

## The Mech 5861

Chapter 5861 The Ideal Fusion.

The entire third round came and went without incident.

When the Dominion of Man was stuck on the defensive, the massive dreadnought pretty much behaved like a giant target.

This taught Ves that dreadnoughts, with the notable exception of the Indignation of Righteousness, were not designed to serve as defensive bulwarks. As incredible as their defenses may be, they were better used as hammers to smash their opposition by relying on brute force.

In any case, the Dominion of Man soon proved why she was one of the most formidable warships in the Red Ocean.

9 waves of lightning monsters got shredded by the dreadnought's point defenses with ease.

Even when the quantity and power of the tribulation manifestations continued to multiply with each subsequent wave, the Dominion of Man benefited from centuries if not millenia's worth of accumulation in anti-small craft measures.

As Ves continued to witness this awe-inspiring demonstration of power, he quickly figured out that Dread Captain Argile and his officers were taking this encounter very seriously.

The only weapon systems the Dominion of Man employed so far were her rapid-fire laser cannon batteries.

Ves had stuck around long enough to know that the dreadnought had way more measures to eliminate large swarms of small craft.

From more hard-hitting plasma turrets to wide-area electrical field generators, the fleeters explicitly designed their dreadnoughts to survive encounters against any sizable first-class mech force.

However, they could see the giant alien face as well as Ves. The Subjugation King was watching and studying the Dominion of Man like a hawk.

It was unnerving to look at the three eyes that glowed in the same tint as the pale green lightning bolts.

Ves always had a creepy feeling that he was staring directly into the eyes of the God King himself despite the fact that he was just looking at a projection.

More than that, anytime he tried to examine the Subjugation King, he began to brush against the powerful entity's domain.

It was anything but pleasant to come into contact with the tyrannical God King's domain.

There was so much power and depth behind it that Ves knew without a shadow of a doubt that he could get permanently lost if he ever fell into it. Illusions of chains and endless rows of immobilized alien slaves gave him a hint of what his own fate would be if the alien tyrant ever managed to converge onto his latest soul mark.

There was also another component to the Subjugation King's domain that made Ves feel sick.

It did not appear to be an intrinsic component of the alien's power. There was an air of... tarnish around the Subjugation King that suggested that the alien tyrant had fallen from grace.

The most likely theory that Ves could come up with was that the Subjugation King used to be a lot more powerful, but either got punished or committed an overreach.

It was not difficult for Ves to imagine a God King with an ego the size of galaxy biting off more than he could chew.

Perhaps his long distance conquest expedition may be part of an effort to atone for his mistakes and get rid of the tarnish that contaminated his domain.

Ves shook his head. He was speculating way too much again. It was foolish to make too many assumptions with so little information on hand.

A brief lull ensued after the Dominion of Man effortlessly defeated the 9th and final wave of the 3rd round.

Ves became impressed by how the Dominion of Man conserved her resources and employed maximum efficiency by resorting to one of her weakest weapon systems to fend off the successive waves of lightning monsters.

The dreadnought's powerful shield generators likely received enough of a reprieve to fully restore azure energy shields.

Though the tertiary laser gun batteries had accumulated heat at a speedy pace, they were still able to cool down at a prodigious speed so long as they paused their fire for a time.

The other weapon systems remained in tip-top shape as they had not fired even once.

Ves took a brief glimpse at the enormous storm clouds.

The tribulation storm hardly abated at all. It was clear that it still had plenty of power left to rain down on the resilient dreadnought.

If this event was anything like the last one that Ves experienced, the 4th round should present an entirely different challenge.

Ves wondered how extensively the God King would be able to tweak the subsequent lightning manifestations. If the Subjugation King had the ability, he should certainly try to present a threat that countered the tertiary laser cannon batteries.

"The lightning storm is releasing another type of lightning construct! It's... it's a giant lightning bird!"

Calling it a bird was a stretch. The flying creature did possess wings, but their surface lacked any sort of wings.

There were two traits that immediately stood out from this latest threat.

First, it was huge.

The tribulation storm only spat out a single creature this time, but it had definitely concentrated all of its power into this lightning construct.

Second, the 'lightning bird' did not appear to be slow at all. As soon as it began to flap its prodigious wings made out of green lightning, it set off from its position and dove straight at the Dominion of Man at a speed that surpassed most first-class multipurpose mechs!

Of course, the tertiary laser cannon batteries had opened fire on the lightning bird as soon as possible.

Though the multitude of transphasic hyper laser beams were definitely chipping away at the massive lightning body, the collective attacks hardly seemed to faze the lightning bird.

It did not even matter that none of the laser beams missed or that many of them concentrated on the same sections.

Their individual firepower was too weak to repel this kind of opponent!

Ves and many other fleeters winced as the lightning bird followed a straight trajectory that ended up in a powerful collision against the energy shields facing the creature!

The segmented azure energy shield did a remarkable job at repelling this attack, but it clearly looked as if it had seen better days.

"The attack has reduced the integrity of this segment by around 35 percent. The shield generator is restoring the active energy barrier as soon as possible, but we cannot let it get hit in quick succession by progressively more powerful lightning birds."

"Our tertiary transphasic laser cannon batteries have failed to hinder the lightning bird. Their ability to track fast-moving targets is commendable, but their absolute firepower leaves much to be desired."

"The next lightning bird emerging from the storm has considerably higher energy readings!"

The dread captain issued a new set of instructions from his imposing command seat. "Intercept the bird with our secondary energy weapon batteries! Start with the laser cannons and employ our plasma cannons if necessary. Do not employ our kinetic, missile, gravitic and other weapons unless instructed. We need to expose as little of our capabilities as possible."

"What of our tertiary gun batteries?"

"Silence them and give them time to recover. It is probable that we will need their firepower once more." Dread Captain Argile said.

In contrast to the tertiary gun batteries, the secondary ones were large enough to make them less suitable to be employed against swarms of nimble mechs.

They were instead designed to pummel sub-capital ships in various different ways. Their tracking speeds were fast enough to keep up with most starship hulls, and their firepower was just enough to present a nice balance between impact and firing rate.

Dozens of thicker and stronger laser beams struck the lightning bird in an instant.

Unfortunately, the relatively short distance between the storm clouds and the dreadnought meant that the secondary gun batteries only had an opportunity to fire a single salvo before the damaged bird crashed against the energy barriers of the dreadnought!

At least the straight-line trajectory of the lightning bird prevented it from inflicting damage on the damaged segmented energy shield. The Dominion of Man had already spun her hull in order to present an undamaged side to the tribulation storm.

"The eruption of energy released by the lightning bird is 63 percent weaker than the previous one. Our last attack volley must have dissipated much of its offensive power."

"We must increase our distance from the storm clouds. Distance is our ally. Our warship fares better when she is at least tens of thousands of kilometers away from the storm."

"We can't run from this storm! We have already moved as far away as we are allowed to do so. Retreating any further will only cause the storm clouds to follow our ship."

This was an unpleasant realization. The relatively close distance between the tribulation storm and the Dominion of Man prevented the latter from utilizing her immense range advantage to the fullest.

The third lightning beast was emerging out of the portal.

This time, the Dominion of Man opened fire the instant the 'beak' of the tribulation manifestation emerged from the clouds.

A full blast of laser beams struck the lightning bird when it had yet to launch itself towards the Dominion of Man.

Already, the barrage of strikes had damaged much of the lightning bird's wings.

That did not stop the battered but unbroken creature from diving straight at the Dominion of Man once again!

With the secondary laser cannon batteries still requiring a bit more time to release another full-powered transphasic hyper laser beam salvo, the dreadnought finally decided to open fire with another set of weapon systems!

Plasma bolts rapidly launched from gun batteries that previously remained dormant.

Each of these plasma bolts had the power to vaporize and melt entire second-class starships with a single hit.

When a multitude of them struck the lightning bird in the middle of its rapid flight, the entire construct instantly burst apart!

"Our plasma bolts have proven to be considerably more effective against the lightning manifestations!"

"As long as the lightning manifestations travel in a straight line, we can ensure 100 percent accuracy from our secondary weapon batteries."

It was at this time that the Subjugation King showed a bit of emotion in his enormous expression.

"Be careful! The next wave may be different!"

This time, the bird did not emerge right on top of the dreadnought, but instead a hundred kilometers away.

If this was an attempt to catch the Dominion of Man off-guard, it failed right away as many of the secondary gun batteries only had to turn their weapon mounts a little bit before they opened fire at the correct coordinates!

Each laser beam struck the lightning bird in the distance!

Though the larger and more formidable tribulation manifestation was able to accelerate much faster than its predecessors, that still did not prevent the secondary plasma cannons from accurately striking the poor bird before it had crossed the half-way mark!

The plasma bolts managed to destroy the bird with a bit of power left to spare.

"Good job, but do not get complacent. It is taking more and more damage to put these birds down."

Since distance clearly did not give these lightning birds any advantages, the next wave saw them appear directly above the Dominion of Man again.

This time, two smaller but still fairly formidable lightning birds emerged!

The Dominion of Man smacked both of them down. The dreadnought had intelligently split up her firepower in order to inflict just enough damage to put both birds down without any wasted energy!

"Damn..."

Ves felt incredibly grateful that the Red Fleet's dreadnoughts had never been deployed against human forces, at least that he knew of. It wasn't just their overwhelming firepower that frightened him. Their efficiency was astounding!

This was why the Red Fleet invested a disproportionate amount of resources into the development of AI, both sentient and non-sentient. It was a clever way of boosting the effective combat power of a warship without piling more expensive resources onto their hulls.

Dreadnoughts such as the Dominion of Man represented the Red Fleet's ideal fusion between absolute power and perfect control, especially after Ves managed to upgrade the Brain Trust!

## Chapter 5862 Opening Gaps

The successive victories did much to buoy the confidence of the crew.

Though the elite fleters serving on the dreadnoughts possessed so much discipline that they would never crumble in battle, they were still affected by morale.

Right now, the Dominion of Man proved through her amazing performance how she was utterly able to dominate the battlefield.

While it was rather annoying that her best and most distinctive advantages could not be employed in this space battle, her ordinary warship armaments were still far superior than that of any battleship.

The more lightning waves the Dominion of Man crushed, the more the crew increased their faith in their starship.

This had several important consequences.

More and more crew members began to resonate with the dreadnought. Their confidence and belief in the Dominion of Man increased so much that the living spark quietly presented them with the offer to form a permanent pact.

Not all fleeters who received this offer fully understood the implications of this pact.

A few of them found it difficult to take it seriously at all. Despite the huge number of Dread Marines and other spacers receiving this offer, none of them had reported what had happened.

Those who formed a permanent bond with the Dominion of Man did not need to communicate with each other in order to sense their own kin.

It was not necessary for them to share what happened to their unenlightened colleagues.

This was why thousands of crew members reacted with surprise when the living starship asked them to make a life-changing decision.

Those who refused the offer may regret the decision they made later on. Unfortunately, the Dominion of Man refused to give the same offer twice.

The ship demanded utter devotion and obedience from her Bloodfire servants.

A good proportion of crew members steadily joined up with the living dreadnought. Each human that chose to become a part of the mighty vessel advanced her evolution just a bit further.

The fire energy generated by the Spark Reactor advanced its grip onto the hull of the immense warship and continued to refine the structure and many of her systems at a lower intensity.

It would have been great if the Dominion of Man could let this process happen for a few days or weeks, but the lightning tribulation refused to give the offending warship any chance to increase her performance any further!

As Ves briefly shifted his attention away from his immediate concerns and took a quick look at the fleeters who were doing their best to keep the Brain Trust in optimal condition, he began to notice a few issues.

The Dominion of Man had undergone a large amount of changes, but that did not mean that every problem magically got fixed by the fire refinement process.

The new and improved Brain Trust managed to form an unprecedented powerful Super Brain, and seemed to be so much better at targeting hostile elements that the fleeters serving on the other dreadnoughts would probably grow jealous that their own AI systems failed to match the Dominion of Man's performance!

Yet... Ves expected more from the Super Brain. Minds driven by A-grade genetic aptitudes were already amazing enough. S-grade genetic aptitude should have been capable of doing a lot more, or else the Chosen Human wouldn't have been able to become one of the foremost god pilots in record time!

"There is a missing link. What am I overlooking?"

Ves soon noticed that the ancestral spirit that he had just created was not merging well enough with the living starship.

The two elements possessed many differences and that hindered them from fusing any further.

As Caramond continued to absorb a huge amount of spiritual feedback from countless different sources, the newly created entity was rapidly approaching the threshold of True God.

The problem was that gathering spiritual feedback from so many different groups of people led to a lot of mixed opinions!

Caramond was becoming more bloated with complex and irrelevant meanings. This weakened his core domain and made it difficult for him to concentrate on his core purpose.

While Ves accounted for this possibility, he did not expect the problem to be so bad. He had hoped that his attachment to the Dominion of Man would narrow his focus.

"There is a missing link."

He suddenly widened his eyes. "Damn! The ship isn't being strengthened by lightning!"

When he looked back at the projected feed, he saw that the secondary armaments of the Dominion of Man eliminated yet another set of lightning birds before they ever came close to touching the dreadnought.

While it was clearly nice to prevent the ship from incurring any damage, a lightning tribulation encompassed far more than trying to grind down a powerful new creation.

"Dread captain!" Ves called as he reopened his communication channel with the master of the ship. "This is important! I am not sure whether headquarters have already clued you in, but it is not wise to keep repelling the incoming attacks with energy barriers. You need to let in at least a portion of the lightning attacks in order to finalize the transformation of the Dominion of Man. A lightning tribulation is a punishment as well as a reward. As long as our vessel can withstand the power of destruction, the power of creation will come to strengthen whatever manages to survive. This is essential to allowing the Dominion of Man to survive the final and most devastating strikes!"

"The advice we have received from numerous sources... corroborate your message. We are reluctant to expose our hull to the lightning storm, especially since it appears to be directed by an intelligent alien adversary. We fear that the lightning tribulation will try to create breaches that we cannot close, or attempt to strike at our azure energy shield generators and power reactors directly. We cannot afford to lose more than a handful of those generators, because any localized weakness will create an opening that can mean the downfall of the Dominion of Man."

"We cannot be timid at this time!" Ves shouted! "I have performed the mental calculations on the escalating power of this lightning storm. It will only take a couple more rounds for the storm to be able to penetrate through the azure energy shields by relying on brute force. Isn't the hull of a dreadnought among the toughest of any warship? You need to put your faith in them, because that is the only way that we will get rewarded in return. Make the right call, dread captain. Don't act too late."

Dread Captain Argile eventually made the right choice. Though he would have never made this decision if his dreadnought confronted the native aliens and so on, tribulation storms were different.

They were crucibles that tested cultivators or their creations, and rewarded them with greater strength as long as they proved their worth.

While Ves would have thought that transphasic energy shields shouldn't block the creation energies that were spilling everywhere after the lightning manifestations had burst apart, it appeared that they were a little too good at their jobs.

It was handy to confirm that transphasic energy shields, especially ones empowered by water-attributed E energy, were effective against tribulation lightning.

Yet it was exactly because of this reason that they needed to be removed.

Fortunately, only twenty seconds passed before the dread captain finally made the risky decision to drop a part of the azure energy shields.

The ship did not remove all of her energy barriers at once. Instead, the crew intelligently opened a few gaps that made it a lot easier to direct incoming attacks. Every other section remained covered by multiple layers of segmented energy shields.

Four lightning birds emerged from the storm clouds and dove forward at the same time!

Each of them happened to target one of the gaps, ensuring that they would not converge on a single point.

Meanwhile, the secondary energy cannon batteries fired at the lightning birds in an attempt to reduce their damage potential.

All four lightning birds lost roughly half of their power before they collided along the length of the hull at once!

The ship did not even shake as four explosions rocked the thick surface layers.

When the light show had passed, the live feed revealed that the hull had received nothing more than scorch marks and a few shallow pits!

The hull of the Dominion of Man was too tough!

Ves expected this result, but it was still nice to see that her physical defenses were more than adequate enough to endure this impact.

"Please check to see whether the portions struck by the lightning birds have strengthened in any way."

"That will take time to verify."

Ves only asked because he wanted to be certain of what happened. While it was difficult to determine whether the boost granted by the release of creation energy had managed to affect the entire hull, he at least expected the affected hull plating to turn a bit tougher than before!

The only serious consequence to this attack wave was that a number of surface modules incurred a bit more damage, but the fleeters already had a response for that. A large number of bots emerged from different hatches and rapidly began to repair or replace broken sensor arrays and such.

In the meantime, the Dominion of Man spun her enormous hull at a 90 degree angle in order to present an undamaged side towards the lightning tribulation.

More lightning birds struck the hull of the dreadnought. This time, the secondary gun batteries inflicted less overall damage to the lightning birds as the fleeters were confident they lacked the power to inflict serious damage to the warship.

Soon enough, the Dominion of Man survived the 4th round without suffering any apparent permanent damage.



"That is 36 strikes in total." Ves summed up. "The fifth round is beginning soon. Get ready to face the unexpected. I don't like the look of that alien."

While the Subjugation King did not exactly possess a humanoid face, Ves believed he was able to perceive a bit of interest as well as challenge.

Soon enough, the lighting tribulation started the 5th round by presenting a completely different threat than before!

A tarnished green lightning bolt threaded through one of the gaps in the energy shield envelope and struck the exposed hull of the Dominion of Man!

Instead of inflicting damage on the surface, the lightning bolt actually broke apart into an army of lightning soldiers.

Yes, soldiers!

Thousands of them appeared at once. Each of them appeared to be larger than a Medium Dread Marine, and all of them radiated a decent amount of power!

Tertiary gun turrets instantly swiveled around and began to cut down the lightning soldiers.

The soldiers blocked the attacks!

Each of them conjured thick shields made of condensed lightning bolts, if that was even possible.

Though the shields wouldn't last forever, they bought enough time for the soldiers to hide behind cover and begin to breach the hull.

Most of their attempts failed to scratch the extremely thick and resilient transphasic hyper armor plating, but there were a number of special soldiers that displayed a unique capability.

They began to drop seeds that grew into plants.

These plants grew at a rapid rate as they drained all of the E energy from the environment as well as the hyper materials used to strengthen the hull plating!

"These lightning plants are weakening the hull! What is worse is that they are starting to spread at an accelerated rate! We need to stop them before it is too late!"

The tertiary gun turrets weren't cutting it anymore. There was only one proper response to this invasion.

Several flashes appeared on the side.

An entire division of Dread Marines had teleported on the exterior of the hull!

The soldiers had been spoiling for a fight, and now they finally got their wish!

Their opening salvo blasted away over a hundred lightning soldiers!

Chapter 5863 War Games

Out of all the possible events that could happen during this ongoing tribulation event, Ves and many other people never expected an infantry force to land on the exterior of the Dominion of Man!

While the storm clouds gathered above the dreadnought continued to roil, thousands of lightning creatures had descended and begun to launch an assault on the outer layers of the vessel.

Of course, a seemingly primitive infantry force that was armed with spears, swords, hammers and other archaic weapons did not possess any obvious sieging or armor breaching capabilities.

It was absurd to think that any infantry force could penetrate hull plating that was easily dozens if not hundreds of meters thick!

The Dominion of Man was not as tough as the likes of the Indignation of Righteousness, but she was still designed to withstand attacks from the most powerful threats imaginable. Neither god mechs nor other dreadnoughts ought to be able to punch through her titanic armor belt with ease!

Yet that did not mean that the infantry force was harmless. Not only were they powerful enough to wreck the weaker and more exposed surface modules, they were also accompanied by alien specialists who planted all sorts of energy seeds onto the surface.

Once these seeds began to sprout, a network of E energy-draining plants began to spread across the surface.

Not only did they absorb any E energy in the vicinity to fuel their rapid growth, but they also possessed the capability to drain hyper materials and compromise the integrity of other materials!

Even though the latter effect took a lot of time to produce results, the implications to the dreadnought were horrific.

The plants continued to grow as they sucked more energy from the environment as well as the hull, thereby becoming more effective as well. Preliminary calculations showed that if this pattern continued, they would eventually be able to grow to the size of mechs by the time they engulfed the entire hull!

Even if the tertiary and secondary gun batteries were able to scour large portions of the hull of these energy plants, there were still a lot of sections that could not easily be cleaned up due to obstacles in the way.

While the Dominion of Man could fire a lot of missiles to clean up these blind spots, there were only a finite amount of them available. The collateral damage would also be considerable.

This was why Dread Captain Volkert Argile quickly resorted to deploying his Dread Marines to the contested site.

Despite being outnumbered 5 to 1, the Dread Marines who teleported a short distance away from the swarm of lightning soldiers blasted into their opposition with an arsenal of armor-mounted weaponry!

The Medium and Heavy Dread Armors worn by the more assault-oriented units of this regiment primarily carried offensive loadouts.

Many of their modules consisted of plasma cannons, positron beam cannons, back-mounted missile launchers and more.

The firepower was devastating for an infantry force.

Each and every well-trained Dread Marine coordinated their fire. Every fire team focused their fire on the more vulnerable looking lightning soldiers.

Since the targets in question did not deploy any lightning shields, the tarnished green lightning apparitions quickly blew apart from all of the attacks!

Even as hundreds of lightning warriors perished in quick succession, the intruders did not remain idle.

They fought back.

A large contingent of lightning spear soldiers stayed behind and launched lightning bolts at the Dread Marines. The damage inflicted by these lightning bolts was surprisingly high, mostly because of the destruction energy attached to them. Yet the potent azure energy shield generators integrated into every Dread Armor allowed the human soldiers to resist the tribulation lightning attacks for a time.

Surprisingly enough, the lightning spear warriors exhibited coordination that was close to the standards of an elite human infantry force.

Like the Dread Marines, they concentrated their fire and sought to overwhelm the azure energy shields and armor plating of individual targets.

The lightning spear warriors were clever enough to focus on the Dread Marines that carried fancier loadouts, displayed a bit more color on their Dread Armors or clearly acted like commanding officers!

One Dread Captain almost yelped as hundreds of lightning bolts struck his azure energy shield from many different directions!

The concentrated strike was so overwhelming that the azure energy shield shattered in an instant!

Amazingly enough, the Dread Armor held, though not without incurring serious damage. Tribulation lightning fried many components and vaporized the outer armor layer.

The fact that the frontal plating still held was a testament of the excellent alloys used to produce the Dread Armor. The Common Fleet Alliance and subsequently the Red Fleet invested an immense amount of resources to develop the best infantry equipment possible.

All of that clearly paid off as the Dread Captain and other targets marked for death relied on their excellent protection to retreat behind other Dread Marines or receive additional protection in the form of remote azure energy shields.

Support-oriented Heavy Dread Marines quickly responded to the enemy tactic by providing additional protection while generating various kinds of interference.

Dust particles began to spread from the marine force, making it harder for outsiders to discern their positions.

Jamming fields came online that could disturb all manner of electronic signals.

Grenades landed amidst the concentration of lightning warriors before generating gravitic waves that were designed to disorient nearby hostiles.

None of these interference methods seemed to produce any noticeable effect. The lightning infantry soldiers did not appear to employ any conventional technology. They fought like an army of cultivators who relied on a combination of personal strength and augmented equipment.

The assault regiment did not possess a lot of other means that could effectively debilitate such an infantry force. Their only means of defeating the invaders was to demolish them with their formidable arsenal.

"Keep firing! We must keep up the pressure!"

"Concentrate fire on their plant-growing 'shamans'! Do not let them spread more seeds!"

The Dread Marines seemed well-equipped to overpower the lightning soldiers. Though their adversaries tried their best to take down individual Dread Marines through focused fire, the human troopers were just too damn skilled and well-equipped to suffer any serious losses.

The lightning spear warriors ultimately did not possess the firepower necessary to inflict any permanent casualties onto the Dread Marines.

At most, they suppress and force individual Dread Marines to retreat from the front and move back to the rear where specialized bots and support troops rapidly repaired all of the battle damage.

However, the confrontation soon took on another dimension as a horde of bipedal lightning warriors armed with a variety of swords, hammers, shields and more exotic alien weapons managed to close the distance!

"Incoming melee shock troopers!"

The Dread Marines had already formed a defensive line in anticipation of meeting this obvious charge.

The powerful troopers had deployed temporary barricades that had been teleported into place or erected from specific sections of the hull.

The barricades weren't meant to form a total blockade. That would only cause the lightning shock troopers to go around.

It was better to funnel these lightning soldiers into a prepared battle line.

Rows of Medium Dread Marines armed with a variety of melee and ranged weapons prepared to meet the incoming charge.

Just before the enemy shock troopers managed to crash into the half-barricades, a series of mines, laser beams, kinetic projectiles, plasma bolts and explosive shells struck their formation!

Hundreds of lightning warriors perished despite their lightning shield protection!

Others incurred severe damage that slowed or stopped their advance.

Though not all of the enemy shock troopers suffered any serious harm, the concentrated attacks nonetheless managed to break up the charge and reduce their momentum!

A Dread Captain raised his giant sword and let loose a battle cry!

"Show these lightning aliens how true humans fight!"

"For Humanity!"

"Dread our wrath!"

The subsequent collision was glorious.

Ves along with anyone else who had the privilege to watch the feed at their stations grew relieved to see that the Dread Marines gained the upper hand.

The Dread Marines at the front wielded a variety of plasma swords, electrified spears, gravitic hammers and other melee armaments that clashed against the weapons of the enemy shock troopers and frequently overpowered them outright!

The shock troopers were no slouches, though. Their weapons hit hard and frequently stressed the azure energy shields protecting the individual dread marines.

Still, even if a bunch of aliens managed to gang up on a Dread Marine and overwhelm the latter's azure energy shield, the trooper quickly pulled back and allowed a Dread Marine in the second row to plug up the gap!

This ensured that the battle line remained strong and cohesive.

For whatever reason, the two infantry forces did not try to outflank each other. Neither were they eager to lift off the surface of the hull and attack their opponents from above.

Ves gradually narrowed his eyes. He increasingly felt as if he was watching a wargame as opposed to a serious battle.

It did not take much time for him to figure out what was truly going on. He looked at the giant face made out of storm clouds and sensed a certain degree of curiosity from the powerful alien.

The Subjugation King... sought to gather more intelligence. He must have deliberately sent out Messier 87's equivalent of an infantry force in order to draw out the Dread Marines and see how these proud human soldiers fought.

However, this did not come without a cost. Not only did the tribulation soldiers expose a lot about the infantry combat doctrine of at least one alien civilization from Messier 87, their deaths also released small explosions that bathed the surrounding Dread Marines as well the nearby hull section with creation energy!

Unfortunately for the Dread Marines, their active azure energy shields blocked much of this beneficial effect!

Ves reopened his communication link with the master of the Dominion of Man.

"I am not sure whether you have already figured it out, but the big alien watching from above possesses a keen interest in learning how our infantry forces fight."

"Let them see." The Dread Captain dismissively said. "We are not that afraid of exposure. It is more crucial for us to understand the enemy from beyond this dwarf galaxy. Our headquarters have already gathered a wealth of useful data from this ongoing... clash."

"The next waves are only going to get larger and tougher."

"That is good. We have many more Dread Marines in reserve. We do not fear a pure infantry battle. We have many powerful special units in reserve that are equipped with much heavier arsenals. If that is not enough, we can employ more direct measures to eliminate the foreign threats."

The dread captain sounded a bit too overconfident. Ves did not think that the later waves of this round could easily be felled, particularly because a force of cultivators tended to emphasize quality over quantity.

However, that was a concern for later.

"By the way, the defeated lightning soldiers always release bursts of beneficial energy. They are strengthening the hull underneath just fine, but they can't get to the Dread Marines because their azure energy shields get in the way. I highly advise you to command the Dread Marines to deactivate their energy shields unless they are in danger."

"Good observation, professor. Our analysis suggests that our Dread Marines will begin to suffer real casualties, but... but the gains may be worth it. We have already reached the limit on how extensively we can improve the performance of our Dread Armors. Bathing in tribulation energy may be the push they need to increase their superiority even further."

The Dread Marines had already begun to drop their azure energy shields.

Of course, they also started to incur real damage to their thick armor plating, but the soldiers all knew the risks.

The frequent lightning discharges began to spread across the exposed Dread Armors and already began to strengthen them in mysterious ways.

#### Chapter 5864 In the Action

It was only a matter of time before the first lightning soldier army got exterminated.

They were too weak for their advantage in numbers to gain the upper hand. Their 'tech' was rather interesting, but ultimately not equipped to pose a credible threat against a reasonable number of Dread Marines.

That did not mean the lightning soldiers were weak in an absolute sense.

A regular first-class infantry troop would have suffered a lot more casualties if it tried to defeat a larger force of lightning soldiers!

The only reason why the lightning soldier army got steamrolled was because the Dominion of Man was the best troop carrier of red humanity.

Not only was the dreadnought capable of deploying hundreds of thousands more Dread Marines, each and every single combatant had access to the best possible infantry gear!

Ves and many other people who were paying attention to this battle already figured out that if the invaders from Messier 87 deployed their alien footsoldiers against practically any other human infantry force, the latter was bound to have a much harder time!

There was only one Dread Marine Corps. Part of the reason why these heavily armed troops were so strong was because their Dread Armors originally contained a tiny infusion of power from the Spark Reactor.

Recent events caused the Dread Armors to become even stronger extensions of the source of fire energy within the Dominion of Man.

At most, the other 7 or so dreadnoughts should be able to field their own contingent of Dread Marines, but that was the limit.

Any other infantry force could only repel what could arguably be considered the weakest alien troops by relying on superior numbers and fixed defenses whenever possible.

Of course, Ves could think of an even better solution.

Mechs.

Red humanity preferred to utilize mechs a lot more than infantry to fight its battles. Ves remained confident that a decent force of mechs should easily be able to wipe out these lightning soldiers with ease.

The problem was what came next. There were 8 more waves of infantry invasions to go, and each one that came next would doubtlessly present greater challenges.

Ves narrowed his eyes. As the Dread Marines earned their first victory, he could sense the pride and elation spreading from the crew.

Combined with all of the tribulation energies released by the defeated lightning soldiers, the entire Dominion of Man became buoyed by this victory.

Unlike the other challenges, the deployment of hostile infantry forces finally gave the dreadnought an opportunity to demonstrate her best strengths.

A huge number of Dread Marines on standby were ready and eager to be deployed on the surface of the hull. Each of them wanted to use their own arms to vanquish the exotic opposition and absorb the strange lightning energy that somehow made their Dread Armors tougher and more perfect than ever before!

Even Ves thought about participating.

Many of the victories so far hadn't been significant enough to channel significant quantities of tribulation lightning to the Brain Trust.

Ves figured that this was one of the disadvantages of trying to turn a huge dreadnought into a living warship. Until the tribulation storm ramped up the power of its attacks a lot more, it was unrealistic for the lightning strikes to strengthen the entire hull of the Dominion of Man.

All of this meant that only the elements that got into more direct contact with the tribulation manifestations reaped the rewards for the time being.

After a bit of hesitation, Ves made up his mind.

He reopened his communication link to the Dread Captain.

"Speak."

"I have a request, captain. I want you to teleport me to the surface. Let me fight alongside your Dread Marines."

"...There are many reasons why I cannot allow you to do that. You are a mech designer. Let our Dread Marines do what they do best without needing to be concerned about protecting a VIP from harm. You are not trained in combat. You do not understand our tactics and protocols. Even if you make use of your mysterious phase lord abilities, you are more likely to pose a hindrance to our troops."

"This is important!" Ves shouted back! "I need to gain access to the tribulation energies released from the defeat of all of those lightning soldiers. They are part of the reason why I have grown so quickly. I just need to be close enough to receive a lightning baptism. Rest assured that I have no intentions of charging forward. I can fight just as well by maintaining a healthy distance from the enemy lightning soldiers. I can stay in the rear and allow a troop of Dread Marines to serve as my

bodyguard. Let me fight. These are the enemies of tomorrow. The experiences I gain from these encounters will allow me to develop much more effective counters against the most potent fighting methods of our future adversaries."

Volkert Argile still sounded resistant. "According to input from multiple sources including yourself, the alien sovereign who 'hijacked' this tribulation storm is using it to scout his future opposition. We are trying to gather intelligence on our upcoming enemies as well. Information has become the golden currency in this preliminary conflict. The 5th round is shaping up to become an opportunity for both sides to test the mettle of their infantry forces against each other. I would rather sacrifice entire divisions of Dread Marines than allow you to expose a rich array of fighting methods representative of Messier 87."

Ves wanted to gnash his teeth!

"I will do my best to limit my fighting capabilities. I will refrain from fighting like a phase lord. I can still fight like a cultivator. I won't be showing off any tricks that are particularly new or innovative to the natives of the nearby supermassive galaxy. Time is running out. The next wave is coming soon. I would like to set myself up before they arrive."

"...Very well. You shall have your wish." The dread captain eventually relented. "Our Rubicon Spatial Transfer System can teleport you to the headquarters company of the 34th Assault Regiment in a moment. You can coordinate your actions with Colonel Desiree Franklin. Please keep in mind that the Rubicon will continue to maintain a teleportation lock on you at all times. We will teleport you back to the Brain Trust if we deem it necessary to keep you alive and unharmed."

"Fine. I can accept that. I understand the need for caution."

"It is good that you do. Above all else, do not get in the way of our Dread Marines."

Ves only had enough time to say goodbye to Sigrund before he 'crossed the Rubicon', as the crew of the Dominion of Man called the teleportation process.

There were huge differences between conventional teleporation systems and the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System.

The use of cutting-edge high technologies and super-class materials such as EE-343F-00334R made the teleportation interval virtually instant.

The stability and safety factor were also higher, which helped a lot in reducing the sense of sickness and disorientation that people experienced after getting displaced.

Ves instantly appeared at an open space amidst a large group of Dread Marines in the rear.

Heavy Dread Marines stood guard on multiple sides. Each of them possessed a wealth of defensive solutions that allowed them to block any incoming attacks.

Other Dread Marines provided support by coordinating different units, arranging field repairs and communicating with the staff situated deep inside the Dominion of Man.

"Professor Larkinson. I have received word of your insistence of participating in the fighting." A female officer wearing a subtle version of Officer Dread Armor walked up to the new arrival with magnetic boots clamping onto the hull. "How do you intend to fight? I hope you do not grow into a giant. It will require much greater effort to shield you from damage if that happens."



Ves considered numerous options, but he decided to make use of his two high-level artifacts.

He retrieved the Oceancaller that was clinging on the back of his Unending Regalia.

"I will stay far enough in the rear while playing my flute. I can manipulate a lot of water energy with this gadget."

"How do you intend to play a flute when you are wearing a helmet? Sound does not even transmit in space."

"It's complicated."

To her credit, Colonel Franklin did not ask any further. She just assumed that the clever mech designer and cultivator knew what he was doing.

"Do not try to be the hero today. The lightning soldiers are not completely mindless. They have demonstrated rudimentary signs of initiative and adaptation. You will turn into a priority target if your contributions are great enough. I have assigned additional protective units to guard you, but we cannot guard you against all attacks, especially if the subsequent waves introduce more abnormal enemy types."

"I will make sure to retreat if that is the case."

The second wave of the current round had arrived.

This time, two lightning bolts shot out from the tribulation storm and deposited two different groups of lightning soldiers!

"Their species are entirely different!"

"One of the two lightning soldier divisions has taken flight! They appear to be made up of winged insects with horns designed for impalement!"

"Our tertiary gun batteries are swatting them down like flies!"

"The winged insects have descended down to the surface again. They have become considerably more resistant towards damage now that they are coordinating their defenses, but enough of our tertiary gun batteries are still able to whittle down their numbers."

"Don't let our point defenses have all of the fun. Tell our command to save them for our troops."

"What of the other enemy division?"

"The second lightning soldier division is made up of worms. Their movements are relatively slow, but they look large enough to swallow a Medium Dread Marine whole. They are not too resistant towards damage, but regenerate abnormally quickly. If we cannot eliminate them at once, they will return to health in a matter of seconds!"

While the 34th Assault Regiment was capable of eliminating one of the enemy divisions with relative ease, it was a lot harder to defeat both of them at once.

This was especially the case when the two enemy troops pincer the human soldiers!

The Dominion of Man teleported another regiment over.

"The 88th Bombardment Regiment stands ready to shell the invaders."

Different from the 34th Assault Regiment, the new arrivals primarily consisted of Medium and Heavy Dread Marines equipped with explosive ordnance.

They opened fire at the worms as soon as possible.

Though the bombardment did not do a good job at eliminating the lightning worms outright, the frequent explosions still managed to delay and stall the injured creatures. Their formation turned increasingly more ragged due to all of this harassment!

Plenty of support units, bodyguard units and ammunition containers accompanied the bombardment units. They made sure the 88th Bombardment Regiment could keep their adversaries under siege.

While the Dread Marines appeared to have the situation under control for the time being, Ves already noticed that it would be a lot harder to fend off these enemies once they came close enough.

He did not know which group of enemies he should attack first.

"The worms have a good chance of breaking our lines." Colonel Franklin said when she had an opportunity to address Ves. "Do what you can to bring them into further disarray. The more disorganized the worms, the easier it is to pick them off on an individual basis."

Ves nodded. "Understood."

His helmet retracted into the collar of his Unending Regalia.

Despite the sudden exposure to vacuum, Ves did not suffer from exposure to vacuum. This was one of the perks of becoming a phase lord.

He lifted his Oceancaller to his lips and got ready to blow into his flute with wind-attributed E energy.

Currents began to form in the distance.

Chapter 5865 Tricky Lightning Beasts

War had come to the Dominion of Man.

The dreadnought's hull was so immense that her entire surface could function as a battlefield unto itself.

At this moment, only a relatively small portion of the surface had come under siege.

Compared to the first wave of enemies, the second wave was a lot trickier.

Twice as many lightning soldiers appeared this time, though it was doubtful that they were actually sapient and civilized.

There was nothing about the large worms and the flying beetles that suggested that they were intelligent beings.

The bloodlust and single-minded determination radiating from the enemies suggested that they were bioengineered beasts that were purely bred for war.

Intelligent or not, Ves did not think that the lightning beasts were any weaker than the army of bipeds that fought before!

The worms demonstrated absurd regeneration capabilities. Even when they got hit by five explosive shells at once, as long as more than a third of their bodies remained intact, they recovered in full in just half a minute!

The flying insects did not exhibit nearly as much regeneration ability, but they were fast, especially when they flapped their wings.

Though the horned insects did not dare to fly too high for fear of exposing themselves to an excessive amount of point defense turrets, they were still able to accelerate their flight while remaining low to the hull surface.

The insects closed in on the Dread Marines a lot faster as a result. The giant creatures seemed to possess greater mass than a Medium Dread Marine, so they built up plenty of momentum behind their charges.

"Brace yourselves!"

"Front row, activate your azure energy shields!"

The Dread Marines at the front had strengthened their defenses in anticipation of meeting the incoming charge. Not only had they installed additional physical barriers, but they also activated their azure energy shields just to absorb the initial impact.

Just as the insects drove their horns into the targets directly in front of their path, they suddenly began to engage in a complicated envelopment maneuver!

The insects demonstrated greater mobility than expected as they redirected their momentum with great effort.

Many of the giant horned beetles split off into pincers that attempted to flank the Dread Marines.

Other lightning insects momentarily flew upwards before diving at the rear lines of Dread marines in short but devastating charges!

"All units, activate azure energy shields!"

Many elements of the 34th and 88th regiments lost their azure energy shields as one or multiple horned beetles attempted to impale their Dread Armors!

If not for the fact that the Dread Armors were intelligent enough to automatically switch on the azure energy shields back in a hurry, the Dread Marines would have suffered greater casualties at this time!

Most of the Medium Dread Marines and all of the Heavy Dread Marines managed to fend off this charge attack without suffering significant material damage.

However, the Light Dread Marines that hadn't been able to evade the charge attacks suffered considerably greater harm!

Horns made out of condensed lightning broke apart the relatively weak azure energy shields and thrust right through the layers of transphasic hyper armor plating.

Refined by fire energy or not, the Light Dread Armor ultimately proved to be inadequate to block the charge attacks entirely.

Some of the humans wearing these relatively thin armors had died outright. Some perished straight away because their heads got crushed. Others expired because their bodies couldn't handle the discharge of destruction energy.

Fortunately, many others were able to survive even when they had been severely injured.

"Engage the emergency evacuation protocol!"

Before the insects could follow up on their charge attacks by finishing off the injured and vulnerable soldiers, the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System teleported the latter away without warning.

"Crush the lightning insects!"

Even though the Dread Marines did not expect the horned beetles to bypass their frontline in such an intelligent and coordinated fashion, they still adapted quickly to the changing situation.

Many Dread Marines aimed their weapon modules at the closest targets and opened fire so long as they were not at risk of striking their fellow comrades.

The horned beetles were not too resilient, and they were trivially easy to strike at this time. The only reason why the lightning beasts did not get wiped out a lot faster was due to the fear of committing friendly fire.

"For the Dominion of Man!"

The Dread Marines resorted to their melee armament to finish off the beetles while they remained fairly close.

Many Dread Marines pulled out swords or projected plasma blades from their thick wrists.

Other Dread Marines who wielded enormous rifles activated plasma bayonets that could cut through the lightning insects just as well.

Excellent technique combined with powerful armaments ensured that the Dread Marines quickly defeated a lot of enemy beasts.

Explosions of tribulation energy occurred in rapid succession, causing all of the Dread Marines to receive varying degrees of lightning baptism.

Though the effect of a single kill was not much, when thousands of insects died in a relatively concentrated section of the hull, the lightning baptism received by all of the Dread Marines had reached a considerable scale!

Hundreds of Dread Armors that absorbed a lot more destruction and creation energy than others even began to glow for no apparent reason!

While the beetles were taken care of, the worms had managed to advance just enough to attack the first Dread Marines in the way.

The lightning worms did not have an easy time. Many of them became impeded by the bombardment unleashed by the 88th Regiment. Twenty percent of the worms even got blasted outright, though most of their destruction and creation energy only ended up strengthening the closest hull sections.

In order to benefit the Dread Marines the most, the 88th Bombardment Regiment refrained from concentrating their fire too much. So long as many of the worms slowed down, they should have become more manageable.

It was not until the worms went on the attack that taught the Dread Marines that it might not be the best idea to leave so many of them alive!

The organic damage sponges continued to suffer huge amounts of damage that broke apart their bodies, but still they advanced until they widened their eerie mouths and dove in to swallow the Dread Marines whole!

"Energy shields!"

"It's not working!"

Surprisingly enough, the worms were able to stretch their mouths so wide that they were able to swallow up the Medium Dread Marines whole!

Hundreds of troopers ended up in the 'stomachs' of the worms within the blink of an eye regardless of whether they kept their azure energy shields active!

Once they got swallowed, they seemed to enter into an entirely different environment where their energy shields wore down quickly and many of their attacks got absorbed by unusually resilient internal walls!

"The Rubicon has lost its lock on the swallowed Dread Marines. It can't teleport them out! We need to break apart the worms before they digest their prey!"

The worms were making this difficult by retreating right away despite their significantly impaired mobility!

Other worms advanced and utilized their bodies as organic shields to prevent the other Dread Marines from coming to the rescue.

Dread Marines already started to perish when the worms wore down their azure energy shields and dissolved their formidable Dread Armors from all sides!

Once the armors got breached, it usually did not take long for the digestive fluids to melt through the inner suits and turn the flesh and bones of the soldiers into goop!

The Dominion of Man did not allow the worms to have their way.

Tertiary gun batteries shredded the worms from multiple directions.

Missiles launched by more distant launchers blew apart multiple worms at a time, freeing the captives while also inflicting further damage to the half-digested Dread Armors.

Fortunately, removing the debilitated Dread Marines from the stomachs of the lightning worms proved to be enough for the Rubicon to do its job and teleport the damaged units away.

The gigantic alien face looking down at the 'battlefield' from above continued to observe the Dread Marines fending off the lightning beasts while exhibiting more and more signs of disapproval.

Ves had no time to pay attention to the mood swings of the Subjugation King. He had already begun to play a monotonous melody that could somehow be heard by the Dread Marines despite the fact that sound did not transmit across the vacuum of space.

It took a while, but once the invisible currents grew strong enough, water spontaneously began to emerge and push against the advancing lightning worms!

The tribulation manifestations crackled a bit, but still maintained cohesion as if they were actual physical organisms.

The small flood conjured by Ves was not as simple as it looked. His Oceancaller drew from all of the compatible E energy in the vicinity and transformed it all into an empowered tide of water that constantly slowed down the advance of the worms.

Normally, the worms should have been strong and implacable enough to move against most water currents without getting impeded too much, but the power channeled by the Oceancaller empowered the body of water to an unnatural degree.

Thousands of worms slowed down even further. They fought to push forward, only to find their progress slowed down even further.

Ves was happy with his initial contribution in battle. It was not the sort of flashy solo action that would bring him personal glory, but he could clearly observe that the Dread Marines were taking advantage of the situation to reorganize their lines and eliminate the nearby worms that did not get pushed by his water currents.

Through certain rules that Ves was not quite familiar with, he began to receive small infusions of destruction and creation energy.

He figured out that much of his rewards became discounted due to distance and limited individual contribution.

However, because he was debilitating so many of the worms, the total quantity of tribulation energies actually became quite considerable!

He was not the only one that experienced this effect. Colonel Desiree Franklin and other officers experienced similar boosts despite not personally firing any weapons at the lightning beasts.

It was an interesting mechanic. It beat getting directly struck by lightning bolts as far as Ves was concerned.

The fact that such mechanics existed in the first place showed that the heavenly authorities of Messier 87 and other galaxies had been refining them for a huge amount of time.

Eventually, all of the lightning worms and lightning beetles got crushed. As the two regiments reaped most of the rewards for eliminating them, another wave of pride and jubilation erupted from the entire crew of the Dominion of Man.

"This is goodbye, professor."

"Huh?"

"The 34th and 88th are no longer in optimal fighting condition." Colonel Franklin stated. "We will soon be swapped out by fresh regiments so that we can repair and resupply. We need to give as many of our Dread Marines an opportunity to feed off their kills."

"I see."

The swap happened in an instant. The Rubicon was so powerful that it could instantly switch an outgoing troop with an incoming troop.

Only two fresh Dread Marine Regiments appeared at this time, but the Rubicon was ready to teleport additional troops depending on the enemy troop composition of the third wave.

This time, a single larger and stronger lightning bolt threaded through the gap in azure energy shield coverage and struck a section of the hull that was hundreds of meters away!

Ves and many of the Dread Marines already expected to face more formidable opposition, but they became a lot more concerned when mech-sized lightning soldiers emerged around the impact site!

The biped aliens easily towered over Heavy Dread Marines and were equipped with armor that wrapped around their slightly inhuman forms. Their tails ended in spiked balls that looked like they could inflict a lot of trauma if they struck anything.

"We are going to need a lot more Dread Marines this time."

Chapter 5866 6th Giant Trapper Division

It gradually dawned on Ves that the 5th round of the lightning tribulation tested the armed forces of the Dominion of Man.

When Ves looked back on the previous battles, he noticed that the rewards for eliminating the lightning soldiers did not benefit the dreadnought all that much.

Less than half of the explosions of destruction and creation energies eventually went on to benefit the nearest hull sections and surface modules.

The remaining energies spilled out into space and dissipated while creating nothing of value.

In contrast, the lightning soldiers felled by the Dread Marines always ended up benefiting the latter to the greatest possible extent.

Very few energies went to waste as the tribulation energies eagerly engulfed all of the Dread Armors in the vicinity.

It was as if the tribulation storm purposefully rewarded the bravery of valiant warriors who resisted its efforts!

Ves was not the only person who noticed these differences.

The surface of the Dominion of Man no longer appeared as frantic as before as many turrets and gun batteries had fallen silent.

Even though there were hundreds of nearby turrets that possessed clear firing lines to the most recent wave of lightning soldiers, they remained completely silent as the fleters recognized in their minds if not their hearts that this was a contest between infantry.

Of course, the alien definition of 'infantry' was a lot broader than that of humans. The towering alien soldiers that appeared in the 3rd wave consisted of a smaller quantity of formidable-looking giants!

Beneath their solidified tarnished green lightning armor, dense flesh and muscle rippled as limbs gripped their weapons.

Helmets that covered everything aside from two predatory eyes gazed forward with a combination of bloodlust and discipline.

The first impression that Ves gained from these tailed mech-sized alien soldiers was of an elite alien troop.

The large lightning soldiers adopted a rigid formation while holding axes that sparkled with corrupting flame.

It soon became clear that the latest adversaries were not dumb muscles when they began to say a silent prayer before conjuring flame barriers around their bodies.

Ves furrowed his brows. The spiritual barriers exuded both menace and resilience. It would not be easy for the Dread Marines to break them apart. Even if they managed to get past the first layer of defense, the human troopers also had to penetrate the armor worn by these sizable foes.

"\$#@\$.

The huge alien face spoke again!

"THE FALLEN HERALDS OF AKSHI. DEATH IS NO RELEASE. LET YOUR CORRUPTING FLAMES TAINT THE FIRES OF THESE SLAVES."

"What did the alien say?" Dread Captain Argile asked over the private communication channel.

Ves quickly responded with his best possible interpretation.

The dread captain made an unusually indignant noise.

"The alien thinks his lighting thralls can engulf our flames with their filth!? We will not let that happen! Our Dread Marines shall shatter these facsimile aliens just as easily as they have done before!"

"Maybe it is better to bring out your mechs if you have any, captain." Ves gently advised. "These 'Fallen Heralds of Akshi' look like they have plenty of strength and leverage to overpower your Dread Marines up close."

"Nonsense! We are the Dominion of Man! We exist to exemplify the strength of mankind! Besides, we have received express instructions to limit the exposure of our fighting methods as much as possible. This confrontation has already turned into an information war. The principal alien observer looking down at us from above must know as little about our comprehensive fighting methods as possible."

Ves frowned, but understood the logic behind this strategy. "I understand. It is a clever choice, though I am not sure whether the Subjugation King has access to other intelligence sources. Still, I guess this is as good a time as any to put your Dread Marines to the test. I am just concerned that they might not be able to keep up if our enemies keep growing bigger and stronger with each passing wave."

"Do not be concerned, professor. We have many anti-mech units at our disposal. Just because we refuse to carry any mechs on principle does not mean we are unprepared to fight them in the field. We have invested over 4 centuries of research on how to dismantle mechs as infantry. It is time for us to demonstrate the fruits of our labor! I already know the perfect unit to deploy against these lightning giants. The 6th Giant Trapper Division shall have the honor of leading this bout!"



The Rubicon Spatial Transfer System teleported over 10,000 Dread Marines at this time!

All around Ves, Dread Armor after Dread Armor appeared at the same time!

It was rather impressive how they managed to appear in perfect formation while adapting to inconsistent footing.

None of the Dread Marines showed any signs of disorientation or lack of preparedness. They had all arrived while aiming their weapons at the Fallen Heralds of Akshi.

Strangely enough, neither the Giant Trappers nor the large lightning soldiers went on the offensive right away.

In this environment where human blood and tribulation energies had already spilled in spades, the entire hull section had transformed into a sacred battleground, for a lack of a better term.

The Dread Marines all became affected by this special atmosphere, and so did the Fallen Heralds of Akshi apparently.

Even though the two were separated across species and life states, there were many universal values that transcended species and galaxies.

Major General Arend Capalli deliberately stepped out of the ranks of his troops. The commanding officer of the 6th Giant Trapper Division 'wore' a suit of Heavy Combat Armor that did not put any effort into hiding his importance.

The Fallen Heralds sent out a giant alien figure whose tail was considerably longer. It even ended in a spike that was reinforced by cursed metal that burned with corrupting flames.

As the two leading officers set themselves apart from their troops, the Fallen Herald Commander raised an ornate axe that was carved with sickening runes.

Though the lifeless alien leader was unable to produce any sounds, his gesture showed that he was not entirely without life.

At the very least, the lightning apparition was capable of simulating enough honor to salute his enemies.

This was not necessarily good news. The greater their intelligence, the greater the threat they posed to their opposition!

Ves was not certain whether 10,000 Dread Marines was enough to defeat this formidable alien troop. There had been far too many examples of mechs crushing infantry with disturbing ease. The advantages bestowed by scale were far too great!

Fortunately, many of the Giant Trappers consisted of Heavy Dread Marines. They were large enough to rival demimechs in size.

Each of these heavy troopers mounted distinctly oversized weapon systems that could actually pose a danger towards first-class multipurpose mechs.

The premise was that they fully utilized their numbers advantage to stack their attacks on specific targets.

There were also plenty of Light and Medium Dread Armors among the Giant Trappers. Their functions were different as they lacked the heavy cannons that could effectively wear down mechs from a distance.

In any case, Major General Capalli raised an arm that held a particularly large and technologically advanced plasma sword.

"I salute you, soldiers of a foreign galaxy! The 6th Giant Trapper Division shall fight you and defeat you on behalf of mankind. By the will of Supreme Marshal Caramond Perle, we shall fell each and every one of you and take your strength as our own! SEMPER FORTIS!"

"SEMPER FORTIS!"

The exchange of salutes had a strong ritual air about them. Even though Ves was not a part of the Dread Marine Corps, his involvement in the battle still caused him to get caught up in the atmosphere.

He gripped his Oceancaller tighter. The fire in his metaphorical heart urged him to unfold his true body, charge forward and exchange blows with the dangerous-looking lightning giants.

He resisted this impulse. It was irrational to the extreme. Ves had to remind himself that the tribulation storm was primarily a test for the Dominion of Man. He was just a freeloader who wanted to siphon a few benefits for himself. It was best not to make the lives of the Dread Marines any more difficult.

Once the two commanding officers returned to their own lines, the ritualistic battle soon commenced!

"GIANT TRAPPERS, SHOW THESE ALIENS HOW WE FIGHT! FOR HUMANITY!"

"FOR HUMANITY!" The Dread Marines thundered in their own suits!

Unlike the prior Dread Marines, the troopers of the 6th Division fought according to a completely different paradigm!

Instead of digging in and forming solid defensive lines to meet their incoming foes, each and every Giant Trapper instantly went on the move!

It soon became clear that the Giant Trappers were capable of fighting in open space as each of their Dread Armors came equipped with transphasic flight systems!

The Light Dread Marines turned out to be the most elusive. Not only did they move the fastest out of all of the other troops, their suits also became invisible as soon as they activated their stealth systems.

What was impressive was that Ves had completely lost the ability to detect their presence!

Neither the sophisticated sensor suite of his Unending Regalia nor the sharp spiritual senses of Blinky was able to detect any hide and hair of the Light Dread Armors that had to be flying in the vicinity.

The Heavy Dread Marines were the first to open fire. Many of them were equipped with back and shoulder-mounted cannons that fired a variety of hyper plasma bolts, transphasic hyper gauss rounds and transphasic hyper energy beams. There were also other heavy units that fired high-yield missiles from their bulky missile launchers.

The attacks hit quite hard. The corrupted flame barriers of the Fallen Heralds visibly rippled as they got struck by hundreds of attacks at the same time!

Every target that became subjected to focused fire quickly lost their defenses and soon started to fall as they were unable to withstand the attention of hundreds of Heavy Dread Marines.

However, there were still a lot of surviving Fallen Heralds, and none of them were particularly slow. They charged forward with flames erupting from the rear of their energy barriers!

A multitude of gigantic comets flung towards the formations of Heavy Dread Marines.

For their part, the heavy troopers did not make it easy for their adversaries to close the distance.

Despite their immense bulk, their powerful transphasic flight systems provided so much effective thrust that they accelerated at impressive rates. If not for their lacking agility, they could easily give light mechs a run for their money!

Still, it was precisely due to their disappointing maneuverability that the Fallen Heralds were gaining on them. The latter's ability to simulate jet engines augmented their straight-line acceleration so well that they were briskly closing the distance!

"YOU SHALL GO NO FURTHER!"

The Medium Dread Marines intercepted the giant lightning warriors!

Their Dread Armors did not possess any active stealth systems, but instead equipped themselves with a variety of different loadouts.

Most of them opted for configurations that excelled in close-range skirmishing. The ones equipped with plasma lances cleverly flanked the Fallen Heralds and charged at their targets, causing their fiery hot weapons to explode against the flame barriers!

Others were equipped with flamethrowers that burned so hot that even the corrupting flames were forced to give up ground!

Most of them opted for configurations that excelled in close-range skirmishing. The ones equipped with plasma lances cleverly flanked the Fallen Heralds and charged at their targets, causing their fiery hot weapons to explode against the flame barriers!

Others were equipped with flamethrowers that burned so hot that even the corrupting flames were forced to give up ground!

The expensive propellant used to augment the power of the flamethrowers was made from a special formula that happened to be particularly effective against spiritual manifestations!

Meanwhile, Ves remained shocked as he stood frozen in the same place. He never expected the Giant Trappers to fight in such an impressive manner.

They struck hard yet remained mobile enough to prevent their adversaries from striking them with each.

Each of them fought like agile but deadly raptor packs trying to exhaust their larger but much more lumbering prey.

Ves imagined the Giant Trappers fighting against a mech force and shuddered. These 'infantry' forces were much more competent than he initially thought!

## Chapter 5867 So Much Cheating

The way the Dread Marines fought against the so-called Fallen Heralds of Akshi was glorious.

The elite and well-trained infantry did not hesitate to employ aggressive fighting tactics to wear down their targets while dancing at the edge of death.

The sight was so impressive that Ves remained rooted on the spot for a time.

His analytical mind could not help but dissect the combat doctrine and strategy employed by the 6th Giant Trapper Division.

The first point that stood out to Ves was that the Dread Marines tried their utmost not to remain still. They flew through space and maneuvered in unpredictable patterns to the best of their abilities.

Their lives depended on it! No matter whether it was the Light, Medium or Heavy Dread Armors, none of their defenses could ever compare against a well-designed mech.

Most weapons employed by first-class mechs were readily capable of overpowering the defenses of Dread Marines, especially if multiple of them focused on single targets.

This firepower disparity had many implications.

Unless there were powerful fortifications on hand, it made no sense for Dread Marines to remain immobile and on the defensive.

This was why the Dread Marines relied on superior maneuverability to keep them alive. Due to their smaller sizes, it was a lot easier for them to move at respectable speeds.

Combined with their much smaller sizes, the Dread Marines turned into wasps that could sting a lot harder than most people expected.

At first, the Giant Trappers made impressive progress. Dozens of Fallen Heralds succumbed to all of the firepower in quick succession as the Dread Marines intelligently distributed their attacks to specific targets to attain maximum short-term results.

The most effective weapons employed in this fight were the high-yield missiles launched by many Heavy Dread Marines.

The guided missiles followed precise yet also unpredictable trajectories before converging on specific targets at the final second. This not only made it difficult for the Fallen Heralds to determine which of them were targeted, but also increased the difficulty of intercepting the incoming ordnance.

As clusters of missiles struck the corrupted flame barriers of their targets at the same time, their high-yield warheads laced with expensive hypers and exotics exploded with great fury!

Not that it was easy to do so. Each transphasic hyper missile contained cutting-edge technology that made them faster and more difficult to perceive.

As clusters of missiles struck the corrupted flame barriers of their targets at the same time, their high-yield warheads laced with expensive hypers and exotics exploded with great fury!

Ves winced when he saw so many expensive missiles getting expended on the tribulation manifestations.

They were relatively small, yet still managed to pack a large punch.

He estimated that each and every high-yield missile was packed with so much precious materials that they had to cost at least 10 million MTA credits, and that was excluding the phasewater that made them a lot more potent!

It was clearly worth the cost, though. Out of all of the armaments utilized by the Giant Trappers, it was the high-yield missiles and to a lesser extent their explosive shells that wore down the defenses of their adversaries the fastest.

The Medium Dread Marines inflicted much less damage in comparison, but they served their own purpose in this lineup.

They were more targeted in their attacks. Once the flame barriers went down, the Medium Dread Marines were able to drive their plasma lances at any exposed weak point with their quick and nimble charge attacks.

Their numbers along with their annoying tendency to circle around their prey debilitated the Fallen Heralds so much that it became increasingly unrealistic for the lightning soldiers to catch up to the Heavy Dread Marines!

Of course, that caused the Medium Dread Marines to attract the ire of all of these powerful foes.

Once the Fallen Heralds started to fight against their closest enemies in earnest, the battle became a lot more intense!

The Fallen Heralds did not fight like simple axemen.

They fought like qi warriors who happened to be wielding axes.

Spikes of power erupted from the giant lightning warriors an instant before they swung their axes in unison!

"Be careful!"

The axe swings propagated large waves of darkened flames that weakened incoming attacks, drained the defenses of any nearby targets and caused the exposed Dread Armors to catch fire!

"These fires are draining the phasewater and hyper materials of our Dread Armors!"

"Our extinguishing methods are not working!"

"We require emergency evacuation!"

"We cannot risk the danger of teleporting your burning Dread Armors into our ship. We will have to evacuate you without your suits."

"DO IT BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE!"

Though the fleeters had come to a silent agreement with the tribulation storm to resist the attackers of the 5th round by relying on their Dread Marine Corps, that did not mean that their troopers had to fend for themselves.

The Rubicon Spatial Transfer System was a core part of their combat doctrine. It was arguably the most powerful and precise teleportation system in the Red Ocean, so it would be a crime to utilize it sparingly.

Other than the greater beyonder gate, the technologies put into the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System was so far ahead in terms of cost and technological sophistication that it was ahead of its time.

Though the corrupting flames generated a lot of interference that made it harder for the Rubicon to lock onto the humans wrapped inside the Dread Armors, it was not strong enough to block teleportation entirely.

The soldiers under imminent threat still managed to escape in an instant!

There were only a few cases where the loss of Dread Armors also became accompanied by loss of life.

These instances mostly happened when one or more Fallen Heralds managed to boost forward with abrupt speed and slam their burning axes into their targets!

The force behind these attacks were unnaturally strong as each impact produced strong explosions that tore apart the defenses of the Medium Dread Marines!

Many of them had opted to switch their azure energy shields off in order to absorb as much tribulation energies as possible.

While the Dread Armors were intelligent enough to activate their azure energy shields during emergencies, it took time for the energy barriers to get up to strength.

The hasty measures were not enough to block the power of the explosive axe strikes!

It was not just the corrupting flames that inflicted a lot of damage. Tribulation lightning augmented every strike, enabling the Fallen Heralds to inflict considerably greater damage than when they used to be alive!

"Do not let your Dread Armor get hit! These dark flames will stick to any metal and continue to burn everything down!"

The giant lightning soldiers began to gain the upper hand. The explosive strikes were already bad enough, but even their glancing blows had the potential to take Dread Marines out of the fight.

The Medium Dread Marines fought valiantly as they continued to entangle the Fallen Heralds, but their numbers were dwindling at an unsustainable rate.

Large quantities of high-yield missiles circled around and took out lightning soldier after lightning soldier.

Ves already noticed that the Heavy Dread Marines launched far more missiles than they could reasonably carry.

There were only two possible explanations why they could launch more missiles than could possibly fit in their ammunition containers.

The first possibility was that they were all equipped with dimensional pockets that were filled with lots of spare missiles.

The second possibility was that the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System teleported fresh missiles directly into the launchers of the Heavy Dread Marines after they expended their previous payloads!

When Ves concentrated on the Heavy Dread Marines, he quickly figured out that the Rubicon was doing all of the work.

"That's cheating!"

Ves had never heard of anything as absurd as directly reloading armaments through teleportation!

It was such a dangerous and wasteful tactic that an accident or ten should have occurred by now! All of those Heavy Dread Marines were constantly moving around to the best of their abilities, making it even more difficult to precisely teleport the missiles exactly inside the tubes of the missile launchers with no mistakes!

Ves developed a strong desire towards the Rubicon. He wanted to obtain a souped-up teleportation system for himself. The one utilized by the Dominion of Man was so good that it could do practically anything!

"Professor Larkinson!"

"Ah, yes, General Capalli?"

"Our Dread Marines are experiencing difficulties with neutralizing the dark flames spread by these lightning soldiers. Since you are capable of summoning water with special properties, please use that strange flute of yours to see whether you can douse the flames."

"I will do my best."

"Good. I will dispatch additional defensive units to keep you safe while you work."

A bunch of Medium and Heavy Dread Marines already arrived at his position before deploying various defenses, though they conspicuously left out their azure energy shields.

Ves brought his Oceancaller back to his lips and began to play a slightly uplifting tune.

There was no need to attack or inhibit the movements of his latest adversaries. He doubted that his relatively weak strength and shallow understanding of qi cultivation would allow him to inflict serious damage against these mech-sized tribulation manifestations.

What he could attempt was trying to douse a few flames with special properties.

He concentrated hard on cleansing corruption, putting down fires and cooling down burnt armor plating.

Soon enough, modest waves of water formed in the distance and quickly began to engulf the nearest Dread Armors that had caught fire.

Part of the water instantly evaporated as the heat and power emanating from the corrupting flames turned out to be fairly strong!

However, the corrupting flames also began to disappear, leaving the Dread Armor partially melted but still capable of putting up a decent fight!

The Medium Dread Marine took the time to raise a thick thumbs up before he went back into the fray.

Even though he had been offered the chance to teleport back inside the ship so that the technicians could carefully preserve and repair his tribulation-blessed Dread Armor, the soldier refused to back down when he could still contribute to the fight!

"Can you do that again, professor?"

Ves frowned as his previous exertion hadn't been light. "I can, but my efficiency is not very good. I can only help out one Dread Marine at a time, general."

"...Do what you can."

The fight continued. Over a thousand Dread Marines had already been taken out of the fight, and hundreds more were in the process of getting burned or shattered.

The Fallen Heralds of Akshi were not as numerous, but still had enough to last quite a while. Their powerful axes and the protection of their corrupted flame barriers made it a lot harder to produce lasting results.

This was especially when the giant lightning soldiers started to unveil more and more tricks!

Each time they swung their axes, they produced corrupting flames that turned into piercing arrows, burning nets, fiery snakes and other unusual forms.

It was difficult to predict the effect of these empowered axe swings in advance. There were so many possibilities that even the Brain Trust struggled to infer the results before they happened!

Ves clearly knew that the water summoned with the help of his Oceancaller was able to pitch in, but his technique was too poor and his Spirituality was too low for this kind of fight.

"I need to strengthen my efforts? There has to be a trick."

He did not know cultivators well enough to know how they were able to leverage their power to a greater degree.

He furrowed his brows as he quickly sifted through his memories in order to learn from good examples.

After a bit of searching, he suddenly came across the Destroyer of Worlds.

As the only god pilot with a companion spirit, she had actively developed a lot of powerful methods where she could combine her willpower with Emma in order to produce greater synergies.

Though Ves was not a high-ranking mech pilot, he could still take a page out of Irene's book and take advantage of his companion spirit!

"It's showtime, Blinky!"

"Mrow!"

Chapter 5868 Water Wave

Ever since he took part in battle, Ves never truly felt satisfied with his performance.

Sure, he was able to employ tricks that the Dread Marines couldn't replicate, but he felt a bit outclassed.

It shouldn't have been a surprise. Ves was a mech designer. He was not a qi cultivator, so trying to fight like one would never yield great results.

While Ves accepted the reality that he would never become a great qi cultivator, it was different in the case of Blinky.



His companion spirit was his second life. The Star Cat may technically serve as an extension of his own Spirituality, but he had gained enough independence to adopt another form of cultivation.

Ves had specifically worked on the Imaginary Universe Method Version 3.0 in the hopes of transforming Blinky into a scary and versatile True God one day. He clearly had high hopes in his companion spirit's ability to absorb, process, manipulate and exploit E energy of all varieties.

The problem was that the cultivation required a huge amount of ramping up before it could begin to show its strengths!

The Blinkyverse had made a lot of progress towards forming its first complete star system, but that was just a fraction of the full potential of this spiritual pocket universe.

Ves therefore did not expect too much from combining Blinky with his spiritual manifestations. It would be delusional to think he could function in the same way as Emma.

Not only was Blinky unable to travel too far from Ves, the Star Cat also lacked the reinforcement of Irene's willpower.

High-ranking mech pilots would have been really handy in this battle. Any powerful expert mech, ace mech or god mech would have been able to counter all of the spiritual tricks employed by the Fallen Warriors of Akshi and overwhelm them by relying on brute force!

Alas, Ves was not a mech pilot. He was a mech designer. One who also happened to be a phase lord.

If this was just a regular battle, Ves would have unfolded his true body and started to punch the Fallen Heralds a long time ago.

It was a pity that he needed to play his part in the ongoing information war. There was no reason to give the Subjugation King a good look at the combat capabilities of a phase lord.

"I need to advance." Ves notified the Dread Marines assigned to guard his life.

"Sir, that is ill-advised. You are already under threat from this distance. You will make yourself much more vulnerable to attack if you proceed with your action."

"I know the risks, but I can take a hit." Ves began to retrieve a very girly umbrella from the back of his Unending Regalia. "The Dominion of Man will step in if that is not the case. The Rubicon Spatial Transfer System still maintains an active lock on my body. You can accompany me, but please do not impede my passage."

His commanding tone was evidently enough to get his bodyguards to play along.

"Very well, but if you have to move forward, at least position yourself behind one of the secondary gun batteries up ahead."

"That is a good idea."

Ves began to step forward while Blinky dove out of his head. The purple companion spirit flew forward and began to merge into a nearby water wave that had just emerged.

The combination was unexpectedly smooth. Ves felt much more in control of the water wave than before. Why hadn't he done this before? It was as if he had switched from typing a document with one hand to two hands!

As much as Ves wanted to explore his new capabilities, he still had a battle to attend to. He continued to move forward in order to give Blinky the space needed to get involved in the battle.

Once Ves approached a secondary cannon battery and sheltered behind its armored bulk, he concentrated on playing the flute and directing Blinky's actions.

At the same time, his newly obtained Flower Parasol unfolded and began to display its pink radiance to everyone who paid attention in his direction.

Perhaps it was an illusion, but perhaps even the giant three-eyed alien face twitched when the Flower Parasol began to brighten up the surroundings.

"Mrow!"

Though Ves felt a lot more nervous now that he got closer to the action, he also felt a lot more thrilled. His mood became electric and his musical performance became more energetic!

As the Dread Marines mysteriously began to hear music in spite of the fact that their communication channels only transmitted essential information, the water wave started to do a lot more work!

"Mrow!"

Blinky began to disgorge large amounts of water-attributed E-energy that he had stored from the primordial planet's ocean as well as the asteroid belts of the incomplete star system.

It did not look like it, but the relatively small companion spirit had absorbed so much water energy that it would take months to drain his reserve at this rate!

Of course, the integrity of the Blinkyverse would become compromised a lot sooner than that. A severe imbalance in the elements would weaken the foundation of the internal universe and make it vulnerable to external breaches.

Blinky could not spew out water energy without limit. It was fine for him to keep this up for an hour or so, but any longer would produce noticeable imbalances that would take a lot of time to remedy.

For now, the companion spirit's efforts were making a considerable difference.

The water wave directed by Ves and the Oceancaller became faster and engulfed the burning Dread Armors a lot more effectively.

It became a lot easier to douse the corrupting flames when there was more water energy available.

Even if the quality of water energy was not that strung, Blinky was able to produce an ample quantity of it at a time.

"Whatever you are doing is working, sir. Keep up the good work, but take care not to attract more attention. Some of the lightning soldiers are already showing signs of trying to locate the source of the water."

Ves felt a lot more fulfilled than before. Though he still wasn't close enough to the action for his liking, he was contributing a lot more to the battle than before.

Even though there were way too many Dread Marines that caught fire due to the ubiquitous energy attacks unleashed by the Fallen Heralds of Akshi, the Blinky-empowered water wave was able to save many of them from getting burned and corrupted.

Each Dread Armor that surrendered to the corrupting flames was another precious tribulation-forged asset that got lost.

By saving them, the Dominion of Man would be able to field a considerably more powerful Dread Marine in the future, especially after they had been repaired.

Around 800 lightning soldiers were left at this time. The powerful mech-sized cultivators swung their axes as fast as they could. It did not matter if they failed to strike any Dread Marines because all kinds of fire spells continued to fling from their blades.

The 6th Giant Trapper Division gained the upper hand again, and it was not entirely due to Ves.

Around 800 lightning soldiers were left at this time. The powerful mech-sized cultivators swung their axes as fast as they could. It did not matter if they failed to strike any Dread Marines because all kinds of fire spells continued to fling from their blades.

It took a bit of time, but eventually the Light Dread Marines had made their moves!

Utilizing their stealth capabilities to the fullest, they had managed to sneak close enough to make their final sprint and set off their trap!

It turned out that many of the Light Dread Marines were armed with transphasic knives that radiated with the power of destruction!

Though Blinky was close enough to determine that the knives were not Destroyer weapons, they were still quite potent nonetheless.

The fleeters must have poured a lot of research into developing a substitute or alternative to Destroyer weapons.

Just as with dreadnoughts, the CFA or RA must have come pretty close to attaining the desired result, but ultimately came up short as the researchers were unable to produce the most difficult breakthroughs.

This was probably how they ended up in the hands of the Dread Marines. The special knives did not possess the fiery heat and power of plasma weapons, but they happened to be a lot stealthier while still retaining plenty of lethality.

Each of the Light Dread Marines took advantage of the vulnerability of injured lightning soldiers who had lost their flame barriers. The relatively small but nimble machines evaded every nearby attack with exceptional grace and stabbed their imitation Destroyer knives at any weak point they could observe!

Every stab inflicted considerable damage that nearly always proved crippling, if not fatal!

Hundreds of tribulation energy explosions engulfed the site as the Fallen Heralds lost a lot of battle strength in an instant!

Just as the surviving lightning soldiers tried to burn the offenders that had entered into their midst, the Light Dread Marines instantly retreated and engaged their powerful stealth systems again.

Only a handful of unlucky Light Dread Marines got burned by errant flame attacks, and all of them quickly dove into Ves' water wave before getting teleported back into the ship.

Frustrated, the surviving Fallen Heralds of Akshi intensified their struggle! They did their best to make up with the huge amount of numbers they lost by getting assassinated by small human infantry troops!

"The 3rd wave is winding down." An officer spoke at one point. "There are only 200 lightning soldiers left. We outnumber them so much that they cannot withstand our attacks for long."

"I can see that." Ves responded.

"How much have you expended yourself? Can you fight in the next wave?"

"It should be no problem. My energy expenditure is not as great as you think. I have a huge energy reservoir. What you should really be worried about is whether I will run myself ragged. My mental capacity is finite."

"I will pass on your words."

The 3rd wave finally crumbled as the lightning warriors failed to inflict severe damage onto the Giant Trappers.

The taste of victory was sweet. Over 7000 Dread Marines remained undamaged after all of this fighting. This was truly impressive considering they had just completed a bout against enemies that resembled mechs in scale.

While the crew of the Dominion of Man awaited the arrival of the next wave, Ves quickly evaluated his performance so far.

Using Blinky as a means to empower his spiritual manipulation worked well. It would have been better if his companion spirit did not have to stay within a certain range of Ves. Perhaps he should look into solutions that could increase this limit.

As Ves compared his performance against the Fallen Heralds of Akshi, there were still reasons for him to feel dissatisfied at his combat methods.

Neither Ves nor Blinky fought like real qi cultivators.

Oh, they simulated it decently enough, but they lacked the understanding and the practice to fight like the Fallen Heralds.

The difference between Ves and his last adversaries was that the latter actively leveraged the power of E energy radiation to empower all of their moves!

The Fallen Heralds weren't actually all that strong. Their attacks hit a lot harder than they should and their defenses could withstand considerably greater damage than anyone expected.

The reason for that was because they were capable of channeling the power of heaven to augment all of their moves!

Even though the Dominion of Man absorbed huge amounts of ambient E energy radiation from the immediate environment, every lightning soldier was able to draw tribulation energy from the storm above everyone's heads.

The point was that Ves did not do enough to leverage the power of heaven.

The only reason why he was capable of conjuring so much water and drawing in so much water energy was because his Oceancaller was doing all of the heavy lifting.

Ves had always been content to outsource this function to his relic while he focused on other matters.

This might serve as an acceptable excuse for a mech designer like Ves, but it was absolutely unacceptable for a pure qi life form like Blinky!

Instead of trying to borrow the power of heaven to do more with less, his companion spirit focused on disgorging large amounts of water energy from a hidden reservoir as if he was a brute!

This clearly needed to change.

## Chapter 5869 Collective Action

The surface of the Dominion of Man had turned into a battlefield yet again.

This time the scale was a lot larger than before.

In the 4th wave of the 5th round of the ongoing lightning tribulation, over 100,000 lightning soldiers appeared at a time!

Though smaller than the Fallen Heralds of Akshi, the strange insectile aliens proved to be far trickier to defeat through massed firepower.

"They are packed in tight formations! Open fire! Bombard them to pieces!"

"It's not working! Our attacks are being repelled by their combined energy barriers! As long as the tribulation storm keeps feeding them E energy, our firepower can't exhaust the protective layers!"

The insects armed with a variety of sharp and pointy transmuted forelimbs did not appear to be simple warriors.

They were cultivators, and fought like ones.

Different from before, the cultivators were relatively weak, but they excelled at casting and maintaining cooperative spells.

Each formation consisting of tens of thousands of lightning soldiers was able to cast a mass energy barrier spell that absorbed incoming attacks with ease!

The good news was that the incoming firepower from the 5 Dread Marine Divisions that replaced the 6th Giant Trapper Division forced the enemy formations spread across the hull to hunker down.

The aliens did not have enough spare cultivators left to organize any coordinated counterattacks!

Explosions, energy beams and projectiles continually rippled against the exterior of the shining metallic bubble that surrounded the insect formations.

The insect species clearly possessed a strong affinity with the metal element, but combining it with tribulation lightning caused their cultivation techniques to become a lot stronger than normal.

It was enough to stymie the Dread Marines arrayed against them. No matter how quickly the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System filled up the emptied missile launchers with new warheads, the continuous barrage high-yield missiles failed to break open the powerful metallic barriers.

Several Dread Marine Divisions once decided to regroup and focus fire on one of the enemy formations.

That turned out to be a mistake because the metallic insects quickly redirected thousands of their own number to drilling through the hull of the Dominion of Man!

Each and every insect was able to chew through the resilient transphasic hyper alloys with great difficulty, even when they empowered their mandibles with metal-attributed E energy.

The progress of a single insect was rather slow, but when thousands of them worked together to create a large hole, the section of hull plating started to break down disturbingly quickly!

"Return to your previous assignments! Do not let any of the insect formations have free rein!"

The ongoing battle quickly returned to a stalemate, but one that favored the enemy more than the defenders.

Though the Dread Marines had not suffered any significant casualties so far, it had never been the goal of the tribulation soldiers to defeat these soldiers.

The insect formations still had spare metallic insects left to chew through the hull plating!

No matter how many meters they had to drill in order to breach into the interior of the Dominion of Man, the insects worked tirelessly to open up a gap that could be exploited by subsequent lightning soldiers or more direct tribulation attacks.

"STOP THEM AT ALL COST!"

The five Dread Marine Divisions amped up the pressure. Over 50,000 Dread Marines attacked from afar and up close. They concentrated their firepower and timed their attacks for maximum effect. A few of them even combined their weapons to launch significantly more powerful attacks that could easily shatter the armor plating of a first-class mech.

Yet so long as their firepower remained dispersed, they were unable to muster enough numbers to exceed the replenishment rate of the metallic energy barriers.

The obvious solution to this problem was to bring more firepower. There were still plenty of intact gun batteries that could open fire at any time.

There were also a lot more Dread Marines in reserve that were chomping at the bit to participate in this glorious battle.

However, Dread Captain Volkert Argile refused to send more Dread Marines for multiple reasons.

Protecting the Dominion of Man was important, but it was also necessary to build the confidence and battle spirit of her powerful troop complement.

Winning battles by throwing overwhelming numbers at a problem would never allow his elite troops to refine their courage and prepare them for the greater challenges ahead.

Aside from that, there was a mysterious feeling in his burning heart that wanted to keep the battle fair.

While it was difficult to estimate how many troops he needed to deploy to engage a wave of lightning soldiers in honorable combat, the dread captain already felt as if he had reached a certain limit.

Bringing in another Dread Marine Division should easily be able to break the deadlock, but the victory would become hollow as the result had little to do with the superiority of his armed troops.

The ritualistic battles between the tribulation manifestations and the armed forces of the Dominion of Man had to be fought by relying on differences in technologies, methods, tactics and coordination. This was the definitive way for an army to prove their superiority over others.

Since almost everyone serving on the Dominion of Man had gotten caught up by this special atmosphere, they rejected the option of reinforcing the Dread Marines in the field.

If the best human infantry force in the Red Ocean was unable to solve this problem under fair circumstances, then they no longer had the right to feel proud anymore!

There was only one notable exception to this sentiment.

Ves had earned a place in the field due to his undeniable contributions in engineering the ship-wide transformation that triggered a response from the heavens.

Though no one would begrudge him for sitting out, he insisted on participating anyway, which meant that he had put his honor on the line as well.

Ves furrowed his brows as he studied the performance of the metallic insects. Their formations were spread by several kilometers each, so he was only able to approach and study the closest one while huddling behind a dormant secondary gun battery.

When he tried to use his Oceancaller to breach the metallic energy barrier with water tides, his attempt failed to exert enough pressure to break the current equilibrium.

It did not matter that Blinky tried his best to increase the power of the water attacks by disgorging as much water energy from the Blinkyverse as possible!

Unfortunately, the companion cat was still too weak. The aperture that connected the Blinkyverse from the main universe was too narrow to release too much water energy at a time.

In a contest between two different cultivation techniques, the difference in energy levels was usually decisive enough to determine success and failure.

Though Ves was pretty sure that he could easily overpower several metallic insects at a time, it was impossible for him to overcome the combined efforts of thousands of lightning soldiers!

It was frustrating! The coordination of the insects was practically flawless as they synced with each other without any interruption.

Their coordination was unnaturally good. It was not difficult to find out why. When Blinky observed the formation of lightning insects, the companion spirit could easily see that they were connected in a dense and sophisticated web of spiritual connections.

The tribulation manifestations utilized their own version of a spiritual network.

No. Calling it a spiritual network was not accurate enough. Compared to the works of Ves, the lightning soldiers employed a much more sophisticated and evolved version of a network!

Blinky clearly observed the presence of runes in the spiritual connections. They did not simply follow the straightest path from one insect to another, but intertwined with countless familiar-looking runes that produced unknown but doubtlessly beneficial effects.

It was impressive!

Not only was the spiritual network able to connect the spiritualities of every lightning insect to a much greater extent, but also caused them to unify their minds and will without any risks to their own mental states!

Aside from that, Blinky could also sense an unusually strong sense of resilience from the runed spiritual network.

Even if Blinky was able to penetrate or bypass the metallic energy barrier, there was absolutely no chance for the Star Cat to break apart the runed spiritual network by devouring it piece by piece.

The runes provided a powerful form of protection that was expressly put together to resist this attack vector!

The only solution that Ves could come up with was to overwhelm the runed spiritual network by relying on brute force. A strong enough attack could shatter all forms of defense!

Yet that proved to be an insurmountable problem. Neither the Dread Marines nor Ves could muster up enough raw energy to breach the defenses of the lightning insect formations.

It was not for lack of trying.

Though the Dread Marine Divisions kept trying out many different tactics and weapons systems to break past the seemingly invincible metallic energy barriers, none of their tricks were working.

Dread Captain Volkert Argile came close to calling in reinforcements anyway in order to end this confrontation.

A hollow victory was still a victory. Any outcome was better than giving the lightning insects enough time to drill a deep enough hole through the outer hull of the Dominion of Man.

Before he resorted to this dishonorable option, the dread captain contacted Ves one more time.

"Do you have any suggestions that can break this unfavorable deadlock aside from the obvious?"

Ves pressed his lips. "Energy."

"Professor?"

"It all comes down to energy." He said. "So far, the battles we have fought amount to a confrontation between two different combat paradigms. Our Dread Marines are not active cultivators. They rely far more on their strength of arms and the technological support of the Dominion of Man to produce powerful results. Our adversaries do not have access to our technological toys, but they make up for this shortcoming by relying on their vastly superior cultivation and the energies supplied by the tribulation storm. Both paradigms have their pros and cons. The main advantage of our current set of enemies is that they are able to unify their cultivation and energy manipulation to produce results that far exceed their individual efforts."

Ves could practically feel the frustration from the other side of the private communication channel.

"How do you suggest we solve this problem, then?"

"Our enemies are fueled by the tribulation storm. Our Dread Marines are at least partially fueled by the Spark Reactor. We need the latter to contribute more to the Dread Armors that are deployed in the field."



"They are not designed to channel so much energy, whether it is conventional or unconventional!" Dread Captain Argile spoke. "The exact science eludes me, but there is a high likelihood that the Dread Armors will either explode or burst into flames. They are not as flexible as you think!"

"Are you sure about that?" Ves grinned. "Have you forgotten about the lightning-baptized Dread Marines that fought in the previous waves? I suggest you swap some of the regiments in the field with the 34th Assault Regiment or the 88th Bombardment Regiment. Their Dread Armors have already been repaired and replenished by this time, correct?"

"They should be." Volkert Argile said in a much more contemplative tone. "I will take your advice under consideration. Do you have any other suggestions?"

Ves slowly grinned as a fantastic idea just emerged in his mind!

"I do... I just came up with an idea that I would like to try. It's risky, though. I need the cooperation of the engineers who are currently in charge of the Spark Reactor. I also need your crew to do whatever it takes to increase the flow of fire energy to the hull section where I am currently situated."

"I can do that, but why should we make these adjustments?"

"Energy." Ves grinned. "The key to breaking this deadlock is energy. It is not just the lightning-baptized Dread Marines that can channel greater amounts of energy. I think I should give Blinky a try!"

The Blinkyverse was ultimately too small and underdeveloped to provide sufficient help in battle at its current stage.

Since that was the case, why not switch to a much more powerful source?

The Spark Reactor was a much more powerful source of E energy!

## Chapter 5870 Cultivation Deficiency

The battle intensified as familiar soldiers returned on the battlefield yet again.

Though the fleeters were unwilling to field more than 50,000 soldiers at a time, it was no problem to swap out one unit with another.

The 34th Assault Regiment and the 88th Bombardment Regiment had already made their contributions. The 6th Giant Trapper Division had fought much more arduous battle and suffered considerable losses that could not easily be replaced. No one would begrudge them if they sat out the remainder of this event.

There were many other fresh units of Dread Marines that eagerly wanted to earn glory in battle. They also learned about the rewards for defeating the lightning soldiers and eagerly wanted to gain strength through defeating their opponents.

However, the needs of the Dominion of Man surpassed the individual needs of the troopers.

As much as the current selection of Dread Marines deserved a chance to baptize their Dread Armors in tribulation lightning, their lacking results forced their superiors to make the switch.

With the return of a lot of familiar Dread Marines, the fight intensified, but not by much.

Even though the newly arrived Dread Marines had absorbed varying amounts of tribulation energies, it was not quite clear how they improved.

None of the Dread Marines exhibited any significant differences in performances. They did not suddenly move twice as fast or launched attacks that inflicted ten times as much damage.

While the humans who fought with the evolved Dread Armors clearly sensed that they had reached a new level of strength, their improved conditions did not come with a manual that taught them how to leverage their new boons effectively!

This was not the result that Ves and Dread Captain Volkert Argile wanted to see. They expected the lightning baptism to provide more concrete results.

"I think the evolved Dread Armors need to be fueled with energy in order to display greater strength." Ves suggested as he continued to observe the fighting from his position behind a dormant turret. "When is the Spark Reactor ready to channel fire energy to our locations? It has already been several minutes."

"Your request is unprecedented, professor. It takes time to make the required adjustments. Do not forget that the Spark Reactor is located kilometers away from your position. Our engineers have informed me that they must manually override the safeguards built into the Spark Reactor in order to further redirect its output of fire energy. In addition to that, they must manually open up waystations and other safety valves in order to channel so much fire energy to the right destinations. We have teleported all of the relevant engineers to the right coordinates. It should not take long for them to complete the necessary modifications."

Trying to modify and alter the functioning of so many elements of the ship's energy transmission system was like playing with fire. It was exceedingly dangerous to tinker with the power lines and other relevant components without cutting off the power supply.

Nonetheless, the engineers bravely did what was necessary in order to support the soldiers who were struggling to fight for the Dominion of Man's survival.

Ves could feel it. A surging firestorm welled up from below and began to pump out a lot more fire energy across the entire hull section!

The effects were immediate. Everyone felt a bit hotter than before. The raw power of the living spark also reinforced the transphasic hyper plating, slowing down the progress of the metal-eating insects.

However, it was the Dread Marines who benefited most from this change. Each and every one of them fought a little harder than before.

This was not a surprise as every Dread Armor had already been brought up to the current generation by incorporating high-quality hyper materials.

Each attack hit harder than before. Energy weapons and explosive weapons received the greatest benefit as they were much more likely to incorporate fire hyper materials.

The energy barriers that shielded the formations of metallic ants rippled to a greater extent than before.

It was not enough.

The added pressure was great, but the Dread Marines still did not gain enough of a firepower boost to break the equilibrium.

The effect of the increase in fire energy was noticeably greater on the Dread Armors that had undergone lightning baptisms.

The metallic suits began to glow in a fiery corona as they did a considerably better job at absorbing and channeling the fire energies.

Their attacks hit even harder than the Dread Marines who had not fought in the previous waves.

The plasma swords wielded by the Dread Marines of the 34th Assault Regiment burned hotter and struck more punishing blows against the metallic energy barrier.

The explosive shells and missiles launched by the 88th Bombardment Regiment burst with greater fury upon impact.

The Dread Marines of the 6th Giant Trapper Division were able to fly faster and charge with greater impact!

In order to achieve quick results and set up a domino effect, Dread Captain Argile had decided to concentrate the replacements in a single formation. Each of the newly appeared Dread Marines had to utilize their enhanced combat strengths to quickly take down a single energy barrier!

"It's... it's working!"

The lightning insects had done a fantastic job at maintaining their combined energy barrier while enduring a huge amount of pressure.

Yet even they possessed limits. The damage inflicted onto the metallic energy barrier had finally exceeded the replenishment rate.

This meant that the barrier shielding tens of thousands of lightning insects was finally starting to weaken!

"Wait! What is that?!"

"Alpha insect detected! We are detecting much stronger energy fluctuations from the larger alien!"

A larger, more ornate and better equipped insect suddenly became visible. The alpha insect had previously hid itself by hiding in the press of lesser insects.

Now that the metallic energy barrier was beginning to drain, the lightning insect commander or champion could no longer remain idle.

It raised one of the forelimbs that ended in a pointed spear and began to channel a lot more metal energy than any of its fellow insect brethren!

Ves and many other observers widened their eyes.

The power released by the alpha insect was astonishing. It became clear that the creature's cultivation was at least an entire stage stronger than any of its ordinary compatriots!

The sudden intervention immediately turned the tide of the battle. The alpha insect not only made the metallic energy barrier a lot tougher, but also began to strengthen it in a more qualitative manner!

Runes began to shimmer into place as the alpha insect utilized his superior cultivation knowledge to his advantage. The metallic energy barrier had become more efficient! It took less energy to block the same attacks than before!

This was bad news for the crew of the Dominion of Man because it negated their previous advantage.

There were limits to the offensive power of the Dread Marines. They were too small and could not mount weapons that were too large and cumbersome. Technology granted them strength, but also limited their power expression. Hyper technology was able to stretch the rules a bit, but there were always limits.

Ves frowned when he witnessed all of these changes. He had learned a lot of lessons about combat and the application of E energy, but most of them emphasized mankind's inferiority in these areas.

There was no way in hell that humanity could outcompete the aliens of Messier 87 in terms of E energy manipulation.

Perhaps the only mitigating factor was that the aliens from the distant supermassive galaxy were accustomed to fighting in high-energy environments. Once they started to fight in the Red Ocean, many of their techniques either became weakened or unusable due to lacking energy support!

"It all comes down to energy." Ves repeated to himself.

The intervention of a champion with greater cultivation than the rest of its kind taught Ves how a single strong figure could transform the combat effectiveness of an entire unit of troops.

The current sight reminded Ves of his battle formations. Allowing a superior cultivator to leverage the collective strength of many soldiers in a much more effective manner could produce overwhelming results that could easily turn the tide of an engagement!

Previously, Ves had always relied on other champions such as Venerable Joshua to function as the linchpins of these battle networks.

This time, none of them were available. His expert pilots were many light-years away. Even if they were closer, they still wouldn't be allowed to participate so that the aliens of Messier 87 still had no solid clue what high-ranking mechs could do against their forces.

It was up to him or rather Blinky to function as the coordinator of a battle network, or at least a bastardized version that worked for Dread Marines.

First, Ves needed to verify whether Blinky was capable of absorbing and channeling the increased fire energy released by the Spark Reactor.

"Do your job, Blinky!"

"Mrow mrow!"

Blinky felt apprehensive at the thought of directly absorbing or coming into contact with the fiery energy.

When the Star Cat utilized his devouring ability to gather a large quantity of potent fire energy that was emanating from the hull, the companion spirit immediately experienced a lot of pain and discomfort!

"Mroooow! Mroooooow!"

Blinky was only able to absorb a minute amount of fire energy produced by the Spark Reactor.

However, the Blinkyverse instantly destabilized as the foreign energy immediately started to go berserk!

It started to destabilize the first star, heat up planets beyond their acceptable range and start fires that could not easily be extinguished!

The energy was untameable. Blinky was far too weak to control E energy generated by a True God-like entity. The fire energy was not only exceedingly high in quality, it also carried a relatively weak but still valid imprint of its originator. This meant that Blinky would have to overpower the living spark in a contest of some sort in order for the companion spirit to tame the newly gained energy!

Perhaps that might be acceptable if Ves and Blinky were free to experiment, but they were operating on an active battlefield at this time!

"Spit it out, Blinky."

"Mroooow! Mrooo..ooooow...! Mrow-mrow!"

"Don't be greedy! You can try to digest some later! Right now, we have a battle to fight!"

"Mrowww..."

It took a lot of effort, but Blinky finally spat out the fire energy that proved to be uncontrollable.

Ves began to grimace. This was not good news. It became increasingly more obvious to him that the Dread Marines and especially the ones baptized by lightning had little clue how to channel E energy more effectively.

Even though Ves was not a proper qi cultivator, he still recognized many instances of waste and inefficiency. If the Dread Marines had a proper cultivator in their midst, they could channel the fire energy a lot more effectively, thereby achieving much better results on the battlefield!

Ves originally thought that Blinky could play this role, but the incompatibility between him and the power of the Spark Reactor hindered his plan.

He switched his gaze between Blinky and the Dread Marines.

Why was Blinky unable to properly harness the fire energy generated by the Spark Reactor while the Dread Armors showed no rejection reactions?

Ves quickly realized one of the possible answers.

"The Dread Armors are already being treated as an extension of the Dominion of Man. I... am not. Blinky and I may have contributed to her evolution, but we haven't formed a Bloodfire Pact with the dreadnought."

He had no intention of doing that. He would pretty much have to bid farewell to his current life if he made this commitment. He would also be at risk of literally going down with the ship if the Dominion of Man failed to survive this lightning tribulation.

In any case, now that he identified the current problem, he quickly tried to come up with a solution.

"Wait, I may not be a part of this sacred brotherhood, but I happen to know an entity that does!"

Caramond!

The ancestral spirit that was still in the process of coming into power was deeply rooted into the Dominion of Man!

All Blinky needed to do was to borrow Caramond's power to manipulate the fire energy generated by the Spark Reactor as if it was his own possession!