The Mech Touch

Chapter 7591 Spoils Dilemma

"Hastily attaching pieces of superdimensional debris onto the exterior of the surviving starships will strain them. Their mass is not low. The more superdimensional goods we bolt onto their hulls, the more their acceleration profiles will become impaired. As a mech designer, you should be well aware of that. I do not think it is wise to be too greedy here. We are not talking about high-grade superdimensional matter. The vast majority of scrap consists of medium-grade variations, which are not as scarce. Our fleet has already suffered so much losses that we cannot withstand as much alien aggression as before. If we handicap ourselves even further by slowing down our navigation speed, the odds of failing to return home will increase drastically."

The Saint Commander did not ignore the value of superdimensional spoils, but she did not worship them either.

Given that the Larkinson Clan already controlled a means of acquiring more superdimensional matter, Casella looked down on picking up too much scrap from the battlefield.

Ves shook his head in disagreement. He had a different stance on the matter.

"We cannot leave these spoils to the aliens. They will end up building more Saint Piercers and Saint Armors, thereby causing many human defenders to suffer the wrath of well-equipped phase leaders. I think we can take the risk. The aliens in this region may be numerous, but they are so disorganized that they have failed to intercept us once while we were moving deeper behind enemy lines. Our journey home will not be as dangerous if we avoid all populated and fortified star systems along the way. We can also make a deal with the Terrans. In exchange for handing over a portion of the superdimensional debris, I am sure they are willing to send a relief force that can meet us when we are close to reaching the borders. That will drastically reduce the chance of suffering an unfortunate fate at the last and most vulnerable leg of the journey home."

He made a great suggestion. The state of the combined fleet was terrible in multiple ways.

Not only had they lost a lot of mechs and starships, they were already in the process of depleting a lot of essential supplies.

From energy cells to high-powered ammunition, all of the fighting so far had forced the humans to consume their supplies at a very prodigious rate!

It did not help that the loss of numerous combat carriers and other vessels also ruined much of the supplies they carried. The salvaging parties had already begun the process of

retrieving any intact goods of value from those wrecks, but the yield was bound to be insufficient.

"What about collecting more unique and novel samples?" The Saint Commander asked instead. "The Farseer and the other members of the Red Collective have already boarded their shuttles in order to descend to the surface of the ruined alien temple complex. They did not even wait for our surviving mechs to sweep the site for any surviving defenders and hazards. From what I heard, they are particularly enthused about collecting a large amount of stone fragments that bear strange ritualistic markings. The more samples they can bring back, the greater the probability of deciphering and reverse-engineering an entirely new paradigm of energy manipulation."

Ah. That sounded important as well.

"You are not wrong about that, but... our transportation capacity is limited. Bringing back more superdimensional matter will help red humanity a lot more in the short term. Bringing back a larger proportion of black stone debris will only help the Red Collective attain a breakthrough in the far future.I think the collies should focus more on making scans and recordings. They can collect a number of samples if they want, but make sure to remind them to be... restrained. We canot be certain about the risks of transporting large amounts of unknown materials that may still carry residual power. Even if they can do nothing more than help the surviving deathborn track our fight across the stars, that is already an unacceptable result."

The ace commander who not only carried much of the leadership burden but also could not afford to take a single rest looked even more annoyed than before.

"Do we possess the capacity to study and declare the exotic alien spoils safe?"

Ves had to think about his answer very carefully. "To be honest... not really. The Moloch Squadron has an eclectic mix of specialist qi cultivators. That favors them slightly. However, their backgrounds are still too shallow, and none of them have studied alien E energy manipulation traditions as strange as this one. I think that many of them are betting that much of the debris is harmless now that they are broken and depowered."

The projection of the Saint Commander nodded after a short moment. "I suppose you are correct. As alien as the deathborn may be, certain architectural principles still remain universal. I am willing to assume that the risk of carrying deathborn spoils can be contained as long as we reinforce their shielding and move away from a star system that is filled with dark miasma."

They exchanged a few more words about loot priority and other logistical issues.

Neither of them wanted to leave this star system empty-handed or close to it. They were still forced to make very difficult decisions about tradeoffs.

For example, Ves proactively made a suggestion for the combined fleet to dump less essential goods and supplies in favor of stuffing more valuable loot inside the hulls!

Not that there were many opportunities to do so. Too much stuff still remained essential. The best they could do in most cases was to throw away phasewater and other lower-value spoils taken from previous engagements.

"We should have brought more empty transport ships when we began our campaign." Blinky sighed. "If we did, we wouldn't have to abandon the opportunity to bring back so much valuable stuff."

"Ships of all kinds are in short supply in the Red Ocean. It would have taken too much time and effort to expand our fleet with cargo haulers. Their speed is also not the best. Their presence would have slowed us down, causing us to miss more opportunities and increase the risk of falling into an ambush. I think that keeping our fleet composition lean and swift is the right choice. It is better to survive and return with less spoils in our hands."

They had lost too much in this battle. They needed to justify the losses by bringing back more stuff that could make a profound difference in the ongoing wars. Ves felt the urge to expand their transportation capacity further.

Yet now that they had become the most wanted humans in the surrounding regions, the humans couldn't afford to waste too much time on this obsession!

The need to survive ultimately trumped his greed. He forcibly restrained his urges once again and tried to squeeze the next words out of his current form's feline maw.

"I am afraid that I cannot control myself if I have a say in this matter. I will leave the selection of spoils that we should attempt to bring back to you. There are many different groups that prioritize certain goods over others. Only you can be trusted to balance their interests. Use your judgment. Do not hesitate to ruthlessly deny other people's requests. They will listen to you as long as you do a proper job."

Though Casella felt a little irritated that Ves tried to fob off this troublesome responsibility onto her, she could at least insure that the people under her command would not weigh down the fleet too much.

"Very well. I accept this responsibility. For now, I believe you should return to the Armitage or the Tarrasque. Your giants need your encouragement. Your wife has also been complaining excessively about your injured state and your continued absence."

The Dark Apostle nodded. "Good idea. I have been bearing this pain for too long. I am more than willing to receive treatment for my injuries."

"You are just in a hurry to 'log off' and let me suffer through all of the pain instead." The Star Cat snorted.

"Hehe. There are at least some boons to sharing the same true body."

If both of them had a say about their current state, they would not remain this way for too long.

Although it was utterly unrealistic for them to split off into separate physical vessels for the time being, neither Ves nor the Dark Apostle had forgotten about their agreement.

The giant leader was willing to be patient and let Ves continue to work as a mech designer for the next few years.

If the latter failed to make enough progress, then the Dark Apostle would definitely express his ire at the delay!

In any case, once the Saint Commander closed the communication channel, the Dark Apostle turned away from the Riot Mark III and the devastation that she had wrought onto the alien temple complex and moved into higher orbit.

Ves actually wanted to go down to the surface and examine the temple complex in person, but his true body needed treatment first.

It took a while before the Dark Apostle returned to the Armitage.

Now that he flew closer, his expression darkened when he saw the gaping tear at the side of the giant carrier's hull.

Due to her cigar-like shape, this enormous gap looked quite bad since it practically ran from the bow all the way to the stern!

A lot of structural and functional parts had completely disappeared as a result. A lot of compartments became exposed to vacuum while plenty of systems operated at partial effectiveness.

Fortunately, all of this damage ultimately did not constitute a big deal to a capital ship like this. The giant carrier mainly served as a transport ship for human phase lords and their gigantic sets of equipment. The hull did not mount too many volatile and dangerous weapon systems or other high-tech modules.

Repair crews had already covered most of the gaps with temporary metallic covers to keep out the vacuum and radiation. More substantial fixes could be done later with more robust materials... such as spare superdimensional alloy plating.

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Chapter 7592 Organ Deficiency

When the Dark Apostle entered the Armitage and met up with the surviving giants, he became surprised by their reaction.

He expected them to feel disappointed or defeated at their latest showing. Though they had managed to kill numerous enemy phase lords, they suffered a disproportionate amount of losses in the process.

Comrades had died. Both the Flesh Choppers and Ur-Titans gained more vacancies in their roster. Friends and teammates who previously guarded their backs had met an early and unfortunate end on the battlefield.

Yet despite this painful outcome, the mood among the giants was not as bad as the Dark Apostle feared.

Though the exhausted human phase lords did not exchange many words with each other, their low voices betrayed a certain degree of excitement and satisfaction.

The strategos of the Flesh Chopper approached the Dark Apostle's side. "This is the life of a soldier in a time of war. Just because we have become giants does not mean we have forgotten the lessons we have learned when we were still human. To us, death is not an intolerable result. What matters more to us is whether those who have fought and died for a worthy cause. Although we do not know exactly what is going on with the deathborn and that planetary temple complex, we can still figure out that we have inflicted a massive setback to our enemies with our assistance. We were the ones who managed to kill half-a-dozen enemy phase lords. We also managed to endure the onslaught of two well-equipped greater phase lords who hail directly from the Red Cabal. These are all accomplishments that we can feel proud about."

She made a good point. The two squads of Ascended Giants had confronted some of the best units that the native aliens of the Red Ocean could throw at them. The fact that the giants did not collapse throughout the fight was proof that the Phase Lord Department was on the right track!

Still, the battle managed to expose many faults and shortcomings.

"Just because we fought decently against the elite phase lords of the Red Cabal does not mean we can afford to be complacent." The Fiery Axe warned as she gripped the handle of her iconic weapon. "The short-lived campaign against the mutated voribugs already exposed some of our weaknesses. This latest battle has enabled us to make direct comparisons between ourselves and our alien counterparts. If we assume the alien phase lords are just as capable of catching up with us in terms of superdimensional arms and armor, our remaining advantages are not decisive enough to crush our enemies."

The Dark Apostle nodded. "I agree with your assessment. There is always room for improvement."

"We have more work ahead of us. There is no need for us to fight any further. Our greater priority is to return with all of the precious footage and data that we have collected and figure out how we can do better next time."

"Do you have any ideas about this subject? You look like you have already formed a few conclusions."

The female giant nodded and smiled. "Our greatest shortcoming is that we do not have anything comparable to greater phase lords as of yet. That is not a gap that we can close in the short term, so I would rather prefer to address more immediate issues. One of them is the low quality and quantity of our phasewater organs. If there is one benefit to fighting against the representatives of the Red Cabal, it is that we have managed to harvest their high-quality phasewater organs. Even the more common and familiar ones such as the basic three are much more optimized than the regular versions."

The Dark Apostle's eyes lit up after hearing this. As the future sole owner of Ves' true body, he had a vested interest in acquiring as many high-quality phasewater organs as possible!

Even if the capacity of his true body could not possibly fit so many phasewater organs, the ability to pick and choose from a wide range of fantastic options was a huge benefit!

"Implanting these native alien phasewater organs directly into our bodies is wasteful. We should hand them all over to the Red Collective so that the human eggheads can decipher them and develop giant versions that are perfectly adapted to our biologies."

The Fiery Axe actually looked reluctant. "I... do not entirely agree, sir. Your suggestion will definitely benefit our giant race the most, but only in the medium and long term. It will not help us in the present as it will take at least a few years for the research to bear fruit. We still need strength. You especially need more strength. We all acknowledge you as our leader because you have proven it with your strength. Others can do the same. Do not assume that each of us have permanently submitted to you. Any of us have the right to challenge you, remember? Some of us plan to do so at each annual event just to keep you on your toes. If you are not properly prepared, then there is a chance that you will suffer an unexpected defeat."

Both Ves and the Dark Apostle grew upset after hearing that. They had indeed made such a promise, as the giants were very much obsessed with the principle that 'might makes right'.

It was this kind of primitive pageantry that Ves was more than happy to abandon his identity as a human phase lord. As far as he was concerned, the Dark Apostle was more than welcome to wrangle these unruly manchildren!

That said, Ves still valued the power and influence associated with control over the Phase Lord Department. He did not want to see his other self lose the authority he currently enjoyed among hundreds of formidable giants.

Yet... the thought of directly implanting organs originally developed for other species such as orvens, nunsers and phase whales made him feel a little sick.

"We do not need to rely too much on the power of phasewater organs to defeat any challenges." He said through Blinky's form. "Our true body is larger and denser than that of any other giant. Also, our gear is much better than anyone else's. Even if we do not make use of superdimensional equipment in our duels, my knowledge and craftsmanship will ensure that we will always hold the edge in this aspect."

The Fiery Axe shook her head in disapproval. "You are not wrong in your assessment, but you also sound like a spoiled scion. Being further ahead in your progression as a phase lord does not give you a decisive edge, especially when your personal combat experience and your battlefield judgment falls short. The same goes for your superior equipment. In certain ways, you are like a child with the strength of an adult. You are still far from truly mastering your current strength and means. Now that I have fought alongside you and seen you in action, I am confident that I can defeat you on a good day."

"Do you truly mean that, woman?" The Dark Apostle almost bristled at the implied challenge.

The strategos grinned in response. Her posture exuded confidence.

"I am not disrespecting you, Dark Apostle. You are still my leader. I am merely being honest. Do not expect me to hold back or take it easy on you in our upcoming leadership challenge. If I am able to defeat you despite your current advantages, then that proves that you are no longer deserving of your crown. I will happily take it over if that happens. If you want to avoid this outcome, then I advise you to take your development more seriously. None of us want to be led by a giant that is not doing his utmost to become stronger. We are counting on you to not only serve as an example of our race, but also prove that you are better than our alien rivals."

This was the disadvantage of a strength-based society.

A leader constantly needed to develop his strength regardless of his responsibilities.

It would have been a lot more convenient if the leader of the giant relied on his brains rather than his brawn to hold his position.

Unfortunately, the Ascended Giants had not yet developed a society that could accept such a principal!

In fact, red humanity was not much better off. In times of existential crisis, too many red humans actually supported the ascendancy of god pilots.

The ignorant masses had largely forgotten about galactic mech councilors, who had once been elevated to the top of the Mech Trade Association with the explicit mandate of representing the average citizens of human civilization.

Rule by strength had made a comeback. Ves was quite clear that it was not going away anytime soon.

"I think... I will examine the list of collected phasewater organs later." The Dark Apostle slowly said after a moment of thought. "If there are any particularly interesting or powerful organs, I will think about implanting them into my true body if they are not too tattered. There should still be room for a couple of them I think. If there is one lesson that I have learned after dueling against the Blackwater Summoner, it is that I need a killer solution if I want to dominate my enemies. I need my own trump card that is inherent to me and my race. I need my own 'blackwater'."

"I will do my best to help you with that." Ves voiced his support.

The Dark Apostle did not want to acquire the power to manipulate a substance as anomalous as blackwater.

What he truly wanted was to gain the ability to wield strength comparable to the trump card of the Blackwater Summoner.

Relying on the basics was not enough. True powerhouses always counted on an absolute advantage in order to rise above their lesser peers. The Dark Apostle still needed to develop his own one if he wanted to secure his seat at the top of the Phase Lord Department.

"It is too bad we let the Blackwater Summoner get away." The Dark Apostle lamented. "If we managed to kill him and secure his carcass, then even if we couldn't salvage his best organs, the rest shouldn't be too bad either. I bet his body contains plenty more unique organs."

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Chapter 7593 Taking Stock

After the Dark Apostle settled his affairs at the Armitage, he finally made his exit, allowing Ves to finally regain control over his true body.

"Damn that hurts!"

Of course, that also meant that Ves had to deal with the consequences of getting splashed with blackwater!

The doctors on site immediately began to treat his half-molten shoulder and upper arm. The amount of body mass lost or damaged from blackwater exposure was quite severe. Wounds of this proportion should have been outright crippling to ordinary humans.

Fortunately, Ves was made out of sterner stuff. His abnormal phase lord physique allowed him to endure much greater wounds and keep going as if he merely suffered an ordinary cut. He could not do much about losing control over his left arm, but the doctors who had decided to specialize in studying and treating human phase lords comfortably told him that he should be able to regenerate his flesh over time.

"It will take approximately three to six months for you to regain normal functionality over your shoulder and arm according to the results given by our predictive model." One of the senior doctors stationed aboard the Armitage explained. "Do remember that your true body cannot generate mass and phasewater out of thin air. If you do not massively increase your nutrition, your physique will cannibalize itself in order to make your limbs whole again. This will result in an overall weakening of your muscles and a reduction in your phasewater concentration. If you want to prevent this occurrence, then you will have to ingest tons of organic matter as well as phasewater in order to maintain your current level."

Though Ves did not necessarily mind a modest regression, he knew his other self definitely objected to this outcome!

"I shall keep your advice in mind." He compliantly responded. "Please coordinate with my staff about meal plans and subsequent treatment steps. Do you have any painkillers that are effective for people like myself?"

The doctor gently shook his head. "Our science has yet to advance to this extent. Phase lords, even the lesser variants, are highly resistant to all manner of drugs and stimulants. Simply multiplying the dose does not work either. I have heard that the native aliens have painstakingly developed entirely different formulas that are customized for each species. If we are able to acquire documentation and samples that apply to at least several different alien species, our research institutions may be able to formulate a human-specific version within half a decade."

In other words, the doctors couldn't give Ves anything to dull the persistent pain generated by his left shoulder.

Even now that it had been cleaned up and wrapped by soft composite bandaging, the limb still made him feel as if a dozen razors constantly dug into his flesh.

Could Ves bear the pain?

Yes.

His pain tolerance was not low. He had suffered worse in the past.

That did not mean he liked it. Chronic pain was a very serious condition that had driven plenty of people mad. Even Ves was not arrogant enough to assume he could remain unaffected by this debilitating condition.

It would definitely affect his work efficiency going forward. Even without the pain, the loss of control over his left arm meant that he would have a significantly harder time with manual work and precision work.

"I advise you to lighten your workload in the next two months." The doctor said as he correctly read what Ves was thinking about. "No matter whether you are a baseline human or a powerful phase lord, biology and common sense still applies equally to all. Stress and heavy strain will compromise your recovery process. At best, you are looking at several more months of restoration. At worst, your injuries will exacerbate, which may in extreme cases necessitate amputation. I highly recommend that you do not engage in active combat again for the remainder of the period."

"Believe me. I have no intention of doing so. I am not stupid."

That did not mean he would hide like a coward if the combined fleet ever got cornered by a vastly superior force of aliens. If that ever happened, he would have far greater concerns than the possibility of losing his arm!

Ves departed from the Armitage shortly after that. Now that he wrapped up his business with the Ascended Giants, it was finally time for him to address the more critical and exciting issues.

He activated a projection that gave him a good view of the environment.

The dark miasma had made a comeback at this time, which significantly increased the difficulty of conducting operations.

Casella was forced to remain inside her cockpit and continually project her Command Field through the Minerva Mark II and the Victrix.

The ace command mech naturally remained in the center of the fleet.

At times, small groups of salvage shuttles escorted by mechs occasionally ventured outside the protective range of Casella's Saint Kingdom.

The personnel had to endure constant mind-altering hallucinations and other adverse effects, but they had little choice. Too much valuable debris and wounded soldiers had already fallen well beyond the range of protection.

The good news was that the mass withdrawal of all of the native aliens and deathborn had made the dark miasma a lot safer than before. The soldiers no longer had many concerns about suffering direct ambushes and attacks for the time being. As long as their mental resilience was up to standard, they could endure the dark miasma so long as they returned quickly enough.

Meanwhile, the Victrix construct strategically hovered right above the ruined temple complex. Despite the sheer amount of devastation wrought during the closing moments of the battle, the collies and other interest groups had already managed to dig out plenty of unique and novel specimens!

From rune-covered bricks to finger-sized fragments of depleted green crystals, the deathborn stronghold had turned into one of the most valuable archeological dig sites in the entire dwarf galaxy!

None of the search parties had to stumble upon anything truly precious, and few people believed that they could find anything truly game changing in the few days they had left.

If they wanted to thoroughly sift through everything of value across the entire breadth and depth of this ruined temple complex, then they either needed to spend multiple years or bring in a hundred times more manpower to finish this enormous job!

Suffice to say, that was totally unrealistic. The volunteers had no choice but to limit the scope of their treasure hunting operation and put much of their focus in the core district.

The salvage operations in space proceeded a bit better in comparison. The fleet had managed to keep track of every significant piece of superdimensional debris and other valuables. Even if they had drifted outside the range of Casella's Command Field, their predictable trajectories made it easy to bring them back.

The only letdown was that there was no way to obtain anything valuable from the deathborn lords.

The key to defeating the latest threat to red humanity was figuring out their strengths and weaknesses.

Studying the battle footage alone was not enough. Researchers would have a much easier time if they could capture a real deathborn lord or at least get their hands on a formerly possessed carcass.

Unfortunately, the high-ranked deathborn possessed intelligence that they understood the importance of denying information to the enemy.

"What do you mean there is nothing left?"

"There is nothing to retrieve, sir. When the deathborn lords decided to flee by abandoning their possessed phase lord vessels, the latter immediately became subjected to a state of accelerated decomposition. It is as if they had become so exposed to the power of death that they crumbled into bones and dust in a matter of minutes. There was nothing we could do to stop this unnatural process."

"..."

It was not enough for these deathborn bastards to run away. They also had to destroy their vessels along the way, leaving nothing useful to the victors of this battle!

Even the body struck by the Riot Mark III had been wiped out in totality.

Sure, the phase lord carcass would have been completely ruined from the inside due to extended exposure to a tier 3 Destroyer weapon, but researchers could still figure out a lot of details from studying the partially atrophied extremities.

Ves eventually shrugged. "Fine. The deathborn race can keep its mysteries. We won't be tangling with them again in the short term. The Terran Alliance and the Red Three should be much more concerned about the early invasion from M87 than us. I am sure they will investigate this matter to the end."

Although the Larkinson Clan could not remain unaffected by the rise of a powerful new enemy, it was not large enough to take on too many major threats at the same time.

At this time, Ves did not want the armed forces of his clan to overextend and fight against the native aliens, the mutated voribugs and the deathborn all at once!

The clan should focus on defeating one major enemy civilization at the time. For now, the native aliens were the most ubiquitous as well as the more acute threat at the moment.

Wiping them out entirely was unrealistic, but red humanity could still beat them so badly that they reluctantly gave up on their all-out offensive.

Once the conflict between red humanity and the native aliens cooled down, the Larkinson Clan might finally be able to spare more attention to the newer threats.

As Ves' shuttle finally entered the hangar bay of the Tarrasque, he stepped out and briefly took in the atmosphere.

The heavy cruiser had come away from the battle while suffering only minor damage due to her importance.

Even so, the native alien defenders made sure to leave their mark on the warship. Parts of her hull had been scorched, and numerous surface modules had been wiped out. The damage was anything but serious in the greater scheme of things, but that did not take

away from the fact that the Tarrasque's energy defenses had failed to endure the onslaught for a time!

Ves would have real complaints if the vessel where his wife and children resided during the battle got struck by a ship-killing superdimensional projectile!

He was not ignorant of the fact that the Saint Commander and other soldiers had done their best to prevent this possible tragedy from occurring. They had worked hard and sacrificed the defense of other starships in order to keep the Tarrasque alive.

From the words and expressions of the mech technicians and other busy personnel, Ves got the impression that the crew had absolutely no concerns.

The ship remained whole and none of her vital parts and systems had suffered any spec of damage.

Their only concerns were the mechs. Many Woodsap mechs and other machines assigned to the ship had fallen in battle.

Due to the loss of numerous combat carriers, the Tarrasque was forced to take in mechs originally assigned to other berths.

Many of the returning mechs boasted varying degrees of battle damage. Some machines got struck so badly that they couldn't even return without getting towed by another mech or shuttle!

The maintenance crews had a lot of work ahead of them. The battle damage was extensive and complex. Speed was of the issue because the entire fleet still resided behind enemy lines. The sooner the damaged machines got repaired, the sooner they could contribute their strength to everyone's defense!

Perhaps the only good news related to this matter is that the surviving Woodsap mechs rarely demanded any attention from their caretakers.

As long as the innovative organic machines did not outright get blasted into pieces, they could always regenerate their wooden frames back to normal condition!

They just needed access to enough biomatter, phasewater and energy in order to return to peak condition.

Although the process was not efficient from a macro perspective, nobody cared about this detail. The ability for biomechs to return to fighting condition by themselves was an invaluable advantage in this kind of situation!

Chapter 7594 Symbiosis or Dominance

When Ves came back, his first priority was to check on the condition of the Riot Mark III.

The powerful yet unstable machine had massively deviated from its previous pattern. This concerned Ves a lot because he couldn't properly model the D-mech's future behavior. Who knew what kind of shenanigans it would pull off going forward.

Soon after he entered the mech workshop where the Riot Mark III had recently been brought, he sighed in relief at the sight of a seemingly calm and dormant mech.

Its latest mutations had reverted, but only partially. This signified that the current relationship between the mech pilot and her demon still remained fairly cordial.

As Ves extended his senses, he could feel the distinct absence of danger and chaos.

The Middle Demon had voluntarily reined in his madness and aggression for the time being. He behaved remarkably calm and controlled for a being of his nature.

Ves did not expect this circumstance to last, though. Demons were inherently hostile towards living beings. Just because this particular entity could be rational did not necessarily mean he was willing to work honestly for humans.

Already, Ves could sense a small undercurrent from his D-mech. The machine remained a contested battleground where two sides sought to obtain complete control over it. Neither side could truly rest unless one of them got eliminated.

Ves stepped closer at a slightly slower pace than usual. Even with his bandages and adjusted uniform, his left shoulder still hurt like hell. Making fast and abrupt movements only exacerbated the pain.

The thought of needing to endure this injury for at least several months sounded like torture to him. He would definitely have difficulties concentrating on his work during this period.

"Saint Orfan." He called up at the seemingly dormant machine, making sure to appear as harmless as possible. "Are you still awake?"

Despite the fact that the Riot Mark III had been secured in a custom-fitted cage of superdimensional alloy braces, the machine may still be able to overpower its restraints and break out if it wished!

Naturally, the tier 3 Destroyer spear was nowhere to be seen. The crew had already taken the dangerous weapon away and placed it back in its specialized storage container.

"I AM... STILL AWAKE." Her voice transmitted from the restrained D-mech out loud. "I SUPPOSE YOU HAVE... QUESTIONS."

"You sound like you need a long break."

"I DO. I WILL REST AS SOON AS YOU ARE DONE."

"Then I will keep this short." Ves said as he immediately adjusted his plan. "First, are you okay? You and your machine have experienced drastic changes, and you took a great risk at the end of the battle."

"I'M FINE. THINGS COULD HAVE BEEN BETTER, BUT I AM... NOT IN DANGER."

"That is good to hear." Ves briefly smiled. "I am aware that you may feel... slighted by the fact that I did not consult your opinion before I forged a deal with the Prophet's Bane. I apologize for that. I did not see any other choice at the time."

"...I UNDERSTAND. I AM NOT HAPPY WITH IT, BUT... I SUPPOSE IT IS MY OWN FAULT FOR BEING WEAK. I DO NOT BLAME YOU FOR MY OWN FAILINGS. IF MY MENTALITY WAS NOT WEAK TO THE POINT A SINGLE ALIEN WITCH MANAGED TO MAKE ME LOSE CONTROL, THEN I HAVE NOT EARNED THE QUALIFICATIONS TO NEGOTIATE WITH YOU. IT MAKES SENSE FOR YOU TO SPEAK TO THE DEMON INSTEAD. JUST KNOW THAT I WILL NOT LET THIS HAPPEN A SECOND TIME. I WILL FIGHT BACK HARDER NEXT TIME IN ORDER TO ENSURE HE WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO SPEAK ON BEHALF OF US BOTH."

Ves relaxed a bit further after hearing that. His fears about Rosa Orfan's mental state turned out to be overblown. The female champion was not as weak or fragile as he thought. She still maintained the quintessential attitude of an ace pilot. Her willpower had not collapsed or regressed. All of these were good indications that she remained sober and in control.

"So now that stuff has changed, how do you describe your relationship with the Prophet's Bane?"

Several seconds passed by before Rosa offered a lame response. "I... HAVE NO WORDS. MY OPINIONS ON HIM HAS CHANGED, BUT NOT TOO MUCH. HE IS STILL A PARASITE WHO DREAMS OF DEVOURING MY SOUL. JUST BECAUSE HE CAN BE POLITE AND WITHOUT HIS GREED DOES NOT MEAN THAT I CAN SEE EYE-TO-EYE WITH HIM. HE ALREADY OCCUPIES SO MUCH OF MY SOUL ALREADY THAT I AM DESPERATE TO WIN IT BACK."

"I see. So both of you will revert to the old status quo?"

"YES, BUT NOT TODAY, OR EVEN TOMORROW. MAYBE AFTER WE HAVE RETURNED TO HUMAN SPACE. RIGHT NOW, NEITHER OF US SEE ANY POINT IN FIGHTING AGAINST

EACH OTHER WHEN A POWERFUL PHASE WHALE OR DEATHBORN LORD COULD COME AND KILL US BOTH. WE HAVE MADE PROGRESS ON THIS ISSUE AT THE VERY LEAST."

That sounded like a genuinely positive development!

Though it was far too unrealistic for Saint Orfan and the Prophet's Bane to completely reconcile with each other, this would still be the best possible result from Ves' perspective.

His design philosophy was Mutual Growth in Adversity.

That did not mean he wanted to subject his clients to permanent suffering.

What he truly wanted to see was two initially hostile partners work out their differences over the course of many battles and form a permanent union of sorts.

In other words, he wanted them to choose symbiosis over domination!

Situations where one side outright devoured the other without giving the latter any chance to survive was far from Ves' ideal outcome!

A part of him still felt regretful about the time where Patriarch Reginald Cross did not appreciate his good intentions and turned his living mech into a lifeless vessel!

Although the leader of the Cross Clan had imprinted himself so strongly on the Mars that the ace hybrid mech had practically become his second skin, Ves only saw a huge amount of lost potential.

A solitary individual could never generate as much synergy as two equal partners!

Ves hoped that the Riot could follow a more promising route.

Achieving true symbiosis was by far the hardest route to traverse, but he genuinely believed that it would lead to the best possible growth for both Rosa Orfan and the Prophet's Bane!

Of course, Ves was not stupid enough to voice his hopes aloud. Neither of the two were willing to entertain any notion of permanent cooperation at this early stage. They still dreamt of completely eliminating their 'adversary' so that they could take complete possession of everything!

"By the way, I wanted to ask you a question about what happened at the end. I clearly saw you throw the tier 3 Destroyer spear at the massive green crystal. Under normal circumstances, the Destroyer weapon should have been blown apart or flung in a random direction at high speed. Neither of these outcomes happened. Instead, the spear 'magically' reappeared in the Riot's grip. I have checked the footage taken from my

raiment multiple times. It failed to record any transition. The weapon just blinked into your machine's hand all of a sudden."

"I CAN'T EXPLAIN IT PROPERLY." Rosa Orfan sounded less certain. "AT THE TIME, MY INTUITION FAINTLY TOLD ME THAT IF I THREW MY SPEAR, I COULD GET IT BACK REGARDLESS OF WHAT HAPPENED. I DID NOT EXPECT IT TO RETURN TO MY MECH WITHOUT DOING ANYTHING. IF I HAVE TO EXPLAIN IT... MY WILLPOWER AT THE TIME WAS A LOT STRONGER, WAY WAY STRONGER."

Ves nodded. "That is right. Somehow, your resonance strength when completely unburdened by your own demon has surpassed 400 laveres. That is extremely impressive given how little time has passed since your breakthrough. It can take decades for many ace pilots to achieve the same kind of progress, though most of them admittedly spend much of it in times of peace. Still, even if you factor in all of the fighting as of late, your progress is still the fastest among your cohort of Larkinson ace pilots. Not even Tusa or Dise can come close to you in terms of raw willpower."

A sense of pride and satisfaction emanated from the D-mech. "I RESPECT MY COLLEAGUES, BUT NONE OF THEM HAVE BEEN FORCED TO ENDURE THE TORMENT OF BEING SHACKLED TO THIS DEMONIC MACHINE. I HAVE WORKED HARDER THAN ANY OTHER SAINT TO STRENGTHEN MY WILLPOWER. EVEN THEN, MY PROGRESS STILL WASN'T GOOD ENOUGH, OR ELSE I WOULDN'T HAVE LOST CONTROL IN THE FIRST PLACE."

She still felt a lot of blame for that personal failure. She would probably beat herself up over her disappointing showing numerous times in the following weeks.

That was not good. Ves needed the Riot Mark III at its strongest, and that would only happen if Saint Orfan remained sharp and motivated.

"Everyone stumbles." He tried to reassure the downtrodden ace pilot. "Even I have experienced numerous failures over the years. You can never completely prevent these bad incidents. What you do have control over is how you can do better next time. Now that the deathborn lord has taught you a brutal lesson about your mental vulnerability, I expect you to mitigate such accidents as best as possible. Does my request sound reasonable?"

"I... ALREADY PLANNED TO FIX THIS PROBLEM MYSELF. AS I HAVE SAID, I NEVER WANT TO LOSE CONTROL LIKE THAT AGAIN. YOU HAVE SEEN ME AT MY WORST. I AM HOPING THAT I CAN DROWN THIS AWFUL IMPRESSION WITH MUCH MORE IMPRESSIVE SHOWINGS IN THE FUTURE. I FINALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT DISE MEANS WHENEVER SHE LECTURES OTHERS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING CONTROL."

Chapter 7595 Strategic Resource Constraints

The talk with Rosa Orfan cleared a lot of doubts.

She and the Prophet's Bane had entered a new phase in their tempestuous relationship.

While they still remained hostile with each other, a possibility had opened up where they might agree to set aside their differences for a short moment.

Of course, whether such an occurrence took place completely depended on the whims of the Middle Demon.

The Prophet's Bane held all of the power in this relationship. It was he alone who could decide whether to assail his human prey or suspend hostilities.

That was very much an undesirable state of affairs, but no one could do anything about it. Aside from achieving a major breakthrough, the only ways for Rosa Orfan to truly resolve the threat of a takeover was to defeat the demon in totality or achieve a genuine state of symbiosis.

None of these outcomes could be attained in the short term.

What was worse was that Ves also had to go out of his way to satisfy the latest request of the Prophet's Bane.

The promise weighed heavily on his mind. He felt so tempted to discard it, but a deal was a deal. Ves was not willing to compromise his integrity and piss off the most powerful ace mech in his arsenal just because he felt squeamish all of a sudden.

Before he left, he made sure to voice his intentions.

"Demon, I am glad to see you living with Saint Orfan in peace at this time. I hope you can continue to grant her relief in the future. Your mercy shall not go unnoticed. As soon as I get back to my office, I will begin to make arrangements regarding the supply of... human sacrifices. Given that our deal makes no demands on the particulars of the human subjects, I intend to negotiate a transfer of heinous prisoners with nearby states. Passing them on to you will not only satisfy your appetite, but also cleanse our society of unproductive actors. It will take time for us to collect these people, so please be patient."

The Riot Mark III shook a little, but that was all. The ace mech could hardly do anything now that it was locked down to this extent.

Ves still got the message, though. He wordlessly nodded in acknowledgement before turning around and making his departure.

Half an hour later, the tired and injured Senior Mech Designer processed the most critical paperwork in his personal office.

Now that the fleet had suffered so much attrition, Ves and other leaders had to make a lot of hard decisions.

Dozens of emergencies had popped up, so much so that the limited manpower at their disposal could never address all of them. The Larkinsons and other groups had little choice but to ignore lesser matters.

Fortunately, Ves did not assume a lot of direct responsibility this time. The Saint Commander and other leadership figures had to oversee many more units and activities. This was why they were not quite ready to attend a briefing.

Since Ves gained a little time for himself, he chose to leave his office and drop by the design lab.

"You have finally deigned to enter your workspace."

"Well, I am glad to see you too, Gloriana. Aren't you concerned about my injury?"

His wife looked up from one of the worktables and directed a measuring glance towards the stiff and bandaged shoulder.

"You spent many minutes on the battlefield after you concluded your duel with the Blackwater Summoner. You did not choose to remain in the infirmary. This means that your injury is not severe enough to warrant my attention. If your condition was critical enough, then you or your doctors would have notified me directly. That has not happened."

Well, she may be right about this, but she didn't have to adopt such a heartless tone.

Ves still moved closer until he was able to lean forward in order to plant a kiss on her cheek.

His wife did not cooperate. She scowled while deliberately leaning backwards.

"Gloriana! What is up with you today?! Can't you welcome back your wounded husband properly?"

"I am not in the mood, Ves. Have you not spent a single second of your life thinking how your recklessness affects our children and I? DO YOU NOT KNOW HOW WORRIED I BECAME WHEN I SAW SO MANY SOLDIERS FALL?! ARE YOU IGNORANT OF THE FACT

THAT BOTH OF OUR CHILDREN BECAME SCARED OUT OF THEIR WITS WHEN THEY SAW YOUR SUPERDIMENSIONAL RAIMENT GET BREACHED BY BLACKWATER EXPOSURE? MARVAINE EVEN CRIED WHEN HE THOUGHT THAT THE PHASE WHALE MANAGED TO BRING YOU CLOSE TO DEATH!"

Ves winced as he took a few steps backwards. He never found it pleasant to endure her shouting.

That did not mean it was unwarranted. Ves had already begun to think back on his prior decisions and mistakes. Though he did not feel as badly about his missteps as his wife, he did not think she was doing anything wrong.

He deserved this rebuke.

"While we all embarked on this campaign with the knowledge that we may face higher-than-expected resistance, I admit that our curiosity and unfounded courage may have led us to take more risks than necessary." Ves explained with an even tone. "I apologise for that. As soon as we entered the edge of the Hypeh-Tekas System, we should have recorded all of the abnormalities that we could gather from this safe location and depart right afterwards. Whatever the native aliens were up to inside the dark miasma, we did not have an obligation to pierce through this dangerous veil. We should have transmitted our findings to the Terran Alliance and the Red Three so that they could organize and dispatch a proper assault fleet."

This was one of the conclusions he had made after spending a bit of time on reflection. The combined fleet possessed a lot of strength to be sure, but it still had major shortcomings. Ves and the Saint Commander should have stuck to conducting low-risk raids on inadequately defended supply depots and industrial hubs. There was no need to tempt fate and match their weapons against the elites of the Red Cabal!

Regardless, the battle had already been fought. It was too late for them to turn back the clock. The surviving humans had little choice but to accept the consequences and make the best of this situation.

Now that Gloriana had vented her frustration, she calmed down and moved on to more interesting business.

"I have been paying attention to the spoils brought back by our salvaging teams. The goods that belong to the native aliens are valuable, but they do not hold my interest. Much of it has already lost its novelty in my opinion. Perhaps the only truly new goods that we can obtain from this group are strange and unfamiliar phasewater organs. You and your 'Ascended Giants' may be eager to get your hands on them, but they hold no appeal to mech designers such as myself."

"I wouldn't say so with absolute certainty."

"Pardon?"

Ves smirked back at her. "Biomechs, especially ones that are able to imitate the physiology of phase lord bodies, may be able to integrate these alien phasewater organs and tap into your exotic power."

"Such biomechs do not exist."

"Yet." He emphasized. "I am sure it will only be a matter of time before a biomech designer that is crazy enough has managed to merge the two together into a functional whole. That individual may be me one day. There is a small possibility that my current Woodsap mechs or my future Mergewater mechs may be able to evolve into phase lords. After all, they are all alive. Phase lord cultivation is universal enough that it works for many sapient alien species that do not have much in common with each other. If that is the case, I see no reason why my living biomechs should be exempt from this rule. You can pretty much regard them as separate organic species in their own right."

"Your theory sounds crazy..." His spouse said in a tone that conveyed both doubt and amazement. "Yet its logic is sound enough that it may actually be viable. I do not think it will be easy to achieve this, though. Many minor alien races of the Red Ocean have tried their best but failed to produce a single phase lord among their ranks. If entire civilizations cannot accomplish this, then I doubt that a single mech designer such as yourself can beat the odds."

He readily acknowledged her skepticism and shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose you are right. I am only viewing this from an opportunistic lens. If there is a quick and easy way to turn my biomechs into artificial phase lords, then I will definitely invest in this research direction. If there are no such openings, then I will spend my time on other priorities. There is no urgency to produce the biomech equivalent of phase lords. The cost in phasewater alone makes mass prohibitively expensive."

Even though phasewater had lost its limelight to superdimensional matter in recent months, that did not mean that the former had lost all of its luster and desirability.

Phasewater was still an immensely valuable substance that could drastically elevate the performance of weapons, armor, energy shields, FTL drives and so much more!

The Phase Lord Department of the Red Collective already received a lot of flack for its voracious demand for phasewater. There was no other way to produce so many human phase lords and fuel their subsequent growth and progression.

Since much of his power and authority was derived from this department, the last thing Ves wanted to do was to create a competitor to his giants!

There was not enough phasewater to satisfy the hunger both at the same time.

Chapter 7596 Enduring Assets

Ves and Gloriana entered a quiet office in order to continue their discussion in a more private setting.

The married couple made themselves comfortable on their self-adjusting hovering chairs and began to talk about subjects that held their interest the most.

Mechs.

"You have kept an eye on my Woodsap mechs while I was deployed in the field." Ves said. "I wasn't able to keep an eye on them while I was guiding the Dark Apostle in battle. I hope you can fill me in on the performance of my creations. How did they fare? Did the prototypes succeed in their jobs, or did they fail in an unacceptable manner?"

Gloriana knew that this was a subject that had been lingering in Ves' mind throughout the entire battle and beyond.

Just because he could not devote enough attention to this issue did not mean he cared little about it. He was forced to focus on immediate concerns due to the limitations he was subjected to. Only now that he had taken care of all of the immediate issues was he finally able to allocate his attention to his primary work.

His wife offered him a smile. "Your prototype Woodsap mechs have endured the greatest test of their short lifespans so far. I can confidently say that they have acquitted themselves well. Sure, not all of them made it back to their motherships intact or alive, but almost any other standard mech would have definitely fared worse under the same circumstances. I am quite certain in this assessment. Your biomechs are not invincible, but the fight has proven that their resilience and endurance are great assets. Your organic machines are practically unkillable. They have suffered crippling damage, yet as long as they have access to enough organic matter, they can restore their functionality back to an acceptable level in a matter of seconds or minutes."

She waved her hand, activating a projection that displayed short highlights that portrayed the Woodsap mechs in action.

The biomechs predominantly made out of TE Wood suffered hit after hit. From transphasic laser beams to powerful kinetic rounds, all of the Woodsap mechs in question suffered blows that would have put any other first-class multipurpose mech out of commission.

Yet the prototype machines endured despite their newness. Each of them cautiously drew upon the power of life energy that saturated the entire battlefield at the time to supplement their energy consumption and generate new matter out of the blue.

The Woodsap mechs that still enjoyed access to a nearby Gaia Tree regenerated even faster. They directly pulled TE Wood and other organic matter from the artificial growths and managed to shape entirely new parts in record time.

The sight of these wooden mechs taking so many hits yet regenerating back up to full strength moments later had a very profound impact on the enemy.

The native alien soldiers had never seen anything like it. Phasefighter pilots and warship personnel increasingly found that their attacks produced no effect. No matter how many times they directed their fire towards the Woodsap mechs, the latter proved as persistent as cockroaches!

Ves was certainly gratified by the performance of his Woodsap mechs. He had to admit that his works just happened to have found themselves in an environment that closely matched their ideal conditions.

As long as his Woodsap mechs locked their adversaries in a contest of attrition, they would always enjoy a considerable advantage!

Still, the highlight reel did not blind Ves to the fact that his works had ultimately faltered during this engagement.

"All of this looks great, but they do not teach me as much as the failure cases." He said in a measured tone. He tried his best not to let his excitement override his good sense. "I know my latest work well enough to understand that it is still far from perfect. So tell me, Gloriana. What caused my Woodsap mechs to die?"

Gloriana had already prepared her response to this inquiry.

"There are several different circumstances that have led to the fall of your prototypes. All of them are foreseeable, so there is nothing new on that front. It is still a good idea for you to watch what has happened with your eyes."

She waved her hand again. A different collection of recordings began to play. The projector displayed numerous biomechs that already looked in bad shape but continued to get pummeled by enemy ordnance.

"Almost all of your Woodsap mechs performed well in the first half of the battle, but the same cannot be said for the period that comes after. As you have already been told, our combined fleet was not able to provide sufficient supply and replenishment for your biomechs. It did not help that our mounting losses and the growing disparity in numbers forced those very same Woodsap mechs to remain in place when they should have returned to their motherships for emergency replenishment and servicing."

That caused Ves to frown. Either the Saint Commander or the Second Elf had decided to keep these damaged Woodsap mechs in the field when they really should have been recalled.

Numerous living mechs and bonded pilots had sacrificed their lives because of this costly decision.

He did not fault the commander responsible for this order for choosing such a course. He knew enough about the progression of the latest battle that the combined fleet indeed needed every single unit in play.

Withdrawing the exhausting Woodsap mechs for just a quarter hour would have led to mounting losses in other units!

The more the native aliens outnumbered the humans, the greater the chance that the battle would tilt decisively in favor of the former!

In order to prevent this worst case scenario, the Terran soldiers actively endured the escalating danger towards their lives and paid the price for their sacrifice.

Ves grimaced at this thought. He felt as if a more indirect incidence of human sacrifice had occurred.

It was similar to his deal to sacrifice human criminals to the Prophet's Bane, only this time it was dressed up in a more righteous coat!

"These Woodsap mechs should have lasted longer." He whispered. "Yet they did not because they were short-handed."

Gloriana nodded. "The native aliens stationed many phasefighters, warships and defensive platforms around Hypeh-Tekas II. Their quantity is not excessive. It is still clear to us that the Blackwater Summoner had not spent enough time to complete a proper orbital stronghold around the planet. However, the incomplete defensive arrangements still proved superior due to their relatively high quality as well as their superior numbers. Your Woodsap mechs were forced into an uphill battle from the beginning. The fact that they did not get wiped out in their entirety is a testament to their good design."

Her husband still did not look satisfied. He thought back on his previous plans and discussions with the Terran contingent.

"Caracalla Shuku told me that he and his fellow Terrans had come up with a plan to gain a strong advantage over the course of this battle. From what I have seen, nothing of the sort has happened. These Woodsap mechs entered the battlefield and got ground up by the blades of the enemy. What happened?"

His wife shrugged. "I do not know. I am not privy to these discussions. However, I have shared a few words with Alexa and several other Terrans in the fleet. They informed me that their plan failed to take off due to the difficulty of reaching and accessing the surface of Hypeh-Tekas II. I have surmised that the Terrans intended to land on the planet and create a small foothold where they could plant their Gaia Trees and allow them to grow rapidly by draining resources from the local terrain. If they were able to make this happen, then the Woodsap mechs would have been able to persist much longer without suffering losses."

"Ah. I see."

That had been the plan. The problem was that the enemy did not cooperate with the Terrans. Their orbital defense network defended the planet a little too well to allow for this gambit to proceed.

While it was possible for the Terran biomechs and other assets to bypass the orbital defenses and reach the surface, those very same enemy defensive platforms would never let their guns fall silent!

Too many of them would have bombarded the descending Terran units with impunity, thereby making sure that few if any of the landing party made it to the surface intact.

Therefore, the Woodsap mechs had gotten stuck trying to destroy enough of the orbital infrastructure first, because that was a hard requirement to make a landing without excessive opposition.

"Plans rarely survive contact with the enemy." Ves sighed.

"Correct. Due to this setback, your Woodsap mechs suffered increasingly more from energy and resource deficits. The living mechs and their bonded pilots tried their best to adapt, with limited success. They tried to save resources as best they could, but the intensity of the battle was too high. If they did not fight back hard enough, then they would either perish, or allow the assets fighting alongside them to suffer severe setbacks in their stead."

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Chapter 7597 The Amazing Adaptability of Woodsap Mechs

The Amazing Adaptability of Woodsap Mechs

As amazing as his Woodsap mechs could be, it was hard for them to unleash their full potential when they were running low on resources.

Their rapid regeneration that allowed them to bounce back from heavy strikes time and time again put an enormous drain on their reserves.

Without enough TE Wood or compatible biomass in the vicinity, the advanced Carmine mechs could no longer replenish their organic frames as quickly or as extensively as before.

Without enough energy, they could not properly fuel the processes that allowed them to fight and restore themselves on the battlefield.

The Terran test pilots should have made the decision to return to their motherships so that they could properly replenish themselves.

However, they did not do so for two reasons.

One of them was that their side was already short-handed on the battlefield. Any withdrawal had a chance to trigger a catastrophic cascade.

The other reason was that returning to their mothership would not help them as much. The combined fleet had already depleted a considerable amount of Gaia Trees and other sources of biomass in prior engagements. The latest fight had expended practically everything that remained, which meant that it was impossible for the Woodsap mechs to get what they needed when they returned!

"In fact, there is a third reason why those Terran pilots chose to stay in the thick of combat." Gloriana mentioned. "That reason is cannibalization. Every time a Woodsap mech falls, it usually leaves behind enough usable debris that other intact biomechs can use to repair their own damaged frames. This has greatly extended the longevity of the biomechs that remained. Let me show you a presentation that I have made."

The projector displayed an information-dense graph that tracked the physical conditions of all of the Woodsap mechs from the start of the battle.

As time passed by, many of the lines dipped below 100 percent, which indicated that they sustained damage.

Certain biomechs hardly got hit after many minutes of fighting, but others endured such frequent attacks that they suffered multiple impacts that should have crippled them already!

However, these biomechs often managed to drag their physical conditions above 70 percent in short order, which signified that their amazing regeneration processes worked as intended.

Yet nothing lasted forever.

In the latter half of the battle, some of the lines began to dip straight to 0 percent regardless of how much the Woodsap mechs fought to endure in the field.

Usually, suffering losses should have made it harder for the remaining mechs to sustain themselves, as the enemy could concentrate their firepower on fewer targets.

Yet that did not happen.

Each time a Woodsap mech fell apart, at least half-a-dozen biomechs that happened to be positioned close enough experienced significant improvements to their physical integrity!

They healed by as much as 20 percent over a span of a few dozen seconds!

For many of these struggling biomechs, that was enough restoration for them to last for another couple of minutes!

This pattern repeated often enough to prove that this was not a coincidence, but a real pattern and a proven battle tactic.

This was most definitely a rare but beneficial advantage of his product!

Although cannibalization possessed a negative connotation, Ves was sure that he could spin this phenomenon in a positive light.

Killing off Woodsap mechs did not necessarily make the rest of their units weaker.

Instead, the surrounding biomechs drew strength from their fallen comrades and were able to fight with greater vigor!

However, as Ves studied the lines and took note of which organic machines persisted and which ones fell, he spotted a concerning pattern.

A frown appeared on his face.

"This loss pattern does not appear fair or random. Among the prototype biomechs, the standard human machines have been brought low three times as much as the more exotic elven variants. Did the Saint Commander or the Second Elf deliberately choose to sacrifice one for the other?"

Gloriana shook her head. "I took notice of this as well, and already conducted a small inquiry. The answers given to me by the Second Elf and the surviving test pilots makes it clear that it is not a top-down decision. The Terran soldiers themselves decided on this strategic direction. None of them are stupid, Ves. Even if not many of them are orthodox first-class multipurpose mech pilots, they still know which biomechs are more effective than others."

"Are you saying that these Terran pilots conducted a performance analysis while they were in the thick of the action?"

"Apparently, so, Ves. It is not as absurd as you make it sound. The pilots of the standard human version are already aware of the disparity in performance. Past engagements as well as training sessions have already exposed a gap that almost none of them can surmount. They made an honest assessment of themselves and concluded that they could not produce as many results as their elven counterparts when given the same amount of resources and opportunities."

While this was not an absolute rule, Ves himself already knew that this was true. He conducted much more extensive studies on the performance parameters of the different variants and knew that the gap could not be chalked up to coincidence or statistical uncertainty.

The Elven Edition of the Arboreal Project enjoyed far too many advantages.

They were piloted by elves personally blessed and transformed by Gaia.

The biomechs forged a much stronger pact with their exotic partners.

Their affinity with the wood element had improved, allowing them to channel and process Wood E energy more efficiently.

Their physical regeneration sped up while also consuming less resources.

Their performance increased whenever they fought in the vicinity of intact Gaia Trees.

Furthermore, the bodies of elven mech pilots received greater protection and fortification while they remained inside the cockpits.

This directly increased their chances of surviving blows that would have ordinarily killed their more fragile human colleagues!

Frankly speaking, the unexpected emergence of the elven race and the development of the Elven Edition of his Woodsap mechs sometimes made Ves question whether there was still a point of servicing his human customers.

Many Terrans had already become convinced that his Woodsap mechs were tailor made for the emerging elves!

While humans could also make good use of the products of the Arboreal Project, they fell so far behind that it was difficult to justify their inclusion.

This pressure became particularly acute in times of crisis and resource scarcity!

What happened over the course of the Battle of Hypeh-Tekas II could be regarded as a direct consequence of this disparity in performance.

Human mech pilot after human mech pilot voluntarily closed in on their alien targets and attracted the greatest proportion of firepower onto their organic machines.

Despite all of their tenacity and adaptation, the enemy firepower proved too much for many of them. Yet the living mechs and sometimes their human pilots willingly welcomed their demise knowing that their sacrifice replenished the conditions of their superior elven counterparts!

The elven Woodsap mechs did not let these sacrifices go to waste. Their elves put their full focus on inflicting as much damage onto their targets while trying to evade as much incoming strikes in return.

They fought strategically with a remarkably clear awareness that they formed the linchpin on the assault against the alien orbital defense network!

Defensive platform after defensive platform fell under their precise firepower.

Alien phasefighters got blown into pieces in quick succession by coordinated attack volleys that always trapped them inside unescapable kill boxes.

The elven Woodsap mechs tried to harness and channel as much of the poisonous life energies in the environment as they could.

Even if they did not dare to absorb all of it directly, they were still able to generate beneficial effects just by shaping the free-floating energies in special ways!

The human pilots and biomechs could never do this without receiving instructions. They had never been taught the theory and methods to manipulate life E energy in such a manner.

However, the elven pilots all seem to have acquired many gifts from their new patron and goddess. As part of their species transformation, they also gained an unknown number of innate abilities and techniques that allowed them to wield a fraction of Gaia's power!

Although the effects were not too pronounced this time, any measure made a difference during this pitched battle.

As Ves continued to study the curated footage, he lamented the willing sacrifices of human Woodsap mechs while also applauding the superior performance of the elven biomechs.

He also happened to take note of another interesting phenomenon.

This was a pattern that he already spotted after previous engagements, but the much greater pressure of this particular battle basically supercharged this practice!

"My creations are continuously evolving in real-time." He remarked. "They are not stubbornly holding on to the standard parameters of their original design. In fact, it is the opposite. Every time they endure damage, their restored parts always deviate a bit from their prior conditions. Actually, they do not even have to wait to get damaged before making adaptations to their organic parts. These biomechs are actively implementing modifications on their own initiative!"

Although this phenomenon only truly kicked off during the latter half of the battle, it was still an amazing sight to behold to Ves.

At first a single elven Woodsap mech began to slim down.

The wooden mech frame grew thinner and weaker.

Redundant or less effective weapon systems slowly broke down so that the available biomass and other advanced materials could be used to repair or strengthen more essential parts.

On the whole, this Woodsap mech actively grew weaker, but that was the right decision to make.

Ves called up a few data logs and immediately noticed that the very same Woodsap mech managed to become a lot more efficient in the process!

Energy consumption dropped by over 35 percent, which made an enormous difference at this stage of the battle!

Chapter 7598 From One Extreme to Another

As soon as the first Woodsap mech proactively shifted to a weaker but much more energy-efficient configuration, the other surviving Woodsap mechs followed as well.

The adaptations did not remain confined to this single direction.

Other Woodsap mechs began to experiment with other adaptations. Many of them either failed or produced mediocre results, but there were always a handful of solutions that objectively improved their chances on the battlefield.

Some of these successful adaptations rapidly spread throughout the entire cohort, which allowed all of the Woodsap mechs to collectively improve their performance in record time!

Yet not all of them maintained the same overall shape and configuration.

Certain machines that relied more heavily on evasion began to shed even more organic parts while simultaneously strengthening their flight systems.

Other machines that sought to break the tough exteriors of enemy defensive installations discarded many of their integrated weapons in favor of channeling all of their available resources into powering their hardest-hitting guns.

Mechs assigned to swat down fast and agile alien phasefighters evolved in the opposite direction. They maintained much of their mobility while concentrating much of their offensive focus on rapid-fire energy guns or long lances.

Ves manipulated the interface until he was able to call up the evolving state of the Rosenstorm.

The Second Elf's personal machine looked splendid. Though the living mech's eye-catching roses caused the organic machine to attract a lot of firepower, the elven commander proved skilled enough to evade a majority of incoming attacks.

Instead of taking on a direct combat role, the Rosenstorm evolved in the direction of a command mech. The biomech still maintained a decent set of armaments, but had discarded a lot of redundant or less important weapon systems in order to strengthen less exciting capabilities such as sensors and communication systems.

All of this improved the Rosenstorm's ability to direct the other Woodsap mechs with speed and precision!

"I generally do not like to work with biomechs, but even I have to admit that the ability for Woodsap mechs to evolve and adapt on the battlefield is a fantastic boon." Gloriana said with a hint of praise in her voice. "Your Woodsap mechs essentially enjoy the versatility of smart metal mechs but do not inherit their greater fragility. The only major problem that I can think of is that these divergent biomechs will incur a greater logistical burden on their owners. Standardized mechs are the norm across much of our society because they are significantly cheaper and more practical to produce, service and repair. All of the surviving Woodsap mechs that have made it back have all evolved in their own unique directions. Some of them have developed such weird changes and mutations that the Terran biomech technicians and other experts are clueless on what to do. They are treading new ground."

"I can see what you mean." Ves gruffly responded as he continued to study the surviving biomechs.

From his perspective, every Woodsap mech had grown into unique specimens. They transcended the design specifications of the original pattern and became significantly different biomachines.

Their performance was also fairly mixed as a consequence. The pressure of battle ensured that failed or inefficient alterations did not last long enough to spark another disaster.

At the last minutes of the battle, many of the Woodsap mechs that remained operational were already nearing depletion.

In a desperate attempt to withstand more attacks while simultaneously reducing the drain on their energy reserves, the Woodsap mechs began to grab any pieces of broken alloys and other small debris before slapping them onto the surface of their torsos and other parts!

The TE Wood automatically caught and fixed the metal plating as best as possible.

In less than half a minute, the first biomechs that experimented with this wild idea turned into knight-like existences!

Their slender, energy-saving mech frames substantially bulked up as they gained a lot more protection.

The additional mass significantly slowed them down, making it much harder for these armored biomechs to evade incoming damage!

However, these machines managed to resist incoming attacks a lot better and without putting their more valuable biomass in excessive danger.

The field-salvaged armor plating did not last long in most cases. A few hits were usually enough to break them or dislodge them from their holds.

That was fine.

The Woodsap mechs and their human partners never expected for this solution to last forever.

The biomechs simply moved to a nearby collection of debris and picked out other thin but substantial pieces of metal to fashion them into new armor plating!

"I hate whoever devised the idea of using battlefield spoils as an improvisational armor system." Gloriana did not hide her contempt in the slightest. "However, I cannot deny that it was the right decision to make. There are so many broken metal and fallen machines across the battlefield that your Woodsap mechs always had a solution close at hand. Repurposing them in order to serve a better cause is an ingenious means of stretching every available resource within reach. I just wished that the biomechs did not suffer an enormous setback in aesthetics."

As shabby as the Woodsap mechs covered in 'homemade' armor may look like, they managed to block hundreds of not thousands of extra attacks without compromising their more sensitive organic parts!

This single oddity effectively ensured the survival of the remaining Terran prototype mechs.

All in all, Ves had much to be proud of. His Woodsap mechs exemplified the ideal that he tried to bring to life. These were no static machines that only rigidly adhered to their initial configurations.

Woodsap mechs possessed the capacity to grow and evolve by themselves. They were like the human-controlled versions of mutated beasts!

Yet... not every instance of autonomous adaptation and evolution was benign.

Ves and Gloriana analyzed a few more aspects about the surviving Woodsap mechs before they finally addressed the very large and stinky elephant in the room.

"Tell me about the... Poison Willows."

Gloriana's expression immediately turned flat. "Your protege Alexa Streon can tell you more about this particular... affair. What happened to the Poison Willows... was ugly. It should have never come to this point. Something had gone terribly wrong, and I cannot tell you why. You know your products better than I. What demonic bargain have you made that caused these variants to go utterly berserk? They inflicted a considerable amount of harm to our own side. From the moment they grew into giant, uncontrollable mutations, they blindly lashed out at the closest targets, which often turned out to be our own mechs."

The projector changed to display a curated playback of the entire incident from beginning to end.

At first, the Poison Willows did as instructed. They plunged into the dark miasma at several different locations before offering up their delectate fruits to the voracious deathborn.

The undead cannon fodder possessed no mind that was capable of recognizing such an obvious trap. The stupid deathborn all fell for it and gleefully devoured the fruits and their hidden payloads!

That was when the poisonous seeds took root and began to alter the sated deathborn.

Parts of their intangible forms went out of control and recklessly started to drain their lives in order to produce more poisoned life energies!

Other surrounding deathborn did not miss what had happened. They overcame whatever instinct that prevented them from cannibalizing each other and ruthlessly bit into the fattened pigs, only to become the latest vectors of a very fast-acting condition!

As Ves had already learned at the time, the subsequent chain reaction and mass extinction of all of the deathborn slaves had completely altered the battlefield.

The dark miasma had been beaten back!

The enemy forces lost a lot of advantages!

The combined fleet under the leadership of the Saint Commander were able to confront the enemy under much more favorable terms than before!

In that sense, the gambit originally proposed by Alexa and realized by Ves succeeded brilliantly!

Unfortunately, neither mech designers put much thought into what might happen afterwards.

While the Poison Willows quietly absorbed the abundant amount of life energies floating in the environment, they not only regained all of their health and vitality, but also began to grow larger and stronger as they continued to feed on the excess!

"They should have stopped this behavior when they reached full satiation." Ves said with a frown as he continued to watch the footage. "Why did they not obey their instructions? I have made it very clear to both the living mechs and their human pilots that they must absolutely pay attention to never exceed their limits. There is too much that we don't know about this kind of stuff."

His wife snorted and let out a short laugh. "Hah! Do you not realize how drastically these living mechs and test pilots have changed? When you initially modified the Woodsap mechs into Poison Willows, the latter became steeped in death. The loss of life and vitality had drained the biomechs and their human partners of much of their personality and liveliness. Sure, they sounded much more obedient and reliable, but that was when they were in a highly abnormal state. Now think about what happened to them when the Poison Willows switched from one extreme to another."

Ves started to imagine this scenario. His expression darkened as he thought of all of the problems that might occur.

The human pilots had almost turned into zombies at first.

For them to regain their full personality while becoming utterly stuffed with life energy produced such an extreme contrast that they probably failed to maintain their grip on reality!

Their situation was so extreme and unprecedented that it would be a miracle if even a single test pilot managed to maintain their composure!

In such a drastic scenario, Ves could easily imagine that each of the pilots became so drunk with life energy that they instinctively sought to absorb more, heedless of any of the dangers and warnings!

Chapter 7599 Grotesque

From the moment he started to play around with a method as dangerous as the Last Defiance Manual, Ves had become a lot more acquainted with the ways a person could become addicted to power.

Even so, he had failed to foresee this outcome.

The extreme contrast between a state of near-death to a state of overflowing strength and vitality had caused practically all of the Poison Willows to lose control!

Not a single living mech or Terran test pilot managed to resist the temptation of taking their rejuvenation a step further.

Ves quietly watched the archival footage. He observed with great attention how each and every Poison Willow first regained their vitality, then began to grow and mutate as if they had removed all of their limiters.

The initial runaway process appeared nearly identical. Whatever differences the Poison Willows may have, they all ventured down the exact same path at the same pace.

This indicated to Ves that this was not a personal failing. If only a couple of weak or mentally impaired pilots lost control, then the overall product should still be sound.

That was not the case this time.

All 20 variants suffered the exact same mishap. This was very strong proof that the problem was structural in nature.

The design was at fault. Ves had failed to foresee this problem and implement enough effective measures that could stop this disaster from taking place.

"In hindsight, maybe it was a good idea that I was only able to convert 20 of my Woodsap mechs into Poison Willows." Ves slowly remarked. "If our enemies had been willing to give us more time, then there would have been a dozen more organic bombs on the battlefield. The fact that only these biomechs actually lost control should have made the problem a bit more manageable."

Gloriana shook her head in disapproval. "You love to push the boundaries of what is possible. Whenever you are confronted by the unknown or the dangerous, you often fail to take them seriously. There is a part of you that possesses so much curiosity that you cannot help yourself. You always have to cross the line and find out what you can do. The only reason why you haven't received any strong admonishments this time is because the initial plan worked. The Poison Willows did their job and made an enormous contribution to our eventual victory. It is just unfortunate that it also came with an unnecessary sacrifice. Those Terran pilots didn't have to die for reasons that were completely beyond their control."

She made a valid point. As much as Ves did not want to acknowledge it, his decision and judgment had failed him this time. The blood of those 20 living mechs and Terran mech pilots was on his hands.

"You know what makes this situation even worse in my eyes?" Gloriana continued to press her opinion. "Nothing will change. You are not the type to learn from your mistakes, especially ones of this nature. You will continue to go on taking risks as before. You have been rewarded for your bold risk-taking often enough that it has already become seared into your soul. Even if you stumble and fall every now and then, you can still convince yourself that you are doing the right thing by arguing that your success rate is high enough to justify all of your failings. Have I guessed your thoughts correctly?"

"Uhhh... pretty much." Ves lamely replied.

She knew him too well. She even managed to predict his internal justification!

His wife simply snorted in response. "Typical. Since you are unwilling to restrain yourself, you need others to tell you that you are going too far. I have been derelict in exercising this duty in the past, but this will change starting from today. I admit that your wiley Devil Tongue has managed to mesmerize me into participating in your dangerous schemes, but no more. I have woken up and seen the truth. I will no longer accept any reckless suggestion about how good it is for us to drag ourselves into the depths of the Red War. It is completely inappropriate for you to force your wife and children to participate in an action as dangerous as roaming behind enemy lines!"

Her arguments cast his previous decisions in a bad light. Though Ves still believed in his own vision of the future, he did not feel as eager to defend his standpoint as in the past.

His wife had every right to complain about the potentially disastrous consequences that might have occurred if they had a little less strength and luck during the last engagement.

Once Gloriana had her fill on this issue, she slowly calmed down and directed her attention back to the problematic biomechs.

"Although your Poison Willows all mutated out of control, it is quite interesting to see their monstrous forms. They reveal new facets about the tech and materials that make up your Woodsap mechs."

She manipulated the interface to display all 20 mutated Poison Willows after they had completed their initial growth surge.

Though the rogue biomechs never truly stopped growing since they went out of control, their shapes did not undergo any drastic changes after their initial surge died down.

Pretty much all of them had multiplied in size. The smallest ones had become at least as tall as an Ascended Giant!

Most of the Poison Willows retained their humanoid form, but only loosely. The wild growth progressed so chaotically that they had lost all sense of symmetry and proportion.

For example, one Poison Willow possessed a pair of mismatched legs. One of them grew abnormally long and thick, causing it to resemble an extension of the torso!

The other leg meanwhile failed to grow at the same rate. It even began to mutate into a branch that possessed no other useful function aside from growing a few dozen leaves.

The upper body looked like a mess as well. The torso grew larger but also thinned out at the upper end. The head looked comically undersized. One arm morphed into an absurdly long wooden tentacle while the other arm mutated into a giant cannon!

Despite how grotesque this biomech had become, it was anything but harmless.

An entirely different personality had seemingly taken control over this rogue biomech. The overmutated Poison Willow lashed out at the nearby Woodsap mechs and managed to inflict considerable damage at first!

Many human units became disarrayed as they suddenly had to shift their attention to the new and unexpected threats.

At first, the Woodsap mechs showed clear hesitation when fighting back. They never expected for their own colleagues and comrades to turn against them. For whatever reason, they still believed that the Poison Willows could be subdued without resorting to lethal attacks.

That belief began to dissipate over time as the Poison Willows never let up. The misshapen biological menaces not only grew stronger as they continued to absorb more life energy from the environment, but also remained completely irresponsible to the urgent messages transmitted to their silent cockpits!

Eventually, the Second Elf and other commanders assumed the worst and gave up on the notion of holding back.

"The living mechs and their pilots are already dead." Caracalla Shuku transmitted over the command channel. "It does not matter whether they are actually dead or brainwashed to the point of treating us as their enemies. If they are still true to themselves, they would never want to use their weapons against their fellow soldiers. We must put this travesty to an end for their sake as well as ours."

Despite saying this, the Woodsap mechs still struggled to put down the Poison Willows.

Nobody liked the fact that they were being forced to kill their former brothers and sisters in arms!

Another reason why the Woodsap mechs struggled to solve this problem was that they were far too lacking in power.

The Poison Willows may have turned into ugly wooden giants, but they still enjoyed many of the advantages of normal Woodsap mechs!

In fact, those strengths became a lot more pronounced due to their continued absorption of life energy!

Each attack that managed to chip away at their enlarged wooden mech frames healed within a matter of seconds. The Poison Willows attracted so much life energy that they could recklessly squander huge amounts of it to restore or fuel any system that demanded resources!

Their speed, strength, resilience and above all else their regeneration became supercharged!

If not for the fact that the rogue machines had lost virtually all of the skill, judgment and cohesion of their former pilots, they could have inflicted a lot more damage to their human opposition!

Even so, their sheer power and endless super-regeneration meant that they could still inflict a considerable amount of damage with their haphazard actions!

Mechs suffered crippling damage. Starships endured strong blows that breached compartments and disabled various systems. Their defiance alone created rifts in the battle lines that caused other human units to endure even greater pressure from their alien opponents!

The Poison Willows needed to be eliminated in a much more decisive manner.

How?

By overpowering their regeneration.

Eventually, the Saint Commander managed to solve this escalating problem by directing the greatest guns at her disposal towards the rogue biomechs.

Although the Amaranto Mark III was too preoccupied to lend her considerable firepower, the Tortuous Scream was more than willing to do what was necessary!

The former orven battleship had lost much of her secondary and tertiary gun batteries in order to make room for lots of bunkers.

Her primary gun batteries remained intact, though.

The caliber of these battleship-grade weapons were so enormous that some of them could even fit mechs inside their massive barrels!

Normally, battleships did not bother to use these primary guns against strike craft and anything of a similar nature.

Mechs were too small to hit at a reliable rate. As long as their pilots were alert enough, they could easily execute evasion patterns that made it a lot more difficult to swat them down at longer ranges.

This time, the main cannons did not miss.

The mutated Poison Willows had become much bigger targets than before. Even if they had not lost any of their mobility, their loss of control had actually made them more predictable!

The Saint Commander did not even have to intervene in person to predict the trajectories of these out-of-control biomonstrosities. The Tortuous Scream's own smart AI's proved more than capable enough to calculate the most effective firing solutions.

In the face of plasma bolts that were so large that they could burn a hole through a large fortification, the mutated Poison Willows could hardly put up a resistance.

When multiple battleship-grade cannons struck the biomonsters at the same time, their rampage instantly came to an end!

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Chapter 7600 Ves the Incorrigible

A travesty like this should never happen.

Ves watched the archival footage with dismay. The Tortuous Scream directed her formidable collection of primary gun batteries to fire upon 20 biomechs that should have remained on humanity's side.

Yet due to their wild and uncontrolled mutation, they had not only become completely unresponsive to orders, but also turned their aggression against their own side!

The crew of the Tortuous Scream had no choice but to comply with the Saint Commander's latest instruction and target the out-of-control Poison Willows with deadly finality.

At least the battleship-grade guns managed to keep it clean.

Their firepower was on another level. All of the attacks launched by the mechs in the field looked like nothing in comparison.

Even the proud ace mechs of the Larkinson Clan struggled to match the raw power output of even a single massive naval gun!

Although none of the attack salvos launched by the Tortuous Scream received anything but the faintest resonance empowerment from the Minerva Mark II, they never needed to rely on such fancy tricks in order to inflict a great amount of damage.

The Poison Willows targeted by the converted alien battleship likewise lacked the reality-defying protection of a resonance shield or a Shield Kingdom.

They completely derived their durability from their special material composition and their impossibly quick regeneration!

Small-scale attacks from other mechs and strike crafts may as well be pinpricks to these endlessly regenerating abominations.

Even if they got struck in the center of their chests by a particularly dense concentration of attacks, the supposed loss of their cockpits of power reactors failed to quell their regenerating properties!

They had become so monstrous that they no longer played by the rules of ordinary biomechs!

Yet no matter how much power these outraged organic machines managed to derive from the poisonous environment, even they could not overcome the firepower of a genuine battleship.

Although the Poison Willows did their best to evade the incoming attack salvos, their awkward and inhuman controllers proved inadequate for the task.

Not that human pilots could fare much better in the same situation. There was only so much they could do to prevent their biomech frames from getting hit by the formidable barrages.

Plasma bolts, energy beams and kinetic projectiles that were powerful enough to demolish entire unshielded city districts struck the enlarged biomechs with merciless intention.

Many Poison Willows shattered or disappeared outright!

Their fabled regeneration failed to gain any chance to undo any damage when the entire organic mech frames pretty much got destroyed in totality!

In the rare instance where a Poison Willows received heavy damage yet managed to cling to a semblance of life, they rarely managed to celebrate their survival before a second salvo of battleship-grade attacks finished the job!

In the end, the depressing sequence ended relatively quickly.

The Tortuous Scream's primary gun batteries were much slower to reload than other armaments, but at least she had enough of them. Her large hull had been practically built to accommodate these large and costly guns. She had merely fulfilled her purpose in this incident.

Nonetheless, her crew and many other people still felt despondent about turning their guns against their own side.

Even if it was clear to Ves and anyone knowledgeable enough that the original test pilots of the Poison Willows had already 'died' from the moment they went out of control, it still did not make this situation any easier.

"This failure will leave a black mark on their record." Gloriana calmly explained to her silent husband. "The good news is that this did not happen in the presence of third parties. None of our friends and allies who have fought alongside us have any reason to publicize this incident and turn it into a scandal. You have earned at least that much trust and goodwill."

"Ah."

Ves hadn't thought that far yet. He agreed with her analysis. There wasn't much of a reason for his allies and collaborators to make use of this failure to launch an attack on him. They needed him and inventions far too much to risk a break in relations.

"That does not mean they are willing to forget about what happened." Gloriana continued. "I have no doubt that each and every ally has quietly preserved their data logs and put them into confidential dossiers. They will probably choose to do nothing for the moment,

but if a moment ever arises where they need to attack your credibility, you can bet that they will unveil your stain to the masses."

In other words, Ves did not have to pay a price for this dismal outcome at this time, but it may eventually come back to haunt him in the future.

He shrugged in response. "Acceptable. We cannot suffer any stumbles in the short term. As long as we can maintain our momentum long enough, we will continue to grow to the point where I can better withstand the backlash."

His wife did not expect him to respond so mildly to such a looming threat.

"Have you learned nothing from your mistakes?"

"I wouldn't say that, honey. I have indeed learned from my mistakes, but only in this specific instance. That does not mean I will rein in my risk tolerance and hold back when conducting other experiments in the future. You have ultimately underestimated the strength of my drive and the depth of my ambition. I may have played with fire and got burned this time, but that has not deterred me from starting other fires whenever the need arises. As a mech designer, I recognize that innovation is always accompanied by risk. The greater the breakthrough, the greater the associated dangers."

He sounded incorrigible.

Gloriana decided to drop the subject. She saw no point in arguing her point any further. Ves had completely dug in his heel on this fundamental matter.

If she wanted to prevent Ves from making other stupid blunders in the future, she would have to supervise his experimental projects and serve as an additional sounding board.

As long as he came to her for feedback, she could inject him with a strong dose of common sense. That would not cause him to drop his wild ideas entirely, but she would become satisfied if her caution helped to uncover possible flaws and plug in a few more gaps.

Their private discussion continued.

They went over the performance and conditions of all of the Larkinson ace mechs that participated in the battle.

Every ace mech needed a bit of work.

The First Sword Mark III largely remained pristine, but her collection of sword fey had clearly seen better days. Some of them had endured so many attacks that they had become utterly deformed. A few of them had also incurred enough damage to their internals that they no longer functioned properly anymore!

"Repairing the broken sword fey is not a high priority for the time being." Gloriana said. "We have brought enough spares to keep the First Sword Mark III topped up. The problem will become more serious if she uses up her current batch of sword feys in subsequent engagements. Strong enemies with offensive superdimensional strike capabilities can wear out the sword feys relatively easily despite their resonance empowerment."

That was because resonance empowerment ultimately played a much more diminished role in superdimensional warfare.

The Red Cabal did not bestow the name of Saint Piercers to their superdimensional lances without reason. Their special armaments had proven remarkably effective at negating the effects of true resonance time and time again!

What truly threatened the lifespan of the sword feys were the fact that they were made out of relatively inferior medium-grade superdimensional alloys.

They could still last for a decent amount of time when contending against other superdimensional weapons of the same grade, but the aliens did not play by the same rules.

Their artificially manufactured alien-grade superdimensional matter roughly occupied a position that was half a grade higher!

Even if the Saint Piercers and other equivalent native alien weapons could not match the superiority of true high-grade superdimensional weapons, they still possessed a qualitative edge when employed against the sword fey!

As Ves watched the footage of the First Sword Mark III in action, he noticed that the sword formation struggled to block the ultra-long-ranged attacks from the superdimensional siege cannon of the enemy space fortress.

Saint Dise did her best to extend the longevity of her sword fey.

She employed clever and intricate formations that layered the blades together so that they could support each other.

Whenever a blade got deformed, the ace pilot flipped the weapon around so that the structure would roughly straighten out when receiving a heavy blow from the other end.

The ace pilot also channeled her metal affinity a lot harder than in the past in order to reinforce the strength of her remote armaments as much as possible.

Ves became particularly impressed by this last one. Saint Dise had consistently worked on strengthening her comprehension and mastery over the metal element. She had made steady progress over the last month, but nothing more.

This time, the urgency of the situation had clearly pushed her over the limit. Her sword fey shone much brighter and received considerably more reinforcement than normal.

Unfortunately, Saint Dise's growth was not enough to restore the broken sword fey.

Once the weapons got completely bent out of shape, there was nothing she could do to make them usable again.

Perhaps she may be able to mimic the restoration capabilities of his Woodsap mechs in the future, but he doubted it. The metal element did not possess a strong tendency in restoration. It was much more inclined to lean on its rigidity to prevent damage in the first place!