter the distance. There is no better unit at our disposal that deserves this treatment more than your giants."

The Fiery Axe felt very honored by this statement. She had lost much of the frustration at being held back during the previous engagement. The strategos became determined to become the stars of the upcoming show! Only then would the Ascended Giants be able to prove their worth!

"Sir." The female giant turned to Ves. "Will the Dark Apostle lead us into battle? We could use your strength. This is an excellent opportunity to prove your valor."

Everyone turned to Ves. Nobody tried to tell the mech designer that he had no business on the battlefield, because he had long surpassed the typical limitations of his profession!

Nonetheless, there was no obvious response to this question.

Ves himself had not been prepared to make up his mind on this issue at this instance.

He could feel his other self clamoring to show up and make a powerful showing of himself!

The Dark Apostle felt neglected.

He wanted to burst out and show every red human that he was not an existence that everyone could afford to overlook!

"I... am not entirely certain." Ves hesitantly spoke up. "The deathborn present interesting new problems, some of which that I happen to be able to address a lot better than others. I already have a particularly powerful solution in mind that I am eager to test on them. I can also learn a lot more about this new race if I am interacting with them up close. They have already given me a

considerable amount of inspiration. I look forward to learning more about them in this decisive battle."

Though his answer sounded a bit ambiguous, it was clear that he was leaning in favor of intervening in person!

Casella did not dismiss this choice out of hand. She knew pretty well how powerful Ves had become. He had not managed to win the leadership of the Ascended Giants by being a pushover!

Nonetheless, the significance of having the important mech designer of the Larkinson Clan risk his life on a very dangerous battlefield imposed a huge burden on her strategic considerations.

She could not afford to let him brave the worst dangers without providing him with sufficient backup!

The need to prepare additional contingency plans constrained her options and forced her to be a little more restrained when formulating their upcoming offensive.

"We have noted your eagerness, Ves." Casella said in a neutral voice. "We hope that you keep your status in mind and let your giants go first. As one of our leaders, it is not necessary for you to act as the tip of the spear."

"I know, Casella. I am not stupid."

"I doubt your other personality can say the same."

Ves felt insulted somehow, though not that much. He already dreaded the necessity of reining in the Dark Apostle's enthusiasm once the big moment had arrived.

The discussion continued. There was much that the red humans could do to tip the scales a little bit more in their favor.

Many people placed a lot of expectations on the collies within their ranks.

Formation Master Andrea Vos bore the expectant looks without crumbling under their weight.

"We have learned much from the previous ambush." She said with a particularly sharp expression. "Our personnel have their hands full with studying the enemy's methods and techniques at this very moment. We may not have the time to develop a truly effective counter against the enemy's methods, but in the sparse time that we have left, we can still deploy incremental improvements and other small solutions. For example, I am personally involved in upgrading our defensive spell array in order to increase the difficulty of breaching it. What happened before will not occur so easily next time."

The initial breach had been responsible for the loss of several starships! There was little the rest of them could do to prevent this from happening. It therefore became imperative to address this weakness as much as possible before the next encounter!

"Are you and your men working to provide additional protection against mental attacks?" Commodore Zonrad Reze asked with purpose. "We cannot fight at our full strength when we must constantly guard against the unconventional methods of the deathborn."

The Farseer looked less than certain. "I cannot give you any guarantees on this, commodore. I can assure you that we agree with you that this vulnerability must absolutely be addressed. We do not have any convenient solutions on hand. We must develop them from the ground up, but there are limits to what we can do in a handful of days."

Chapter 7530 The Need for Mass Promotion

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The meeting soon came to an end.

Unfortunately, most of the attendees did not look satisfied when they exited.

It couldn't be helped.

People generally held meetings in order to bring everyone on the same page and agree on a plan to solve their problems.

The gathered leaders managed to fulfill the first condition easily enough, but they made much less progress on the second condition.

The Red Collective was not an endless wishing well. Its experts were predominantly newcomers to the field of cultivation science. How could they possibly have a mature set of solutions available that could readily address the novel set of challenges presented by the deathborn?

Nobody had ever fought against an enemy as vexing and confounding as this extragalactic incorporeal race, and past archives barely mentioned any cases that resembled this situation!

The problem became compounded by the fact that the entire combined fleet was effectively cut off from the rest of red humanity.

The dark miasma's oppression was all-encompassing. It continuously dampened all forms of energy transmission. Though it did not snap the various connections entirely, the channels became so clogged with filth and darkness that nothing else could get through!

However, that did not truly stump Ves.

If he wanted to access the galactic net or communicate with red humans outside of the Hypeh-Tekas System, then he could still make use of a handful of unconventional methods.

Shortly after the end of the meeting, Ves and Gloriana returned to their separate workplaces and silently entered the System Space at the same time.

A young female Journeyman Mech Designer performed the same action after being informed just a moment ago.

Many light-years away, a certain swordmaster did likewise.

All four mech designers appeared at the foot of a picturesque mountain.

Three of them immediately felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted off their shoulders.

"This feels better." Gloriana said with obvious relief in her voice. "I forgot how much more pleasant it was to live in a normal region of space. The aliens have truly ruined the Hypeh-Tekas System. It is not a location that is suitable for habitation anymore. There is only death and resentment in the local space."

Alexa Streon gently nodded in agreement. "The arrival of the deathborn has introduced us to an entirely different approach to warfare. When it comes to E energy manipulation, they are undoubtedly the masters, while we are still the apprentices. Perhaps the only reason why we still stand a chance against these new aliens is because they are fighting far away from their true homeground."

"Deathborn?" Ketis looked puzzled. "You have met those strange aliens?"

Ves grimaced. "We did, and they are much more troublesome to fight against than we thought. Let me fill you in on what our forces have encountered so far."

A few minutes passed as three mech designers collectively brought Ketis up to date.

The latter initially did not take the deathborn so seriously, but that was because her only exposure to this new phenomenon were sporadic reports about their appearances on large battlefields.

The weak intangible beings spawned from those sites could easily be dispersed with a bit of effort, but the ones that had made the Hypeh-Tekas System their home sounded a lot more formidable!

Ketis gradually changed her expression. She had no reason to doubt the descriptions of her fellow Larkinsons.

"I wish I was there." She stated as her extraordinary willpower condensed a little around her body. "I would have loved to chop those deathborn apart with my blade. In fact, I believe that you guys may have been able to repel them a little better if you had our Swordmaidens or Penitent Sisters with you. They are strong in mind and will, and they have already developed a few techniques of their own to channel their power through their weapons. There is not much use of these tricks when fighting against the native aliens, but it sounds like it is a different story when dealing with the deathborn."

That was a bold statement.

"I do not like to admit this, but I think you may be correct on this matter." Gloriana said with a frown. "Most of the first-class mech pilots employed by our clan and the Red Association are highly knowledgeable and skilled in their craft. They are all excellent graduates of first-class mech academies, which are widely famed for their punishing academic courseloads and training regimes.

The graduates of these institutions have all become excellent users of the most advanced standard mechs that the human race has produced, but... that is the extent of their strengths. Due to how much time they spent on developing their current set of skills, they never had any time to spare on other pursuits, particularly the ones that polish their minds and will."

This was a rather well-known shortcoming in the mech industry. It was one of the many factors that critics pointed to when they mentioned that the breakthrough rate among first-raters was not as high as with second-raters and third-raters.

Of course, this issue was way more complex than appeared on the surface. Academic workload only constituted one of many variables in a highly interconnected system.

Ves had little interest in engaging in this particular debate.

He still acknowledged the point that his former student made.

"You are probably right." Ves said. "The mech pilots in our combined fleet are technically skilled but spiritually underdeveloped. Aside from the limited number of veterans that had already been promoted in advance, the rest are spiritually underdeveloped. They have not endured the hardships that we have suffered. They have not piloted true living mechs for multiple years like the men and women of the expeditionary fleet. The latter group may not be as skilled as the graduates of first-class mech academies, but they are far superior in grit and attitude. They would not have been so flustered when dealing with the deathborn. I wish that we had them under my wing during this campaign."

It became increasingly more important for the Larkinson Clan to uplift the veterans of the expeditionary fleet.

Ves previously did not prioritize this matter too much because he thought that he and his clan still had plenty of time to complete this particular chore.

The appearance of the deathborn and their unfathomable incorporeal attack methods changed the equation.

He no longer felt satisfied with the dullards in the Premier Fleet. Third-party mechs such as the beloved Omega Threshers may fare well when used against purely material enemies, but they possessed massive shortcomings when trying to confront immaterial foes!

The differences between the conventional mechs and his prototype Woodsap mechs made this very clear ever since they entered the Hypeh-Tekas System!

In order to deal with the enemies of the future as well as the present, it became more imperative than ever to equip his Premier Fleet with the right mechs as well as mech pilots!

Ketis realized this as well. "I will have to accelerate the promotion of the mech pilots under my command. Many of them will be pleased. They have long waited for an opportunity to promote into your Premier Fleet. I am personally looking forward to how our Avatars of Myth, Swordmaidens and so on will finally bring their unique approaches to combat on the first-class battlefield. There is just one problem."

"The mechs." Gloriana mentioned.

Ves let out a tired breath. "I know. The Arboreal Project is the only true first-class living mech that I have designed so far. While many of its versions are predominantly designed for Terrans and norms, I can still design a Larkinson-specific version that plays better to the strengths of our veteran mech pilots."

The swordmaster frowned at that. "I have multiple issues with this plan. Your Woodsap mechs are all designed for the Terran Alliance from the onset. As far as I know, the configurations of those machines are stuffed with multiple integrated weapon systems. That is far too much for our own pilots, who are long accustomed to piloting specialized mechs that only carry one or two weapon systems at most."

"The Woodsap System can help to improve their control over their organic machines."

"Not every Larkinson wants to be tied to a single living machine for the rest of their lives." Ketis countered. "Besides, our mech pilots will be even more reluctant to make a permanent commitment to an organic mech. Perhaps you have worked so long on your Arboreal Project that you have already lost your sense of alienation towards biomechs, but many others have yet to do so. We are not Terrans, Ves. Our servicemen only know how to pilot metallic war machines. That is what they are long familiar with. The notion of piloting a mech made out of wood and other squeaky parts is profoundly disturbing to them. They may be convinced to work with your Woodsap mechs for a time if there is no other choice available. Perhaps a third of them may come to love your biomechs. However, do not expect the rest to follow suit."

Her feedback provided a lot of perspective that Ves and the others needed to hear.

Unlike the other three mech designers, Ketis had yet to enter their world, which meant that she still remained deeply connected to the original Larkinsons serving in the expeditionary fleet.

Ketis knew how her subordinates would react to all of the weirdness that Ves was up to these days. It would be stupid to disregard her well-intentioned warnings and reminders.

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought.

"I think you are right, Ketis. In a more ideal situation, I should be able to present our troops with a diverse range of first-class models that they can choose from. The problem is that this reality does not exist at the moment. I can only present variants of Woodsap mechs to our Larkinsons. I can spend a bit of time designing simplified variants that effectively function as first-class specialized biomechs for faster and easier adaptation. They won't have too many bells and whistles as a consequence, but they possess enough familiar traits to minimize the study and training needed to become proficient in their use. Let's do this, Ketis. Once you go back, you should canvas our mech legions for candidates that are willing and able to pilot the Woodsap mechs that I have just described in the near future. I am sure that there are at least some Larkinsons in the expeditionary fleet that are adventurous enough to give biomechs a try."

The swordmaster thought about the proposal and slowly nodded. "I can do that. I should be able to find several hundred willing candidates that are both open-minded enough. I will not freely give them this opportunity, though. They need to earn the right to fight at a bigger stage."

