The Mech Touch

Chapter 7601 Rectifying the Premier Fleet

"It is pretty clear that the First Sword Mark III has failed to live up to her potential in this battle." Ves said after he had watched enough of the archival footage. "This is not a failure on the part of Saint Dise. She did her best to do her job under adverse circumstances. Saint Commander Casella Ingvar had little choice but to use her to fill gaps that she and her battle partner are not suited to fulfill."

This was one of the less-than-ideal instances where a highly offensive ace mech was forced to play a defensive role. It would have been a surprise if the First Sword fared well under those conditions.

Combined with getting harassed by intelligent enemies who deliberately stayed away from melee range, the First Sword Mark III did not get to have a single moment where she could fight to her heart's content!

"I agree with your assessment." Gloriana said with a stoic voice. "If we managed to complete the Bastion Mark II, we would have been able to free up the First Sword and allow her to venture forth without getting weighed down by so many burdens. If we managed to complete the Promethea Mark II in time, then she would have been able to provide enough fire support to relieve Saint Dise much sooner."

The two unfinished mech design projects still loomed over their heads. After going through a hard battle, both Ves and Gloriana were more than tired of getting outnumbered and outgunned in battle!

They deeply wanted to expand and strengthen the forces under their command. They could not afford to stall the completion of the aforementioned mech design projects for too long.

"The gains we have made from the Battle of Hypeh-Tekas II will greatly benefit the upcoming Promethea Mark II and Bastion Mark II." Ves tried to lift her mood. "If we completed the designs according to their original specifications, then they would definitely have shortcomings when confronting the deathborn or particularly troublesome phase leaders. For example, we need to make sure that the Promethea Mark II can produce a large enough conflagration to burn large swathes of deathborn. We also need to help the Bastion II defend against particularly dangerous super-acid substances such as blackwater."

Ves harbored particularly strong concerns about the latter. He envisioned the Bastion Mark II as the ultimate defensive machine among the lineup of high-ranking Larkinson

mechs. The upcoming version of the Bastion needed to be ready to block and repel any form of attack, even ones that could disintegrate other ace mechs!

His wife looked thoughtful for a moment. "I truly have no idea how to neutralize damage caused by blackwater exposure. Energy shields of all kinds have already proven useless. Material defenses are just as vulnerable given how easily the blackwater managed to melt a large hole through your high-grade superdimensional raiment."

"Nothing is invincible." Ves said with a hint of conviction. "I already managed to find a clue during my other self's duel against the Blackwater Summoner. No matter what strange and exotic properties blackwater might possess, it is still a variation of water. This means that it is at least partially subject to the rules and interactions of the Five Elements. I have found that blackwater can be interfered with by utilizing the earth element. My methods were crude and weak at the time, but at least they proved that I was on the right track. We can continue to follow this direction and work out a more sophisticated countermeasure."

"Hmmm... that indeed sounds promising, Ves. The Bastion Mark II already possesses a decent association with the earth element. I originally intended to focus on bolstering her connection to space and gravity. Now, I think we need to make sure to strengthen her foundation to a satisfactory standard before we can explore more exotic design applications."

The earth element was the quintessential defensive concept. It should pair extremely well with the Bastion Mark II. They just needed to make sure that Saint Jannzi spent enough time and effort into mastering this fundamental element.

Ves and Gloriana continued to examine and discuss the performance of other Larkinson ace mechs.

The Dark Zephyr Mark III and the Amaranto Mark III also failed to live up to their potential this time, both for the same reasons as the First Sword Mark III.

The combined fleet initiated this battle with inadequate numbers, assets and above all else intelligence.

"Even the best tools could dull their edge when utilized improperly." Ves roughly summarized the situation.

"Then we should endeavor to prevent future situations where we are forced to make use of tools that are not up to the task."

As they completed their overview of the battle, the married couple finally turned their attention to the spoils.

Gloriana smiled again. "Our personnel have not yet completed their tally of all of the spoils, but the interim updates have already revealed a great amount of promising materials. There is a particularly high demand for salvaged alien-grade superdimensional alloys. Even if they fall short of the true high-grade materials, they are still objectively stronger and tougher than our mid-grade materials."

"Those Saint Armors are quite large." Ves commented. "We managed to collect several of them, though not all are intact. While we still have to reward our allies with the shares that they have earned, that still leaves us with many tons of the alloy. We can allocate much of that surplus into converting the Promethea Mark II into a full superdimensional mech. We can also upgrade our older ace mechs by replacing non-superdimensional parts with their superdimensional equivalents."

His wife seriously considered this suggestion.

"I am not ready to issue a verdict on this matter. I am open to incorporating generous amounts of salvaged alien-grade superdimensional alloys into upcoming designs such as the Promethea Mark II and the Lionheart Mark II. I do not think it is necessary to go back and rework the Dark Zephyr Mark III or the Amaranto Mark II. Haven't we decided to wait for a number of years before we initiate a major revision and upgrade for our existing works? The urgency is not too great. The only ace mechs that are truly lacking in adequate superdimensional protection are the Amaranto Mark II and the Minerva Mark II. They can go without for a while longer."

Ves reluctantly nodded in agreement. Their arrangements heavily depended on the spoils allocated to the Larkinsons.

The Ascended Giants had actually done most of the heavy lifting. They also suffered heavy losses in the process.

That entitled them to a greater share of the spoils, but many of the survivors probably wanted to use up as much of their quota on redeeming high-quality phasewater organs.

If that was the case, then there should be enough room for maneuver for the Larkinson Clan.

"I am more interested in the debris collected from the deathborn temple complex." Ves spoke. "It doesn't look like we can make immediate use of the stone materials and the secrets that they may contain. However, the Red Collective will probably figure them out sooner or later. Once we learn how to harness some of the methods of the deathborn race, I think that we can implement a much more powerful upgrade to the Phobos Mark II."

The only high-ranking stealth mech of the Larkinson Clan was one of its most useful assets.

Although the sneaky machine's frontal combat effectiveness was not too high, the Phobos had delivered fantastic results in sabotage actions!

The combination of highly effective stealth systems and the ability to weaponize incorporeal fiends literally allowed the Phobos to terrorize the native aliens!

Their fleets and bases were at constant risk of falling victim to unstoppable surprise attacks!

If the combined fleet had taken on the Phobos during this campaign, then it would have definitely progressed a lot smoother!

Ves believed this to be the case despite the fact that Venerable Zimro Belson had yet to achieve a major breakthrough!

"We may be able to derive other useful applications from the deathborn race." Gloriana said. "It is clear that the deathborn have developed a deep and rich civilization that is completely unrelated to the traditions of the Milky Way and the Red Ocean. I have already heard that even a single rune-covered rock from their temple complex can fetch a price equivalent to a chunk of high-grade superdimensional matter. This is because the fragments of their strange spell arrays can give researchers a glimpse to a completely different power system. We can derive a whole host of brand-new theories and principles from studying the remnants of alien construction!"

At least the combined fleet gained more assurances that they managed to come away from this cursed star system with a profitable balance.

Even if the Terran Alliance and the Red Three were all entitled to a hefty share of these spoils, the Larkinson Clan would definitely be able to keep at least an entire cargo bay's worth of broken black stones and green crystal fragments!

Ves and the research institutions of the Larkinson Clan probably didn't need so much stuff to conduct their studies. They could sell or auction off the surplus to third parties with very deep pockets in order to fund the replenishment and expansion of the Premier Fleet.

That was another lesson that he had learned.

As much as the Larkinson Clan had invested in the establishment of a proper first-class fleet, it was clear that more needed to be done before the Larkinsons could stand up to the foremost powers of the Red Ocean.

At the very least, the Premier Fleet should not have to rely on the Bluejay Fleet to achieve good results on the battlefield.

While it was extremely difficult to add more warships and high-end machines to the roster, it was significantly easier to reinforce the Premier Fleet with first-class multipurpose mechs and combat carriers.

The completion of the Arboreal Project should definitely accelerate this expansion!

Woodsap mechs had definitely proven their worth during this campaign.

Despite the controversy generated by the Poison Willow Variant, that had nothing to do with the basic versions.

Ves was more than satisfied with the strength, endurance and adaptability of his Woodsap mechs. He had no qualms about adding them to the Premier Fleet's mech roster.

Due to the incorporation of the Terran Alliance's Hibiscus System, the Larkinson Clan could completely widen its recruitment standards.

There was no need to carefully select suitable recruits among a relatively small pool of graduates from the toughest and most demanding first-class mech academies.

Even ordinary footsoldiers could effectively pilot Woodsap mechs after a few months of high-intensity training!

Sure, proper first-class multipurpose mech pilots would still be able to perform better in almost every case, but the gap should not be enormous.

As long as the Woodsap mech pilots already possessed strong foundations as footsoldiers, they would definitely be able to fit in with other mech units in a short amount of time!

With that in mind, the Larkinsons did not even have to resort to external recruitment anymore.

They could easily tap into the existing mech soldiers or footsoldiers of the expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance for manpower!

Ves knew that the Swordmaidens had always placed a high emphasis on swordsmanship training for both their mech pilots and other personnel.

The obsessed Swordmaidens maintained this tradition from the onset of their humble beginnings. They never relented on it despite the fact that they never anticipated that Ves would eventually be able to invent a control system that allowed norms to pilot mechs as well!

Now, all of these well-trained and highly disciplined Swordmaidens were probably the most ideal candidates to pilot Woodsap mechs configured for melee combat!

Ves would have been willing to raise his appreciation for the Swordmaidens even further if they were not so horrible at ranged combat.

They were not incapable of using firearms against enemies. However, their aversion to ranged weapons was ideological in nature. They simply refused to make use of them. That meant that they not only lacked a lot of practice with guns, but would completely waste their potential if they were paired with multipurpose mechs!

Oh well.

Nothing was perfect.

Chapter 7602 Proper Finalization

After concluding his meeting with Gloriana, Ves continued to remain busy with other obligations.

He met with Jovy Armalon, Commodore Zonrad Reze and Formation Master Andrea Vos in sequence in order to get on the same level with the Red Three.

The RA, RF and RC each developed a strong interest in the spoils taken from the death-cursed planet.

Ves and the Saint Commander were able to take advantage of their greed to negotiate a few favorable deals and exchanges with them. Suffice to say, the Red Three would do their part in strengthening the Premier Fleet and preparing it for future hardships.

He also met with the surviving soldiers and attended the burial ceremonies of the fallen.

Thousands of humans had perished in this dark and foreboding star system.

The mood among the people remained grim despite the fact that the Moloch Squadron managed to improve their defensive spell array once again in order to push back the dark miasma a little further.

Many people still remained nervous about their continued stay in the star system. The longer they stayed, the greater the chance that their alien adversaries might come back with an armada that was large enough to overrun their depleted forces!

As much as the higher ups wanted to extend their stay a few days more and use all of that additional time to sift through the massive destroyed temple complex even more, none of it would benefit anyone if the combined fleet ended up destroyed.

A good leader needs to be able to make a proper consideration between risk and reward.

The Saint Commander ultimately chose to wrap up any salvage operations by the end of the 4th day after the conclusion of the battle.

That had given the Larkinsons and their allies enough time to pick up all of the most obviously valuable loot.

While they could have spent additional time on restoring heavily damaged but not completely demolished starships and searching for other high-value loot, the risk of getting confronted by a second major alien force from the Red Cabal was too great.

"The Blackwater Summoner strikes me as an ambitious leader who has invested a great amount of social capital and other resources into the transformation of the Hypeh-Tekas System." Saint Commander Casella explained to Ves in private. "I doubt that he is truly done with collaborating with the foreign deathborn race. Given his status and importance, he is capable of rallying surrounding alien forces into a large retaliation fleet that may be inferior to ours in quality, but can still outnumber us by an order of magnitude. If we delay too much, then we will give our enemy too many chances to catch up and intercept us while we are trying to return to human-occupied space."

"Hm, I have no objections to leaving so quickly." Ves said. "It is just a shame that we won't be able to dig up more useful scraps from the surface ruins. There are so many hidden gems buried under all of the rubble. The deathborn can teach us much about energy manipulation and E-engineering. The folks over at the Red Collective are so ecstatic about the data that we have transmitted that they don't have enough researchers to study everything they wish."

It was incredibly hard and time-consuming to decipher a completely foreign paradigm of manipulating E energy, let alone deriving practical applications that could be utilized across the new frontier.

Yet the potential payoff was so massive that the RC was willing to sink a huge amount of resources and manpower in this endeavor!

His chief of staff even passed on rumors about setting up a completely new department that was solely dedicated to deathborn sciences, but a lot of important collies objected to this measure.

The near-defection of the Phase Lord Department served as a negative example of what might happen.

Many collies concluded that it was a bad idea to put a lot of people who studied and eventually followed alien science and traditions in a self-contained department.

Although Ves himself did not think that any human researcher would be stupid enough to worship the deathborn due to researching its works, who knew what kind of hidden traps the M87 natives had built into their structures.

The lack of clarity about the risks and dangers of working directly with alien materials was one of the reasons why the scientists embedded within the combined fleet did not receive permission to handle the alien samples directly!

Out of safety reasons, the eager researchers only received permission to study the sterile recordings or in rare cases manipulate the black stone debris through highly secure bots.

The collies of the Moloch Squadron complained about these restrictions every day, but that did not stop them from discovering wonderful little insights with every passing day!

Ves had visited the avid researchers multiple times a day at first, but then he realized that he allowed this matter to occupy way too much of his schedule.

He decided to hold himself back and allow the collie scientists to do their work in peace for a while. This way, he could digest the highlights of their discoveries in a much more compressed timeslot from time to time.

The combined fleet had already departed the Hypeh-Tekas System.

Nobody wanted to look back or even contemplate the notion of turning around.

Ves had met with the Saint Commander enough times to know that she and her staff had already formulated an elaborate retreat plan.

They had abandoned all offensive objectives in order to maximize the chances of making an orderly return to friendly space.

There was no more need for them to hit alien supply centers or isolated raiding fleets.

The spoils they carried in the cargo holds or bolted onto the hulls of their overloaded starships more than made up for all of the other lost opportunities!

Multiple interested parties from the Terran Alliance and the Red Three expressed a great amount of interest in securing physical access to the unique spoils.

The Terrans even agreed to ramp up their raids and counterattacks against the native alien border systems just to make it harder for the enemy to divert enough forces to intercept the combined fleet!

As long as they held up their end of the bargain, the Terrans earned a much larger proportion of temple debris than what was appropriate for their initial contribution.

The Red Three naturally grumbled about redistributing the pie, but even they did want to see all of the effort go in vain if the lackeys of the Red Cabal successfully prevented the broken black stones from ending up in red humanity's hands.

During these quiet but tense days of space travel, Ves continued to busy himself with multiple different priorities.

His main focus was finalizing the Arboreal Project.

This was a much bigger ordeal than any of his other design projects. The scale and scope of his Woodsap mechs far exceeded anything else he made before, with the possible exception of his first Carmine mech line.

Even so, the Arboreal Project represented a milestone for his mech design career. It was his first true major collaboration project with a genuine top-tier human power.

The Terran Alliance did not just pay little attention to the development of his Woodsap mechs either.

Spearheaded by the Devos Ancient Clan, a broad coalition of Terran movers and shakers all became invested in this promising and outright revolutionary product line!

They contributed a small but significant portion of their best mech designers and researchers into fleshing out the many variants and creating all of the auxiliary technologies needed to realize the Arboreal Project.

Ves genuinely felt grateful for the Terrans for taking him so seriously. Not everyone was willing to invest so much attention and resources in a mech design project led by a mere Senior Mech Designer.

Though his overall ownership of the Arboreal Project had plunged by a considerable degree due to the proactive contributions of the Terrans, they also elevated his Woodsap mechs far beyond what he could accomplish by himself.

He genuinely believed his Woodsap mechs had become competitive enough to match the combat effectiveness of other popular first-class multipurpose mech models!

Once he and the Terrans formally unveiled the completed Arboreal Project to the Terrans and the public at large, his new works would definitely invite a huge amount of scrutiny.

Master Laila Rebecca Devos already warned him that critics would judge his Woodsap mechs by a much harsher standard than anything he made in the past.

"You are about to enter one of the hardest mech design competitions in reality. Nothing invites more scrutiny from Master Mech Designers and even Star Designers than the initial release of a brand new line or model of first-class multipurpose mechs, especially one targeted for formal military organisations. These are products that compete on a higher level than the Omega Threshers and other cast-offs that your clan has been able to acquire. These are the mechs that people use to calculate the balance of power of entire nations, states and large organizations. Given their supreme importance, the

consequences of any fault will be greatly magnified. You must prepare yourself to face a great amount of questioning and criticism. This will happen regardless of your current reputation and popularity because my fellow peers and those who depend on their work are not as easy to fool."

Ves definitely got the message.

This was no longer a one-man or one-group show anymore.

He could not treat this matter as casually as he did whenever he completed a Larkinson-exclusive mech design.

He had to finalize his work properly and comply with a dizzying amount of rules and regulations.

The Terrans had often been accused of being a bureaucratic nightmare, and Ves found first-hand that this was not a stereotype.

There were definite downsides to working with an off-shoot of one of the oldest existing political entities of the human race!

Even if the Terrans periodically reinvented themselves, they still had dozens of laws in their books that still remained unchanged since the Age of Stars!

Fortunately, Ves did not have to tackle this headache-inducing rules maze by himself.

The Terrans themselves had become incredibly proficient at navigating this maze. They had lots of staff that knew all of the ins and outs on how to get a product through this bureaucratic hellhole within a reasonable amount of time.

All of these obstacles actually constituted a strong barrier against outsiders.

Foreigners and those who lacked high-level support from Terran society would definitely get tripped up if they attempted to introduce their products by themselves. Their inability to properly check the boxes and grease the wheels would cause them to face year-long delays if not outright rejection!

"These Terrans really don't play fair." Ves crossed his arms and remarked with a sneer.

"It is one of the most effective means to keep Terran mechs pure." Alexa Streon explained. "It was never meant to be fair. Many Terrans would rather miss trends and fall behind on the technology curve than surrender our ability to meet our own military demands."

Granted, the Terran mech industry did a fantastic job of remaining competitive despite the overly insular nature of its corresponding mech market.

As Ves did everything he could on his end to read through test reports and perform minor, targeted adjustments to the almost-complete mech designs, he gained a much stronger appreciation of the exacting standards of the Terrans.

The original 120 prototype Woodsap mechs that accompanied the combined fleet into enemy territory was only the first batch.

In reality, the Terrans had grown several hundred more and distributed them to a wide variety of testing grounds and clan-owned mech units.

Each of these parties put the newfangled organic mechs through their paces in their own diverse methods.

While the overall realism of these highly curated tests fell short of what the Woodsap mechs had experienced during the Nemesis Campaign, they went much deeper into collecting data on very specific functions.

These tests uncovered many limits and even more little faults.

Although the flaws were all minor enough that they produced no substantial negative consequences in most cases, it was still possible for them to interact badly in very rare situations.

If the wrong coincidences occurred, the Woodsap mechs might suddenly shut down or whatever!

The Terran mech designers did their best to solve these problems on their end, but since Ves was the ultimate authority when it came to living mechs and elemental Carmine mechs, he still needed to fix some of the bizarre problems himself!

All of the work had grown extremely tedious to him, but he did not complain too many times. He fully understood the necessity of all of the work. It was better to nip these problems in the bud before they snowballed into a major scandal down the line!

"At this rate, it will take a while after returning to human-occupied space before I can finally announce the release of the Arboreal Project."

It was better to be safe than sorry.

He knew that all of this work would pay off in the end. Once the public truly became familiar with his groundbreaking Woodsap mechs, he believed that his other collaboration partners would become much more invested in developing his remaining 4 elemental Carmine mechs!

Chapter 7603 Risky vs Steady

"So what is your verdict, doctor?"

"Your body is healing at a slower rate." The medical professional calmly spoke to the man sitting on an examination bench. "To be more specific, it is not restoring your shoulder injury according to the model that we have derived from studying the physical recovery rates of other human phase lords. According to the current data that we have collected, we estimate that it should take at least 3 more months to fully recover from your substantial exposure to the substance currently known as blackwater."

The news clearly worsened Ves' mood.

"I see. Why is my body responding so slowly?"

"Our team has not formed a definite conclusion, but I have developed a personal theory. If my hypothesis is correct, then your body is not just trying to restore your true body to full health, but is also simultaneously developing an evolutionary adaptation that may probably offer greater resistance against future exposures to blackwater. Much of the reason behind this delay may be the simple fact that your true body is struggling to autonomously deduce an effective configuration of organic tissue that can form a more effective barrier against a toxin that had previously caused grievous damage."

That sounded like a plausible theory!

Even though the doctor had not been able to provide conclusive proof that this was the case, Ves already believed that there was a 90 percent chance that it was true.

"Is this a normal phenomenon among phase lords?"

"Yes, but... not to this degree, sir." The other man responded. "Phase lords are derived from phase whales. The latter possess many remarkable strengths and advantages. It is clear to any discerning biotech professional that phase whales cannot possibly be produced through natural selection. They are clearly artificial in design. One of the less prominent features of their exquisite organic design is a high degree of resistance against environmental hazards. As you are probably aware, phase whales tend to grow inside enormous phasewater-rich gas giants. These are extreme environments where juvenile to adolescent organisms must endure extreme pressure, temperatures, turbulence and possibly other wild predators. Phase whales can never thrive in so many different extreme environments without developing the capacity to quickly become resistant to extreme hazards."

"That.... Makes a lot of sense, but your tone suggests that this only applies to phase whales."

The doctor nodded. "Correct. It is common consensus that phase lords are diminished or inferior versions of phase whales. The former attempt to match the grandeur of the latter, but cannot never succeed because their alien biologies can never replicate the many

advantages that phase whales take for granted. This is why a phase lord is always more fragile and less durable than a phase whale of equivalent mass and phasewater concentration. What is... unusual in your case is that your current body response does not align with that of a phase lord. It does not fully align with a phase whale either. It is a unique case that cannot neatly fit in a single category. You are... unique."

"That does not tell me much."

"I have only studied phase leaders for less than a decade." The doctor helplessly spread his arms. "I have heard of greater experts who have studied phase whales and phase lords for several more decades. They were the members of the original MTA and CFA who entered the Red Ocean long before the Big Two commenced the Phasewater Generation. They might not have been able to acquire and study a large amount of research samples, but the fact that they resided in the new frontier for so long means that they may be able to give you a much better explanation. However, it is difficult to speak to them as the RA and the RF hoards them like a dragon hoards its treasures."

Ugh. Selfishness rears its head again.

The Red Collective was supposed to be a relatively open superorganization where every party could come together in order to advance a common cause.

Those early entrants to the Red Ocean should have contributed their knowledge and expertise to the Red Collective, which possessed a much stronger mandate when it came to studying phase leaders and phase lord body cultivation.

Unfortunately, pretty much every power always held back the good stuff.

While they were readily willing to donate common knowledge, manpower and resources, anything with true value rarely became available to the 'public'.

It was behavior like this that prevented human civilization at large from making greater advances!

To be fair, Ves had to admit that he and the Larkinson Clan did not exactly set a good example either.

He held back plenty of advancements in order to secure an advantage for him and his power base.

It would have been much more difficult for them to stay ahead of their rivals if they did not possess their own trump cards!

Although Ves had put serious effort into sharing his goodies, he still had a long way to go before he could truly call himself altruistic.

At least his contributions so far were much more massive than the life's works of many other Master Mech Designers put together!

"We recommend that you continue to maintain your elevated consumption level until your next scheduled checkup." The doctor wrapped up the session. "Your true body is not only burning a substantial amount of resources in order to heal its injuries, but is also diverting some of it to experimentation. I cannot tell you how long it will persist in doing so or whether it will ever cease if an acceptable solution is not forthcoming. If your condition continues to suffer because of this, we may need to resort to manual intervention."

That was a very real possibility!

After all, who knew how clever and competent Ves' true body could be in developing a more effective form of defense against blackwater.

Ves and a number of other experts of the Larkinson Clan had already spent a bit of time on studying the minute sample of blackwater and attempted to figure out a way to resist its incredible lethality.

None of them had made any progress! They did not even fully understand the full nature and properties of blackwater at this time!

The only solid conclusion they had made so far was that it was clearly a variation of phasewater, but that was far from enough to comprehend its essence.

They had not even managed to confirm that blackwater incorporated superdimensional matter, though a lot of scientists secretly believed that this was definitely the case.

They just needed to find solid proof.

This was why they still needed to conduct a lot more research in order to learn something actually new or useful.

Given how much the researchers were already struggling with blackwater, Ves had little hope that his true body could do any better.

That said, he did not dare to rule out every possibility.

If his anomalous true body somehow managed to formulate an effective defense, then Ves had no qualms about imitating it so that he could apply the new solution to his Superdimensional Giant Regalia!

After all, he would rather rely on external defenses to withstand blackwater exposure.

He did not want to encounter the Blackwater Summoner once again and allow the greater phase lord to melt his insanely valuable and ruinously expensive raiment into ruin!

Perhaps it didn't matter.

It may very well be that Ves and his forces might not encounter the Blackwater Summoner in the future.

However, Ves had become so spooked by how quickly blackwater ate through armor-grade superdimensional alloy that he still suffered lingering trauma from his last encounter!

For his own peace of mind, he did not mind diverting a bit of manpower and resources to getting to the bottom of this mystery material.

If the Red Cabal was clever, then it would definitely 'persuade' the Blackwater Summoner into coughing up the secrets into this amazing trump card.

It was too wasteful for a single phase whale to hide this insanely effective weapon against the toughest defenses that red humanity had just begun to employ!

If more phase whales and phase lords began to implant the organs capable of producing, storing and controlling blackwater, then a lot of high-ranking mechs would get into trouble!

If this ever happened, then it became even more important to find a way to resist its exceptional corrosiveness!

Just like how the emergence of Terran Destroyer weapons had spurred a frantic development into Destroyer-resistant alloys, Ves believed the same technological pattern would take place once again.

If he was lucky enough, then his own true body may very well be the first to make a breakthrough!

"Is there anything else I should know before I go, doctor?"

"There is nothing pressing for the time being aside from the fact that you are not spending enough time resting. Phase lord or not, you are still recovering from a severe injury as well as a significant overdraft of your strength. Although your remarkable physique makes you much more tolerant of abuse, I do not advise you to work long hours. Proper rest and relaxation should produce the most ideal possible outcome. Any substantial exertion can set back your recovery."

Ves briefly winced. "I see. It is... difficult for me to cut back on my responsibilities. There is just too much on my plate at the moment. I will try my best to optimize my schedule, but... time is precious."

As he exited the examination room and made his way back to his office, he thought about his progress so far.

He spent much of his time on finalizing the Arboreal Project. None of it was in vain. Together with his hard-working Terran colleagues, they had already implemented hundreds of tiny and subtle tweaks to the Woodsap mech designs.

10:48

Even though hardly anything had changed to an outside observer, the differences were quite substantial to a serious mech designer like Ves!

They had managed to sand off the edges and fix tiny flaws that they never noticed in the previous phases of the collaborative design project.

What was 'odd' was that many of these fixes actually decreased the performance of the Woodsap mechs by a small margin.

To put it in different terms, the current iteration of a Woodsap mech had actually become weaker to the older prototype Woodsap mechs utilized by the combined fleet!

Ves did not choose to go in this direction. The Terrans insisted on it. Their rules and regulations were so strict that they had no other choice.

In cases where rare glitches or coincidences could produce catastrophic consequences, the Terrans would rather alter a set of components to safer but less optimal implementation.

Ves personally did not like doing this because it diluted the cutting-edge nature of his products.

It was the equivalent of making a mech 'fatter'.

He would rather trade the fat for muscle because the latter tended to be a lot more useful in most cases, but the Terrans evidently prized stability over absolute superiority.

In truth, Ves did not actually think their approach was wrong.

The Terrans simply erred more on the side of caution, while the Larkinsons had a habit of pushing the boundaries.

This probably had a lot to do with the age of their traditions.

The Terrans had long moved past their youthful exuberance.

After living through so many millenia, the Terran people no longer needed to resort to radical measures in order to grow or maintain their power base. They could afford to be patient and adopt a long-term perspective.

The Larkinsons on the other hand only formed their clan for a relatively short amount of time. Before that, they were insubstantial. Ves and his fellow clansmen had a lot to prove, and they were not shy about taking risks in order to get ahead. Their past successes had only reinforced their habit of pushing their limits!

Although Ves had long been aware of this difference in perspective, he never fully realized how it bled through in his design work.

It was only now that he deeply collaborated with a group of Terrans that he understood how his usual approach to his work clashed hard against their much steadier attitude towards the same work!

"Aren't you guys at risk of falling too far behind if you keep this up?" Ves asked Master Laila Rebeca Devos over a communication channel one day.

"Not at all." The physical projection of his chief collaborator shook her head. "You cannot paint our entire mech industry with a single brush. There are many hungry and less established Terrans that have something to prove. As long as their theories and work deserve recognition, they should eventually be able to pass on their contributions to us. In addition, we are not close to the greater mech community. We occasionally work with third-party partners such as yourself. What matters is that we control the process. We only accept instability as long as we can set the terms. That may put us slightly behind compared to the Rubarthans, but we do not generate as much wasted effort."

That sounded rather clever, though Ves found this approach to be far too rigid and inflexible for his taste.

Oh well. This was none of his business.

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Chapter 7604 Privilege of Power

Cooperating with a strong partner such as the Terran Alliance came with a lot of advantages and disadvantages.

Ves greatly benefited from the former, so he had little choice but to put up with the latter.

He and the Terrans had forged a solid understanding of what to expect from each other. Though Ves may be the nominal leader of the Arboreal Project, he still had to go to greater lengths to accommodate the demands of his clients.

He did not mind working with control freaks. The Terrans were decisive and competent. They knew what they wanted and knew what they were doing for the most part. They just needed his input to make sure the Woodsap System worked as intended.

Even so, Ves did not acquiesce to every request like a doormat.

There were times where he still needed to abide by his principles.

"Absolutely not!" Ves shouted back at the latest Terran flunky who opened a communication channel with him. "What happened to the Poison Willows is tragic, but I have already accounted for that. Experimental works tend to produce highly unstable results. It is normal to expect failure. The core Woodsap mech designs completely lack the destabilizing factors that caused those variants to mutate out of control. In fact, I have gone back to my work and implemented additional guard rails and safeguards to reduce the chance of accidents even further."

Though the Terran official looked intimidated, he did not back down on his own responsibilities.

"Our department cannot accept this answer, Professor Larkinson. We are no strangers to accidents when it comes to rampaging biotechnology products. We are the silent guardians that keep our biotechnology alive and safe. Our work has prevented the proliferation of over 99 percent of dangerous and highly risky biotech output. Where the common folk sees innovation, we see disasters in the making. We are not opposed to new inventions, but we cannot abide by the reckless introduction of too many new technologies that have not been proven to be safe."

Ves groaned and placed his palm on his face. "The Devos Ancient Clan told me that it has already applied for and received all of the necessary approvals and exemptions. Even if you are dissatisfied, you should speak with my Terran partners first."

"We have already done so, professor." The boring man responded. "We are not entirely satisfied with the accelerated development and testing process of a product that introduces so many new technological applications at once, but... our superiors have 'encouraged' us to be more lenient than normal. We are not blind to the pressure of warfare and the necessity of expedience. That does not mean we can tolerate everything. There is one problem that your Devosan allies cannot speak on your behalf, and that is the highly mutatable characteristics of your 'third order living mechs'."

Ves adopted a stubborn expression and crossed his arms. "My third order living mechs are a well-documented phenomenon. I have already defended the right for my living mechs to exist in a highly publicized tribunal in the past. While they sound like sources of trouble, almost every mech pilot who has actually made use of my products has come to love the interactivity and mutual dependence. Living mechs are not wild exobeasts that go berserk at the drop of a hat. They are living companions who take on a role that is reminiscent of that of ancient horses of hunting hounds. As long as our soldiers manage their

relationships with their living mechs with sincerity, they will always become greater than the sum of their parts."

The Terran bureaucrat patiently listened to the response, but remained unmoved.

"We do not deny the many benefits of making active use of your living mechs, but that does not excuse the potential liabilities. According to known data, your living mechs and particularly your third order ones have a rare habit of defying their own software programming. Even more alarming, the more your third order living mechs have 'grown', the greater their ability to overcome their own hardware limitations and restrictions. This is highly concerning to our department because they can defy their human pilots at any time and act autonomously. It does not take an incident as extreme as what happened to the Poison Willows to cause a disaster. Just a single Woodsap mech stationed in the middle of a city may decide to forcibly activate and launch an alpha strike at an adjacent apartment complex."

"That is insane!" Ves wanted to tear his hair out! "If I am being absolutely honest, such a possibility cannot be ruled out. However, living mechs have no reason to attack their own owners and partners unless you give them one! I do not think that any of you are stupid enough to mistreat and abuse your living mechs. I have already emphasized this rule in all of the instruction manuals. As long as you treat them as respectfully as intelligent pets, they will not turn against you. In fact, their loyalty is a boon, because they are even more protected against third party hacking or tampering. They will always recognize the right side."

This discussion proceeded to drag on for a few minutes.

Though the bureaucrat sounded like he was determined to enforce Terran law on the Arboreal Project, Ves simply stuck to his guns and refused to budge!

He absolutely did not want to lock his Woodsap mechs to the second order! That seemed like an absolute regression in his eyes! Many future Terran customers would definitely suffer from the lack of benefits that came with fighting alongside the best version of a living mech!

Now that the talks went in a circular direction, the Terran official finally lost patience.

"Your continued refusal to comply with our demands will exacerbate the problem, professor. We cannot allow our prime Terran militaries to adopt new biomechs that are not under the absolute control over their human owners and operators. If you persist in holding your current stance, then we may be compelled to delay or suspend the release of your Woodsap mechs until you have reconsidered."

Feh.

If Ves was still an ordinary Journeyman or Senior Mech Designer, then he would definitely quake in his boots.

A regulator from a first-class government agency possessed a massive amount of power!

It was a pity that he talked to the wrong guy today.

Who was Ves?

He was a tier 2 galactic citizen!

While the other man did a very good job at ignoring this fact, that did not mean he could dictate reality.

That power was reserved for high-ranking mech pilots!

Compared to ordinary space peasants or low-tier galactic citizens, Ves had already transcended many of the shackles that held back the masses.

Even if he flagrantly violated the rules, human society itself would try its best to bend around his outrageous actions and decisions!

This was one of the fundamental lessons that Ves had learned about status and power.

After corresponding with other high-tier galactic citizens in the past year, Ves found out that he was hardly the most extreme individual to abuse his status.

The Polymath and the Evolution Witch had done much worse!

Of course, their vastly greater power and influence afforded them the leeway to go so far.

Once the tedious call finally ended, Ves dropped his amiable and diplomatic smile.

"How tiresome." He sighed. "It seems like mech designers at this level spend more time on arguing and paperwork than designing mechs."

It couldn't be helped. The stakes were much higher when it came to designing first-class multipurpose mechs.

As a newly independent nation, the Terran Alliance had fallen into a precarious situation. It needed the best of the best in order to defend its territories and beat back the aliens. Yet it also needed to do so the Terran way. Rules had always been an integral part of Terran culture.

This was why the bureaucrat tried to persuade Ves to change his mind despite the fact that it was a nearly futile effort.

Rules were also why the Devosans and other allies could not stop this fellow from bothering Ves.

No matter.

As a tier 2 galactic citizen, his intentions trumped ordinary considerations. Ves knew that he did not have to do anything to sweep this problem under the rug. The Terrans themselves would find a way to make it go away, either by carving out yet another exemption, or dig up and proceed to invoke some obscure rule or law that originated several thousand years ago.

After taking care of a few other administrative chores, Ves eventually turned towards his augmented assistant.

"What's next on the agenda?"

His friend and assistant Gavin waved his secured data pad. "I have good news for you, Ves. The collies have made a substantial breakthrough in their research. They have apparently devised a way to activate or stimulate a handful of the artifacts and other objects created by the deathborn. They would be happy to show off their progress and obtain your input on them. The Farseer did issue an unusual request, though."

"What does she want?"

"She requests... you bring your daughter on tomorrow's visit."

"My daughter... wait."

Children normally had nothing to do with the ominous deathborn race, but that did not necessarily apply to his second daughter!

One of the most precious gifts that he imbued to his daughter was a companion spirit that had grown up alongside her since birth.

Different from her older sister, Andraste's companion spirit possessed a strong affinity towards death.

In the early years, Ves and his wife had grown quite concerned that her abnormal companion spirit would affect her personality in a detrimental fashion.

However, Andraste actually formed a loud, boisterous and active personality, which completely contrasted with her cute but much more negatively-aligned companion spirit!

Gloriana did not understand how this could be, but it made a lot of sense to Ves.

Companion spirits may be derived from their principals, but the former gained enough separation from the latter that they could follow completely different paths!

The strong nurturing from her parents combined with her bright and happy childhood also helped with counteracting any possible adversarial effects from her companion spirit.

Even so, when faced with the Farseer's request, Ves still felt reluctant to bring her daughter close to those evil and blood-soaked artifacts.

There was a big difference between getting into contact with a 'clean', 'pure' and relatively 'upright' death goddess like Helena and getting close to foul and utterly evil deathborn artifacts!

Yet... if anyone in the combined fleet could interface with those messy remains, Yaika most certainly possessed the greatest potential!

"I will ask Andraste whether she is willing to take the risk." Ves responded after a moment of thought. "There is definitely an element of danger involved with this. You can tell the Farseer that she must implement enough safety measures to satisfy my criteria. I will not let my daughter get in touch with anything that is either obviously dangerous or too large. This is not the time to conduct boundary-breaking experiments. It is already enough to find out whether Yaika can successfully interface or manipulate the smallest deathborn devices."

Ves was not willing to turn his daughter into a test subject. Other people could fulfill this job. It was incredibly easy to impart other humans with death-aligned companion spirits. He could even harvest the required ingredients from the deathborn artifacts to increase compatibility if necessary!

The reason why he did not object to letting Andraste come into contact with the potentially dangerous battlefield spoils was because he possessed a vested interest in this research.

He not only wanted to gain a much better understanding of a future major enemy, but also aspired to incorporate their strengths into the next edition of the Phobos and possibly other mech designs!

For example, Ves believed that a death-aspected mass production model would definitely thrive when thrown into combat against the mutated voribugs!

Chapter 7605 How to Invade Another Galaxy

"How would you initiate an inter-galactic invasion?"

"Ehhh... what?"

"Let us assume you are tasked by the leaders of your race to build a foothold in a completely foreign galaxy that none of you have ever come into contact with in the past. Let us also assume that you are working with relatively limited resources. Let us further assume that you can only sneak in a relatively small amount of manpower and resources across the intergalactic void. What are your first steps? What are your priorities? What scenarios will you try to avoid at all cost?"

The Farseer posed a number of very interesting but incredibly complicated questions to Ves.

That was not how Ves expected to be greeted after he had just stepped aboard the increasingly more famous Moloch.

He was not the only notable individual to arrive at the quirky vessel crewed by the members of the Red Collective.

"I would find the weakest aliens around and kick their asses first to teach them who is boss." A boisterous young female voice sounded from behind. "Of course, you shouldn't pick on anything big like a planetary government. There are always pirates and outlaws in every galaxy. Nobody really cares about them, especially the weakest ones, so once you have taken over a disreputable outfit, nobody will be able to tell the difference. You can do a lot from there as long as you don't do anything stupid. What do you think, Lucky?"

"Meow!" A hovering gem cat playfully floated around her head.

"Hihihi! Of course I am right!"

Both Ves and Andrea Vos smiled indulgently at the child.

"Your plan contains sound logic, but you have missed a number of steps." The formation master gently responded. "What is praiseworthy about your plan is that you understand the importance of information warfare. Before two hostile races ever launch their first shots at each other, they always compete through the medium of information. If red humanity's first step after reaching Messier 87 is to announce itself as a visitor from the Red Ocean, then many of the established alien civilizations will ruthlessly hunt us down to kill us, or worse, capture us and extract every piece of useful information that we possess. That sounds rather counterproductive, do you agree?"

The young red-headed girl nodded. "I suppose so, ma'am. That's why I think it is best to make contact with the opposite of those big and powerful civilizations. Bottom-tier outlaws are so weak and messy that nobody ever keeps track of them. I bet there are many groups that consist of a mix of weird and exotic aliens. Even if 'humans' suddenly appear among them, none of the aliens in M87 will think too much about it. That galaxy is

just so damn big that it probably has more intelligent species than all of the grains of sand on a planet."

That was a remarkably insightful explanation. His daughter put real thought in her argument, though it still rested on a number of dangerous assumptions.

The Farseer still maintained her smile. "I agree with you, but my previous comment still stands. If you want to find suitable pirates to subsume, you will first need to understand the regional stellar environment, the alien polities that reside in it and the flow of traffic and forces. All of that requires intelligence gathering, and that is incredibly difficult to do at the start. As a new entrant, you have a responsibility to avoid tipping off the truth of your identity while simultaneously interacting with completely new aliens to learn what they know. Any contact is risky. The wrong words can set off a violent reaction. The wrong actions can betray your complete ignorance of regional customs and taboos. The wrong choices can turn an incredibly rare and precious attempt to invade a different galaxy into waste."

"Oh..." Andraste thought herself clever, but she clearly hadn't accounted for so much. She lowered her head while reaching out to hug Lucky against her chest. "Then... you will first have to send out spies. Good ones. People who can look and listen at other aliens without getting caught."

The mature woman nodded. "Correct. This is a whole different subject that falls outside of the scope of this discussion. It is sufficient to note that if you keep your presence in a new galaxy as hidden as possible, you can make any low-key preparations as you want as long as they do not surpass a threshold where the buildup cannot be hidden anymore."

"I have read some of the early records about the Big Two's initial decades in the Red Ocean." Ves couldn't help but comment. "The documents strangely don't explain how the mechers and the fleeters managed to cross the void between the Milky Way and the Red Ocean 70 or so years ago. Perhaps their pioneer ships set off a few centuries ago with a souped-up version of a conventional FTL drive or some other exotic faster-than-light travel technology. Whatever the case, once the first humans arrived in the new frontier, they behaved with a great amount of caution and discipline. They did not even dare to venture too much beyond Bridgehead One, as every movement could betray their true identities and origin."

The Big Two demonstrated a lot of patience. Perhaps they could have kicked off the invasion of the Red Ocean within as little as a decade, but they instead kept their heads down for 4 more decades just to collect more intelligence and increase their preparations!

The MTA and the CFA clearly possessed an immense amount of might, enough to overrun the alien civilizations of the Red Ocean by relying on brute force alone, yet did not grow conceited enough to resort to this method!

The mechers and fleeters instead insisted on sticking to the most cautious and rational invasion plan. They avoided many mistakes and even opened up the Red Ocean to the public just so that they did not have to put too much of their own forces and resources at risk!

Their caution actually paid off as the Great Severing could have inflicted much more catastrophic losses to original humanity if the Big Two tried to do everything themselves!

However, this historical event also served as a very clear warning that no matter how much you tried to do everything correctly, new and unknown variables could always turn everything into a mess!

No plan could ever completely survive contact with the enemy!

"The reason why I posed my question to you is because I wanted both of you to enter the appropriate mindset to understand the actions of the deathborn civilization." The Farseer said as their group ventured deeper into the Moloch. "The invasion strategy of this race is naturally different from ours. The deathborn does not have our method of crossing the intergalactic void, but they arguably possess a better method. Due to some quirk of M87 exotic energy configuration, deathborn spontaneously spawn in sites where a large amount of sentients have died. Even if the Red Ocean has not descended into a galactic war, it is impossible to stop this spawning process."

Ves nodded and frowned at the same time. "You're right about that, but there is a big difference in intelligence between the stupid lowest-rank deathborn and the formidable deathborn lords that we have encountered at Hypeh-Tekas II. The combat logs and after action reports all make it clear that the latter are projections rather than actual 'bodies'. Their true controllers still reside inside M87."

"That is true." The formation master responded with a despondent breath. "We have done our best to investigate how the latter have been able to project their consciousness across hundreds of thousands of light-years, but none of the records that we have been able to recover from the native alien ships and planetary temple ruins have provided any answers. We can only speculate that the deathborn civilization has developed such a strong transcendent hierarchy that their higher ranks have gained the ability to 'possess' or 'direct' the lower ranks beyond conventional boundaries."

"I doubt this capability is easy to pull off, especially at stupendously large distances. Nothing comes for free. It must have cost those deathborn lords an exorbitant amount of resources and effort just to project their presence into the Red Ocean. Defeating them on the battlefield will likely force them back to their starting point. This is why many of those deathborn lords did their best to flee rather than fight to the bitter end. They cannot easily afford the cost of failure."

Though Ves believed that his theory made sense, he lacked the proof to back up his assumptions.

"If we step back and evaluate the strategy that the deathborn have employed, it is clear that their unique racial characteristics have encouraged them to exchange stealth for speed. They have not tried too hard to hide their early entry into the Red Ocean. The emergence of weak and low-intelligence deathborn is one thing. Projecting their 'lords' directly to another galaxy and having them make contact with a native alien leader is another matter entirely. Luckily enough for them, they actually managed to form an alliance of convenience with a desperate local powerhouse."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "I actually think that sounds fishy. Think about it. The Blackwater Summoner is one of their most ideal initial partners. He is powerful enough to gather a lot of resources for them, yet he is not strong to the point that he can resist their highly proficient mental techniques. As you already know, phase whales tend to be strong in body but a lot weaker in soul. I think the deathborn leader may have managed to enthrall or at least influenced the decisions of the Blackwater Summoner upon contact."

"That is a plausible theory, sir. Many of us believe this to be the case. Nonetheless, there is still a distinct possibility that the Blackwater Summoner agreed to work with these extragalactic newcomers on a completely voluntary basis. From his perspective, the short-term threat posed by red humanity and the mutated voribugs is far greater than the initially unimpressive deathborn. His racial bias may have also caused him to underestimate the strength of a race that completely lacks a physical form and can only settle for possessing dead bodies. Whatever the case, both of them have managed to obtain what they needed from each other. No deception or coercion is necessary."

That made this situation worse. Despite the huge setback this initial alliance had suffered in the Hypeh-Tekas System, Ves doubted that his forces had managed to end this cooperation entirely.

The deathborn still had enough of a foundation left to continue to work together with the Blackwater Summoner!

"So how does this topic have to do with the deathborn relics that we are about to observe today?" Ves asked in his eagerness to return his attention to more relevant matters.

"I wanted you to understand the reasoning behind the extensive construction efforts in the Hypeh-Tekas System." The female cultivator said. "The temple complex is an especially important functional node to the enemy's invasion plan. Our studies in the past week have gradually revealed clues that it possesses far more functions than converting dying sentients into newborn deathborn. It is not only a large source of manpower, but also a headquarters, research institution, megaworkshop, holy site, intergalactic transceiver and more. Perhaps an easy way to understand it is to regard it as a more multifunctional version of our Astral Octagon."

"Ah. I see. A facility as important as this is most definitely a huge investment. If the Blackwater Summoner was responsible for mobilizing all of the resources necessary to construct it, then he most definitely feels pissed that it lasted so short. Rebuilding a

similar temple complex may not be possible if he has already squandered the wealth that he formerly possessed."

Of course, all of that no longer mattered if the deathborn chose to expand their cooperation with other phase whales!

"If we knew that the temple complex was so important, then I would have argued more firmly to extend our stay in the Hypeh-Tekas System." The Farseer said with a regretful voice. "It should have been well worth the additional risks just to spend a few more days to dig more valuable artifacts from the enormous planetary facility. Its size is so immense that we have only managed to search through a fraction of a percentage of all of the land."

Ves silently disagreed with her. No matter the value of the broken temple complex, none of it would have been worth it if they got cornered by an immense retaliatory force!

Chapter 7606 Convenient Gadget

Ves understood the point that the Farseer tried to make.

She explained the Red Collective's speculations concerning the strategy and methods employed by the deathborn civilization.

"We have great reasons to believe that the deathborn race is a major power in Messier 87." She continued to say even as they arrived in front of a highly secure checkpoint. "Their racial characteristics bestow far too much of an advantage. New deathborn can arrive in any area where intelligent beings have perished. It is possible that the native alien species of Messier 87 have developed a rigorous set of rules and customs to treat the bodies of their deceased to prevent the rise of undead apparitions, but you should be well aware of how difficult it is to maintain order on a battlefield."

Ves could easily imagine it. M87 was much larger in volume than an 'ordinary' galaxy like the Milky Way, let alone a dwarf galaxy like the Red Ocean.

How many spacefaring races occupied the stars? How much territory could they cover? How much devastation could they wreak in a true high-energy environment?

Whatever the specifics, the quantity of slaughter taking place in this resource-rich galaxy was bound to be at least a hundred times if not a thousand times greater than in the old galaxy!

"A supermassive galaxy as large as this must be hosting billions if not trillions of conflicts across its enormous span." Andrea Vos apparently held the same thoughts. "Deathborn will continuously spawn wherever exotic radiation can reach. In fact, the much higher concentration of E energy radiation will not only speed up the process, but also empower a substantial proportion of them beyond the level of cannon fodder. Such favorable

conditions make it difficult for us to imagine that the deathborn cannot rise to the level of a major race. They may even rank in the top 10."

Though he agreed with her assumptions, Ves did not think it was that simple.

"The deathborn are a rather disgusting existence, though. They emerge from the dead bodies of other intelligent alien species. As far as we know, these newborn entities retain no semblance of personality or identity from their prior incarnations. That means that every sapient organic being is nothing more than fertilizer to the deathborn. The undead ghosts are unquestionably parasitic in nature. They are diseases, one that is nearly impossible to get rid of. Much like the voribugs of the Red Ocean, the deathborn exist as an everpresent plague on galactic society. If you do not take proactive measures to suppress their propagation, they can easily multiply to the point of taking over an entire galaxy. Such threats always evoke universal hostility. I cannot imagine that the deathborn are able to live comfortably back in M87."

The female cultivator nodded in agreement. "There are many of us who believe that to be the case. The deathborn likely possess very few allies in their home galaxy. That may also be a reason why they are so eager to be the first to invade the Red Ocean. Not only do they possess an unparalleled advantage in doing so, but the temptation to conquer an entire galaxy and turn it into a safe and unopposed breeding ground for their race is too much to resist."

If that was true, then the major setback the deathborn had suffered back in Hypeh-Tekas II would not slow them down for too long. Their leaders would definitely invest a lot more resources into rebuilding their temple complex!

"It is possible that at least some of the other dwarf galaxies orbiting M87 have already fallen to the deathborn." Ves boldly theorized. "Perhaps the other races that are more conventional in nature recognize the threat and are attempting to invade them, but that is difficult to accomplish when they have crossed hundreds of thousands of light-years just to reach their destination. Even their God Kings require at least decades of time just to traverse the distance."

Though he did not know whether this was the case, it certainly raised the importance of the Red Ocean.

As long as the aliens of M87 got ahold of phasewater and superdimensional matter, they could develop all kinds of new technologies that could help them travel to other galaxies!

Even inferior versions of beyonder gates could already help these powerful aliens travel a lot faster inside Messier 87 itself. They could set up their own form of a galactic gate network to centralize their civilizations and set off an unprecedented economic boom!

Once they managed to establish a reliable and cost-effective means to travel from M87 to one of its many dwarf galaxies, the barriers to trade and conquest would plummet even further.

The deathborn would also come under much greater pressure if their exclusive galaxies became a lot easier to invade!

In short, the bounty of the Red Ocean represented a game changer to any decently competent race or civilization. Those who mastered the power of transphasic or superdimensional technology could bring the entire galactic neighborhood within their reach!

Of course, that also made life a lot harder for the civilizations that currently resided in the Red Ocean.

No matter whether it was the native races or red humanity, they all had to contend with each other while at the same time guard against outside intrusions.

At this time, the group had finally passed through the last checks.

The security verification was deliberately made to be as strict and rigorous as possible due to the incredible sensitivity of the goods placed within the most confidential labs and vault.

Even a tier 2 galactic citizen like Ves had to go through the whole process without skipping a single step!

"The Blackwater Summoner is clearly playing with fire." Ves grumbled. "I don't know what he is thinking by bargaining with such an obviously dangerous race. The deathborn have no inherent interest in helping the phase whales and the Red Cabal. They will become enemies sooner or later. That stupid phase whale may have very well doomed the entire new frontier to a wasteland of death."

The Farseer briefly grinned. "What is good for the Blackwater Summoner is not necessarily good for the rest of his alien peers. His words during the battle suggest that he is turning into a rogue operator within the Red Cabal. He no longer cares about the good of the whole. His influence is on the wane now that he no longer enjoys the direct protection and patronage of his dead god of a father. In this regard, his collaboration with the deathborn is rational. He is seeking to gain more power, and if he has to work together with an invader from a much more powerful galaxy to do so, then that is entirely acceptable as long as he is shameless enough to abandon the principles and ideals of his race."

Ves would have wanted to claim that humans could never be so depraved as to surrender all of their racial loyalty just so that they could bend the knee to an entirely different alien race, but he knew better.

The Blackwater Summoner would probably fit right in with the loathsome cosmopolitans!

What was it with people and suicidal treachery?

"If the Blackwater Summoner is such a bad guy, we should kill him." Little Andraste said.

"Meow meow." Lucky echoed as he rested on her slender shoulders.

Ves sighed in regret. "It is not that easy. We had our best chance during the previous battle, but he managed to get away. I doubt he will make himself vulnerable going forward. It is out of our hands, now. I am sure that the Red Three has become apprised of his elevated threat. It will be up to them to assassinate him. Our clan simply doesn't have the means."

"Oh."

They fell silent for a time as they entered a sterilizing chamber. A brief gust of wind and a bright flash of light later, they finally entered one of the hottest labs in the entire combined fleet.

A dozen or so figures garbed in bright white or yellow hazard suits were working in their own individual chambers.

The transparent walls and barely visible energy shields helped to prevent any activities taking place inside from contaminating other stuff.

Ves took note that the researchers of the Red Cabal had even taken the time to develop a small defensive array that was specifically designed to isolate the propagation of death energy!

"Your precautions are quite thorough."

"We have to be, sir. We are working with completely new and foreign pieces of alien technology. Accidents have already occurred in the first days. Nothing has happened after that, but that was because we revised our safety protocols and implemented more safeguards."

The Farseer guided them to an empty chamber. Once they passed through a secure hatch, they approached a plain metal worktable.

Several small devices rested on the surface.

Some of them were made of the same black stone that was used as the main material as the temple complex.

Others were made of a weird metal alloy that possessed a distinctly unpleasant aura.

The final object consisted of a relatively intact small green crystal.

"Normally, we do our best to keep the samples as separate from each other as possible, but we have already tested these objects. These are small, low-powered gadgets that are highly unlikely to pose a threat to us. They do possess a number of peculiar properties that may be of greater interest."

The woman picked up a badge-like object made out of stone and offered it up to Ves.

Ves paused for a moment as he looked at Andrea's bare hand.

The other lab researchers always made sure to handle alien samples with robotic arms, gravitic manipulators or the gauntlets of their hazard suits.

That was why he found it odd that the Farseer was brave enough to come into direct physical contact with an alien device.

"Is it safe?"

"Probably, but we cannot rule out every possibility."

"..."

Ves eventually shrugged and simply plucked the stone badge from her hands.

Nothing dangerous happened.

He sensed no immediate threat from the small alien object. It produced no concerning spiritual fluctuations nor underwent any physical changes. It behaved no different from a random piece of rock that he could pick up on any random terrestrial planet or asteroid.

"So what is so special about this thing?"

He tried to go over the black object with his spatial senses as well as his spiritual senses, yet he still failed to find anything beyond the usual.

Not even Blinky managed to detect anything suspicious!

"Meow... meow!"

Lucky meanwhile curiously floated closer to take a sniff at it. The gem cat quickly backed off while reacting in disgust.

Whatever qualities the shaped rock might possess, it clearly fell outside the category of Lucky's food!

"The object holds no value in our hands." The Farseer admitted. "However, that does not remain the case if it ends up in the grasp of a more qualified individual. Would you please pass it on to your daughter?"

Though Ves hesitated for a second, he still chose to trust in the formation master's judgment and offered the stone badge to his energetic girl.

Andraste eagerly took hold of it, seemingly heedless of any threat the alien creation might pose!

Just a few seconds after she took hold of it, the black stone object abruptly began to show activity!

"Careful with that, Andraste!"

Strange green energy lines lit up on its surface. Their patterns were as alien and unfamiliar as other examples of deathborn technology!

Yet aside from lighting up, the stone badge did not do anything else. It simply became content to act as an unconventional light source for the time being.

"This is...?"

"We may be looking at one of the prerequisites to activating and accessing other forms of deathborn technology." The Farseer readily explained with a smile. "The temple complex was not staffed by the deathborn alone. It used to host at least tens of thousands of living subordinates of the Blackwater Summoner for whatever reasons. In order to enable them to make use of some of the devices and facilities of the temple complex, they have all received badges like this recovered specimen. It is not the most secure means of solving this problem, but it was likely developed as a temporary stopgap measure. The deathborn likely intended to introduce a more elaborate security system or get rid of native alien labor entirely in the future. We were just lucky enough to interrupt them before this could take place."

As Andraste wondrously waved the glowing stone badge around, Ves couldn't help but feel lucky that they managed to assault Hypeh-Tekas II fast enough. They wouldn't have been able to get their hands on such a convenient gadget otherwise!

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Chapter 7607 Deathtech

The badge did not look all that impressive.

However, Ves found himself unable to fully understand its mechanisms and principles. To his senses, it truly looked like a piece of stone carved into the shape of a uniform accessory.

Even when its surface began to display growing green lines, Ves found himself unable to explain why those specific places lit up. The rock composition of those glowing bits did not seem any different from the rest. He was quite certain that no esoteric green crystals had been embedded into the alien object.

"What you are looking at is one of the simplest examples of what we have come to call deathtech." The Farseer said as she stood at Andraste's side. "The badge is made out of a special stone variety that is in turn part of a collection of specially treated materials called deathstone. Much of the artifacts and debris that we have taken from the ruined temple complex consists of 6 different grades of deathstone."

Deathtech.

Deathtone.

Brand new terms to describe brand new phenomena.

Ves knew that these words had already been used a lot of times by the researchers lucky enough to work with samples of deathborn technology at this early stage.

The collies working in the labs of the Moloch and the researchers stationed in several other ships were practically making history!

"What defines deathtech?" He asked. "What are the key traits that distinguish it from other technologies?"

This was easy for the Farseer to answer.

"Let me preface my response by stating that our understanding of deathtech is hardly complete. We are merely scratching the surface of what the deathborn has introduced in an entirely different galaxy. I am convinced that their manifestations of technology are much more impressive in their home galaxy. Nonetheless, what they have shown so far possesses numerous new and interesting properties. For one, deathtech functions decently enough in normal environments, but gains a considerable amount of potency when put in an environment that is saturated with death energy."

That was easy enough to guess.

It also provided clarity to the previous battle.

"If that was the case, then deploying my Poison Willows had unintentionally neutered the temple complex when it was still intact." Ves thoughtfully responded. "That explains how

the Riot Mark III was able to descend from orbit without being greeted with stronger defensive fire. The alien facility was so big and so developed that it is hard for me to believe that its anti-air capabilities are so inferior. What truly happened is that the temporary dispersal of dark miasma had effectively deprived it of an ideal operating environment. All of that 'deathtech' suddenly behaved like a fish out of water."

The formation master shook her head. "I would not use that particular analogy to describe the circumstances at the time. Deathtech still performs adequately outside of a favorable energy environment. It likely has to be as the deathborn will not be able to utilize their equipment outside of the territories under their control. I would rather equate deathtech to amphibian organisms. Many of them fare better when swimming in water, but they can still hop on land if they need to hunt for easier or more abundant prey."

The properties of a racial technology said much about the species that created and utilized it. From this trait alone, Ves deduced that the deathborn highly preferred to operate in territories engulfed in death energies.

For example, star systems blanketed by dark miasma or old battlefields that had become steeped with alien corpses would definitely allow the deathborn to operate at their strongest!

This trait heavily limited the deathborn's ability to operate in positive energy environments. This heavily reduced their overall threat to the other races that occupied Messier 87. After all, the deathborn didn't seem all that scary once they entered the light.

This likely also saved them from getting crusaded against by a massive coalition of rival alien civilizations!

"Have you tested the badge in chambers that have been filled with death energy?"

"Yes, but only on a limited basis, sir. Those initial tests have introduced numerous unexpected surprises. Sadly, that was also when we suffered harmful accidents. Numerous pieces of deathtech are embedded with security protocols or possess interactions that are deadly to living organisms. Deathtech is safer to use by entities that are not threatened by exposure to death-attributed E energy."

Ves turned his gaze towards his daughter. "Doesn't that put my girl in danger?"

"Not exactly." The Farseer tried to reassure him. "Deathtech is made to be used by the deathborn, or more generally speaking entities that are not harmed by exposure to death energy. Prior medical examinations of your daughter have long revealed that she actually falls within this category. As a posthuman paired with a companion spirit that is aligned with the death attribute, her entire body and soul has actually acquired an immunity or a high degree of resistance against the harmful effects of death energy. More importantly, we have discovered that many deathtech devices contain several permission levels. The

higher ones are not accessible to living alien thralls. Only a genuine deathborn can activate these restricted functions."

"Are you telling me that my younger daughter can moonlight as a deathborn?"

"We believe that to be the case." The cultivator responded with a smile. "To what degree, we cannot say. That is why we have prepared this little session. We want to take a first look at what little Andraste can do when coming into contact with a number of low-risk artifacts. Depending on how thoroughly the deathborn have implemented their security measures into the deathtech devices that they have constructed in the Hypeh-Tekas System, your daughter may very well gain the equivalent of administrator access to these alien artifacts."

That clearly excited the collies. From the reports that Ves had read, the collies had largely failed to activate the artifacts in their hands. They could only look at their surface and deduce a few clues that were largely trivial in the greater scheme of things.

"Before you called upon Andraste, have you tried spoofing these devices with your own version of a deathborn?"

Andrea responded with a disappointed expression. "We tried, but our results are limited. We lack the time, resources, knowledge and expertise to produce more than a handful of marginally acceptable outcomes. Our research institutions back in friendly territories are much better staffed and equipped to study the recovered deathtech devices, but we cannot that long. The more progress we make today, the sooner we can understand this latest galactic-scale threat."

Ves truly did not like to put his daughter at risk, but there was another side to him that actually approved of this initiative.

He had imbued the seed of death inside the precursor form of Yaika for very deliberate reasons. If Andraste was destined to become a champion on the battlefield, then he wanted to ensure that she was able to thrive in the midst of death!

If deathtech could unlock new possibilities and empower her future endeavors far beyond the level of her ordinary peers, then Ves was eager to find out whether he could harness this exotic new tech base!

"Andraste."

"Yes, papa?"

"Describe to me how you feel now that you have held the badge for a while. Do you feel any danger from it? Has it conveyed any information to you? Do you feel that you can do something specific with this thing?"

His daughter spent a few seconds formulating her words. "I... don't know. I don't feel anything special about it to be honest. There might be something about these glowing bits that twigs my senses, but... that is all I can say."

"Thank you. I am glad to hear that you are still comfortable. Don't hesitate to toss it away if it becomes harmful."

The Farseer reached out to pick up a disc that was at least thrice as large as the badge.

The texture of this stone disk looked a little different. While it was made out of the same family of 'deathstone', it was clearly made out of another grade.

"This is a piece of grade 5 deathstone." She said. "Our material tests have already discovered that it is harder and more energy-dense than grade 6 deathstone. It takes a little more resources and effort to produce it. That means that this artifact is a little more important than an identity badge. We have not tried to activate it because previous experiments with similar objects triggered a security protocol that caused them to crumble into pieces."

That said much about the nature of these circular rocks. They were deliberate constructions that possessed sensitive functions. While they were somewhat disposable to the deathborn, they were still important enough to make it harder for third parties to unlock their true capabilities.

"I am curious. What grade of deathstone is the main structure of the temple complex made of?" Ves asked.

"Over 90 percent of it is made out of grade 4 deathstone. This is clearly the base material that the deathborn and their native alien collaborators have used as the baseline for their megainfrastructure project. We do not believe that this is the preferred grade for such a facility. The deathborn most definitely prefer to make their alien headquarters and ritual site out of stronger and more energetic variations of deathstone, but they are heavily constrained by their current circumstances. If we assaulted Hypeh-Tekas II a year later, I have no doubt that the entire complex would have been made out of grade 3 or maybe even grade 2 deathstone. We have already detected small proportions of these superior materials in core areas."

"Give me an example."

"The monoliths that surrounded the massive green crystal were made entirely of grade 3 deathstone. The top layer surface where the green crystal rested upon was made out of a sparing amount of grade 2 deathstone. These design choices suggest that the aliens are limited in production of superior grades of deathstone and are forced to allocate what little they have on where they are needed the most."

"I see. That makes a lot of sense."

From what Ves could deduce from this explanation, grade 6 and grade 5 deathstone probably consisted of the low-end versions of this material family. They were cheap and easy to produce en masse, but lacked the strength to serve as a qualified structural material. Anything the aliens made out of grade 6 and 5 deathstone shouldn't be too dangerous or impressive.

When Andraste slowly took hold of the stone disk, its surface began to light up in moving green patterns.

Soon enough, a combination of completely unfamiliar glyphs and more recognizable native alien text scrolled across the surface of the device!

"Is this... the alien version of a data pad?" Ves quickly guessed.

"Apparently so." The Farseer smile grew wider. "This is the first 'normal' activation of such a device. All of our previous attempts have failed for one reason or another. Let us conduct another test."

The older woman instructed the girl to let go of both the badge and the disk, before proceeding to touch the latter again.

Nothing happened. The stone disk remained inert. The alien 'data pad' refused to activate.

That disappointed the collie. "Ah. I see. Our visitors from M87 do not allow any random member of their species to access the information contained within this device. Well, this confirms one of our suspicions. The deathborn clearly take their information security seriously. Even their own kind must carry their own 'badges' or other identifiers in order to access their tech properly."

"Have you found such objects?"

"Yes, or at least we suspect so." The Farseer responded in a graver tone. "We have found badges made out of higher grades of deathstone that were presumably worn by alien corpses that have been animated by deathborn officers. These are the true backbone of the temple complex. They likely served as the overseers and controllers of the many systems and facilities of that alien site. It is too dangerous for your daughter to experiment with the help of these badges. The risks are too great."

Though Ves wanted to see what Andraste could do if she came into contact with the higher-end deathtech specimens, he largely agreed with her caution.

Whatever possible gains he could obtain from such experiments was not worth the risk of serious harm befalling his cute little girl!

Chapter 7608 The 'Simple' Acceleration Boot

The alien data pad may serve as a valuable source of information, but Ves doubted it held anything that could catch his attention. It was merely an item used by a low-level alien overseer of sorts. Such a mundane information container was unlikely to hold high-level secrets.

Nonetheless, the Farseer showed greater interest due to the possibility that it could contain a dictionary of sorts between deathborn language and the common native alien languages of the Red Ocean.

If that was true, research into deathborn artifacts could progress by a huge extent, as deciphering the language of this mysterious race opened up a lot of new options!

Ves felt happy that his daughter had unlocked real value for the researchers, but he also felt eager to move on to more exciting stuff.

The leader of the Moloch Squadron clearly sensed his growing impatience. She gently took back the stone disk and laid it back on the worktable.

The item itself only remained active for a dozen or so seconds before it returned to its previous locked and inert state.

That was to be expected. This made it a bit more inconvenient to access and study all of the information contained within. Andraste would have to cooperate frequently with the collies until the latter managed to develop a more direct workaround against the alien security measures.

The older woman next picked up a boot and invited Andraste to wear it on her left foot.

Though the alien boot looked huge in proportion to the preteen's miniscule limb, the collies had thoughtfully filled up much of the internal volume with temporary hardening slime.

It still looked ridiculous when over half of Andraste's leg disappeared inside the opening of the alien item!

"This feels really weird." Andraste helpfully commented. "What is this supposed to do?"

"Walk forward, dear."

The little girl attempted to do so. Naturally, there was no way she could maintain a fluent and natural gait with such a large object strapped to her left leg, but she did her best to move forward.

"Huh?!"

"Meow?!"

Andraste suddenly whipped forward at a much higher speed than normal!

Lucky, who still flew close to her in order to guard against any possible threats, got left behind as his charge found herself at least 10 meters away!

"Interesting." Ves straightened his back as he finally found a deathborn gadget that was worthy of study. "What has happened?"

"The deathborn temple complex had only been recently built, but already covered a large expanse of territory." The Farseer patiently explained. "Much of the main facilities can be accessed through normal transit options such as aircars and underground rails. However, that still does not help with traversing large but confining buildings. In order to increase the efficiency of the native alien guestworkers, the deathborn has provided the more important among them with 'acceleration boots'. It is not difficult to deduce how they work. Each boot is embedded with a small green crystal, which serves as a multifunctional energy reservoir. This crystal can absorb and store small amounts of death energy, which can be used to drive a mechanism that amplifies the forward motion of the wearer of the boot."

The explanation did not contain enough details to satisfy an engineer like Ves. He seriously doubted that this so-called acceleration boot was as simple as she made it sound.

Her theory at least ruled out more esoteric possibilities.

For example, Ves briefly suspected that the boot somehow accelerated the passage of time around Andraste, essentially granting her more time to traverse a set distance!

That would have made the acceleration boot at least a thousand times more valuable!

It was too much to hope that this gadget could manipulate the power of time itself. It was much more reasonable to assume that it provided a simple and straightforward kinetic boost. At most, it might do something interesting with inertia in order to prevent the wearer from losing his posture.

"Whoa! Look at how fast I have become! This thing is so clunky, yet it can make me run so much faster!"

The red-headed girl certainly enjoyed it. She happily raced from one end of the lab chamber to the other end and back again without expending a lot of energy.

That was until her accelerated motion abruptly ceased. The transition happened so suddenly that she almost fell flat on her face!

"Huh?! It stopped?!"

Andrea Vos chuckled. "As I have said, the boot only contains a small green crystal. The energy capacity of this component is not large. Once you have used it up, you can no longer power the acceleration boot."

"Aww. Can you recharge it? I want to run faster again!"

"That is rather problematic. We have yet to devise a safe means of transferring death energy from one deathcrystal to another."

"What an inventive name for those alien green crystals." Ves remarked.

"It fits the pattern." The RC cultivator shrugged her shoulders. "Besides, our team and I have already decided to set aside our conceit and keep it simple. Millions, if not billions of people will work with some form of deathtech in the years to come. We refuse to make their lives more arduous than necessary than label these recovered alien artifacts with convoluted terms."

That was a far more noble sentiment than Ves expected from her kind.

"What are the properties of deathcrystals? You called them multifunctional. Please explain why."

"As far as our research has unveiled, the green crystals are largely uniform in material composition. What distinguishes them from each other is size and shape, though the deathborn may have other ways of differentiation that we have not yet discovered. Whatever the case, it is apparent that smaller deathcrystals are quick and easy to mass produce. The disadvantages are that their energy capacities are low and they are not able to bear too many functions. The larger crystals perform much better in that regard, but they are progressively more difficult to produce. As their volume increases, they become more potent in many aspects, but that also makes them more prone to fracturing."

In short, bigger green crystals were much more powerful, but also much harder to make.

That sounded simple enough.

"What can these bigger deathcrystals actually do?" Ves asked.

"We have already made a number of deductions, but the list is far from complete. They can store energy, data, turned into energy weapon foci, form energy shields, refine and purify death energy and more. However, many of the more advanced functions cannot be done by the crystals alone. They also need to work together with supporting structures that are embedded with alien formation marks."

"I see."

That fell outside of the scope of his immediate interest. Though he was still interested in the green crystals, he had no patience to figure out how to produce them and how to shape them into functional components.

He happily left this chore for the researchers of the Red Collective!

As Ves turned back to Andraste and her comically large boot, a thought came to mind.

"Is it possible to recharge this acceleration boot by feeding it with death energy?"

"Yes. If you are able to do so, you are welcome to try."

Blinky briefly emerged from Ves' forehead. The Star Cat opened his maw and began to eject a modest quantity of death energy from the Blinkyverse.

The alien artifact eagerly absorbed the spurt of negative energy, leaving nothing behind!

"I've regained my speed!" Andraste exclaimed as she went to race back and forth again.

Unfortunately, her little sprinting session ended just 20 or so seconds after it received an injection of compatible energy.

"Too short!"

Ves also frowned. "This acceleration boot is not an energy efficient object."

"It works well in an environment that has already been desecrated by the daily sacrifice of millions of aliens and humans." The Farseer mildly responded. "It may be possible to increase their efficiency by implementing a more refined design, but the deathborn has not bothered to do so. The acceleration boot is relatively crude and low tech by their standards as well as ours."

Though the description cheapened this object, Ves actually valued it highly.

This was because red humanity had yet to figure out a way to produce a similar effect through E-technology!

Granted, humans had only recently gained the opportunity to play around with E energy radiation.

The deathborn had countless more years to discover and refine their extraordinary energy applications!

"Is it possible to figure out the working principles of this acceleration boot and adapt it to our own machines?" Ves asked. "It would be great to develop a cheap and easy means of speeding up all of our mechs and other craft. This can even be a gamechanger!"

Ves did not look down on this deathborn artifact in the slightest. Its cheapness only elevated its strategic potential.

Depending on the difficulty of this research, a small amount of investment could produce a disproportionately high yield!

Unfortunately, Andrea did not have all of the answers.

"I cannot say, sir. We lack the information to make this judgment. Studying the acceleration boot may allow us to develop a revolutionary new means of speeding up your mechs, or it may lead to a dead end where nothing useful can be gained. However, I believe that a partial success is the most likely outcome."

"What constitutes a partial success?"

The Farseer bent down next to Andraste and carefully yanked it off the little girl's feet. She lifted it up and tapped its scuffed surface.

"As long as we have deduced the means to reproduce simple deathtech products, it is theoretically possible for us to produce imitations of these acceleration boots. That unlocks the option of scaling them up so that they can either be installed onto mechs or fitted around their existing feet."

That sounded like an unwieldy solution.

Yet red humanity may not have a better way to take advantage of this alien technology.

"That still does not address the need for death energy. We cannot easily produce it, you know."

"You are wrong, sir. Death energy is always present on the battlefield. As long as our soldiers kill their enemies, the corpses of the latter will naturally provide the fuel that can activate the acceleration boot. The same applies when humans are slain."

He could see where she was going with this. "You mean, the acceleration boots will start as deadweight, but as the battle progresses and both sides begin to inflict losses on each other, the alien-derived gadgets will gradually come online."

"Exactly. Can you imagine it? The more deaths take place, the greater the quantity of mechs that are able to move faster than before. Depending on the power of the acceleration boots, this mobility advantage can be large enough to create a decisive advantage in the latter phases of a battle. Not only will your machines be able to crush their opponents, but they will also be able to pursue fleeing enemies with greater ease. Speed is precisely what they need to secure a decisive and fruitful victory!"

It could also work the other way around. If friendly human forces were on the losing side, the progressive activation of the acceleration boots could make the remaining intact forces a lot stronger and more difficult to eliminate.

This could easily mean the difference between an orderly withdrawal or a total rout!

Ves gained a much more serious appreciation of deathtech after getting introduced to this simple acceleration boot.

He realized that the recovered artifacts could each serve as potential blueprints to new and amazing design applications!

No matter whether it was possible to replace the need for death energy with more convenient forms of E energy, deathtech had the potential to inspire many wondrous products!

It was no wonder that the Red Three and other major powers were willing to pay a ridiculous amount of money just to get their hands on salvaged alien junk!

Chapter 7609 Huge Research Potential

The artifacts of the deathborn race all promised to provide their possessers a glimpse of completely foreign paradigms.

After the Farseer introduced the modest but promising acceleration boot, she began to show off a few other low-powered trinkets.

Though their immediate value was not high, they all possessed traits that made them priceless in the hands of the right researchers!

"This is a band that somehow increases a living wearer's health and damage resistance. We believe the deathborn handed it over to workers assigned to perform particularly dangerous and physically demanding work. I do have to warn you that it also comes with a complication that makes it difficult to remove."

When the woman carefully placed the band around Andraste's wrist, the grade 5 deathstone item automatically shrunk until it turned into a rather thick bracer around her skin.

Strange energies began to infuse into her body. Ves initially grew alarmed, but he resisted the urge to do anything rash when he saw that those energies did not corrupt her nor inflict any harm.

Instead, the deathstone band did exactly as described. They somehow empowered his daughter's body through completely unfamiliar means. He had never observed anything like it in the past, yet he could sense his daughter responding well to this treatment.

They conducted a few tests. Trying to prick Andraste's skin with a needle became a lot harder than before.

The skin barrier simply refused to succumb to the sharp object for a time!

It took a lot more force than Ves thought to finally create a breach!

Even then, hardly any blood leaked from the wound. The injury did not undergo accelerated healing, but the unfamiliar body-reinforcing effect practically made it inconsequential.

Of course, the reinforcement band did not remain active for long. Once the death energy stored within its relatively small deathcrystal ran out, the band ceased to fortify his daughter's body.

"Aw." His daughter visibly deflated as she already began to miss the sensation.

She hadn't felt so strong and healthy before!

It was difficult for her to accept that she wouldn't be able to enjoy this remarkable state on a permanent basis.

Though the demonstration was brief, Ves already saw many possible ways to take advantage of this deathborn artifact.

If he was able to study and deduce the working principles of this item, he could develop a crude imitation that could strengthen any organic form!

Whether it would only run on death energy or other forms of input, he didn't think it would be difficult for him to produce a batch of reinforcement bands to be worn by other humans.

If he was able to scale up the design, then he might even be able to incorporate them into his organic products, most notably his Woodsap mechs!

That would definitely delight the Terrans!

It would also be a considerable game changer to the Terran Alliance!

Given that the deathborn had initially emerged close to the borders of this colonial alliance, the Terrans were definitely bound to face organized deathborn armies in combat.

Woodsap mechs may be one of the few mechs that could fight against this unfathomable enemy more effectively.

Environments steeped in dark miasma hindered the performance of many machines, but his Woodsap mechs instead became tougher and more resilient!

This would especially be the case if Ves and the Terrans incorporated more than the reverse-engineered version of a reinforcement band into their designs!

Other deathborn applications that relied on death energy as their power source could also end up enriching the capabilities of his Woodsap mechs.

Ves already began to form preliminary plans to design a distinct variant that was explicitly designed to counter the deathborn!

As he grew eager to discover what more nifty inventions the deathborn had brought into the Red Ocean, his daughter struggled to remove the reinforcement band.

"It isn't coming off! I need help!"

"Andrea?"

"That is the complication that I have mentioned. The reinforcement bands are apparently designed to remain permanently affixed to their wearers. They cannot be removed unless you break them or resort to other extreme methods."

That made it sound as if the deathborn treated the reinforcement band wearers as slaves or disposable workers more than anything else. The design choice said much about their mentality and priorities.

"If that is the case, how do you plan to remove it from my daughter's wrist?"

"We have a theory. First, you should feed it with a small amount of death energy in order to get it operational again. Then, Yaika should attempt to command the reinforcement band to detach from Andraste's wrist."

They proceeded to do just that.

Blinky breathed a wave of death energy at the band. This caused it to make a noise and resume the process of strengthening Andraste's physique.

Meanwhile, a smaller and younger feline companion spirit stared hard at the band. Yaika tried various different ways to persuade the band to unlock.

It worked.

Both Ves and the Farseer looked a little surprised when the reinforcement band shifted its internal mechanisms and regained its previous size.

The young girl pulled the enlarged object away from her wrist now that it was no longer pressing against her skin.

"Huh. That was easy."

Ves glanced deeper at Yaika. The intangible kitten had become a lot more useful now that the deathborn had entered the scene. The companion spirit's strong affinity for death meant that she could impersonate the deathborn in several different cases!

Though he did not believe that Yaika could fool every automated system, she could still unlock access to a lot of simpler objects with less rigorous identity verification processes!

"What's next?"

"I think you will be pleasantly surprised by the effects of the next trinkets."

She introduced a bizarre deathstone battleaxe that somehow struck double when Andraste only swung the weapon once.

This showcased a hint of the exquisite E energy mastery of the deathborn race. They somehow found a way to convert pure death energy into kinetic cutting energy at a remarkably high conversion rate!

The weapon hardly generated any heat or other waste energy, which meant that this handweapon was close to perfection in this aspect alone!

The next deathstone weapon happened to light up Andraste's eyes.

The sword may have been designed according to alien customs and aesthetics, it was still a very recognizable armament to the young swordswoman.

She wielded the slightly oversized weapon with a grip that compensated for the added weight and unwieldiness.

The girl then proceeded to swing the blade in an experimental fashion. She quickly got the hang of her new weapon and slightly adjusted her stance and grip to increase the smoothness of her sword forms.

"What is special about this sword?" She questioned as she did not sense anything special so far. "It feels as if I am swinging a regular stone blade."

"As far as we have managed to find out, this sword possesses a singular effect that does not act on its wielder. Instead, you will have to hit another subject in order to observe the consequences."

Andraste immediately turned towards her father with an anticipatory glance. "Can I...?"

Ves sighed. "Use the flat side first. Don't cut into your father right away."

As a human phase lord, a weapon as small and trivial as this would never be able to pose a serious threat to his life.

That did not mean he was eager to serve as his daughter's target dummy. He especially did not want to get hit on his still-injured side!

He simply held out his right hand before Andraste slapped it with the flat of the stone blade.

"Oh." Ves almost jumped in surprise. "I definitely feel something coursing through my body. The effect is too weak, though. It only carried halfway through my arm before it ran out of power."

He felt a fleeting sense of discordance in the affected limb. As he slowly swung his arm around, he felt as if his arm was no longer moving as precisely as before. It was as if it had become a little rusty.

"The effect is stronger on regular human-sized organisms." The Farseer explained. "We already hypothesized that its strength is much diminished on a subject such as yourself, but it is good to obtain confirmation. The apparent purpose of this deathstone sword is to impair the opponent's body coordination. Any normal human-sized organism that is struck by the blade is unable to move as deftly and precise as before. It only lasts for less than half a minute, but the condition can be prolonged through repeated hits."

Andraste quickly lost interest in the deathstone sword. "This is cheating. I much prefer to beat my enemies square and fair. Anyone who wields a dishonorable sword like this can never become a true swordmaster!"

She practically threw the weapon back onto the worktable. Her disgust looked genuine. She had become far too indoctrinated in the views and principles of the Swordmaidens to treat this weapon in a positive light.

Though Ves held a very different opinion about this matter, he did not feel motivated enough to correct his daughter's mindset.

"I see that it works surprisingly well against organic beings. What about pure machines that possess no flesh or nervous systems?"

"The deathstone sword has failed to impair their performance in any measurable way." Andrea Vos responded. "We did not test the weapon extensively, though, so do not treat my answer as an absolute truth. There may also be higher-end versions of this weapon that can debilitate a wider range of opponents. We have not been able to find any during our search of the temple ruins. For now, we only managed to recover this single specimen, so what you have witnessed is the most of what you can expect."

"It is quite an interesting effect nonetheless." He admitted. "If it works on all organisms as I suspect, then the extraordinary principles are quite profound. It is definitely worth a thorough investigation. If we are able to understand this weapon well enough, we may even be able to develop a version that is effective on inorganic machines."

This was the first effect that he had seen from a deathborn artifact that negatively affected enemies.

That was valuable in a different way from the other artifacts because it did not overload the user with an additional extraordinary influence.

Instead, it solely acted on another target!

If that target was an enemy, then Ves had much less concerns about safety and risk management!

Only a few more items were left.

The Farseer briefly showed off a circlet that bestowed its wearer an augmented view of death energy.

Though Ves and the other people inside the chamber had no need of such a gadget, that did not apply to others.

To people who lacked companion spirits and had yet to make significant attainments in qi cultivation, the ability to 'see' the presence and flow of death energy in plain sight was very useful!

There should have been plenty of alien guest workers at the temple complex who needed this capability in order to do their jobs!

Unfortunately, this circlet also possessed the same annoying trait as the reinforcement band. It tightened up onto a wearer's body after activation, thereby making it difficult if not impossible to remove to most individuals!

Yaika came to the rescue again. Relying on her similarity to the deathborn, she was able to command the vision circlet to unwind and become loose again.

Ves still looked appreciatively at it. "The value of this circlet is perhaps the highest out of all of the artifacts here. Systematic E energy detection has always been a headache to our scientific community. There are currently very few lab instruments that can detect and measure E energy radiation in a reliable fashion. Their costs are prohibitive and their resolution leaves much to be desired. It is rather pathetic that we have to rely more on simulation models and feedback from accomplished qi cultivators to measure this phenomenon. This vision circlet can change all of that. As long as we understand how it works, we can unlock the key to developing a proper E energy detector or meter!"

This would definitely be a massive breakthrough!

Chapter 7610 Artifact Exchange

Ves and Andraste had become much more acquainted with the novel new technologies introduced by the deathborn.

The selection of artifacts opened their eyes and gave them a taste of deathborn creations.

If these gadgets served as a somewhat accurate representation of the deathborn tech base, then it was clear that these undead ghosts did not make use of 'conventional' metals and electronics like red humanity.

However, as much as Ves grew fond of the research potential of these devices, it was still difficult for Ves to derive much satisfaction from possessing them. Any design applications derived from studying their working principles would probably take at least a few years to become available. Research institutions always worked with timetables that stretched across years. The more ambitious studies could easily drag on for decades or in rare cases centuries!

Although red humanity undoubtedly stood to harvest a lot of gains from thoroughly studying and digesting all of these deathborn technological remains, none of that provided much help to Ves in the short term!

The most surefire way to change this was to sell the Larkinson Clan's share of the very rich spoils.

Perhaps Ves may be a little too lacking in patience to wait so long, but other groups possessed this quality in abundance.

The Larkinsons could easily sell a few container's worth of deathborn junk to the Terran Alliance or other highly interested powers.

Ves had already heard that a strong bidding war had already erupted in the background. The higher-ups had already pre-allocated specific items and other goods to different research institutions.

The scientists working at these labs all felt grateful for being able to study novel alien technological objects, but they could never have enough.

They yearned for more. The eggheads preferably wanted to obtain multiple copies of the same type of item, or many objects that possessed shared functions and characteristics.

Having multiple similar items in their possession significantly increased their research speed and efficiency.

They directly gain more redundancy, allowing them to perform deeper and riskier examinations without the fear of breaking anything irreplaceable.

The researchers would also be able to derive more insights when studying small or large variations between similar alien technological applications.

There were many examples in human civilization's history where its researchers managed to achieve technological breakthroughs within record time due to securing a rich amount of alien spoils!

A research project centered around studying a single 'acceleration boot' might drag on for a decade due to the lack of samples.

However, if the same researchers gained access to 5 more acceleration boots, their progress might accelerate so much that they could achieve the same results within a single year!

Given how much everyone was in a hurry to strengthen their forces in this day and age, it was absolutely essential

That made the current spoils distribution so problematic. Every major power wanted to obtain at least one copy out of every family of deathborn artifacts. After all, nobody knew for certain whether the total value of an acceleration boot vastly exceeded that of a reinforcement band or vice versa.

The current examinations sought to shine a light on the objects in the hopes of clarifying their secrets, but they remained far too cursory for the time being.

Much of their secrets still remained shrouded in mystery.

This was a problem because none of the big players wanted to suffer a loss because they mistakenly looked down on a hidden gem.

Therefore, logic dictated that they should secure at least one item out of every distinct category of alien devices.

Yet that sparked another problem. Once they secured a single copy, they automatically began to yearn for additional ones.

After all, it took way too much time for their research teams to complete their work with just a single specimen!

This gave the Larkinson Clan an opportunity to sell its share of the spoils at a very high premium!

"My advice to you is to sell most of your spoils." The Farseer recommended. "Your Larkinson Clan lacks the foundation to conduct proper research on these exotic alien artifacts. I have heard a few good things about your research institutions, but I am not blind to their limitations. They lack the scale, funding, heritage and talent to match the output of the larger and more established institutions. Their only advantage is that they are strong in the sectors that your clan is good at, but those are narrow specializations."

As a scientist herself, her opinion held a lot of validity. Ves knew quite well that his research institutions excelled at refining companion spirit trees and other subjects related to his work. They had also become quite decent at developing components for his current and some of his upcoming lineup of mech products.

Yet his in-house R&D institutions still had a long way to go before they could get close to matching the competence of the top research institutions of the Red Three and other major players!

Given such a disparity, Ves felt it was more worthwhile to exchange these deathborn artifacts for strategic resources.

"I do not mind a trade. Our clan isn't short on cash or phasewater as far as I know." He said. "What we do need are more exclusive knowledge, starships, shipyards, RF Warship Tokens and certain kinds of super-class materials that we can readily use to upgrade our ace mechs. We are not too concerned about our long-term future right now. It is much more important to strengthen our positioning in the short and medium term, for that we need stuff that is useful today or tomorrow."

"Since we are both a part of the Red Collective, I hope that you can give your fellow collies priority in your exchanges. Our other departments have provided significant aid to the Phase Lord Department in the past, and many of them are still doing so to this day. Multiple human phase lords have died so that we may be able to benefit from their sacrifice. The other departments are not callous enough to ask for compensation in the

value that has been lost after they have died, but that does not change the reality that each of those giants has been nurtured with the help of the entire Collective."

The Farseer attempted to guilt Ves into giving the RC a discount.

It was not easy for Ves to refuse this obligation. He had not attempted to quantify every transaction that took place, but he still possessed a broad sense of how much benefits he received and how many favors he had given in return.

He had to admit that the RC had done slightly more to Ves and the Phase Lord Department than the opposite.

Though Ves originally intended to repay this generosity on a gradual basis in the next 10 or so years, it was a lot better to square his 'debts' within a year.

"I am not opposed to trading away the bulk of these deathborn items, but I am not the only decision-maker in my clan. Other Larkinsons have bled and died to secure these blood-soaked treasures. I will need to discuss the details with my Saint Commander in order to form a decision. She should have the same read on the situation, so I do not think she will reject an exchange. The only matter of debate is choosing the artifacts that we are willing to let go. After all, many of these items hold value beyond their research potential."

The round disk contained a lot of deathborn texts and other information that could help the Larkinsons understand the language of the latest hostile alien species.

The reinforcement band was a potential life safer for Andraste.

Ketis may be able to progress her design philosophy while simultaneously advancing her swordmaster cultivation by studying the jinx sword.

Not everything had to be handed over to a research institution in order to secure an advantage!

"I shall make sure to inform the relevant people at the Astral Octagon about the intentions of your clan." Andrea Vos said. "The various departments have all accumulated knowledge and goods of high value that they would be willing to offer to you. Several of them are more than happy to teach you new E-energy applications."

Ves smiled back. "You guys would just love to trade knowledge. It is not as if you guys are losing out on much if you share some of your secrets with my clan and I. The diffusion of knowledge cannot be stopped."

Secrets had a tendency to spread no matter what. The more they spread, the harder it was to keep them bottled up. Ves believed that any research related to the deathborn artifacts was bound to spread across the new frontier in waves.

The big players would definitely gain a first-mover advantage, but their inability to protect the exclusivity of their derived technologies meant that their allies and rivals would produce imitations within a mech generation or less.

After that, the secrets could no longer be regarded as such anymore. The new technologies would gradually lose their shine as they diffused across the rest of human society. Many of them may even become commodified, which meant that they became as boring and unremarkable as FTL drives.

Of course, this process had a lot of nuances. The delay in acquiring and mastering the alien-derived technologies was crucial to many parties!

Ves could accept that he and his clan may not be able to be the first to take advantage of these amazing new technologies, but they should at least be second or third in line!

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