The Mech Touch

Chapter 7551 Stronger Than Expected Feedback

Before Ves could begin his work, he first needed to make an important request.

"Everything I have said about the Poison Willow has remained theoretical for now. As much as I have tried to make its design, I cannot give you any absolute guarantees that it will work out as expected in reality. I need to ask one of you to step forward and volunteer your Woodsap mech for the very first conversion. This will come with many risks because I expect to encounter a lot of issues that may not be perfectly resolved for the first time. This can not only be dangerous for the biomech in question, but also the bonded pilot due to how they are intrinsically connected by the Woodsap Pact. Nonetheless, the setbacks that I will suffer during this conversion process will go on to make the subsequent transformations smoother and less troublesome. Is there anyone brave enough to put their life and the life of their biomech on the line?"

Ves expected a lengthy pause before a Terran pilot finally decided to break the awkward silence, but that was not what happened.

Over a dozen Woodsap test pilots that had been listening to him in a daze hardly hesitated before stepping forward to offer themselves and their bonded partners up for experimentation!

"My Woodsap mech is at your disposal!"

"Choose me! My biomech is the toughest and healthiest in my squad."

"My will is firm. No matter what accidents may occur, I shall definitely endure what comes!"

"Stand down, men." The Second Elf himself took an elegant step forward. "As your superior, I must assume this responsibility myself. The Rosenstorm and I shall test whether we deserve to make use of the new variant."

As brave and responsible Caracalla Shuku may be, Ves immediately shook his head.

"I am sorry, Caracalla, but your application is rejected. I did not design the Poison Willow with elven mechs and mech pilots in mind. You Terrans have done weird stuff to yourselves and my work. This means that there is greater risk of unexpected complications and such. The risks are frankly unacceptable. At most, I will agree to a

single conversion of an elven Woodsap mech, but it must not be one as important as yours."

Ves had no time to indulge in the Second Elf's leadership responsibilities. He understood the need to stand up for his subordinates, but this was no joke. If anything went catastrophically wrong, the Terran contingent would be down a critical leader and biomech!

After another minute of wrangling, the Terrans finally settled on an ordinary human volunteer.

He and his Woodsap mech did not experience as much combat in the previous engagements, which meant that his organic machine remained closest to 'factory settings' relative to the other biomechs.

This was a major consideration as pretty much every prototype Woodsap mech had experienced a degree of growth and evolution over the course of the current campaign.

While Ves was very glad to see that his works had truly begun to enjoy their lives, he could not deny that their individual growths and mutations might cause complications during the conversion process.

This particularly applied to the Rosenstorm, which was not only elven, but also experienced the most growth out of this cohort by far!

It made a lot of sense to work on the least changed Woodsap mech first in order to establish a solid baseline.

"Thank you for your service." Ves seriously spoke to the Terran pilot who eventually won the privilege to be first. "Both you and your Woodsap mech will experience many changes that will discomfit or even harm you. I can only ask for you to be attentive and document anything you experience, no matter how small they may be. The risks to your life and health remain significant. I cannot promise you that I can catch any fault in time. Knowing this, do you still agree to go first?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Let's begin."

Alexa had been right about the Terrans. They showed a surprising degree of collective responsibility when asked to make a sacrifice. These test pilots were especially chosen and trained for this trait.

Though Ves had tried his best to emphasize the unknown dangers and risks involved, practically any Terran test pilot would have been willing to step forward.

Fortunately, Ves only had to make due with one this time.

Just as he expected, the first attempt proceeded slowly and with plenty of interruptions.

Even if Ves and Alexa planned out the variant with considerable detail, actually transforming the base version of his Woodsap mech into a strange reimagining demanded a lot of steps that he had never performed in the past.

Fortunately, Ves was not alone in his work. It turned out that the experienced biomech technicians and biomech designers stationed on the Terran combat carriers neatly made up for his relative lack of experience with dealing with these kinds of problems.

To think that he initially looked down on their limited skills and abilities.

Working together with them had become a necessity as they possessed a lot of valuable hands-on experience and expertise that could only be accrued over time.

Even if their advice was not all that correct or accurate, their feedback still helped with pointing Ves in the right direction.

The active conversion process dragged on for over four hours, which was more than he expected.

It couldn't be helped. Ves was doing so much stuff for the first time that he and the Terrans had to think hard to overcome one novel problem after another.

They also had to play it safe. They made changes and adjusted the accelerated mutation process without knowing what would happen at the end. This forced them to wait for a period in order to monitor the changes and step in if anything threatened to go astray.

Their caution and prudence turned out to be necessary.

Three major incidents occurred which forced Ves to put a premature halt on some of the ongoing transformations. Theory had clashed with reality as unforeseen issues threatened to cascade into disaster if left unaddressed!

Fortunately, Ves' attentiveness towards the vitality of his Woodsap mech and the rich experience of the biomech technicians caught these potential bombs in time.

"This Poison Willow of yours is the most insane biomech design that I have ever worked with." One of the low-ranking biomech designers remarked. "No proper Terran designer would ever design an organic machine that is reduced to such a weak and fragile state. This is not a proper combat unit anymore. It goes against everything I have learned."

Ves couldn't help but shrug after hearing this. "Ever since the Age of Dawn kicked off, all of the rules that you are familiar with have changed. Our means of combat has expanded

into strange and weird directions. This will not be the last time we resort to weird variations such as this to defeat our opponents. It doesn't really matter as long as it works."

Though Ves maintained a confident demeanor, he felt a lot less certain inside his mind.

The many problems and complications he had to address so far had chipped away at confidence and made him a little less certain that the variant would work as expected.

He constantly had to remain on his toes and be ready to intervene at any moment. He continually had to monitor the condition of the transforming biomech and rely on his own judgment whether the changes were benign or malignant.

Any missteps in this area could easily lead to catastrophe!

During this tense work session, Ves continually became affected by the changing state of his work.

Woodsap mechs were usually filled with life and vitality, so draining them of what defined this particular brand of elemental Carmine mechs felt like agony.

He hated it when he drained them of the power and resources that enabled them to endure a huge amount of punishment on the battlefield.

He hated it when he had to deprive them of the generous buffer that they relied upon to prevent total death.

He hated it when he saw the bonded Woodsap mech pilot growing weaker and showing signs of strange and unexplainable afflictions.

Ves paid especially close attention to the last one. The human pilot mattered the most as far as he was concerned.

Alas, there was not much he could do about the feedback between the two. The Woodsap Pact provided a lot of benefits to the pilot, but that also meant that he had to suffer if his bonded machine experienced any major ills.

While Ves had already anticipated this interaction, he became surprised by the magnitude of changes.

Compared to the ordinary Blood Pacts formed between Carmine mech pilots and the Yellow Jackets, the Woodsap Pacts turned out to be several times stronger and more consequential in this regard!

The lives between the pilots and their bonded biomechs were much more tightly connected to each other than he imagined!

This brought great benefits as long as the Woodsap mechs remained healthy and strong, but also had the potential to bring great harm if the opposite occurred.

Ves felt a little bad about that. He had not envisioned this particular disadvantage when he originally worked on the Arboreal Project.

He questioned whether it was possible for a Woodsap mech pilot to survive the total and irreversible demise of his bonded biomech.

Over the course of this sweaty conversion session, Ves gradually felt more and more relieved as he approached his intended destination.

Even if he had taken a bit more detours than he originally expected, everything was worth it as long as he successfully achieved his goal.

Thank you for reading my work. If you wish to support The Mech Touch, please vote with your golden tickets!

Chapter 7552 Renner Alvous

Renner Alvous felt increasingly less in tune with his environment.

As an elite Terran mech pilot and a test pilot for the Arboreal Project, Renner never felt as detached as now.

It was as if a dark filter had attached itself to his mind. Everything he saw, felt or tasted gradually became less stimulating to him. It was as if he was living in a monochrome universe where dull and boring had become the norm.

This sense of detachment had sapped him of his drive and motivation. He used to feel so excited about becoming the first to pilot an incredibly innovative Carmine biomech designed by the founder of the Red Collective himself!

Until recently, every day he woke up, he made sure to express a form of gratitude for the rare and coveted opportunity handed over to him. He had competed with many other Terran mech pilots to be the first to test out the brand-new Woodsap mechs. He never took for granted that he had been chosen above many other rivals and colleagues. Each day, he strove to practice his skills and learn more about piloting his new partner in battle.

Yet when his personal Woodsap mech underwent a drastic change, Renner found it increasingly more difficult to care about these matters.

He still recognized on an intellectual level that he had been one of the chosen few, and that he should continue to work hard to prove that the higher ups had been right to select

him. Yet the lack of the joy and motivation in his body caused him to stop caring about why it was so important to him in the first place.

Though Renner Alvous possessed enough awareness to understand that his new mental condition was not normal, he gradually lost the emotions that would have caused him to feel alarmed about this transition.

His attitude had not been the only aspect about him that was being transformed.

While he hadn't noticed it at first, many different sensor and monitoring systems precisely detected the gradual decline of his physical health.

Practically everything about his body started to deteriorate. His skin lost its suppleness. His eyes grew dimmer. His brains worked slower. His muscles started to atrophy.

The changes alarmed the Terrans around him so much that a team of doctors confined him to a treatment room and began to monitor his physical condition with high-powered scanners!

Those doctors might not fully understand the esoteric mechanisms that caused the Woodsap mech pilot's body to deteriorate, but they were highly familiar with all of the symptoms that they had detected with their instruments!

"You are aging at a hyper-accelerated rate." One of the doctors explained the findings so far. "Your 'Woodsap Pact' has bound your life to that of your biomech. We used to believe that this was a figurative statement, but the evidence that we gathered in the previous hours has forced us to rethink our assumptions. We find it difficult to accept this conclusion, but the evidence before our eyes does not care about our old paradigms. The fact of the matter is that you have skipped your middle years and are currently racing through the later phases of your lifespan. After our brief discussion with Professor Larkinson about the approximate natural lifespan of his 'Poison Willow', we believe that your extremely rapid aging process will only cease once you are about to approach the terminal years of your life. If you do not experience any further radical or unexpected events that affect your lifespan, we believe you only have another decade to live at most."

"..."

Any pilot who was previously at the prime of his life until very recently would be alarmed to hear that his entire life had been cut short by so many years!

Yet Renner Alvous barely experienced a ripple in his mind.

For a moment, he felt mild regret that he would not get to live long enough to become a hero with his new bonded partner.

He would not be able to witness the unstoppable rise of the Terran Alliance for very long.

He doubted he would get an opportunity to start a family when his body was failing left and right.

All of these regrets should have made him feel scared or indignant.

He did not. He felt nothing. It was as if the doctor had just revealed that he had become afflicted with a seasonal flu.

The medical professional naturally understood his patient's condition well enough to understand what was going on. The man wearing a clean white lab coat let out a regretful sigh.

"Your condition is... unnatural. Technically, you are still a norm. The absence of a neural interface in your Woodsap Mech means that your brain has never experienced any accelerated wear-and-tear. Conventional life-prolonging treatments should still be effective. However, the fact that your physical condition is a direct mirror to the physical condition of your Woodsap mech makes us believe that the treatment will fail, though this is not the only possible outcome. Regardless, we dare not take any risks unless we are left with no other choice."

"..."

The doctor paused for a few seconds before resuming his explanation. "I also bring good news. The fact that this mirror effect exists leads us to believe that we can eventually reverse your physical decline. Your Woodsap mech is the origin of your decline. It can also become the source of your revival. If Professor Larkinson is able to reverse the changes he has made to your assigned biomech, we believe that its rapid physical improvement will subsequently be fed back to your deteriorated body. However, we dare not assume that every fault will be repaired to perfection. In the biotech sector, it is common knowledge that it is easy to accelerate aging, but incredibly difficult to reverse the same phenomenon. Aging is a universal biological rule. Every organic being has a limit to their lifespan. Even the most long-lived species possess hidden limitations that may not be obvious on the surface."

"..."

Renner Alvous did not really care for all of these wordy explanations. On the other hand, he no longer possessed the ability to feel irritated, so he wordlessly endured all of the talking.

The doctor released another sigh. "Head over to the exercise room and complete a light workout. You are still needed on the battlefield. Keeping your body active over the next few days will not reverse your unnatural aging, but it will help to keep it healthy enough to reduce the chance that you will spontaneously collapse once you start to fight. If not for the fact that we still do not understand the mirror effect associated with the Woodsap

Pact, we would have begun to replace your weakened flesh and organs with bionic alternatives."

Renner Alvous remained motionless for three seconds before he belatedly nodded and moved to the exercise room.

While the rapidly aged Woodsap mech pilot continued to disturb the people around him with his increasingly more terrifying condition, the same doctor moved to the combat carrier's biomech workshop in order to report the latest findings.

Ves had already completed his modification work on the first Woodsap mech that was paired with Renner Alvous.

Though the biomech still needed a few more hours to wrap up the ongoing growth process, Ves no longer had to tinker with the organic machine in person.

He had already handed the nascent Poison Willow over to the local Terran biomech technicians.

They possessed more than enough practical expertise and knowledge to babysit the first Poison Willow and take care of minor issues.

As he began to work on the second Woodsap mech, he diverted a portion of his attention to listening to the doctor's report.

"Hm, I see." He said as his hands continued to manipulate a projected interface. "I feared this would happen. I had already taken into account that the life and vitality between the two partners are shared, but not to this degree. I underestimated my own work. There is far more to the Woodsap Pact than what I have already ascertained. It is unfortunate that Mr. Alvous has to bear the brunt for my ignorance."

The Terran doctor looked sympathetic. "I agree, but at least he volunteered with the knowledge that he faced unknown dangers. This is not the first or last time that we have engaged in new and groundbreaking research. The Age of Dawn has opened Pandora's box for us all. Every single field of science is experiencing a nirvana of breakthroughs, yet we cannot deny that a large fraction of that progress is paved with human lives and suffering."

Ves turned his head and looked at the older man in a new light.

"Oh? Your tone suggests that you do not entirely disapprove of this activity. Aren't doctors like you supposed to follow an oath and seek to avoid harm whenever possible?"

"I have many colleagues who hold this stance, but I maintain a broader perspective, sir. In my humble opinion, the greatest harm that we can suffer is total genocide. Our species is at risk of becoming extinct in the next decade. Our margin of error is woefully thin. Any

critical mistake can doom our future. If we want to avoid this outcome as much as possible, we must be cruel to ourselves and fight for any chance to secure our survival. Although many of my stodgier professionals refuse to acknowledge or admit it, the ugly truth is that much of the ethical rules that have kept our sector honest for centuries have become suggestions as of late. I cannot divulge any specific details, but I have heard stories and rumors of dangerous research projects."

That certainly sounded ominous.

Ves grew curious. He wanted to know more about them, if only to get an early warning if these crazy scientists accidentally created something that they couldn't control!

"Do the authorities have a good grasp on what is taking place?"

"I cannot give you the answer to that question." The doctor shook his head. "The Terran Alliance is still young. Many of its institutions are still trying to find their bearing in this new age. Space is enormous. You can hide many illegal research labs in the endless cracks among the stars. I would like to believe that the ancient clans are at least aware of what is taking place in their own territories, but that may be too unrealistic given how the ongoing wars have strained their resources. Without sufficient oversight, we may see a return of the abuses that our civilization had embraced during the final decades of the Age of Conquest."

Ves had no doubt that was the case. He knew that biotechnology possessed a lot of forbidden research directions. Many scientists that previously did not have the guts to defy the order established by the Big Two no longer faced the same constraints and suppression as before!

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Chapter 7553 The Antitote of Death

Renner Alvous may be the first, but he was no longer unique.

More Terran mech pilots suffered from the same afflictions.

The symptoms were almost identical. Each of them seemed to have aged at a hyper-accelerated rate. Each of them lost the spark of life that defined their lives prior to this instance. Each of them essentially became dead men walking.

Ves feared that he had already condemned them to an irreversible fate.

Yet his hands did not work any slower because of this. He remained committed to the plan, and he understood that the Terrans would never refuse to make this sacrifice.

Even as his heart became weighed down by the guilt of his actions, his modification actions became faster and smoother over time.

He learned. He gained proficiency. He increasingly comprehended the depth of what he was bringing into existence.

Ironically, witnessing the unnatural decay of the lives of all of those mech pilots helped to increase his understanding of the forces that he was manipulating.

He expanded his grasp on the concepts of life and death. He felt as if he had become a more qualified weaver of life and a spinner of death. He inadvertently discovered new directions of research that could enable him to develop his own alternatives to life-prolonging treatment serums.

All of this should have excited him under normal circumstances, but seeing more and more brave soldiers suffer the consequences of his brilliance sapped the joy out of his heart.

He increasingly felt that he was trodding on forbidden terrain.

Mech designers shouldn't be engaging in this kind of work.

It was fortunate that Ves was not only a mech designer.

As the days passed on, more and more Woodsap mechs lost vitality and turned into dry and eerie trees.

The only life they seemed to have left was all concentrated into their fruits. These bright and shiny pear-like objects looked extremely discordant amidst the thin branches and cracked bark.

Ves could feel the morale among the Terrans plunging in real-time. The more Poison Willows aboard a combat carrier, the greater the impact on the confidence of the crew.

This was why he was forced to rotate among the other Terran combat carriers in order to ensure that they retained a sufficient amount of healthy and normal Woodsap mechs.

By the time the combined fleet had come close to the estimated coordinates of Hypeh-Tekas II, Ves finally deigned to take a break.

"I can't do this any longer." Ves said with a heavy heart. "I changed my mind. 20 will have to do. I do not think it is necessary to convert so many Woodsap mechs anymore. I have gained a much greater understanding of what I am working with. I believe that the probability that our scheme will succeed is high enough that the current quantity is acceptable."

The Second Elf looked relieved. "That is... good news. Though my fellow men and women are not afraid of sacrifice, I have to admit that it is disturbing to witness the perversion of so many fonts of life. Your Woodsap mechs are among the greatest creations that you have brought to life. To deliberately strip them of the life that defines them is a form of desecration. We would never accept this solution if the situation did not demand extreme measures."

Ves sighed and turned around to leave this cursed place.

"Treat them well. Their conditions are not their fault. Try to preserve them after they have fulfilled their purpose. I still believe that the process that they have undergone can be reversed."

"Do you truly think so, sir? They have already given up so much of their lives to produce their rich and irresistible fruits. Once the deathborn have devoured them all, the Poison Willows have become hollowed out. There is hardly any life left in them to sustain them and their human pilots."

Ves briefly halted his steps. "I originally designed this variant with the intention of creating predators. I did not set out to turn them into sacrificial lambs. If my original vision for this variant still holds true, then the Poison Willows may be able to reverse their own adverse conditions by themselves."

"What if you are proven false."

"Then I will just have to engineer a different solution." Ves shrugged his shoulders. "To mech designers like myself, problems are not punishments that we must bear without complaint. Problems exist to be solved. The only points of uncertainty are whether I am competent enough to develop a solution and whether we can stomach the cost."

He proceeded to make his way out as both men pondered upon these words.

Soon after his shuttle departed from the hangar bay of the Terran combat carrier, Ves felt as if he had shed a heavy burden.

He shouldn't be feeling so depressed after working on so many Poison Willows. If he was being honest with himself, they were hardly comparable to the greater horrors that he had fashioned with his own hands. The Riot Mark III alone could crush all of the Poison Willows without breaking a sweat.

Yet somehow, Ves felt a lot more impacted by his recent work than he should. Why was this the case?

"Perhaps... it is because the Poison Willows are incongruent with my design philosophy."

On the surface, this argument made sense.

The Poison Willows had been brought to the brink of death at a very young phase that should have ordinarily signalled the beginning of their bright and vibrant lives!

How could these barely living mechs look forward to experiencing an entire saga of growth and evolution when their ostensive lifespans did not surpass a decade?

What was even more disturbing to Ves was that their awful physical conditions did not assist their mech pilots at all. In fact, the opposite occurred!

Healthy and vigorous pilots who could still look forward to enjoying a century of life if they did not perish on the battlefield had lost almost all of their lifespans in a matter of hours!

The overbearing nature of the Woodsap Pact had only shown its positive sides up until recently.

Now that Ves had created the Poison Willows, this very same extraordinary contract had revealed its ominous edge.

This incident had taught him a brutal lesson.

Not every pact was for either side!

Though a part of him felt grateful for learning this truth so early, he still felt sour that such a thing existed in the first place.

He had lost some of his love and fascination for his Carmine mechs.

They should have been the savior of the mech industry and the human race as a whole.

While Ves still believed in this premise, he could not deny that they had introduced the human race to a host of new and confounding problems.

In the Milky Way Galaxy, his infamous Auto Heretics had completely destroyed the peace and stability that had governed much of its stars for four centuries.

Too many repressed norms had impatiently acquired the boundary-breaking machines and did not even bother with learning how to pilot a mech properly in order to take advantage of their destructive power straight away!

So many local and regional wars had erupted among the destabilized star sectors of original humanity that Ves, the terrible mech designer who unilaterally introduced this abomination to society, had accumulated a humongous bounty!

If not for the protection of his mother and the growing number of hidden cabals that had chosen to collude with her, poor little Veronica would have long transformed into someone's hunting trophy!

Ves' eyes grew strained when he thought what his external incarnation was about to face.

It was almost about time for Veronica to step foot at the legendary Ruined Temple.

Or something like that.

He wasn't sure about the details. Cynthia kept her plans very close to her chest.

He understood the necessity of it all. He and his mother had made far too many enemies in the old galaxy. They would be happy to pounce on any leaks regarding the movements of the menaces that possessed an undeniable relationship with the forbidden Five Scrolls Compact.

Ves subtly shook his head.

This was no time for him to worry about Veronica's upcoming business. His female feline incarnation may be surrounded by enemies, but she could always lean on the shoulders of their True God mother.

One of the advantages of having such a scary and controlling mother was that her protection was a lot more comprehensive!

Even if Veronica learned that several god pilots personally sought to hunt her down, the Oblivion Empress had already won over several god pilots who had long grown disaffected by the tyranny of the Big Two!

Instead of worrying about this enormous galactic-scale chess game that was gradually unfolding millions of light-years away, Ves could make much better use of his time worrying about his more immediate problems.

Once his shuttle made its way back to the Tarrasque, he left the vehicle and made his way over to his wife's personal design lab.

"You have finally returned." His wife greeted him even as she fed a spoonful of artificially fortified fruit to her son.

"Papa!" Marvaine happily greeted him from Gloriana's lap!

"Meow." Lucky raised his paw in greeting even as he floated protectively beside the little guy.

The sight of his wife and child evaporated much of the dark air that had remained inside of Ves.

Life was the antidote of death.

As Ves approached, he picked Marvaine up and happily planted a few kisses on his son's cheeks.

"Who's my little mech designer?"

"Hihihihi!"

He continued to hug his son even as he turned towards his wife. "I missed you, honey."

"You truly mean that." Gloriana observantly responded. "I have heard about the... side effects of your latest work. I am glad to see that you are not torturing yourself to death. How are the Poison Willows?"

"They are... in optimal condition." Ves carefully responded. "I have my concerns, but they have not significantly deviated from my design. They will do their jobs. I am very confident in that. In fact, I do not think that we need more than 10 Poison Willows to fulfill their strategic objective. The additional ones should mainly serve as backup."

"Are you that confident that the poisoned fruits will wipe out all of the deathborn?"

"I am more confident in them than before, Gloriana. All of that hands-on work has really deepened my understanding of what I have been working with. I even incorporated small improvements in the later biomechs. To me, life and death are no longer as absolute and rigid as before. I have improved my ability to mold them into different shapes. I have even come up with a few ideas that could serve as the foundation of the second generation of my Woodsap mechs."

Chapter 7554 Expanding Foothold

"So what have you learned, exactly?" Gloriana asked as she took Marvaine back into her arms. "Your descriptions of your gains are too broad and abstract. It is difficult for me to understand how you have improved. Your tone makes it clear that you have benefited greatly from your latest project."

She was correct. Ves had spoken too lightly about his gains.

"It is difficult to explain. It is as challenging as describing what a mech looks like to a blind person." He responded. "I have figured out deeper insights into the cycle of life and death. Perhaps it is better to give you a small demonstration."

He raised a hand with his palm upward and began to summon a mote of life energy.

"So warm." Marvaine commented with a smile even as his little arms tried to reach out towards the font of life.

However, that font of life began to sputter and lose activity in a matter of seconds. It progressively lost more and more of its luster until it had turned into a dark and seemingly lifeless seed.

The mote of life energy had turned into a kernel of death energy.

Gloriana raised her eyebrows in surprise.

This was hardly a unique transformation. What truly impressed her was how fast and seamless Ves managed to complete this transition!

Even if this was a very small and simplistic transformation, not just any practitioner could perform such a feat!

What he did next raised her appreciation for her husband even further.

He concentrated harder and began to exert himself a bit more. After a few seconds of delay, the seed of death seemed to ignite into a bright and life-bearing flame!Cha

Though the revived mote of life energy had become weaker and less stable than before, it still represented the outcome of an extraordinary action!

"You can turn death to life without relying on any intermediary processes or reagents?" She asked.

"I am something of an expert when it comes to life energy." Ves smirked. "As for death, there is so much of it around us that it is much easier to figure out its properties than unusual."

"Do not belittle yourself. It is one thing to comprehend the concept of death in isolation, but to be able to grasp the greater meaning of the connection between life and death is clearly an advanced operation. Normal qi cultivators of the Red Collective have to rely on talent, extensive study or very scarce reagents to achieve a comparable result. You have truly harvested greatly this time, Ves."

Ves couldn't help but feel prideful. "Thank you, honey."

Marvaine joined in on the party as well. "Papa is the best!"

"Haha, I don't dare to make that claim, little buddy. I am just a Senior Mech Designer. There are Star Designers that can produce much more grandiose results."

"I still think you are the best." Their son stubbornly maintained his stance. "Your mechs are more alive than the mechs made by others. I love them lots. Every mech should be as alive as yours."

"Not every mech designer agrees with you. Different mech designers have their own vision of what mechs should be. I would like to convince them all that living mechs are superior to lifeless mechs, but I need the strength to back up my convictions. I will become a lot more persuasive once I have been promoted to the rank of Master Mech Designer."

"Has your recent gains helped with that?" His wife asked.

Ves nodded. "Definitely. What I have learned not only helps me with developing better Woodsap mechs, but can also be used to enrich the other elemental Carmine mechs. The relevance may not be as high, but it is not low either."

"What other concrete benefits have you obtained?"

"Hmm." He paused for a moment. "I think I have a better understanding of the nature of the deathborn. I am more confident than before in my ability to unravel them. I know how to feed them as well as starve them. I am more confident in my ability to defeat them on the battlefield. I don't need to rely on a lot of complicated gear either."

He talked a bit more for 5 minutes straight. He gained a lot of small ideas, and he he looked forward to testing as many of them on the upcoming battlefield, provided that they did not introduce any excessive risks.

"You sound as if the deathborn are already on the chopping block. That is dangerous, Ves. We still do not fully understand what we are confronted by. Their true strength is unfathomable. It is too dangerous to look down on them when we are still far from invincible."

Her words woke him up a bit. He tried his best to reset his mentality and expectations and managed to make decent progress in it. He still felt unusually confident about the upcoming battle, but he became more aware that his current feelings may blind him from unexpected setbacks and difficulties.

"The final briefing starts soon." He said. "Our fleet should almost be close enough for us to witness what our enemies have prepared."

Gloriana assumed a serious expression. "That is true. Let us settle Marvaine first. He is still at least a decade too young to participate in our affairs. It is naptime for you, my son."

"I'm not tired! I don't wanna sleep! I wanna see!"

"Be a good boy and do what your mother tells you." Gloriana frowned.

Half an hour passed as Ves and Gloriana settled their children and took care of miscellaneous business.

After that, they both entered a virtual conference room that had already become half-filled with various distinguished individuals.

Shortly after the pair sat down, Saint Commander Casella Ingvar finally commenced the meeting.

"As most of you are already aware of, we have taken a considerable risk by sending ahead scout mechs and scout vessels. The Command Field projected by my Victrix has kept the deathborn and the dark miasma at bay, but that has still left them somewhat vulnerable to ambushes conducted by enemy strike forces. I still decided to send out a scouting force because most of the potential losses are bearable."

The combined fleet would not lose all that much if the scouting force got annihilated. The only truly irreplaceable asset was the Victrix. If the situation truly became desperate, then the resonance-empowered owl was probably strong and fast enough to make it back to the combined fleet with or without any friendlies.

In the worst case scenario, Casella had been prepared to dispatch Tusa and the Dark Zephyr as a high-speed rescuer.

Fortunately, that hadn't been necessary. Who knew what kind of trouble might befall the ace light skirmisher if he ventured out alone into the dark miasma!

The central projector came to life.

It depicted a relatively fuzzy map of Hypeh-Tekas II and its immediate orbit.

Ves and many others could quickly tell that this snapshot was hardly complete. The image had been constructed with the use of multiple sets of sensor data, yet because of all of the interference and hardware data, they possessed very little awareness of what was located at the blind spots.

Still, the visible details already gave them plenty to talk about.

"So the Red Cabal is able to maintain activity amidst the deathborn after all." The projection of Commander Zonrad Reze said with a serious expression before raising a finger to highlight 4 major structures. "These orbital structures are clearly fortresses of native alien designs. While they are derived from mass-produced templates, their specifications rank among the top of what we have encountered during the Red War."

The projection of the Fiery Axe snorted. "These fortresses are too stationary to evade our axes. My giants and I can demolish them with ease!"

"These are not standard native alien orbital defenses." Casella shook her head. "Do not forget that they are anchored in the heart of the initial stronghold of the deathborn race in this dwarf galaxy. These orbital fortresses appear completely intact and fully functional despite the fact that they are engulfed by dark miasma and the deathborn. This makes me believe that they have most definitely received upgrades of indeterminate nature."

Taking down these fortresses may not be as straightforward as they wished.

"Those orbital fortresses are not the real concern." Ves spoke up. "It is what our enemies have built on the surface that is truly critical for us. The native aliens or the deathborn have built a massive structure on the planet. Not only is it big enough to be easily seen from this simplified display, it is also generating a huge amount of emissions."

The bizarre alien structure possessed an architecture that was utterly foreign to the Red Ocean.

It did not look like anything that a human or a species from the new frontier could conceive!

What further convinced the gathered leaders that the structure was extragalactic in design was that a large number of deathborn rose up from its central cavity and spread out into the surrounding space!

This... planetary-scale temple-like structure appeared to be the primary source for all of the deathborn in the Hypeh-Tekas System!

"How can it produce so many deathborn?" Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson asked. "Don't they emerge from the corpses of deceased aliens?"

The Saint Commander already had a guess in mind. "Look at the starships that are situated along a line. Most of them are not warships. Our analysts have determined that they consist of a mix of large-capacity transport haulers and civilian passenger ships. It is reasonable to speculate that they are shipping in large amounts of bodies, both living and dead. We may have found out where the native aliens have sent the human populations of dozens of captured planets in this war theater."

"Wait, commander! Are you saying..?!"

Multiple people made a horrifying realization!

"The native aliens have packed up billions of captured human soldiers and civilians just so that they can dump them on this planet in order to sacrifice them en masse to produce so many deathborn." Casella flatly relayed her analysis. "And that is not the worst of it. The

Red Cabal has not let off their own species either. In order to strengthen their new allies, the local alien races have not hesitated to sacrifice billions if not trillions of their own brothers and sisters. We have stumbled upon an extermination center of enormous properties! They have committed all of this killing to grant the deathborn race an increasingly more formidable foothold in the Red Ocean. The longer this detesting activity persists, the more these menaces from Messier 87 have planted their roots in our dwarf galaxy. This. Cannot. Be. Tolerated."

That was an understatement!

For the sake of all of the murdered human captives alone, many of the gathered people felt an undeniable obligation to put a stop to this ongoing atrocity!

Chapter 7555 Planning in a Fog

The meeting continued as multiple leaders and analysts tried to figure out the enemy disposition.

It became clear that Hypeh-Tekas II was absolutely prepared against enemy assaults.

The four major orbital fortresses might not provide as much coverage as a full orbital defense network, but they still possessed enough firepower and defenses to repel a small attack fleet.

In order to neutralize their threat, the humans either needed to invest a significant amount of time or employ overwhelming force.

"Without eliminating at least two of these orbital fortresses, any conventional force attempting to assault the central temple built on the surface of the planet will have endured a great deal of firepower." A mech officer remarked.

"Our adversaries will not let us do so with impunity." Another officer stated. "Their mobile forces will do everything in their power to block us or delay us from destroying those fortresses."

The initial scouting attempt did not manage to gather enough information to give them a full picture of the enemy's mobile assets.

They could vaguely perceive a long trail of transport vessels, yet few of them appeared to be fit for battle.

While that might suggest that the Red Cabal had not stationed any warships in the local area, nobody believed that this was the case.

The Red Cabal invested serious effort and resources into building up this secret stronghold. The fact that the alien overlords ordered the establishment of four massive orbital fortresses was a clear indication that they valued this place!

This meant that there was certainly a dedicated defense fleet lurking nearby. The enemy vessels could be hiding anywhere. The dark miasma still produced so much interference that it was difficult to detect enemy hulls if they lingered a bit further away than usual.

"We do not have time to scout the surroundings for the missing enemy ships." Saint Commander Casella Ingvar shot down a proposal to delay the assault in order to gather more intelligence. "Our movements cannot be hidden. Our enemies are most certainly aware that we have arrived, and they are probably enacting their own defense plans as we speak. The more we delay, the more initiative we give up. For better or worse, we must make our moves even if we are going in half-blind."

That statement put plenty of people in a bad mood, but it couldn't be helped. Even an ace commander could not conjure up an easy victory out of nowhere.

Everyone realized that they had to prepare for a confrontation without knowing the exact number and type of enemy phasefighters and warships. They could belong to any major race and be based on any kind of model.

However, the combined fleet was not that weak.

The projection of the Fiery Axe loudly snorted and crossed her huge arms. "Every piece of alien hardware is fragile in front of our giants. Let us lead the charge! With our superdimensional weapons and raiments, we can withstand any blows and cleave anything that belongs to the enemy into pieces!"

Andrea Vos of the Red Collective immediately shook her head. "Although the scouting data has not detected any active or inactive spell arrays, we already know that the deathborn race is proficient in their use. I believe it is almost certain that as soon as our forces cross a threshold, a large-scale death energy formation will affect us and attempt to debilitate us. The protection offered by our defensive spell array and the Saint Commander's domain has also proven to be fallible. We will most definitely be met with unconventional resistance that is difficult to guard against in full."

"Have you completed any research that can help us withstand the deathborn's strange methods?" Commodore Zonrad Reze asked with great concern.

The Red Fleet hated mysticism the most. It was no wonder why this was the case as warships depended heavily on relatively unremarkable mortal humans to crew their stations.

Even if many modern RF warships had begun to integrate increasingly more competent and powerful sentient AIs, humans had never forgotten the lesson that they should never lose control over their own war weapons.

If the fleeters were forced to leave all of the fighting to the AIs, then they had already lost the struggle for survival pretty much!

"My formation masters and I have been working to incorporate as much of our latest lessons and realizations into upgrading our initial defensive spell array." The Farseer calmly explained. "The new version is ready to become active at any time. The intensity of the protective field should be higher, and it will also become more difficult for our adversaries to take advantage of its loopholes. However, do not expect to see a qualitative improvement. This is still an early generation product."

The collies simply did not have the time to implement more substantial and noteworthy improvements.

At least they managed to make at least some progress. Any improvement was better than no improvement.

The Saint Commander clearly thought so as well. "My Command Field is ready to shield you all from the mental assaults of the deathborn, but it is reassuring to hear that you will not have to rely on my strength alone. As long as we make good and intelligent use of our energy fields, we should mitigate the threat posed by the enemy's energy fields, but only if they remain within a controllable range. This is not always the case."

"So what are the primary threats that we are facing?"

"The enemy champions and powerhouses." Casella replied. "The enemy's phase lords have all remained out of sight for the time being. This is clever on their part. Perhaps they already learned the hard lesson of recklessly exposing their intelligence to their adversaries."

This was bad news for the others because they had little to no clue about the enemy's high-level disposition.

This was a crucial matter because the amount of lesser and greater phase leaders lurking nearby directly affected whether the combined fleet possessed the qualifications to challenge this enemy stronghold!

Ves and many other people studied the data closely, but simply failed to detect any sign of a native alien phase lord or phase whale.

"If I was in the shoes of the enemy commander, I would order every phase lord to shrink their true bodies to normal proportions as much as possible and station them inside an orbital fortress or a warship." He mused. "I would also tell them to remain as small as

possible until they have found a good opportunity to unfold their true bodies and launch a counterattack."

"That is a plausible situation." The Saint Commander acknowledged before turning to the resident envoy of the Red Collective. "Farseer, can you and your fellow scryers determine the quantity and the coordinates of any alien phase leaders with your own methods?"

Andrea Vos did not dare to issue a direct reply. She frowned and paused for a dozen seconds before she issued her response.

"We can try, but the outcome will be unpredictable. We have already tried to scry the enemy commander and other formidable alien leaders. None of our attempts have succeeded. The dark miasma's interference is still too strong for us to find the true answer. Even if we come closer, we may still not be able to deliver a satisfactory answer. It is better to rely on more conventional methods."

"..."

The qi cultivators of the Red Collective were not genies that could consistently figure out any problem.

They possessed their own limitations.

Besides, the deathborn must have probably developed their own countermeasures against remote observations. The act of scrying was dangerous and could easily be detected and blocked by practitioners of what they were doing.

In short, a shortcut did not exist.

The ability to study the enemy from afar sounded nice, but the collies still lacked too much knowledge and expertise to pull it off under adverse conditions.

This definitely had to improve!

Ves did not want to provide such good treatment to a bunch of random people if they failed to do their jobs.

The Saint Commander no longer bothered to inquire further about the possibility of scrying.

In any case, the combined fleet had already come close enough to conduct reconnaissance the old-fashioned way!

"Who will fight the enemy phase lords when they inevitably emerge from their hiding places?"

"Us!" The Fiery Axe raised her physical weapon! "We have plenty of giants to take care of both the enemy naval assets as well as their champions."

"Your numbers are generous relative to our fleet, but we cannot entrust every responsibility to you and your giants." Casella frowned in disapproval. "The enemy phase lords and phase whales take precedence over their more mundane assets. If you have to choose between the two, then block the enemy champions first. We cannot let these powerful enemies assault our fleet directly."

"Consider it done!"

The amount of Ascended Giants stationed in the combined fleet was considerable, but their strength was relatively mixed.

In terms of body cultivation, they were still barely competent lesser phase lords.

In terms of equipment, they were probably superior to almost any lesser and greater alien phase lord in the Red Ocean!

The general consensus was that the Ascended Giants could easily mop up enemy lesser phase lords, but may struggle to do the same to genuinely formidable greater phase lords.

Fortunately, the combined fleet still had other champions.

"I will chop up any greater phase lord no matter if he is wearing a full-body superdimensional raiment." Saint Dise vowed.

However, Casella had a different task in mind for the strongest ace pilot. "No. Leave the greater phase lords others. As long as they have not dabbled in any strange powers, then they are not worth your attention. Your mission is much more critical. You must seek out and confront the deathborn leader directly. We have already managed to obtain a glimpse of his existence. He shall certainly be present this time. You must brave its strange attacks and do your best to keep it occupied."

"I can do that." Saint Dise stated with absurd confidence. "What if this mysterious high-ranking deathborn leader refuses to show up at the start? What if he is lying in ambush?"

"Then you should remain on standby." Casella said. "Do not think of wandering off to challenge a greater phase lord. We absolutely cannot be caught off-guard by the greater threat. From what little I have gathered about this foreign alien powerhouse, he is most definitely a force to be reckoned with. I can only be reasonably certain that this leader cannot afford to remain inactive forever. Perhaps he will show up when we are able to launch a serious assault on the massive planetary temple."

This was clearly a facility of great importance to the deathborn! Casella and many others did not believe that the extragalactic aliens would be able to remain indifferent if such an important location fell into the hands of red humans!

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 7556 Excessive Energy Concentration Concerns

The lack of intelligence remained an unsolvable problem for the time being.

They could only formulate plans and contingencies based on well-reasoned guesswork at best. They all made a number of assumptions that placed a healthy amount of respect on the enemy.

For example, they assumed that the Red Cabal had stationed at least a dozen phase lords in this star system, of which at least two of them may be greater phase lords.

They also did not dare to underestimate the individual combat power of the highest-ranking deathborn leader.

The First Sword Mark III alone might not be able to cope with such a powerful and exotic opponent. The Riot Mark III needed to get involved as well in order to prevent any accidents.

With every allocation of key assets and forces, the reserves remaining in the hands of the Saint Commander dwindled.

This was not a good development, because nobody knew whether their adversaries had more cards up their sleeve.

A bigger reverse provided a greater safety margin. By thinning it out so soon, the Saint Commander had much fewer options at her disposal.

At worst, Casella may have to deprive some forces of their strength in order to prioritize more important goals!

Nobody wanted to end up in this situation, but they had little choice. The combined fleet was almost completely isolated in the Hypeh-Tekas System. It was only due to the critical threat of a cooperation between the Red Cabal and the deathborn race from Messier 87 that they refused to turn around without a fight.

After the less-than-productive final briefing came to an end, everyone proceeded to make their final preparations before commencing battle.

Ves hung back to exchange a few words to Casella and a couple of other important leaders.

"If... if you have to make a choice between ruining the plans of the aliens and the survival of our fleet, which would you prioritize?" He softly asked.

The Casella Ingvar's domain field became a little more volatile in response to his difficult question. Her eyes grew sharper as she pinned him with a judgmental stare.

"I do not believe in binary decisions. Reality is always more open and nuanced than what the best models describe. The difference between a mortal commander and an ace commander is that when they are both presented with a set of bad options, the former becomes all too easily resigned to choose between one of them, while the latter will use her will and determination to forcefully carve out a brand-new pathway towards victory. I do not lose. I must not lose. I will not lose. To contemplate loss outside of contingency planning is the first step to the road of defeat. You may question our odds, but I do not have the obligation to accept your math. Human will can transcend any limitations."

What an answer.

Ves shouldn't have expected anything less from the most formidable commander of the Larkinson Clan.

Though he felt concerned that her optimistic attitude may one day break against the unassailable wall of reality, he still found it encouraging to fight under her command.

In his opinion, a commander that would do anything to seek victory under the bleakest of circumstances was generally better than one who had already given up the fight before it had run its course.

Of course, there were always exceptions.

If the disparity of strength became too lopsided, then a forceful stand would only lead to total annihilation.

A commander needed to possess enough discernment to recognize such situations.

Ves could only hope that Casella and her extensive staff managed to make the correct read this time.

"Andrea." He turned to the leader of the Red Collective contingent. "I applaud your work in improving your defensive spell array, but we both know that staying on the defense will not win us this battle. If we want to beat our enemies, we need to find out their numbers and their weaknesses. We cannot do so without sufficient intelligence support. You are known for your scrying capabilities. Will you be able to help us figure out the details of their hidden forces and what is going on at their huge sacrificial temple?"

The Farseer mildly shook her head. "You are placing too many expectations on our shoulders. As I have mentioned before, the adverse environment is hindering all of our efforts to gather information. The dark miasma continues to flood the surrounding space with foul energies while the enormous quantities of deathborn generate their own forms of interference."

"I know, but these conditions may no longer persist if our gambit succeeds. If the Poison Willows successfully clears the entire field of those aforementioned factors, the conditions that have previously hindered your workings no longer apply, at least for a considerable amount of time. As long as this is the case, you should be able to restore a lot of your prior capabilities. Will you be able provide us with all of the necessary support?"

"I am sorry, Ves, but we cannot promise that." Andrea Vos regretfully said. "If the 'gambit' you are referring to works as you have described, then we will witness an extremely abrupt transition between negative energy saturation to positive energy saturation. I do not believe you have put enough thought into the implications of the latter. Excess has always proven to be adverse no matter what form it assumes. Perhaps in your cognition, an overabundance of life energy is an enormous advantage to you, but have you ever thought that it may poison humans and compromise the integrity of our technology just as much as death energy?"

That... actually sounded like a very legitimate concern.

"I do not think that a sudden explosion of life energy will lead to immediate harm in the short term." Ves said as he furrowed his brows in thought. "I do admit that continuous exposure to an excessively high level of life energy and other positive energies will lead to mutations that may or may not be desirable, but I think that we can cope with that a lot better than the alternative. At the very least, I think that many of your techniques will encounter considerably less obstacles than before. If the transition is powerful enough, we may even be able to restore our connection to the galactic net. You will be able to consult with the peak experts of the Astral Octagon. The researchers and cultivation scientists of the entire Red Collective will be at your disposal. I have no doubt that at least some of them are proficient in manipulating life energy."

That would be a very welcome development. Much of the reasons why the combined fleet was struggling was precisely because they could no longer request aid from remote consultants.

This was a huge setback to the members of large nations and superorganizations. The combined fleet encountered too many new phenomena, but lacked the manpower and processing power to make sense of it all.

If they could reestablish a connection to the galactic net and transmit the core data to the Red Three and the Terran Alliance, the eggheads on the other side would definitely produce a lot of useful insights that could help in the upcoming fight!

"I shall make the appropriate preparations in the event that we can regain our ability to correspond with our headquarters." The Farseer promised. "I do not expect that this window will remain open for long. The dark miasma is strong and concentrated enough to warp the material realm and make intersystem communication impossible. If a corresponding 'light miasma' exists, then similar disruptions may occur. This may adversely affect the forces fighting outside of a protective energy field."

She raised a good point. High concentrations of E energy absolutely altered the fabric of reality. Ordinary technology might not work as smoothly as before. Significant malfunctions may occur.

This had direct implications for the upcoming battle. Even if their gambit succeeded and they managed to get rid of most of the deathborn, the drastically altered environment may still make it dangerous to fight outside of Casella's Command Field.

"I am sure we will be able to cope with this situation." Ves spoke with slightly greater confidence. "I can do a lot with an abundance of life energy. It certainly beats the alternative. All of my living mechs will also fare a lot better in such an environment."

They exchanged a few more opinions before going their separate ways. Time was short and they needed to head over to their stations in time.

Ves only lingered for another minute to say goodbye to his wife and kids before he went down to the hangar bay in order to board his shuttle.

Once he arrived at the Armitage, he took a deep breath before he finally unfolded his true body.

He readily surrendered his control to his alter ego.

"Finally." The Dark Apostle spoke as he curled his arm with an anticipatory grin. "I have been waiting too long for this. Do you know how much I have endured your tedious planning and design work? All of that preparation and effort is nice and all, but what will truly win us this battle is grit and courage. You are lucky that I can still hold myself back. I would have turned crazy if you dragged this show on for any longer."

Ves' other personality clearly complained about the additional months spent inside the System Space.

The passage of time in realspace hadn't been affected by this act, but it had definitely prolonged their subjective passage of time!

"Don't worry." Blinky emerged from the Ascended Giant's head. "We have done everything we could. No more preparations. No more delays. We are ready to enter the field."

"I hope so." The Dark Apostle grumbled as he prepared to don his raiment.

Chapter 7557 Department Dependencies

The Dark Apostle had waited far too long for a chance to let loose.

The grin behind his half-folded helmet could not be contained.

He patiently waited for the elaborate suiting process to complete. The Superdimensional Giant Regalia personally designed and built by Ves covered every part of his body while only impacting his range of motion to a moderate degree.

Though the joints and other areas that required flexibility still constituted weak points, the overlapping layers of high-grade superdimensional armor plating were still virtually impossible to penetrate by conventional attacks.

Even though the Dark Apostle was arguably wearing the toughest and most resilient phase lord raiment in the Red Ocean, he still felt a bit disappointed by its lack of functionality.

Aside from incorporating mundane electronic features such as sensors, auxiliary processors, temperature regulating systems and so on, its value still relied mostly on its material properties.

It was little more than slabs of superdimensional armor hammered into the shape of a giant humanoid.

Compared to all of the amazing mechs and weapons Ves had developed over the years, the Superdimensional Giant Regalia still lacked the spark and brilliance of a truly iconic creation.

Even though only months had passed since Ves had initially created the protective armor for himself and his alter ego, the Dark Apostle did not want to wait for years for a major upgrade like Venerable Joshua or Saint General Ark.

Perhaps Ves could come up with excuses to push back the requests of numerous high-ranking mech pilots, but the Dark Apostle was different.

Even if the personality born from a powerful true body lacked the in-depth understanding of science and technology, he could still access the original's memories.

The Dark Apostle knew quite well how much Ves had improved in the past period.

Furthermore, the Ascended Giant also knew that Ves could still shuffle around his schedule and squeeze more time for his personal projects if necessary.

To the Dark Apostle, nothing was more important than improving their own gear.

In a dwarf galaxy that became increasingly more filled with new and dangerous enemies, the importance of having good protection could never be overstated!

"When will you build me a real raiment, Ves?" The giant impatiently asked. "This suit may be adequate if we are fighting against alien phase lords, but they are no longer the only enemies that we have to be worried about. The mutated voribugs are already bad enough, but at least they don't know any magic. These deathborn are the opposite. The toughest material defenses might not mean anything to their mysterious mind spells."

Blinky, who was currently possessed by Ves' primary consciousness, flew closer and tapped his paw against the surface of the much larger shoulder plate.

"It's not that simple. The best way to qualitatively transform this raiment is to reshape it into a high-level artifact. I can do that somewhat easily enough on a small scale, but we are talking about an extremely tough suit of armor for a 3x scaled phase lord. The technical difficulties are high, but manageable. What is truly challenging is the stuff that cannot be calculated and cannot easily be compensated with high-quality materials. I am still lacking in inspiration at the moment. A good artifact is unique. It is the opposite of a commodity. In order to elevate my raiment into a genuine artifact that is worthy of name and status, I still have to wait for a good opportunity."

The Dark Apostle's expression deflated a little. "Ugh, whatever. Just make sure you get something done within a year. Our lives are at stake. With all of the new bag of tricks our enemies are bringing out, we need to stay on top of the game if we want to survive the Red War."

Ves shared his alter ego's urgency, but there was truly very little he could do. Perhaps the fastest and most convenient way to upgrade his raiment was to seek external assistance, but he deemed that both unnecessary and an unacceptable danger.

He had always insisted on creating his gear and weapons whenever possible. Of course, he was one of the few who had the luxury to pursue this policy. Other people such as mech pilots had no choice but to continue to rely on other producers to meet their needs.

If Ves was like one of them, then he doubted that he would ever think about the hidden dangers of relying on other people's work.

But because he was a producer himself, he constantly thought about substituting other people's work with his own. This tendency had only grown stronger as he became more and more competent at his job.

This was also why he sometimes felt ambivalent about this matter. The greater his capabilities, the more time he needed to invest in affairs that he previously left to others.

It was not always a good idea for him to assume every burden for himself. No one could complete so much work. There was always more to be done.

As Ves continued to mull over his time commitments for the upcoming year, the Dark Apostle strode through the enormous main hallways of the Armitage.

The first and only 'giant carrier' built especially for the Phase Lord Department of the Red Collective was still brand-new. Her bulkheads lacked the warmth and marks of age, but her interior still conveyed a clean and ultra-modern atmosphere for the most part.

The only exceptions were the places where the Ascended Giants spent most of their time.

Though they used to be humans, their metamorphosis into phase lords and the transcendent growth of their true bodies had warped their personalities a lot more severely than their leader.

Even though their inexplicable antagonism towards their former race had mellowed out lately, they still remained alienated from humans.

One of the reasons why that was the case was that they insisted on keeping their true bodies out as much as possible.

It was only due to practicality reasons and so on that they were willing to shrink to somewhat more manageable sizes.

However, any request to fold their true bodies to the maximum possible extent would definitely be met with an angry punch!

At this moment, two squads of Ascended Giants had already gathered in the giant assembly hall.

This was a large space that the giants and their auxiliaries had already decorated in order to 'feel more at home'.

Large banners hung from the ceiling and the sides. Each of them had been fashioned into tribal artworks that symbolized one of the giants or celebrated a common virtue or belief among the giants.

Ves and the Dark Apostle even spotted a few purple or red banners that clearly referred to them. These banners vaguely celebrated their strength, wealth and memorable duels.

That was not the extent the giants had decorated the assembly hall. They had also taken the skulls, bones and entire pieces of debris from the battlefield before hanging them on the bulkheads or placing them on top of their own separate altars!

How savage.

Though Ves mildly disapproved of this primitive behavior, the Dark Apostle became filled with pride at this display!

To the giant, there was nothing to be ashamed about at all of this pageantry.

Besides, plenty of members of the human race also maintained the habit of collecting and showing off their war trophies. The giants simply did not bother to feel ashamed for engaging in crude or gauche behavior.

"Polemarchos!" The leading giant noticed her leader's arrival and raised her iconic axe in salute!

"POLEMARCHOS!" The remaining thirty giants echoed with great enthusiasm!

The Dark Apostle looked satisfied with the greeting. The giants may have spent weeks cooped up inside this giant carrier, but they had yet to lose faith in his leadership.

Ves and the other leaders had not treated them fairly enough. Other units had already enjoyed a taste of combat since the start of the Nemesis Campaign, but the poor giants had yet to receive the same chance due to various reasons.

"Giants." The Dark Apostle calmly and confidently addressed his subordinates. "I know what you are feeling. Time and time again, you have been brought to the battlefield, only to be forced to witness the humans rely on their puny mechs and their clumsy warships to beat their enemies. That isn't working for them anymore. The Red Cabal and the newly arrived deathborn have teamed up this time. Now, their precious 'Saint Commander' has come to beg for us to show our strength. We are wanted this time, because you know what? They cannot win without relying on our enormous muscles and blades! If we want to prove that we are indispensable in battle, then let us show these humans what they have missed out on all this time! For the Ascended Giants!"

"FOR THE ASCENDED GIANTS!"

With 31 Ascended Giants standing at the ready, the entire assembly radiated a sense of pride and menace all at once.

All of them were equipped with mid-grade superdimensional raiments and armaments at 2.5x scale.

This made them considerably larger than the members of the Faceless Giant Phalanx, whose scale was still limited to 1.5x with the exception of their strategos.

None of the Faceless Giants were stationed aboard the Armitage this time, which meant their group did not have to worry about getting dragged down by their lesser warriors.

Size made a huge difference when it came to phase lords. Even if their true bodies were larger, the need to shrink them down by folding lots of organic matter into different dimensions inevitably constrained their ability to bring all of that hidden strength to bear.

If the Dark Apostle had his wish, he would have preferred for all of the giants in front of him to reach a scale of 3.0x, which happened to match his current size.

Unfortunately, the supply of superdimensional matter remained limited. Even the mid-grade stuff had endless demand.

Unless the giants were willing to make do with vastly inferior materials, it was better to stick to their current scale and tough it out if they ever clashed against larger and more imposing adversaries.

Once the Dark Apostle was done with his pre-battle speech, he continued to stand and wait for deployment while chatting with the Fiery Axe.

"Are you happy with your weapon?" The polemarchos asked as he glanced down at the flaming axe.

Fasia Meledor briefly grimaced. "It is a fine superdimensional weapon, make no mistake. It is just... a very close copy of my original weapon that I used to love in my former life. Its sharpness is unreal, and its mass and density are considerably different. The tech that goes into producing the flames is also different. The details do not match anymore."

"Do you want us to reforge your axe?" The Dark Apostle offered on behalf of Ves, much to the latter's chagrin.

"That is not necessary, sir." The female Ascended Giant responded. "You need to be fair. I have not yet earned the privilege of commissioning a personal weapon from you. There are other weaponsmiths in the Red Collective who can take care of needs for the time being. Their craft is not as special as yours, but that does not mean their work is poor. I can make do with their services."

Though both Ves and the Dark Apostle did not entirely approve of this decision, they both had to admit that this was probably the most practical course of action.

Ves could not take care of the needs of every Ascended Giants. Perhaps he was willing to allocate a few weeks to grant a magnificent weapon to an important and trustworthy leader, but he could not do so too often.

The Phase Lord Department truly needed to continue their reliance on the other departments of the RC.

It was not efficient or feasible to try to take care of matters like these in-house. Ves knew the Collective well enough that its specialized departments would always excel at their respective tasks. They complete their work better, faster and cheaper.

This way, the departments also had an incentive to cooperate with each other, thereby preventing the formation of silos that could one day go rogue like what had almost happened to the Phase Lord Department!

If Ves wanted to wash away this mark of shame and rebuild trust between his department and the rest of the RC, then he had to play within the current system and continue to rely on the services of other departments.

Chapter 7558 Early Strike

The giants were ready.

Each of them had donned their raiments and equipped their respective weapons.

Their morale had risen to a new height.

Their willingness to venture into darkness under the leadership of their polemarchos had just peaked!

The Dark Apostle grinned with satisfaction. With this formidable troop of giants under his command, he could truly reshape the entire battlefield.

The deployment of over 30 Ascended Giants at once could never be underestimated. Even if they were not well-equipped for the current battlefield environment, their hard power and sieging capabilities could never be denied.

Just as the Dark Apostle was about to order his men and women to disembark the ship, all hell suddenly broke loose.

Nobody received a warning.

In one moment, everything aboard the Armitage worked normally.

In the next moment, a blinding flash and a wrenchingly powerful physical impact suddenly smashed against everyone, causing them to cry out in pain and surprise!

Nobody braced for the impact that had suddenly engulfed their entire awareness.

It happened so quickly and without any possible warning that by the time that the giants who recovered the fastest noticed the disaster unfolding to the side, they struggled to make sense of what just happened.

Several more seconds passed in confusion before the Armitage's alarms belatedly started to ring.

The once-glorious assembly hall started to flash with alarming red lights. No sounds could be transmitted because whatever struck the giant carrier had torn a rent along the entire length of the hull!

This wound was not trivial in the slightest. The mere fact that an unknown sneak attack managed to carve through the entire side of the assembly hall meant that many other compartments had been affected even worse!

Entire spaces had been blasted into pieces!

Hundreds of unsuspecting human crew members got vaporized in an instant!

Other major compartments lost pressure, and the emergency shielding measures meant to plug the gaps did not always activate!

Supplies spilled into open space.

High-tech instruments became misaligned due to the strong physical impact or became miscalibrated due to intense radiation exposure.

Many ship systems abruptly failed as their energy and data channels all got cut off at once.

Though the crew assigned to the Armitage consisted of seasoned officers and spacers for the most part, they lacked the veterancy and cohesion of a truly elite and reliable force.

It couldn't be helped. The Red Collective's naval traditions were still too new and young. Its naval personnel mostly consisted of members of many different states. It was already a small miracle that this eclectic band of people managed to form an effective hierarchy in so little time.

As such, the surviving personnel reacted slowly to this sudden calamity.

Confusion remained the dominant thought as far too many people asked what just happened when they should have been thinking about conducting rescue and damage control operations.

Fortunately, the surviving officers gradually managed to get their act together. They organized at a local scale first, and gradually began to coordinate their actions once they sorted out their communications.

"We... were just attacked." The Fiery Axe transmitted over their communication channel as her armored form wobbled on the damaged deck. "The audacity... this insult... cannot stand!"

Several other giants echoed their indignation of what just happened. The clues could not be denied. Their alien adversaries had already made the first move!

The Dark Apostle felt just as outraged as his underlings, but he knew better than to lose his cool.

The vast scientific knowledge reserve that he had access to made him much more aware of the practical difficulties of launching an attack at this range.

The native aliens absolutely could not have launched an attack from such an enormous distance!

Yet they managed to do so with devastating results!

"An attack of this scale cannot come from an ordinary alien battleship." Blinky spoke. "Not unless she mounts a spinal mount, which has never been their style. Spinal mounts pose a greater threat towards their 'native gods'. This has to be a relatively new construction, one built for the express purpose of countering humans. My personal speculation is that the attack was either launched from one of the orbital fortresses or that bizarre planetary temple. Accuracy is an enormous problem. Even if the Armitage is a capital ship, she still followed a random trajectory, just like any other warship operating in a hostile environment. The probability of landing a hit with a kinetic strike at this range should have been statistically insignificant."

The Dark Apostle scowled. "Well, whatever math you are thinking about doesn't apply here. The aliens somehow made it happen."

Blinky dipped his feline head in agreement. "That is unfortunately the case. The native aliens of the Red Ocean have the capability to build such a powerful weapon, but I doubt they possess the ability to achieve such a miraculously high hit rate. The best explanation that I can think of is..."

"The deathborn. You suspect that they have already teamed up with the native aliens to help them guide their aim."

If this was the case, then the combined fleet was in for a much bigger fight.

It was one thing for the native aliens and the deathborn to fight alongside each other.

So long as they maintained separate systems and combat approaches, they could both be fought by applying relatively simple and straightforward approaches.

After all, each group possessed very distinctive strengths and weaknesses. The Saint Commander and her staff had prepared many countermeasures against known and speculative threats.

However, it was much more difficult to plan against radically different enemies that cooperated with each other on a deeper level!

If they began to share technologies and agreed to supplement their shortcomings on an active basis, then they would be facing a whole different kind of adversary!

As Ves and the Dark Apostle continued to mull over these concerns, the Saint Commander finally gave the giants an explanation.

"OUR FORWARD SCOUTS DETECTED A HIGH-ENERGY SEQUENCE FROM ONE OF THE FOUR ORBITAL FORTRESSES." Casella spoke in her empowered voice now that she had interfaced with the Minerva Mark II. "THAT IS NOT ALL. THEY ALSO DETECTED DISTURBANCES IN THE DARK MIASMA ALONG WITH MOVEMENT FROM THE SURROUNDING DEATHBORN. THE CONCLUSION IS CLEAR. OUR ENEMIES HAVE ALREADY COMBINED FORCES TO DEVELOP AN ACCURATE, LONG-RANGE SIEGE CANNON."

"..."

Ves did not react with joy when the Saint Commander's words confirmed his speculations.

This was awful news. The enemy effectively stole the initiative with this new capability.

The combined fleet had to race against time and move in quickly. Any procrastination or delay would just prolong their exposure to an insanely accurate and extremely powerful siege cannon!

"THE ENEMY LIKELY STRUCK THE ARMITAGE FIRST BECAUSE SHE IS ONE OF OUR LARGEST HULLS." Casella continued to explain. "THE TORTUOUS SCREAM IS EVEN MORE MASSIVE, BUT SHE IS A KNOWN QUANTITY TO OUR ADVERSARIES. HER HULL IS ORVEN IN ORIGIN, AND SHE HAS ALREADY EXPOSED MUCH OF HER FIREPOWER IN EARLIER ENGAGEMENTS. THE ARMITAGE ON THE OTHER HAND HAS MAINTAINED A LOW PROFILE. SHE REPRESENTS TOO MANY UNKNOWNS. THE ALIENS COULD NOT RESIST THE URGE TO LAUNCH A PREEMPTIVE STRIKE. THE OUTCOME COULD HAVE BEEN WORSE. GIVEN THE POWER OF THIS ATTACK, THE SIEGE CANNON MOST DEFINITELY LAUNCHED A SUPERDIMENSIONAL PROJECTILE."

Ves also made that conclusion.

The Armitage may not be oriented towards strong defenses, but she was still an ultra-modern first-class capital ship!

Ordinary kinetic strikes should have crashed against her multi-layered segmented azure energy shields before ever having the chance to touch her hull plating!

Even if the exterior of the giant carrier got struck, an ordinary kinetic strike absolutely would not have been able to tear a narrow but extremely long gap that measured over a kilometer!

"Let us hope that just one of the orbital fortresses hosts a superdimensional siege cannon." Ves said. "If the other 3 enemy strongholds are identical, then we are in deep trouble."

"We need to smash those orbital fortresses first." The Fiery Axe's eyes burned with battle intent! "They can instantly demolish any of our ships. Our giants might not fare much better despite their superdimensional raiments."

"I HAVE ALREADY INSTRUCTED THE AMARANTO MARK III TO LAUNCH A COUNTERSTRIKE." Casella responded. "THE DIFFICULTY OF HITTING A MASSIVE STRUCTURE IN STABLE ORBIT IS MUCH LOWER, ESPECIALLY TO A MARKSMAN AS EXCELLENT AS SAINT STARK. HOWEVER, I DO NOT THINK THAT STRIKING THIS FACILITY WILL BE AS SIMPLE AS IT SOUNDS. MY INTUITION TELLS ME THAT OUR ALIEN FOES HAVE ALREADY MADE PREPARATIONS TO DEFEND AGAINST A LONG-RANGED STRIKE FROM THE INSTRUMENT OF VENGEANCE."

This was the downside of exposing so much strength in past encounters.

The Amaranto Mark III had long exposed her frighteningly potent firepower on many battlefields. The Red Cabal stationed in the Hypeh-Tekas System shouldn't be stupid or incompetent enough to fail to retrieve the relevant records.

As the Amanto Mark III began to charge up her Instrument of Vengeance in preparation for a retaliatory strike, the Ascended Giants finally launched into open space.

There was no need for them to go through the hangar bay exits.

The giant rent in the hull granted them enough of an opening to squeeze out into open space!

None of the human phase lords took it easy at this time. They all adopted guarded postures as they awaited for a second possible ultra-long-range siege attack.

"Disperse!" The Fiery Axe instructed the men. "Do not bunch up! We cannot make it easy for the aliens to take out multiple of our number at once! Spread out and stay on the move!"

Chapter 7559 Asking For Ideas

The combined fleet could no longer proceed at its previous pace.

The revelation that their enemies possessed accurate ultra-long-ranged striking capabilities made all of the soldiers feel as if they had stuck their heads under a guillotine!

As long as that superdimensional siege weapon opened fire, the guillotine could swing down the necks of some of them at any time!

Nobody wanted to remain exposed to such a devastating weapon for so long!

The Saint Commander did not take long to issue the necessary orders.

"SPEED UP AND SPREAD OUT. DO NOT LINE UP AND GIVE THE ENEMY SIEGE CANNONS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CRIPPLE MULTIPLE SHIPS WITH A SINGLE STRIKE. DO NOT WAIT FOR MY ORDERS BEFORE OPENING FIRE. AT LEAST THREE OUT OF FOUR OF THE ENEMY ORBITAL FORTRESSES MUST GO DOWN IF WE WANT TO ELIMINATE THIS THREAT HANGING OVER OUR HEADS."

If the assumption that every orbital fortress possessed a similar superdimensional siege cannon, then it was not strictly necessary to eradicate all of these large facilities.

Just getting rid of 2 or just to be certain 3 of them was enough to make the combined fleet more secure.

After all, the remaining operational siege cannon could hardly drill through the mass of an entire planet to strike at another orbiting target!

Everyone tried to execute their new orders as best as possible.

Many vessels did not hesitate to move close or at the limits of their sub-light propulsion systems.

The smaller hulls still had a bit of thrust to spare. They could still accelerate at a higher rate, but doing so would just cause them to separate from the bigger ships and ultimately lose the protection granted by the defensive spell array and Casella's Command Field.

The necessity of staying within the range of those protective energy fields heavily constrained how much the human units could disperse from each other.

Ultimately, the combined fleet could only go as fast as its slowest asset, which happened to be the Tortuous Scream.

This ship appeared far too much out of place compared to the sleeker, faster and more maneuverable hulls.

Not only was the Tortuous Scream originally an orven capital homeship, but her relatively large bulk significantly dragged down her acceleration rate!

Her maneuverability was also awful. All of that hull plating and structural components heavily inflated her mass, making it that much harder for her large thrusters to push her forward in space.

Ves feared what might happen to the Tortuous Scream.

The Larkinson Clan only considered her to be a stopgap solution, but she was still crewed by tens of thousands of clansmen!

So many Larkinsons and their cats had chosen to work and live on her exotic alien hull that a direct hit could lead to a devastating loss of life!

Ves could still stomach the loss of a powerful naval warfare platform. It would hurt a lot to lose the firepower of so many reliable bunker mechs, but the Omega Threshers still possessed the capability to fight and maneuver in space.

"Casella." Blinky communicated to the Saint Commander. "The Tortuous Scream."

"Already taken care of." Casella quickly responded.

The First Sword Mark III abruptly turned around and moved in front of the enormous vertical hull of the converted alien battleship!

The ace mech appeared proportionately tiny in relation to the formidable bulk of this capital ship.

The installation of many bunkers during her initial refit process had allowed many bunker mechs to contribute to her defense.

Yet none of their offensive power and maneuverability could match that of a single genuine ace mech!

While the First Sword Mark III unsheathed her Decapitator and held her weapon at the ready, few people were willing to believe the ace swordsman mech could block subsequent attacks.

It couldn't be helped!

A strike could come suddenly and at any time. Who knew if two or three siege cannons had already locked onto the Tortuous Scream's hull.

Even the fact that the Minerva Mark II had docked inside of her bridge and command center did not bestow her exterior with a particularly potent defensive boost.

This was why the Saint Commander had little choice but to reassign one of the top assets under her command.

The First Sword Mark III was supposed to be a formidable offensive threat. Casella had drafted half-a-dozen plans centered around this ace swordsman mech alone!

It pained Casella to take the First Sword Mark III away from the frontlines in order to assist in the defense of a highly vulnerable capital ship.

However, she did not think she made the wrong decision. It was impossible to try and preserve every ship, so she focused on the vessels that absolutely needed to be preserved.

The importance of the Tortuous Scream went without saying.

The Tarrasque also needed to be protected.

The RA heavy cruiser hosted Gloriana, her children and the core Design Department of the Larkinsons!

It was too late to transfer these VIPs to other hulls.

In fact, even if it was still possible to do so, Casella did not think it was wise to move these critical Larkinsons away.

Other vessels were either smaller and more fragile or bigger and much less maneuverable.

The Tarrasque happened to hit a sweet spot. She possessed enough bulk to withstand at least a handful of siege cannon attacks, but also possessed enough maneuverability to evade incoming attacks as long as there was enough time.

Still, in order to lower the chance that the enemy aliens might target her hull next, Casella deliberately shifted her positioning to the rear of the fleet formation.

Did Casella believe that this might help against a determined enemy?

No.

Could she come up with a better response?

Unlikely.

Casella had little choice but to resign herself to this inadequate response.

She continued to put her formidable mind and will to work.

What else could she do to mitigate the enemy threat?

"I NEED YOUR HELP." She transmitted to every human under her purview. "I NEED TO BORROW YOUR WISDOM. FEED ME YOUR IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS. DO NOT BE AFRAID OF SAYING ANYTHING STUPID OR REDUNDANT."

Casella may have risen up to become the most intelligent and knowledgeable mech pilot in the Larkinson Clan, but even she knew her limits.

Perhaps some ace commanders might consider the act of asking for help to be an intolerable sign of weakness, but the Saint Commander did not care too much.

From the beginning, Casella invested her strength into empowering others. Her Command Field existed to grant a portion of transcendent might onto ordinary mechs and soldiers.

She would never develop such a rare and special domain if she held little respect and appreciation for the common soldiers under her command.

This was how she was able to rationalize her latest decision. Asking for their input could be considered a clever form of resource utilization.

Her approach immediately paid dividends.

Surprisingly enough, the first approach did not come from a human, but one of the smart AIs residing on the Tortuous Scream!

Sovvy of the SEA SOVEREIGN template transmitted a very rational analysis to the Minerva Mark II.

[The probable accuracy of the superdimensional siege cannon is likely based on the guidance of one or multiple specialized high-ranked deathborn. These officer-level beings possess enough rationality to fulfill specific roles, but may also possess the ability to extract valuable observation data from the dark miasma. According to the framework of energy field warfare, our combined fleet is still maneuvering right in the middle of an enormous hostile energy field. The dark miasma is a hazard to us, but it is completely friendly to the deathborn. It is conceivable that the latter can directly tap into the saturated death energies and effectively obtain very precise targeting data from various clues.]

Casella slightly nodded her head.

The theory lacked support for the time being, but it neatly lined up with the known facts.

Still, discovering a possible problem was just the first step.

What mattered the most was how to counter this devastating threat!

Sweat began to run down her head. Her mind worked at a higher intensity as she tried her best to combine the scattered advice with her own ideas.

Her intuition told her that time was running out faster than she would have liked.

They urgently needed to implement more defensive measures!

The Farseer provided her input on behalf of the RC contingent.

"The previous limitations still apply. The dark miasma is intensively hostile to our manipulation. Ordinary scrying or other information gathering methods are ineffective at this range. I may be able to perceive more details as our ships have entered knife-fighting range with the orbital facilities, but my guidance will be redundant at that time."

That was an expected setback.

"We should take a closer look at the surrounding deathborn." Ves suggested. "If you track their behavior closely, then you should notice that their behavior shifted just before the attack. If they repeat this pattern, then we can use this activity as an indication that our enemies are determined to shred apart our hulls."

Right now, the deathborn that were possibly in the line of fire abruptly began to exhibit similar behavior!

Even if there were differences, the Saint Commander was 90 percent confident that a second strike from another superdimensional siege cannon was imminent!

The First Sword Mark III held her Decapitator in a blocking stance.

At the same time, she had spread out her sword fey in order to form a makeshift shield and sword formation to expand their protection before the Tortuous Scream!

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Chapter 7560 Bastard

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar and many other soldiers tried their best to determine the timing and targeting of the next superdimensional siege cannon attack.

Unfortunately, most friendly units were still too distant from Hypeh-Tekas II. Their high-powered sensor systems would have normally been able to examine the orbital fortresses in detail, but the dense clouds of dark miasma scattered every kind of signal no matter their nature and properties.

In other words, they were still flying in blind!

Only Casella managed to derive an early warning of an impending strike. Her expansive Command Field and her sharp intuition vaguely detected the rising malice from the surrounding deathborn and dark miasma.

Even though their behavior and patterns still appeared completely random to everyone else, the ace commander could still discern a greater movement from a large number of subtle and minute fluctuations.

Her eyes shone brighter inside her cockpit. The Command Field centered around the Minerva Mark II grew hotter and more agitated as she tried her best to anticipate the next attack!

After a few seconds of silence, her attention locked onto the largest and most massive hull in the combined fleet!

"DISE! INTERCEPT!"

Casella had no time to convey any other information, including her most probable guess of the trajectory of the incoming attack.

Nonetheless, this brief forewarning granted just enough time for Saint Dise to spike her true resonance and perform a specialized deflection technique!

It happened in an instant.

A superdimensional projectile cut almost straight across a large expanse of space, ignoring all of the dark miasma in the way, before quickly breaching past the perimeter of Casella's Command Field!

The domain field in question managed to detect the breach and intrusion a lot better now that Casella became aware of what was possible, but the surprisingly slender and compact projectile flew so fast that she could do nothing to impede its flight!

Psychic storms inflicted virtually zero damage against a solid superdimensional slug.

Projecting Dragon Scales onto the Tortuous Scream was also pointless. It took time to manifest this resonating ability, and the change in defensive strength was incredibly weak when applied to an enormous capital-grade hull.

Pretty much the only thing Casella could do in this incredibly short interval was slow down her subjective perception of time and track the passage of the superdimensional round.

The incredibly dense and hard slug followed a direct trajectory to the center of the Tortuous Scream's vertical superstructure!

Somehow, the distant alien gunner obtained enough data to not only know where to aim, but also anticipate the Tortuous Scream's maneuvers through space!

This was incredibly unreasonable and provided further proof that the aliens were able to obtain high-quality observation data from the surrounding dark miasma!

If this superdimensional slug was allowed to pass through space without getting stopped, then the damage it would inflict on the Tortuous Scream would be catastrophic!

The Armitage suffered serious damage from the first blow, but the actual losses were quite manageable.

The giant carrier was designed very similar to fleet carriers. This meant that she possessed a long but narrow hull that contained plenty of open spaces in order to accommodate a large number of combat units.

The Tortuous Scream was in a completely different situation! Much of her internal space was filled with dense and powerful electronics and structural components. A superdimensional slug launched with great momentum could punch through all of that and inflict catastrophic damage to the most important and sensitive interior of the orven battleship!

The massive hull might even crack in half from a single blow!

Yet just before the extremely fast projectile was about to crush directly through the middle of the vulnerable battleship, the First Sword Mark III slashed down with her enormous greatsword at a speed too swift to be seen with the naked eye!

Too fast!

Even if the First Sword Mark III had been winding herself up like a spring, she should never physically be able to make this move!

In fact, the ace swordsman mech had exceeded her physical limitations and swung her weapon so fast that it was frankly impossible according to her nominal parameters.

Thanks to Saint Dise's reality-distorting willpower, the living mech not only acted faster than she should ever be able to, but also managed to direct her attack just so that the flat of the Decapitator's blade managed to strike the incoming projectile at an oblique angle!

An extremely powerful vibration shook through space!

This spatial ripple expanded from the impact site and spread in every direction, making everyone feel as if they had briefly passed through unstable space.

"What happened!?"

"The Tortuous Scream... is undamaged! The First Sword Mark III managed to deflect the projectile!"

When the analysts reran the footage taken by the highest speed optical sensors, they observed a frame-by-frame playback of the crucial moment.

It turned out that the First Sword Mark III not only managed to strike the dangerous superdimensional projectile, but also exert just enough force in the right direction to deflect it in a harmless direction!

Those who performed calculations after the fact quickly concluded that Saint Dise had not mindlessly batted aside the powerful round, but deflected it while exerting the least amount of force.

This also happened to minimize the load on the ace mech and the greatsword, thereby lowering the chance that they would sustain damage!

The analysts could not think of a better way that Dise could have resolved this situation!

"STAY SHARP." Casella warned everyone. "A THIRD STRIKE WILL COME SOON. THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT ONLY ONE OF THE ORBITAL FORTRESSES HAS OPENED FIRE SO FAR. THE OTHER ALIEN FACILITIES MAY BE LACKING THIS CAPABILITY. WE NEED TO CONFIRM THIS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE."

It made a huge difference whether all four or just one enemy orbital fortress possessed an ultra-long-ranged siege cannon.

Right now, the members of the combined fleet did not dare to lower their guard. In fact, even if the aliens only managed to make a single one work, they still did not take this threat lightly.

Many people had performed the calculations or ran the simulations. The power of those superdimensional strikes clearly exceeded the defenses of any mundane defenses of their starships. Every hull was vulnerable regardless of their design or origin!

At this moment, Ves and the Dark Apostle had a little more time to think. They both couldn't help but look back at the Tarrasque which had retreated to the rear.

Though the heavy cruiser had become less conspicuous among the other vessels, they still found it difficult to set aside the danger to their wife and children.

"My wife..."

"Our children..."

"I thought you didn't care for my human family."

"You are mistaken." The Ascended Giants responded to his other self. "I may not care much for your wife, but our children carry our flesh and blood. They are still human for the time being. I am confident that they will follow in our footsteps and ascend to gianthood once they have reached adulthood."

Ves strongly objected to this intention!

"They will not become Ascended Giants! I will not have any of my kids become beholden to the heavenly authority of the Red Ocean! I will die before I let any of them become a slave to an alien superexistence!"

The Dark Apostle merely smirked underneath his helmet. "I do not think you have the luxury of denying your children their destiny and privilege of being descended from my blood. Look at your little ship. See how fragile this metal shell has become in the face of the weapons of our enemies. Their human conditions make them all the more vulnerable. If Andraste and Marvaine turned into giants, then they are far better off than the vast majority of mortals in human-occupied space. They can defend themselves against most threats and flee into depths of space if they are outmatched. They do not have to rely on the protection of others and can survive in barren locations without relying on any infrastructure. Would you deny your precious children the advantages of an ascended body?"

He made a compelling point, but only to a certain extent. Ves knew that phase lords may be able to survive a hostile universe so long as they were careful to remain hidden, but that was ultimately a cowardly way to sustain their own existence.

Ves did not want to see his son and daughters flee into barren star systems and live like rats in a gutter.

He also did not want to see them lose their humanity and become completely brainwashed by the Red Ocean!

"My children are humans and I am proud of it." He pushed back against his other self. "Do not mess with them. Do not try to convert them. Do not even mention the idea. My babies are my bottom line, got it?! They are born as humans and they shall realize their potential as humans. I will never allow them to be tainted by alien or foreign influences. Red humanity is not weak to the point where we need to resort to gianthood to overcome our challenges."

Fortunately for Ves, the Dark Apostle chose not to push him for the time being.

"Understood." The giant responded even as he maintained a smug expression on his face. "You will come to revisit your stance sooner or later. I can be patient. You have taught me that. Once this entire dwarf galaxy goes to hell, you will beg us to grant strength of gods to your, no, our children."

"..."

Bastard.

How did the Dark Apostle learn to become to eloquent?

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