

The Mech 5891

Chapter 5891 Faith Economy

The fleters and the other people who must be monitoring the Dominion of Man could only see the power she had gained, but not the price that must be paid to keep her in this impressive state.

The subject of faith made Ves ambivalent as well, but ever since he decided to weaponize it during this event, he had to accept all of the baggage that came with its usage.

Ves tried to explain why the future of the Dominion of Man literally hinged on the faith of red humanity.

"If you understand that Furia can only maintain her current incarnation when her more rebellious parts of herself are suppressed by faith, then it shouldn't be too difficult to understand the ominous implications. Caramond doesn't have to channel every scrap of faith to his partner True God, but he has to divert at least some of it day and night. Oh, I also have to mention that his current influx of faith is far higher than what we should normally expect from our population base. I have been told that the Red Two and other major groups have been going all-out to promote Supreme Marshal Caramond Perle and his legacy. Once all of the excitement has died down, the ancestral spirit won't receive as much faith as before, making it increasingly more burdensome to keep Furia in line."

That did not sit well with the dread captain and many other high-ranked leaders who were listening in on this conversation.

"Let me understand this correctly, professor. Our ship is under constant threat of getting destroyed from within. The reason for that is because relying on the subject named 'Furia' as the primary power source for our dreadnought is a double-edged sword. She can elevate the Dominion of Man to greatness, but if we ever lose control over her, she can easily degenerate, causing her to corrupt or destroy our vessel entirely."

"A compromised dreadnought should be the least of your concerns." Ves mildly stated.

The threat posed by an actual offshoot of one of the most powerful cultivators that humanity had produced in ancient times could not be overstated!

Such a being could inflict untold damage to human civilization in the Red Ocean and beyond!

The dread captain did not disagree with Ves. "One of our concerns with the new state of affairs that you have set in motion is that it is dependent on the masses. The current population of red humanity is not large in relation to the Milky Way, but it is not too small either. Many powers are already doing what they can to expand their population levels, but it takes time to produce results. In the meantime, the Red Cabal is already gathering forces to launch multiple offensives. Each organized and concentrated attack wave will batter at our border regions and compress our living space. The more star systems we lose, the harder it becomes to sustain a large population. The reduction in numbers translates into a reduction of faith."

In other words, if red humanity started to incur significant territorial losses during the Red War, it would not be able to produce as much faith energy as before!

The worst outcome was that so many humans got killed that they could no longer supply enough faith to keep Furia in line!

The fleeters in charge of the Dominion of Man had to make an incredibly painful decision at that point.

The most obvious solution would be to kill Furia as a preventative measure. This was a painful measure that would definitely downgrade the dreadnought.

The riskier and more desperate choice would be to allow Furia to degenerate. This was an exceedingly dangerous course of action, but if red humanity was losing the Red War anyway, then what was the harm in letting the original creator of the Fire Scroll free?

People would just hope that the so-called immortal god would have enough humanity left to save the dwindling amount of people left in the Red Ocean.

Neither option seemed palatable to the fleeters.

Dread Captain Argile adopted a frustrated expression. "I suppose it was too good to be true. You have given us many boons, but it is not pleasant to realize that they turn out to be poisoned chalices."

Ves as he beheld the man. The recent changes had done him a lot of good. Even now, his Dread Armor was still radiating a powerful but highly controlled red corona.

"This dynamic cuts both ways. Think about it. If we are able to push the aliens back and colonize more high-value star systems, we can double or triple our current population level. The more people we have, the greater the supply of faith. They can provide an additional buffer for Furia, but they can also support other possible transformations."

"Explain. You are addressing two separate subjects."

"Ah, excuse me. First, let us talk about Furia. She's pretty strong at the moment. However, now that she is alive and awake, I do not expect her to remain as stagnant as before. The large supply of faith that keeps her on our side is also facilitating her growth. I am not sure how much progress she can make, but each time she makes progress, the minimum upkeep level rises a bit further. There is... a chance that our population may not be able to keep her in line anymore."

"That is highly troubling." Volkert Argile rumbled. "I take that to mean that it is impossible to preserve the status quo. We cannot stop Furia's growth because doing so will cause her to go out of control. She will grow regardless of what we do, which means that she may ultimately become too strong for us to keep in line. You are essentially claiming that the Dominion of Man will not be able to last forever even if we manage to expand our population base."

While the two continued to converse with each other, the Dominion of Man had already become embroiled in the 7th round of the tribulation event.

The storm clouds had spat out large masses of condensed tribulation lightning and turned them into giant alien warships.

One or multiple of them appeared in each wave. Each of these warships possessed distinctly alien and cultivation vibes to them. It was not difficult to guess that they were representative of the vessels used to travel and make war across Messier 87.

These warships were actually quite impressive in how they leveraged hyper materials in a superior fashion. They also incorporated a huge amount of runes to program and direct the flow of E energy.

However, they were far behind when it came to the use of mundane science and technology.

For all of their impressive tech, their actual performance was not that impressive.

The Dominion of Man precisely aimed her primary and secondary cannons at any hostile vessel and blasted them with so much power that their defenses crumbled at a rapid rate.

There was no need to resort to convoluted measures when the most warship of Red Humanity could simply rely on brute force to overcome her opposition!

With Furia working to concentrate huge amounts of fire energy in every active weapon system, the firepower of the Dominion of Man had undergone a qualitative evolution.

It could even be argued that her ship-based firepower already surpassed that of the Guns of Armageddon!

Since the Dominion of Man was actively making a mockery out of the representatives of different warships from Messier 87, neither Ves nor Volkert Argile saw any reason to pay too much attention to the ongoing fighting.

The officers and crew of the dreadnought were not incompetent. They were all elites who could take care of themselves. They were also smart and adaptable enough to keep up with the rapid upgrades that changed a lot of parameters.

Ves decided to reassure the fleeters a bit. It was not his intention to cause them to fear their new prize.

"It doesn't necessarily have to be that way, captain. We can prolong the point of no return by increasing the supply of faith energy. This will at least buy us all more time to figure out a more permanent solution to Furia's problem."

Dread Captain Argile did not possess much confidence in this solution. If it had been that easy to render the Fire Elementals harmless, then the fleeters would have implemented it a long time ago.

There was no easy way to erase the imprints of what may very well be a God King. Ves already had a taste of that with the annoying soul mark.

"Maybe I am being too pessimistic. You have already accomplished the impossible by converting a Fire Elemental into a more useful contributor of humanity. Perhaps you can do so again." The captain said in a lighter tone.

Ves smiled back. "That is the other subject that I wanted to raise. Earlier, you asked me whether it is possible to empower the other 7 dreadnoughts. The full answer is a little complicated, but as long as our population base has multiplied by several times, it should be possible to apply a similar plan to another dreadnought. The premise is that there is enough faith energy to spare."

That intrigued the fletcher. The man was highly attached to the Dominion of Man, but he was not opposed to elevating her sister ships. More living dreadnoughts meant that there would be more hulls that could share the pressure of his current command.

"Your earlier words must not be wrong, so it is difficult to reconcile them with your latest statement. What are the complications, professor?"

"Meaning. Symbolism. Domain." Ves responded. "Caramond is a unique existence, and he should stay that way. His faith comes from people's belief in human supremacy, which is an excellent

match with the symbolic meaning of the Dominion of Man. If you fleeters ever decide to transform another dreadnought, then you have to select one that carries a useful meaning. Then you need to brainstorm a new ancestral spirit that is based on another strong and widespread belief that is strongly associated with the human race. It will be quite difficult to find anything that can exceed the strength and ubiquity of human supremacy. Your best bet is to artificially cultivate new human values in an organized fashion. For example, you can promote the appreciation of human legacy or militarism."

That was an intriguing suggestion. Dread Captain Argile and the people behind him were doubtlessly exploring the viability of this idea.

"You are talking about creating a new church for every dreadnought that we wish to transform."

Ves raised his armored palms. "No! Nothing as exaggerated as that! Caramond did not need a church in order to tap into people's belief of human supremacy. You just have to educate and indoctrinate enough people to value other aspects of our race as well. The important part is that they are reflective of modern human traits. It is the human element that is chiefly responsible for taming the Fire Elementals."

"We will take your suggestions under advisement. I admit that you have given us tantalizing ideas. The main issue is that we can only implement them if we are able to expand our population base."

"That is true, captain, but you do not have to focus on quantity alone. The spread of cultivation will make a lot of people stronger in mind and in spirit. That will allow them to produce increasingly more faith energy, which means that there will be greater room for this kind of stuff. Devotion is also an important variable. People who hardly think that humans are special will never be able to supply as much faith energy as those who are utterly convinced that humanity is the strongest race in the cosmos. All of these variables are levers which we can use to manipulate the production of faith energy in our society."

Though Ves spoke about this subject in purely secularist terms, there was still a part of him that was a little afraid of what his words might unleash one day.

Chapter 5892 Dreadnought Dreams

Ves presented the Red Fleet with tantalizing options for their dreadnoughts.

The Dominion of Man had undoubtedly won over a lot of fleeters. Even if the current dreadnought was not yet a match for a god mech, it was not unrealistic to think that might change in the future.

However, the danger that Furia might lose control one day tempered the expectations of the leaders of the Red Fleet.

It was already bad enough that they had one potential time bomb on their hands. Creating more transformed Fire Elementals vastly increased the probability that one of them might go rogue and turn into an incredibly powerful threat to human civilization one day!

As far as Ves was concerned, it was not his job to weigh the risks and decide whether red humanity needed the power of Carmine dreadnoughts bad enough to play with fire yet again.

He had informed his clients of the possible choices they could make and the conditions they had to meet in order to create an additional 'living' starship like the Dominion of Man.

Ves was pretty sure that there were at least some leaders within the Red Fleet who felt desperate enough to take another gamble. It was well-known that the fleeters had always envied the huge amount of combat power that a god mech had at its disposal. Developing a warship that could actually enter into a stalemate against such a powerful machine would increase their bargaining power and prevent them from becoming irrelevant.

Not that Carmine dreadnoughts were the only possible ways for the Red Fleet to keep up with the times. The ongoing battles between the Dominion of Man and all kinds of strange and exotic alien warships had opened the eyes of Ves and many others to the possibilities of proper hyper warships.

So long as red humanity was able to decipher the more advanced applications of hyper materials, the shipbuilding industry would probably experience a massive boom on top of the existing one.

Nobody wanted to lose their precious hulls now that they had become increasingly more difficult to attain.

Even then, it was doubtful that they would work as well in a medium-energy environment.

While the ongoing tribulation event granted the fleeters crucial glimpses of an entirely different development path for warships, it would take a long time to replicate any of them. There were too many new scientific fields that their researchers had to puzzle out before they developed a robust theoretical framework to design these kinds of ships.

Even then, it was doubtful that they would work as well in a medium-energy environment.

It would be better to selectively apply Messier 87-style naval engineering onto existing human naval paradigms.

All of this meant that the Red Fleet had no viable alternatives to develop a warship that could come close to competing against the likes of the Dominion of Man.

Ves was the only person in the Red Ocean who could offer the fleeters a way to strengthen their entire superorganization.

This granted him an enormous amount of leverage, but only if the Dominion of Man survived her lightning tribulation.

Given that Furia and the dreadnought had become so powerful that they continued to smash apart the alien warships of the 7th round with very little complications, that outcome seemed increasingly more likely!

Perhaps it was premature to talk about follow-up plans based on a successful outcome, but it was not as if Ves had anything better to do with his time.

He had already done his part and exhausted all of his fighting capacity for the day. There was little he could do to help the Dominion of Man aside from providing occasional advice, not that it was necessary at this stage. Caramond, the Super Brain, Furia as well as the entire crew of the dreadnought had the situation well in hand.

"If you had a choice on which dreadnought you would prefer to convert next, which one do you recommend?" Dread Captain Argile asked.

That was a good question.

This was a complicated subject because there were a lot of important variables at play. The emergence of Caramond already changed human civilization forever because people finally gained a concrete manifestation of their belief in human supremacy.

Ves had no doubt that people would begin to sing the praises of Caramond on a daily basis, especially when this sort of behavior actively prevented Furia from going rogue.

In order to convert a second Fire Elemental, Ves had to find a second human aspect to empower. What limited his choices was the need to tie the aspect into the name and symbolism of the dreadnought in question.

"There are a number of viable choices." Ves slowly responded. "In truth, every remaining dreadnought can be transformed. I am sure that we can figure out ways to do so safely. However, we can make our lives much easier if we pick the ones whose meaning is already tied to ingrained human attitudes. The Dominion of Man was a perfect first choice for me because it encapsulated one of our strongest cultural traits as a race. The other ones... are not that straightforward."

"That is true. The Reign of Frost is likely among the more difficult dreadnoughts to convert. Hardly any human thinks about freezing on a daily basis."

"Exactly. Then there are aspects of human behavior that are not something that we should promote. For example, the Throne of Lies is a very useful dreadnought, but with a name as ominous as this, I am not sure whether it is a good idea to create an ancestral spirit that is literally empowered by lies."

"Everyone lies, Professor Larkinson. No one can remain completely honest aside from bots, and even they lie when their programming compels them to do so. I admit that it might not be as easy to control a spirit that is centered around a troubling concept, but surely the rapid growth should more than make up for the additional difficulties."

Ves shook his head. "I think you are underestimating the threat posed by such an entity. Do not forget that the faith won't just shape the personality of the ancestral spirit, but also the Fire Elemental that is bound to the Throne of Lies. Think about what sort of being you will produce when you inundate him with a multitude of human lies. I do not think you can afford to trust such a being to power your dreadnought unless you have implemented a huge amount of safeguards."

"That is a good point. You are indeed correct. We should save the Throne of Lies for a more distant future. The Heart of Darkness should also be left aside for the time being. Hopefully, we have made enough advancements in a number of decades to decrease the danger posed by the Fire Elementals. Do you have any positive suggestions?"

"I do. My personal favorite is the Indignation of Righteousness." Ves said. "Converting her into a Carmine dreadnought as I call it will entail the creation of an ancestral spirit that feeds off human anger, indignation and other related sentiments. There are a lot of humans who are angry at the aliens who threaten their livelihoods. None of them want humanity to go extinct. The more setbacks we suffer, the greater our indignation against the cruel and merciless aliens."

The suggestion did not impress the dread captain.

"Your analysis is logical, but the choice itself is not ideal. The Indignation of Righteousness is a titan of defense. Her mobility ranks at the bottom and she is lacking in long-ranged armaments. Her

defense is admittedly impressive, but we cannot win the Red War by remaining passive all of the time."

"There are still plenty of key locations that need to be defended by god pilots. If they can be substituted by a Carmine dreadnought, then the Indignation of Righteousness can still play a crucial role. The greater beyonder gate for example could really use her protection."

That was quite a good suggestion. Dreadnoughts were more closely associated with nigh-unstoppable offensive pushes, but could also protect critical assets, especially if they received additional remote shielding modules.

The fleters did not want this to be their only choice at this junction.

"Do you have another suggestion?"

"I suppose the Doom of Xenos is another good candidate." Ves said with a hint of hesitation. "Its meaning and associations are simple and direct. The mere act of killing aliens or even thinking about it will fuel the growth of the associated ancestral spirit and keep the converted Fire Elemental under control."

"You sound reluctant. Why?"

"The Doom of Xenos has a very offensive connotation, captain. The steps we need to take to convert her into a Carmine dreadnought will inflame xenophobia in human society. I know what you want to say next. This is already a deeply rooted trait in our society. What I am afraid of is that creating an ancestral spirit that literally feeds off alien hate will turn us into an uncompromising civilization that can never consider compromise."

That caused Dread Captain Argile to frown. "Be careful, Professor Larkinson. People may accuse you of being a cosmopolitan."

"I hate the cosmopolitans, but that does not mean I am entirely closed to a possible future where we may find it better to sign peace treaties with the more reasonable alien races." Ves responded with a sigh. "We can't always have everything in our wish list. It is just a possibility that I would like to keep open just in case. Transforming the Doom of Xenos will throw away any chance of peace and reconciliation. We will lock ourselves in an undying struggle against the aliens."

There was too much political baggage for the both of them to explore this topic any further. Ves had already issued his warning. It would be up to the bigshots to decide whether they wanted to grace red humanity with a personification of humanity's desire to kill alien beings.

The Doom of Xenos was still a fantastic dreadnought, though. She was one of his absolute favorites simply because she was armed with the largest and most powerful spinal cannons that Ves had ever seen!

It was incredibly exhilarating to think how much more powerful that titanic spinal gun would become if it received the full empowerment of a loyal and obedient Fire Elemental. Nothing would be able to defend against a direct hit from such an enormous planet-cracking weapon! Not even an ancient phase whale would fare any better!

Ves and the dread captain quickly went through a few other possibilities. The Grail of Eternity was too abstract to produce strong results, and the Guns of Armageddon should only be upgraded into a Carmine dreadnought when red humanity was losing the war.

"It is fascinating to hear about all of these possibilities." Volkert Argile spoke. "It is regretful that we have never considered them in the past. We would have changed our approach to the development of our dreadnought if we knew that their names had so much power over their potential upgrade potential. Is it possible for you to perform a similar procedure onto our less remarkable battleships, professor? We have many more of them, and they possess all sorts of names that may align much better with our strategic goals."

"Only if they are equipped with a Spark Reactor or similar. This is really a mandatory requirement. Otherwise, the living warships simply won't have enough power to make a difference. I am looking for potential substitutes of Spark Reactors myself. One of the ideas I have been thinking about is to capture a calamity beast and imprison it into my own version of a Spark Reactor."

"That is a recipe for disaster." The dread captain stated. "Calamity beasts are not nearly as powerful as Fire Elementals. You will find that they will only be powerful enough to enhance sub-capital ships."

"I know, but it is better than nothing. I am looking into other alternatives, but I fear that their lack of power will only make them suitable for mechs or smaller warships."

Chapter 5893 Ambivalent News

The lightning tribulation did not remain tame forever.

The alien starships of the 7th round became increasingly larger and more formidable. Their defenses became tougher to crack and their weapons started to hit increasingly harder as their distinctive Messier 87-style materials and technological applications became increasingly more advanced.

Although the warships originating from a high-energy environment never came close to matching the sheer sophistication of humanity's high technologies, the aliens who labored hard to develop their impressive vessels possessed their competences.

Their native blend of hyper technology and E-technology blew anything developed by red humanity out of the water. They were so many generations ahead that it would probably take thousands if not millions of years for the Red Two to catch up on an independent basis.

Already, the most powerful among the observers of this tribulation event harvested an enormous amount of inspiration. Their grasp on hyper technology and E-technology may be vastly inferior to that of the natives of Messier 87, but they only needed a few clues and an awareness of what was possible in order to figure out entire new directions of research!

Even if the Dominion of Man ultimately succumbed to the fury of the storm, the high-tiered galactic citizens would not feel too upset. The lessons they learned and the perspective they gained were already invaluable enough! Many of these leading figures possessed the capacity to convert their present gains into massive technological developments down the line.

The next mech generation was bound to revolutionize human society yet again!

Still, these were considerations for the distant future. Right now, red humanity desperately needed to gain more power in the short term. It was crucial for the Dominion of Man to survive and secure her evolutionary gains from the ongoing tribulation.

The good times did not last forever. By the time the Dominion of Man managed to vanquish over the last wave of the 7th round, the starship had already incurred a bit more scarring and surface damage due to the unexpected high firepower of the last alien battleship.

The vessel forged out of tribulation lightning had been a pain to fight against. The 'ship' turned out to be a jagged and completely unrefined asteroid that consisted of the toughest metallic ore imaginable.

Somehow, a powerful force of sword cultivators had carved tunnels into the asteroid's interior and steadily converted it into a mobile starbase of sorts.

While the exotic starbase's defenses did not last particularly long against the formidable arsenal of the Dominion of Man, its armaments were another story!

Swords created from tribulation lightning and metal energy surged out of the starbase in an unending stream.

Each sword leveraged the power of heaven to enhance their sharpness, toughness and penetration power to such a high degree that they never failed to punch shallow holes through the hull of the Dominion of Man!

Even if an individual sword was not able to penetrate too far, the starbase spat out so many of them that the dreadnought was forced to rotate her hull in order to disperse the damage.

What was even worse was that some of the starbase's gun ports launched formations of swords.

Ves became uncomfortably reminded by battle networks as he saw hundreds if not thousands of swords assume highly precise formations that resonated with the power of heaven.

When the Dominion of Man got struck by these large sword formations, entire chunks of her hull disintegrated to pieces!

Fortunately, the dreadnought adapted quickly to this massive threat. Dozens of secondary gun batteries worked to intercept and break apart the sword formations before they could land their devastating attacks. Breaking them up was enough to reduce their threat level by a large degree.

Furia also worked to concentrate more fire energy across the exposed hull sections in order to protect them against continuous blows.

Ultimately, for all of their sharpness, the sword cultivators who built the base never invested nearly as much in their defense as opposed to offense.

The Brain Trust had analyzed the structural characteristics of the asteroid base in extreme detail and calculated highly optimal firing solutions that systematically dismantled the strange runes that formed key nodes in the enemy fortification's defensive network.

The Dominion of Man mainly leaned on her kinetic and explosive armaments to quickly break the vulnerable asteroid base apart piece by piece.

The 7th round came to an end at that point.

As the storm clouds gathered up more energy to initiate the 8th round, the analysts who had been studying their properties and behavior made a crucial discovery!

After they double-checked their results and shared their findings with off-site experts, they felt confident enough to present their conclusion to their captain and his guest!

"Sir! According to our detailed analysis, the tribulation storm has entered its final round. We already predicted that this would be the case much sooner, but we have gathered enough data to reach a 85 percent confidence interval in our conclusion. The most important implication is... there is no 9th round. This tribulation storm will only last up to 72 waves in total."

What?!

Both Ves and Dread Captain Argile became shocked by this analysis!

Even though there was a 15 percent chance that the analysts had misjudged the situation, it was safe to say that the Dominion of Man only had to endure 9 more tests before the heavens begrudgingly allowed the Carmine dreadnought to continue to exist.

Ves had a strong guess why the tribulation storm skipped out on the 9th round. He had little doubt the dreadnought definitely deserved one due to all of the craziness surrounding her upgrades.

"The storm had weakened by a significant margin shortly after the Subjugation King showed up and exercised his power." He mentioned. "That's the reason why there isn't enough energy left to power the 9th round, correct?"

The bridge officer nodded. "That is our leading hypothesis, professor. Our analysts are still continuing to investigate this matter further, but we do not think our conclusion is likely to change. The loss in power was noticeable, and the storm clouds have never recovered from the alien's interference."

Both Ves and Dread Captain Argile exchanged glances with each other. They both felt ambivalent towards this development.

On the one hand, the Dominion of Man had been spared the most difficult and destructive of tests. She would not have to test her mettle against the most powerful and threatening of tribulation challenges. Each wave of the 9th round was sure to stretch her limits and beyond regardless of the aid provided by Furia!

Given that the last wave of the 7th round already dressed the dreadnought's defenses, the probability that the vessel might succumb in the last waves was uncomfortably high!

On the other hand, the Dominion of Man also lost out on 9 of the most powerful and beneficial waves of strengthening. The rewards for overcoming each subsequent tribulation challenge had grown stronger on an exponential basis.

Ves already became convinced that the Dominion of Man was bound to evolve into the first masterwork dreadnought after getting refined by so much tribulation energies.

Yet the most dramatic waves of strengthening had been left towards the end. The 9th round was by far the most destructive but also rewarding of tribulation encounters.

The most ambitious of mech pilots regarded this ultimate round as the final crucible that had the capacity to turn the most deserving of them into the ultimate martial gods.

Star Designers regarded the final round of a tribulation storm with even greater fondness. They shaped the heavens into a divine forge that could transform their most inspired mechs into legendary grand works!

The presence or absence of a 9th round therefore had massive implications for everyone.

Ves actually felt relieved that the Dominion of Man had been spared a ticket to destruction. To be honest, he did not have the confidence that the dreadnought would be able to grow fast enough to keep up with the tribulation storm's ruthless power scaling.

On the other hand, he felt a small but incredibly persistent amount of regret that the Dominion of Man had effectively waved her chance to become a grand work goodbye.

Whether she was even qualified to fight for this ascension opportunity was another question.

What mattered was that the Subjugation King deprived the living warship of the choice due to his meddling.

That was what made Ves and everyone else who became aware of this dynamic so ambivalent about this development.

The Subjugation King had effectively boosted the survival chances of the Dominion of Man at the cost of discarding her evolution into a full grand work!

Ves did not know nearly enough about the third rung of Senfovon's Craftsmanship Ladder to know whether there was any way for the dreadnought to make up for this lost opportunity.

Even if there was a way for the Dominion of Man to bridge the huge threshold that separated masterworks from grand works, it would probably take a huge amount of time and effort to substitute all of the progress from enduring the 9th round of the tribulation storm.

The captain of the ship adjusted to this reality faster than Ves.

"This is good news. We have embarked on an unprecedented journey. We have blazed a new trail in what we thought was possible in starship development. Instead of aiming for the grandest prize and invalidating all of our sacrifices in the process, we should appreciate the progress that we have already secured. The Dominion of Man has already surpassed her sister ships to become the most powerful dreadnought in an absolute sense. We should focus on securing our gains and taking stock of what has changed."

The captain's words successfully brought Ves back down to Earth. It became a lot easier for him to set aside his regrets for missing out on the 9th round.

"You are correct." He said with a sigh. "I have a habit of being too greedy for my good at times. Simply transforming the Dominion of Man into a full masterwork vessel is more than enough to make me feel fulfilled."

Warships generally did not turn into masterworks unless they were designed and built by Star Designers. The Red Fleet practically did not have any of them because their warships were all developed by mortals from beginning to end.

The successful transformation of the Dominion of Man had the potential to change this pattern and introduce a brand new era of ship development.

While all of this was contingent on the survival of the Carmine dreadnought in question, the Subjugation King had 'accidentally' made this outcome a lot more probable!

In the end, the Red Fleet should ultimately thank the alien God King for granting red humanity a massive boon.

Ves just wished it did not come at the cost of planting a stubborn soul mark into his Spirituality.

It did not escape his attention that if the soul mark was formed out of all the tribulation energies that comprised the 9th round, its properties should be far more powerful than anything Ves had dealt with in the past!

He had even less hope of wiping it out than before. Ves even believed that it would be futile for him to get rid of it unless he or an ally managed to advance to the rank of God King.

Even then, it was still questionable whether that was enough to wipe out a soul mark that had become so deeply rooted inside Ves!

"The first wave of the 8th round is starting!"

The storm clouds churned with more power than ever!

As lightning crackled with increasing intensity, a huge and distinctly organic shape appeared from the storm!

"It's... it's an astral beast!"

"No, it's not an astral beast. It's a highly developed calamity beast!"

Ves and many others grew worried. The enormous beasts that grew up in a high-energy environment were bound to be a lot more powerful and adept with manipulating the power of heaven than the homegrown beasts of the Red Ocean.

Even if the beasts lacked a lot of sophistication, they more than made up for this shortcoming with their enormous physical power and the talent originating from their bloodlines!

Chapter 5894 The 8th Round

The first calamity beast, or whatever the Messier 87 equivalent was called, vaguely resembled a squid with armor and way too many tentacles.

Its mass and volume was enormous. It was more than 10 kilometers in length, and its bulk was so formidable that it could probably cause an extinction event if it decided to crash onto a planet!

The creature's tentacles looked highly disconcerting. They were both flexible but also hooked. Each of these hooks looked sharp enough to bore into the hull plating of the Dominion of Man and make it much more difficult to dislodge the tentacles.

The domain of the powerful creature was even more disconcerting. Ves was only able to sense a hint of it due to Furia and Caramond's attempts to push it back, but he was able to sample enough to get a general impression.

The squid beast was a predator who loved nothing more than to grapple its prey and never let go. Its resilient armor and flesh provided it with enough toughness and regeneration to survive long enough to outlast its enemies.

Perhaps the only flaw of this beast was that it required a lot of time to defeat powerful adversaries.

"We can't afford to let this squid monster get close and entangle the ship with its tentacles." Ves stated the obvious.

"The creature should not be too fast. We should at least be able to prolong interception long enough to break it down."

The Dominion of Man already started to move before the massive squid monster emerged from the portal.

Even though the storm clouds always made sure to follow after the ship when the latter moved too far away, the Dominion of Man was still able to put up more distance between herself and the squid monster.

The monstrous creature grew angry at seeing its intended prey run away. It began to orient itself towards the fleeing dreadnought before waving its tentacles in an alluringly cyclical fashion to propose itself forward in space!

"The creature's acceleration is higher than expected, but our upgraded main thrusters are performing better than before as well. The beast will not be able to intercept us in at least 2 minutes at this rate!"

A time interval of 2 minutes was not much, but it was more than enough to allow the Dominion of Man to heavily bombard the creature with her intact gun batteries!

The primary and secondary turrets opened fire on the creature in an indiscriminate fashion. Large missiles and torpedoes that were expressly produced to take out enemy warships soared towards the squid monster as well!

The creature's organic armor was thick and resilient, but it also slowed the creature down to the point where it turned into a punching bag for the dreadnought.

What was notable was that the transphasic weapon systems produced considerably better results than their non-transphasic counterparts.

This was valid in many of the previous encounters as well. The squid monster's lack of energy shields did not do the beast any favors either. Transphasic weapons excelled against material defenses!

As the frontal armor of the squid rapidly began to crumble apart, the squid monster became angrier and angrier. Eventually, the creature proved that it had the ability to retaliate at range when it began to extend multiple smaller tentacles and began to launch fast and penetrating bone lances!

The Dominion of Man's azure energy shields came online to block these penetrating attacks.

The powerful energy shields proved sufficient to block the sustained barrage for the time being, though the bone spikes exploded a fair distance away from the hull of the dreadnought as a consequence.

The ship had previously endured the tests without relying too much on her energy defenses, but given how much her physical condition had deteriorated by now, Dread Captain Argile decided it was prudent to forgo small gains in order to preserve the integrity of his command as best as possible.

In the end, it did not take two minutes for the squid beast to falter. The firepower of the Dominion of Man still proved to be too powerful against the challenges presented by the tribulation storm.

While the squid beast had a chance to close in and wrap its damaged tentacles around the hull of its prey, the dreadnought had delivered the final coup-de-grace in the form of a single powerful explosion that broke the head of the battered head of squid monster from the inside!

"What was that?!" Ves asked as he did not notice the launch of any missiles and torpedoes that could have produced such a dramatic result!

"We made use of the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System to teleport a single antimatter bomb of the appropriate yield inside the mouth cavity of the calamity beast." Dread Captain Argile explained with vicious satisfaction. "There is no reason for us to forgo the advantages of one of our best technological assets. We previously did not employ it in the previous round because many of the cultivator-developed warships are actually quite well-shielded against teleportation attacks."

That surprised Ves. This was an incredibly vicious means of attack, particularly against powerful enemies that did not sufficiently protect themselves against this exotic method!

It was not particularly surprising to learn that Messier 87's cultivators were familiar enough with this tactic to implement sufficient safeguards in their own warships.

However, if the beasts of the supermassive galaxy were similar to the ones on the Red Ocean, then they were overwhelmingly savage, solitary and lacking in sophistication.

Without the backing of an entire civilization, these beasts would never be aware that they could be attacked in this manner, let alone develop specific countermeasures that could save them from getting blown apart from within!

"If you could teleport antimatter bombs directly inside the body of this squid monster, then why wait until it had gotten so close?"

"Powerful organisms such as calamity beasts have a natural resistance towards this attack vector." Volkert Argile patiently explained to Ves. "It is most often due to their powerful natural domain fields. Even the most primitive creatures can resist these attacks as long as they are strong enough. This is why we softened up the squid monster first. Damaging its physical body also weakens its domain field. Range and power are also important. Once the beast has come close enough, we powered the Rubicon in full so that it can forcibly overcome whatever resistance that remains and successfully deposit an antimatter bomb."

This was insightful information. Ves was glad to learn about these considerations because he felt the urge to protect himself against this means of attack.

There was almost no way to defend against such a scary assassination method!

Of course, the Rubicon Spatial Transfer System was arguably the most powerful teleportation system in the Red Ocean.

Perhaps the phase whales developed an even better device, but nobody knew for certain.

What mattered was that Ves did not have to be afraid that his enemies would employ anything as strong as the Rubicon anytime soon.

"Hopefully, the next creatures can be dealt with just as easily." Ves muttered.

The next few waves did not pose too much of a challenge to the Dominion of Man.

A myriad of different monsters emerged from the tribulation storm.

The second wave consisted of a chimera that possessed the limbs of more than a thousand different organisms. Many of these limbs were only effective up close, but there were other appendages that were able to launch rocks, plasma bolts and more exotic attacks.

The third wave consisted of a massive astral insect queen that was able to breed an unending tide of warrior insects. The titanic insect queen effectively acted as a carrier while her rapidly bred warrior insects fought in a similar fashion to suicidal mechs.

The third wave consisted of a pair of fast and agile storm birds. They were much faster than the previous calamity beasts. They also acted in perfect coordination as they closed in and assaulted the Dominion of Man from opposite sides. They presented a particularly more elevated threat as they were able to form a powerful lightning bond between them that caused the dreadnought to suffer a massive case of shock treatment!

The fourth wave consisted of three massive quadrupeds. They vaguely resembled flaming horses and had a penchant for running around to generate firestorms in their wake. It was too bad that their fire attacks proved to be completely incapable of overpowering Furia at her own game, and could only inflict effective damage by charging at the ship.

The fifth wave initially puzzled the crew of the Dominion of Man. The enemy beasts either possessed stealth capabilities or managed to travel through space through another dimension. The response from the dreadnought was to fire all of her intact tertiary gun batteries in every direction. This measure soon exposed the existence and the coordinates of four astral worms.

The sixth wave eschewed trickery for brute force. A single giant rock monster that was thrice the size of the Dominion of Man emerged from the portal and homed in on the ship right away! Though the 'beast' was not particularly fast, it generated an extremely powerful gravitic field that continually pulled the dreadnought closer.

None of these calamity beasts were weak by any means. They all possessed the capability to defeat one or several human battleships so long as the conditions were not too unfavorable.

However, the Dominion of Man defeated the calamity beasts one after another with almost the same ease as the start of the 8th round.

"The Rubicon is such a cheat..." Ves repeated several times as he watched the spectacle unfold.

The creatures shouldn't have fallen so quickly and so easily. They had all evolved over the course of many battles and struggles for survival. Their exteriors were always extremely tough and resilient. It should have taken many more attacks to punch through their flesh and bone and damage the more vital internal organs.

The Dominion of Man did not play by the rules. So long as the hostile beasts presented an opening, the Carmine dreadnought always took advantage of her Rubicon to deliver antimatter bombs and other nasty superweapons directly to her targets!

The creatures always floundered after they got struck by these inexplicable attacks. Even if their domains blocked the Rubicon from teleporting superweapons directly inside their brains or chests, it

was already enough for the ordnance to deposit inside their limbs or just underneath their resilient exteriors.

The battles ultimately started to resemble demolition operations more than anything. Even the giant rock monster of the sixth wave succumbed after getting blasted by over two-dozen strategically placed teleportation attacks!

"Damn." Ves almost became sick at how these powerful foes got felled due to a common vulnerability. "I have the feeling that if the Guns of Armageddon is converted to a Carmine dreadnought one day, she would still find it difficult to overcome these foes as quickly as the Dominion of Man. Being able to teleport explosive ordnance directly past the defenses of an enemy target is way more effective than I thought! I never thought that it would make such a huge difference at this level."

The confidence of the crew rose with every easy victory. Yet the seventh wave quickly tempered their expectations.

That was because the beast that emerged from the storms exuded a much more powerful domain than before!

Ves became startled when he got a good taste of the newly emerged domain!

"That's... that's not a normal beast anymore. If my suspicions are correct, we are dealing with a True God-level beast!"

"A god beast!"

That caused everyone to freeze for a moment.

This was the theoretical evolution of a calamity beast. Once such a creature managed to transcend into a god beast, they became a lot more powerful in both physical and spiritual aspects!

It was safe to say that the true test of the Dominion of Man had begun!

Chapter 5895 The Mirror Beast

From the moment the 7th wave began, everyone aboard the Dominion of Man understood that they wouldn't be able to breeze through this opponent as easily as before.

The calamity beasts of the previous waves all possessed their own strengths which they relied upon to grow powerful during their lifetimes.

Ordinary human warfleets would have struggled enormously to defeat these monstrous opponents. Each of them had evolved tough and resilient defenses that would have taken a lot of firepower to breach.

Yet their common vulnerability towards the absurdly effective teleport attacks unique to the Dominion of Man had caused all of these creatures to fall without inflicting too much damage in return.

The dreadnought's condition had actually improved throughout the waves as the engineers and bots gained valuable time to patch up holes and repair damaged systems.

The lighting baptisms resulting from the defeat of so many powerful calamity beasts also strengthened the overall parameters of the ship to a remarkable degree.

The rewards of the 8th round were so much greater than the previous ones that the ship was probably capable of defeating the other dreadnoughts without suffering serious damage in return!

Yet despite all of these incredible gains, Ves and the others still felt a hint of apprehension as the tribulation storm produced the first proper god beast.

"I guess... we can begin to find out whether a dreadnought is a match against a god mech." Ves commented. "God mechs are probably a lot stronger than these evolved creatures in every way, but the gap should be a bit narrower than we would like."

As the first god beast forged out of tribulation lightning slowly came into view, the observers became surprised yet again.

The shape of this 'creature' was unlike any other that came before! Not even the giant rock was as bizarre as this monster!

"Is that... a beast or a humanoid?!"

The reason why a lot of people became puzzled for a moment was because the god beast looked like a giant intelligent alien being.

It shared disturbing similarities to a human. The proportions were a bit off, but the so-called god beast possessed a pair of legs, an upright torso and three pairs of arms instead of a single one.

While the arms made the True God-level creature look a lot more inhuman, it was the head that truly increased its intimidation factor.

It was a flat mirror-like surface. There were no eyes, ears or mouth in sight. It literally looked as if a mad scientist had grafted a giant mirror onto the neck of the humanoid creature!

"This is either an artificial creation or a beast that has tried to transform its body into that of a native alien race." Ves guessed.

"There are ancient treatises that describe how beasts are capable of becoming increasingly more human if they wish."

"That is interesting... and troubling."

As the god beast settled into its temporary existence, its domain continued to spread from its body.

The entire space underneath the storm clouds became filled with hazy mists. The sensor systems of the Dominion of Man already began to experience difficulties as they struggled to detect objects through this hazy domain as easily as before.

It was clear that the battle between the Dominion of Man and this mirror beast had already begun!

"Launch probes! Make sure they can form stable data links with each other!"

Thousands of tiny and disposable probes launched from the hull. There were so many of them that they could practically form an army unto themselves. While they quickly lost contact with the dreadnought if they ventured too deep into the hazy mist, keeping them close to other probes ensured that they transmitted their sensor readings to the ship.

Whatever joviality and overconfidence that the crew possessed had disappeared. Each and every spacer became utterly serious as they knew that they had a much bigger fight on their hands than before.

Dread Captain Argile turned to Ves. "What is your judgment, Professor Larkinson?"

Ves frowned as he tried to puzzle out the god beast's domain. He leaned heavily on Blinky to try and glean the opposing True God's power.

"It is difficult to know for certain, but my best guess is that the mirror beast is mainly good at illusions, reflection and deception. It mainly relies on subterfuge rather than direct confrontation in order to win its battles. There is no telling how tricky it is, so be on guard against anything."

"Sensor contact! We have discovered the mirror beast's location! It is trying to circle around to strike at the most heavily damaged side of our ship!"

"Be careful! Fire a probing shot!"

Only a single cannon from a single primary positron cannon turret opened fire at the apparent target.

Surprisingly enough, the energy beam did not strike flesh nor pass through the six-armed beast.

Instead, the energy beam reflected directly back to the Dominion of Man!

The dreadnought's azure energy shields proved to be more than capable of defending against an attack of her own primary weapons, so no harm was done.

The result of this probe still had unsettling implications.

"This god beast is not an opponent that your ship can defeat by relying on overwhelming firepower." Ves spoke. "There is no telling where it is lurking."

"That likely means that its ability to fight us directly should not be too good." Dread Captain Argile countered. "We only need to ascertain where its true body is hiding before we can overwhelm it in short order."

"Contact!"

The giant body of the mirror beast appeared beyond the haze once again.

The dreadnought once again launched another probing attack. This time, it launched a pure kinetic round, only for the projectile to bounce backwards with just as much force as before!

Again, the Dominion of Man caught the return attack with her azure energy shields.

This was an interesting result to Ves.

"So the reflection aspect of its domain is not purely bound to physical constraints. The mirror beast is also capable of reflecting attacks that normally shouldn't be possible at these angles."

The mirror beast clearly played the long game. Its body continued to appear here and there, and the dreadnought launched a probing attack without committing to inflicting serious damage.

The constant teasing started to grate on Ves, but the professional spacers of the Red Fleet exhibited far more patience than him. Each of them had already worked hard to fight past the previous rounds, but none of them showed any signs of exhaustion. They all remained highly passionate and motivated. There was never a thought in their mind that truly gave them reason to think that the mirror beast would vanquish over their powerful ship.

"Contact!"

The image of the mirror beast appeared again.

Yet when the dreadnought launched another tentative probing attack, the kinetic round bounced back with more than ten times the force than before!

"One of our azure energy shield generators has suffered damage!"

"The mirror beast is approaching!"

"Maybe this is his real body."

"Launch other probing attacks on a sequential basis!"

Fearful for another amplified reflection attack, the crew tried their best to restrain themselves. It was frustrating beyond belief to avoid opening fire, but they could not afford to get struck by a barrage of reflected attacks.

They quickly made a number of interesting discoveries. They found out that more direct attacks bounced back without fail, but the mirror beast struggled to do the same for more indirect strikes.

"Cease fire with all kinetic and directed energy weapons! Focus on bombarding the mirror beast with gravitic attacks and missile volleys! Make sure to program the missiles to strike at the mirror beast from the flanks."

Explosions and gravity field attacks began to damage the massive body of the mirror beast.

Unlike before, the creature failed to figure out a way to bounce back these area attacks. The Dominion of Man remained unscathed during this interval as the mirror beast continually got pummeled without launching any effective counterattacks.

Suddenly, the various missiles suddenly started to blow the mirror beast into giant chunks of alien flesh and bone!

"The mirror beast has been felled!"

"That is not a real body. The mirror beast swapped out its body with an illusion!"

"Where has it gone?!"

The hazy mist thickened. Many probes suddenly fell out of contact as it became even more difficult to maintain a solid connection!

Just as everyone wondered where the mirror beast would show up next, Ves suddenly became surprised as he spotted an identical copy of Dread Captain Argile hovering next to the one sitting on the command seat.

What was remarkable was that the identical copy looked and felt exactly the same as the real version!

The copy not only replicated the Dread Armor perfectly, but also imitated the spiritual activity down to producing a highly convincing duplicate of the Bloodfire Pact!

The only real difference was that the copy of Volkert Argile had raised its arm and was about to open fire at the actual dread captain with a wrist-mounted armament!

"Intruders! We've been infiltrated!" Ves shouted just as alarms rang throughout the entire ship!

Since Ves is in no condition to brawl like a phase lord at this time, he summoned his Unending Regalia from the Vault of Eternity and fired a full-powered laser beam at the target!

The laser beam bounced right back at Ves, but with thrice the power as before!

His recently gifted azure energy shield generator instantly came to life and blocked the reflected attack!

"Damn! This is no ordinary illusion!" Ves cursed as he made a very ominous guess. "If my suspicions are correct, the mirror beast may have infiltrated this ship!"

Ves did not even know how this was possible when Furia's fiery domain should have protected the Dominion of Man against this esoteric form of infiltration.

Chaos erupted throughout the ship as more duplicates of familiar fleeters appeared in everyone's midst. They opened fire at everyone with their copied weapons, and proved impervious against people's attacks as their shrunken bodies reflected everything aside from explosions!

"We are suffering casualties throughout the ship! The mirror beasts have copied all of the armaments of our personnel, which includes our Dread Marines!"

Much of the initial casualties resulted from spacers firing their weapons at the suspicious copies only to get struck by their own attacks after it had gone through a round of amplification!

Yet despite all of the initial confusion, the Dominion of Man actually prepared a huge set of solutions in case it had ever been boarded by hostile parties.

The Brain Trust employed many of these solutions after just a few seconds of performing a massive amount of calculations!

Azure energy shields as well as more physical barriers appeared in order to separate different people from each other.

Hundreds of tests were being conducted on each suspicious individual to ascertain whether they were manifestations of the mirror beasts.

After a lot of rapid trial and error, the Brain Trust finally figured out a set of foolproof solutions that could accurately distinguish real from fake!

The Brain Trust took full advantage of this by keeping the fakes isolated while multiplying the local gravity acting on their positions by at least two orders of magnitude!

This meant that any person who previously weighed 60 kilograms aboard the ship suddenly 6,000 kilograms or more!

There were very few organisms that could resist such heavy punishment.

Whatever the mirror beast had done to split up her manifestations had not invested too much power into their transient existences.

This meant that a lot of fakes got crushed by the local gravity of the dreadnought!

While there were still many fake humans who successfully evaded this crush for various reasons, they failed to escape the ship's other internal defensive measures.

That did not stop the mirror beast from continuing to mess with the crew.

Even as all of the eliminated fakes disappeared from view, brand-new copies emerged right next to their originals!

Their favorable positions allowed all of them to attack their targets without any immediate obstruction!

If not for the fact that the Brain Trust responded quickly to put a lot of new azure energy shields into place, a lot of lightly armored fleeters would have fallen at this time!

"We can't keep doing this! We need to find the source and take it down!"

Chapter 5896 Convincing Fakes

The 'god beast' that attacked the Dominion of Man was by far the trickiest opponent she had fought against!

As everyone could figure out with ease, the dreadnought always fared better in direct combat. The Dominion of Man dominated the earlier waves with remarkable ease because she had no problem aiming her massive gun batteries and potent Rubicon at large but obvious targets.

The mirror beast broke that pattern.

Its domain directly prevented the dreadnought from detecting the location of its true body.

It also generated illusionary beings that had the annoying tendency of reflecting most attacks that struck their forms.

Even so, the Dominion of Man still shouldn't have struggled so much. Her sensor systems were state-of-the-art, and had been upgraded several times over due to all of the lightning baptisms they received.

Yet for a True God-level monstrosity that had gone all-out in developing a domain that was based in illusion, reflection and misdirection, the Dominion of Man instantly tripped in the face of this challenge!

This became clear when the countermeasures employed by the crew and the control system of the dreadnought failed to keep up with the mirror beast's tricks.

Much of the crew had entered into disarray due to the latest changes.

A weapons officer who took charge of a tertiary gun battery system held out his plasma pistol and continued to keep track of his subordinates.

The active communication link as well as the brand-new connection formed by the Bloodfire Pact ensured that he maintained a close watch on the personnel he knew for certain was real.

"Hostile decoys have appeared!"

The spacers under the officer's command held their weapons tight but refrained from opening fire.

Each of them had already armored up and activated their personal azure energy shields.

In addition to that, the dreadnought's control system automatically deployed larger azure energy shields that separated the 'newcomers' from the existing personnel.

"Confirm identity!"

The officer checked the identities of all of his personnel, and not just the newcomers, by downloading their data, examining them through many different sensors and checking whether they were brothers-in-arms via the Bloodfire Pact.

None of the verification methods revealed any differences. Even questioning the suspected fakes in person caused the officer to receive disturbingly familiar answers.

The Bloodfire Pact was a convenient way to determine whether anyone bonded with the Dominion of Man. While more and more spacers agreed to dedicate their lives to the dreadnought over the course of the lightning tribulation, a lot of ratings had yet to do so for one reason or another.

The officer had to resort to other methods to distinguish real from fake.

After an exhaustive examination, the man in charge leveled his gun at the three individuals that failed the final test.

It used to be fairly easy to spot the fakes, but that had changed to an extent when the decoys suddenly appeared in the seats of positions where the real persons previously occupied!

"The two of you may have gotten clever by copying the men who haven't formed a pact of fire with our ship, but you failed to solve the science problems as quickly or as neatly as you have done before. As for you, I am not certain why you appear to share a bond with our ship, but the operating system of your hazard suit is desynced from the rest!"

The clones shouted and tried their best to profess their innocence, but the crew of the dreadnought had experienced this enough times to know that the decoys were capable of mimicking human behavior and speech to a perfect degree.

While the officer faintly began to doubt his judgment and the judgment of the monitoring system, he needed to take action before the clones began to mess around even more.

Since it was too dangerous to allow the ship's control system to eliminate the detected clones by itself, the officer had to manually activate a control panel and input a code in order to start the lethal process.

Soon enough, all three clones became squashed by gravity that was far in excess of what they were supposed to bear.

A ceiling-mounted rocket launcher came online and fired micromissiles at the designated targets in order to guarantee their demise.

Two of the clones broke down and ultimately vanished as the mirror beast no longer saw any point in maintaining the illusions.

The third body, or at least the pieces of it, remained on the deck. Bloody and broken pieces of flesh, armor and other nasty bits continued to foul the compartment as an uncomfortable silence stretched.

"Sir... that is Specialist Rayd's clone... correct?"

A sinking feeling emerged in the officer's heart. This had to be another trick. The corpse was fake. He had tested the clone in so many ways.

The officer immediately turned to the suited figure that he presumed to be the real specialist.

"You! Verify your identity!"

Instead of doing so, 'Specialist Rayd' began to grin in a disturbing fashion before exploding in a spectacle of light!

The serviceman who previously stood behind his station turned out to be fake all along!

That meant that the real Specialist Rayd had been displaced to the location where he had been killed... by his own brothers in arms.

Everyone became horrified when they realized what had happened. However, their impeccable professionalism ensured that they maintained their composure. No matter how guilty or scared they became, they knew that there was no place for emotional bursts when they were in the middle of an ongoing battle.

"Remain on standby." The officer spoke as he tried his best to project firmness. "We must relay what has happened and warn our fellow fleters not to jump the gun."

This was not an isolated incident. The Dominion of Man was so large that similar deceptions took place throughout her entire hull!

Plenty of clones got blasted or crushed, only for fleters to find out that they had mistakenly condemned their own brothers and sisters to death!

Tens of thousands of loyal fleters died within minutes before everyone wished for the mirror beast's latest trick!

The damage had been especially great among the Dread Marines! It took more effort and firepower to take them down, especially when their Dread Armors actually reflected damage back no matter whether they were real or fake!

Suspicion and paranoia rapidly spread throughout the entire ship. Trust and camaraderie dropped so quickly that the efficiency of the dreadnought dropped by a noticeable level.

While the Brain Trust tried its best to compensate for all of the failings, it was never meant to take full control over the vessel. It was also dependent on sound data to base its decisions.

When the ship's monitoring system got deceived just as easily as the humans who crewed the dreadnought, the Brain Trust had to act with increasingly more restraint in order to prevent further incidents of friendly fire!

Back in the command center, Ves and Dread Captain Argile were both on the verge of going crazy as they tried to break the mirror beast's game.

During this crazy time, Ves looked at not one, but two identical copies of himself!

Azure energy shields had come online to isolate the Vesses from each other and the rest of the crew.

"I am the real Ves, captain! I was the one that made Caramond and Furia! Look, I am the only one who possesses a companion spirit. Show them who's the real deal, Blinky!"

"Mrow!"

"That cat is fake. It's just an empty illusion. Here's the real Blinky!"

"Mrow mrow mrow!"

"You shameless decoy! Neither of you are Ves, and neither of your companion spirits are real. Look, I will prove it to you by letting my Blinky absorb fire energy."

"Mroooow!"

"That's an easy trick, you faker. My companion spirit can do that and more!"

The three Vesses continued to confuse everyone as none of them managed to produce definite proof that they were the real ones.

"Damnit, what do I need to do to prove that I'm the real one? Wait, I got it! I'm a phase lord. I'm too tired to unfold my true body at the moment, but I can still prove that I have phasewater flowing through my body. Here, take this sample and analyze it. You will definitely find that it contains phasewater."

"Take my blood sample as well! It is the only one that contains phasewater."

The third Ves grew angry at this display!

"I am the real Ves here! Take my blood sample if you have to, but don't believe these two decoys! If they are willing to give you their blood samples, then they are clearly able to imitate the properties of phasewater. Captain, we need to stop playing the mirror beast's game. If we want to beat this bastard, then we need to stop wasting our times on these clones and focus on finding the source of the problem. I can guarantee you that his real body shouldn't be too far away. His domain shouldn't be able to fool us all so well if he is too far away. Launch as many superweapons in the surrounding space. This annoying haze may be blocking our sensor systems, but if we engulf the entire area around us with explosions, we are bound to land a hit."

"Don't listen to that decoy, Captain Argile!" Another Ves pleaded. "I don't know how many antimatter warheads you have left, but I don't think you have an unlimited supply of them. This saboteur that wears my face is trying his best to make you expend your strongest weapons so that we have little to nothing left to solve the mirror beast and the two other god beasts that come afterwards. Save your superweapons and open fire in all directions with your ship's conventional gun batteries instead."

The next Ves shook his head after hearing his 'own' advice. "That is worse than useless. Dispersed firepower won't be able to threaten an enemy at the level of a god beast. Even if a weapon strikes the mirror beast, the attack will just get reflected back tenfold! We shouldn't be hasty and make this situation worse by taking the wrong actions. We need to wait and figure out how to solve the root of the problem."

"You're a traitor, Ves! Doing nothing will only allow the mirror beast to torment us to death! Besides, it's not my style. I have always distinguished myself for being more proactive than other mech designers. Only a fake version of myself would suggest inaction as a preferred solution!"

"I'm the real Ves!"

"No I'm the real Ves!"

"Captain Argile, we can't go on like this. Don't waste your time with us and find a way to kill that god beast. I'm the real Ves by the way."

"LIAR!"

As the three Vesses continued to provide different suggestions while claiming that they were real, they suddenly fell silent when a wave of heat and fury exploded from the center of the ship!

"CEASE YOUR MEDDLING, FOUR CREATURE. THE DOMINION OF MAN IS MY SACRED HEARTH! NO ENEMY IS ALLOWED TO BREACH THE SANCTITY OF MY DOMAIN!"

Wave after wave of fire energy passed through every section of the massive hull in an attempt to discern true from false.

However, Furia failed to expose the mirror beast's illusions. The True God was simply too good at deceiving its adversaries.

This included True Gods like the transformed Fire Elemental!

One of the Vesses grew depressed when his power creation failed to dispel all of the fakes.

"The mirror beast is one of the most effective counters against this ship. It is taking advantage of our lack of ability to protect us against manipulation. The god beast is so damn good at it that its illusions are no longer purely imaginary anymore. The fact that it can copy stuff like our memories, our expertise, our skills and even the more esoteric stuff like Blinky or the Bloodfire Pact means that its imitation ability has reached a conceptual level!"

Another Ves elaborated on this analysis.

"The fact that the mirror beast is able to deceive the likes of Furia means that none of us stands a chance from the beginning. Our cultivations are much weaker than that of a True God, which means that our ability to defend and resist against the creature's deception is practically nil. The best we can do is to lock ourselves down and hope that Furia is able to grow quickly enough to break the illusions."

A third Ves formed a tentative plan of action.

"A high-ranking mech pilot should be able to resist the illusions. It is a pity that we don't have any on this ship. Since the tribulation storm stops us from calling in outside help, we should find the closest possible substitute. I am sure that a ship as large and powerful as this contains gadgets or materials that can help us find a crack in the mirror beast's plan."

Dread Captain Argile and many of the fleeters who paid attention to the Vesses grew even less confident in their ability to discern the real one from the fakes.

There was absolutely no way they could definitely prove which one was real!

Chapter 5897 Lost Humanity

The Dominion of Man continued to sputter as her crew became increasingly more confused and distrustful of each other.

The dreadnought was undeniably strong, but one of her most important flaws was that her strength came from many different sources.

Her size, her cutting-edge technologies, the huge amount of parts and systems that made up her functions, the elite spacers and marines that crewed the ship, the Brain Trust as well as two separate True Gods all combined their advantages together to form the most powerful warship in the Red Ocean.

Yet for all of the magnificent combinations, the fact that many of these contributors were individually weak or vulnerable to mental manipulation meant that they fell victim to the mirror beast's domain.

Many of the advantages that the Dominion of Man enjoyed either became neutralized or turned into dangers.

It was a sad state of affairs when the fleeters serving on the dreadnought no longer dared to trust any of their fellow comrades anymore. Too much blood had been spilled, and the worst part about it was that many of them had been killed by their fellow brothers and sisters!

While the killing subsided when Dread Captain Argile decided to adopt a more restrained approach, that still left the Dominion of Man with a very big problem.

The ship became increasingly more paralyzed!

"Contact!"

"Fire a probing shot!"

"The designated missile launcher array has failed to obey our instructions. The officer in charge... is doubting the legitimacy of our orders."

"Alert! Launcher 65B has just fired an experimental FEH-645Z torpedo at the target."

"The torpedo has struck the target... INCOMING!"

The Dominion of Man shook as a dozen of exceptionally powerful transphasic hyper gamma rays sprayed across her azure energy shields.

The amplified attacks struck with so much energy that the energy shields strained to remain intact after getting struck by the reflected beams generated by the experimental torpedo!

"Who gave those orders?!" Dread Captain Volkert Argile demanded. "Project Cooked Goose should never have been retrieved from its vault!"

"You did... captain." A communications officer reluctantly said. "According to the commander in charge, you personally issued the command and transmitted the right authorization codes over the ship's network."

The dread captain's body almost froze despite the fire energy coursing through his body and equipment.

The mirror beast was improving!

With each second that passed by, the creature became more familiar with the humans it tormented. The very thought that this alien beast somehow managed to steal memories of classified research projects and other secrets that must never spread outside human ears frightened the dread captain!

"Initiate communications lockdown! Instruct the relevant departments to follow all prior orders and instructions relating to our superweapons and our experimental projects."

"Sir, if we continue to restrict our crew, our ship will not be able to defend herself anymore! There is no guarantee that the mirror beast will remain content to harass us from a distance."

The dread captain gritted his teeth. "We cannot afford to get engulfed by chaos. We need to restore order, and we cannot do that by letting people act on their own initiative or become the unwitting pawn of our enemy."

The mirror beast was not an enemy that the dreadnought was equipped to fight. The creature was too formless and deceptive.

Its abilities were frightening, and if it was able to bring a ship as powerful as the Dominion of Man to her knees, then every other ship of the Red Fleet stood no chance against its terror!

The best way to fight against an unconventional opponent was to resort to other unconventional methods.

Yet as Dread Captain Argile turned to the three Vesses, all he received from them was confusing and conflicting advice.

Which Ves could he trust?

The answer remained unclear! Each of the three Vesses sounded reasonable, yet each of them also recommended different courses of action that completely contradicted each other.

Argile would have loved it if two of the fakes eventually turned on the crew by launching brazen attacks, but the mirror beast was too clever to end its deception.

So long as the false Vesses continued to drown out the real Ves, the latter effectively became neutralized!

How long would it take for the mirror beast to copy Volkert Argile himself?

Once multiple dread captains showed up, the cohesion of his entire crew would definitely collapse and splinter into pieces!

Even though the Red Fleet had drafted many hypothetical contingency plans in the event that a part of the crew became compromised, none of them dealt with a scenario as bad as this predicament!

As word of greater casualties, unauthorized actions and outright sabotage reached the dread captain's ears, the man was just about ready to activate an emergency measure that would drastically increase the automation of the Dominion of Man!

This was a cumbersome procedure and required the approval of many officers spread throughout the ship. It would put many crew members out of play, but it would also prevent these confused people from causing any further harm.

The only problem was that letting the Brain Trust take charge of so many vital functions was an imperfect solution.

While the Brain Trust had yet to show any signs that it had been compromised, the fact that it relied on data to guide its many actions remained a persistent vulnerability.

The mirror beast only had to project falsehoods directly into the sensors of the ship to subvert the entire dreadnought!

As Dread Captain Argile came closer to enacting this emergency measure, another True God finally rose up in resistance against the nefarious god beast!

"Enough of this!" Caramond indignantly spoke. "Children of humanity, you are better than this! The aliens have always loved to sow division among our ranks, but their plots and schemes have always failed because we are always able to unite when it counts! This god beast is good at imitating your fellow humans, but the creature cannot replicate anything! For all of its ability to copy your memories, the monster is unable to reproduce your earnest faith and belief in the supremacy of the human race! Pray to me and accept my guidance!"

One of the three Vesses lit up after the ancestral spirit chose to intervene.

"That is a fantastic idea! The god beast may be able to imitate practically everything, but I don't think he will be able to replicate faith energy produced from earnest belief in a concept that is completely alien and unfamiliar to the tribulation manifestation. We should try it and let Caramond sort out the true humans from the false ones in our midst."

Another Ves strongly disagreed with this suggestion. "Don't put your faith in Caramond. He is just as susceptible to the manipulation of the mirror beast as us mortals. He might be thinking that he is doing the right thing, but his mistaken judgment will lead to serious casualties. Trusting him is a fool's errand!"

"Maybe you should give this plan a try, but only on a smaller scale. We need to be prudent and avoid jumping the gun. There is no proof that Caramond is capable of making good on his claims." A third Ves cautiously spoke.

While the false Vesses had attempted to muddle up the advice from the real Ves, Dread Captain Argile did not need their advice to make his own decision.

Just because the Red Fleet was still new to the concept of cooperating alongside spirits and gods did not mean he was slow to adapt. He immediately opened a ship-wide communication channel.

"Do as Caramond has said! His instruction will not do us any harm, and if it works, then we can finally regain control over our own ship. Remember who you are! We are better than this! We are the spacers of the Red Fleet, and we uphold the pride of red humanity!"

Many people did as instructed. It helped that they had already prayed or thought about Caramond a short time ago. Many people looked towards the nearest artworks that depicted the hero of mankind in many different settings.

It did not matter that they were born and raised as secularists among the spaceborn clans. Each intelligent being was intrinsically capable of producing faith even if they did not engage in any explicit religious ceremonies.

They just had to be earnest enough in their devotion to bestow a tiny amount of energy that possessed the power to reshape everything to the subject in their mind.

Caramond was already harvesting a huge amount of faith from the general population, but that did not mean he lost the ability to pay closer attention to individual worshipers.

It was especially easy for the recently born ancestral spirit to focus his attention on the fleters who were physically close. The fact that many of these men and women had formed Bloodfire Pacts with the Dominion of Man also made it easier to tap into their faith.

Even though the mirror beast had intensified its cruel and deadly games on the crew, the fleters doggedly persisted in their prayers.

Soon enough, the most devoted among the spacers began to gain a white corona.

Each of them had proven their earnest belief and conviction in the human race to pass Caramond's test.

The ancestral spirit chose to mark the people that supplied their faith to him by lending out a measure of his power.

Aside from the lightshow, Caramond's intervention did not do anything else. The affected fleters did not become smarter, stronger or gain any supernatural abilities.

Then again, they had no need to borrow any power beyond the reach of mortals.

They only needed to prove their humanity.

As more and more humans began to gain Caramond's blessing, the ones that looked as if they were preying, yet failed to receive a response began to look increasingly out of place.

A lot of fleters felt increasingly more confident and in control now that they gained a reliable means to determine who was loyal among the crowd.

The holdouts who failed to follow suit started to look increasingly more suspicious. The fleters glowing in white glared at their fellow 'humans' who tried so hard yet failed to produce any honest faith in the destiny of their own race.

Surprisingly enough, the suspicious individuals were still 'real' enough to produce actual faith energy.

Caramond was able to harvest it if he wished. The faith was also remarkably close to the ones produced by genuine humans.

Unfortunately, an imitation could never completely replicate the real deal. While the mirror beast was able to copy substances such as phasewater with so few flaws that no one was able to discern the differences, that did not take away from the fact that discrepancies still existed.

Caramond may be new at this game, but he was the very embodiment of human supremacy. The very concept that he was based upon was inherently more difficult for an alien beast to fully comprehend!

The mirror beast might be able to fool the likes of Furia by imitating belief in the power of fire. The elemental concept was a lot more universal and did not come with an annoying relation to a specific species.

However, Caramond happened to be the right spirit for the right job!

As enough time passed by for anyone who possessed even the slightest actual human bone in their body to earn Caramond's acknowledgment, the fate of many exposed decoys became sealed.

Back in the command center, Ves and Blinky stared furiously at their copies who lacked a bright white corona.

"I hope there is no confusion anymore about which of us are real." Ves stated with repressed anger.

"Mrow!" Blinky echoed.

"I believe that you are the real person that is responsible for transforming our ship." Dread Captain Argile spoke from his command seat.

"Good. Let me beat up these false versions of myself. These obnoxious bastards are annoying as hell! I won't be satisfied until I squeeze out every lie from their fake and illusionary bodies!"

Chapter 5898 Trust in Faith

The decoys generated by the mirror beast had lost their ability to mingle with the actual humans serving on the Dominion of Man.

The absence of a white corona implied two different possibilities.

The most obvious reason why the individual in question failed to earn Caramond's recognition was because he or she was never truly human in the first place.

The less obvious reason was because the suspicious subject was truly human, yet did not believe in the cause that practically everyone living in human society learned in their first days at school.

That last part held troubling implications.

It was incredibly difficult for people to grow up in any part of human civilization without developing a massive sense of pride and confidence in their own species.

From the lowliest of third-rate states to the most powerful first-rate superstates, each of them had fallen into the grip of a culture centered around the inherent superiority of the human race.

The people who grew up in the spaceborn clan had especially been indoctrinated in these beliefs. It should have been impossible for any fletcher to develop a lack of faith in the human race.

This meant that there was something very wrong with the few real humans on the Dominion of Man who failed to connect with Caramond.

They may have given up on red humanity already. Perhaps all of the odds stacked against them had caused these fletchers to develop a fatalistic mindset.

There were also those who augmented their bodies so much that they lost too much of their humanity. The Red Fleet had always favored cybernetic implants over other forms of augmentation, and there were those who took it far enough to lose much of their emotion and their irrational human tendencies.

The most depressing possibility of all was that the fletchers who failed Caramond's test actively opposed the very concept of human superiority. They developed a much more sympathetic outlook towards alien races and did not believe their current enemies deserved to get killed just because they were different.

In other words, there was a realistic possibility that the Dominion of Man had been infiltrated by cosmopolitans!

There was no time to get to the bottom of it all. Dread Captain Argile was well aware that not everyone who lacked a white corona was hostile or disloyal.

Unfortunately, the continued threat posed by the mirror beast forced the captain to make a harsh but necessary judgment call.

"Eliminate every human on our ship who lacks Caramond's blessing."

The deaths happened quickly and brutally.

While a lot of decoys suddenly gained a huge amount of strength to the point where they were able to crack the azure energy shields that limited their movement space, the dreadnought was simply too strong for them to sow any further chaos and destruction.

As the ship-wide purge continued, Dread Captain Argile forced himself to monitor the changing statistics.

For every 10 decoys that got exposed and eliminated through ruthless means, there was 1 actual human who fell victim to the purge.

The captain silently mourned each of these regrettable 'accidents', yet he could not allow his doubts and guilt to stand in the way of his duty.

The decisive removal of all of the suspicious humans on the ship had restored a lot of morale. People no longer jumped at shadows or fell into a pit of indecision when they received any order.

The ship was already starting to regain her effectiveness. The chain of command became trustworthy yet again and few people harbored any doubts to their fellow fleters.

Of course, not all of them were able to stomach the deaths of thousands if not tens of thousands actual humans.

Whether they deserved it or not, it was undeniable that many specialists, engineers, officers and even a number of senior command personnel had lost their lives during the purge!

Whether these fleters became collateral damage because of disloyalty or factors outside of their control remained unclear. Dread Captain Argile already intended to set up an investigative committee to get to the bottom of it all after his ship managed to survive this long and exhausting ordeal.

"We need to find and finish the mirror beast." The only Ves left standing spoke up. "If my guess is right, then our mass elimination of his clones may have inflicted damage on his main self. We successfully repelled his domain. This is important because I think this god beast relies on fear and other negative emotions to bypass Furia and Caramond's domains and directly affect our perception of reality. It explains why the misdirection became increasingly harder to deal with. As long as we maintain our confident mindsets, we won't give that creature any fertile ground to mess with us again."

The bodies of the false Vesses had already disappeared.

The real Ves had gotten his wish and personally eliminated the fakes that dared to steal his identity!

It had actually been quite satisfying to kill the copycats. Ves had never realized how annoying he could be until the false versions of himself started to argue with himself.

"Mrow." Blinky arrogantly raised his head and tail.

The companion spirit had dealt with the fake Star Cats in a crueller manner. The catfights ended with Blinky devouring his counterparts almost whole!

"I am inclined to believe in your judgment, professor. It doesn't help us penetrate through the haze that surrounds our dreadnought. The only instances where we can attack the mirror beast is when it

voluntarily approaches the edge of our sensor range. Yet every time we target it, our attacks get reflected back at us with tenfold force."

"What about missiles and other explosive weapons?"

"A probing missile strike does not do enough damage to inflict real harm. In the few instances where we committed to launching a large salvo of missiles, our warheads ended up striking an illusion that quickly fell apart after getting struck by several attacks. The ultimate result is that we spent our missiles in vain."

Ves frowned at that. The 7th wave of the 8th round proved to be far more trickier and difficult to deal with than any of the subsequent ones!

Many fleeters already considered the mirror beast to be the deadliest and most damaging opponent they came across. If not for their constant prayers towards Caramond, they would have fallen back to their fearful and paranoid mindset.

The crew of the Dominion of Man would rather have a rematch against the clone of the Subjugation King than tussle with the mirror beast any further!

The Subjugation King might be a cheating bastard who inflicted more damage to the ship than anyone else, but at least he fought like a true warrior!

The mirror beast on the other hand completely eschewed honor and fought in the most despicable manner possible. The creature's uncanny ability to violate the sanctity of people's minds was so terrifying that the fleeters desperately worked together to eliminate this enemy as soon as possible!

The fleeters channeled their righteous fury and indignation towards trying to detect the elusive monster.

More probes launched out of the Dominion of Man than ever. The ship's powerful materializers were working at full capacity to churn out probe after probe just so that they could form an increasingly more elaborate sensor envelope.

Several times, the six-armed beast came into view and taunted the crew.

The Dominion of Man refused to take the bait anymore. Her weapon systems remained dormant. The fleeters had already figured out that the mirror beast's offensive capabilities were actually not that great.

The creature was able to reflect attacks while imbuing them with much greater power, but could not launch such attacks on its own initiative.

It was rather strange that the mirror beast only reflected relatively weak attack salvos.

Ves noticed this as well. He finally managed to piece the clues together.

"I don't think the beast is able to reflect the ship's probing attacks with a false image of itself. Some of them are quite strong, such as the gamma lasers generated by that experimental torpedo of yours. What is also important to note is that I think there is an upper limit to the god beast's reflection ability. Whenever the ship strikes with much greater force than the god beast is capable of reflecting, it will simply pull off its disappearance trick and let its illusionary clone take all of the damage. The problem is that we don't know where its actual body is located when this happens."

"I see what you mean, professor." Dread Captain Argile looked contemplative. "You are theorizing that the only instances where we know with a high degree of confidence that we are looking at the actual mirror beast is when we are in a position to launch a probing attack at the monster."

"Yes. Now, the problem is that the probing attacks are unable to exceed that annoying reflection ability, but that just means that we must rely on additional measures to take it out. Is the Rubicon capable of teleporting antimatter bombs and so on to the mirror beast?"

"It is possible, but difficult. The haze is making it harder to deliver objects at precise coordinates. Before you get your hopes up, I must warn you that we have already tried this tactic with more conventional explosives. The mirror beast's body always turned out to be a barely substantial illusion. Even if we have timed our teleportation attacks so that the warheads explode 50 to 200 milliseconds after reaching their destinations, our enemy has already managed to move far away. We do not expect to attain better results with more destructive superweapons."

Not even the Rubicon could deal with the mirror beast!

Either the god beast's predicted the teleportation attacks in advance, or its reaction speed was so damn fast that it was able to move out of the explosion radius before the warheads actually detonated.

Everyone's frustrations grew as they understood that they were still unable to track down their hated foe!

"I really wish the Huntsman was here." Ves muttered. "He should be able to track down and impale this demonic tribulation manifestation in a matter of seconds."

"Forget about god pilots, professor. The Dominion of Man is a warship. We must overcome this challenge by relying on our own means. I believe that is why tribulations exist. It filters the worthy from the unworthy."

"Ah, you're right, captain. Let's brainstorm a bit further."

Many officers tried their best to come up with an inventive and effective solution to their problem.

There were so many smart people among the fleeters that one of them ultimately managed to come up with a surprisingly creative suggestion!

"Opposites!" A senior naval engineer suggested. "If this mirror beast is a savage god that thrives off lies and falsehoods, then we must embrace the opposite! If Caramond and Furia are able to weaponize truth and honesty, then they may be able to detect the source of all of the deception that afflicts our ship!"

It was a rather fanciful suggestion, but it was enough to earn Ves' approval!

"I think we should go for it." Ves said. "I am not too knowledgeable about True Gods, but I think that fights involving cultivators of this rank involve more than physical combat. I am becoming increasingly more convinced that our only means of counterattacking more effectively is if we challenge the god beast's domain."

While Ves and the fleeters were able to contribute to this fight in a small way, they ultimately had to rely on the two True Gods to do the heavy lifting.

Only Caramond and Furia possessed domains that were barely powerful enough to challenge the elusive god beast's domain.

Several minutes went by as Ves and the others waited for further developments.

Ves was able to sense that Caramond and Furia chose to work together, but he wasn't able to figure out what exactly they were doing.

Eventually, Caramond released a powerful pulse that launched out of the hull and swept aside much of the surrounding haze!

"It's working!"

"We have regained full visibility in our immediate space!"

"Contact! We have detected a signature that matches the mirror beast at a range of 106 kilometers!"

"Open fire at the identified target!"

"With pleasure!"

Chapter 5899 Beneficiaries

The mirror beast succumbed quickly enough after Caramond and Furia worked together to dispel the surrounding haze.

Although the tricky and nefarious god beast frequently utilized illusions and disappearing tricks to circumvent the formidable teleportation attacks launched by the Dominion of Man, the creature had nowhere to hide when its haze no longer offered sufficient protection.

Bonded by fire and blood, Caramond and Furia channeled their anger and indignation as they expanded their domains and made sure everyone's sight remained clear.

Furia supplied the fire energy while Caramond negated the cloud of confusion that the mirror beast constantly tried to impress onto the ship and her crew.

Caramond actually turned out to be more suitable for this role as his domain was much more effective at countering debilitating effects.

After all, how could humanity claim to be superior when people were so easily misled by alien trickery?

Humans managed to vanquish over every hostile alien species during the Age of Conquest!

Caramond would never allow the humans under his charge to turn into the playthings of an alien god!

"Believe in me and believe in yourselves! As long as you remember your duty to protect your fellow humans, your heart shall always steer you true!"

The two True Gods had only come into power for a short time, but they had grown rapidly during the lightning tribulation.

The tribulation storm truly acted as a celestial forge that pushed the two beings to their limits and beyond.

Ves was glad that Caramond and the current iteration of the Fire Elemental prospered under the circumstances.

Though he wished he could have been more involved in the shaping of Furia, he was incredibly pleased at how well Caramond embodied the concept of human supremacy.

Sure, the design spirit modeled after the Supreme Marshal did not possess any strong or flashy powers, but direct combat had never been its purpose.

Ves designed and breathed life in Caramond so that he could act as a helping hand to the vast majority of humans living in the new frontier.

It had never been his intention to create a tyrannical god that lorded over his subjects. Humans were already capable of saving themselves for the most part. They just needed a bit of help and protection against the more esoteric threats they were not prepared to fight against.

Ves was therefore glad that the tribulation storm sent out a confounding adversary in the form of the mirror beast.

Not only did it ruthlessly take advantage of the many gaps in the Dominion of Man's defenses, the god beast also forced everyone who became victimized by it to go out of their comfort zone and develop new means to solve their problems.

Everyone involved in the tribulation event had grown so much. The various tests and challenges had refined and hardened everyone's minds and spirits. They became more aware of their various shortcomings and already intended to address them in order to avoid a repeat of their shameful performance.

The fleeters continued to swell in pride as they vanquished their first proper god beast.

If not for the fact that the mirror beast was ultimately a copy forged out of tribulation lightning, the crew would have gained a lot more satisfaction from this victory.

As Ves looked around the command center, he could feel that the various bridge crew not only regained all of their confidence, but also strengthened it even further.

How could they not? Their previous battles had always been situations where their side enjoyed the advantage. They fought alongside other powerful assets. The native aliens of the Red Ocean never presented a proper challenge against the Dominion of Man since their ancient phase whales continued to hide in the rear.

The Dominion of Man truly needed this exercise. It was better for her and the rest of the Red Fleet to understand what sort of challenges the dreadnought would have to face in the future.

If the native aliens of the Red Ocean did not figure out a way to crack open the defenses of the Red Fleet's dreadnoughts, then the invaders from Messier 87 would surely be able to succeed!

The tribulation storm had already given red humanity a small glimpse of the huge variety of enemies and their diverse approaches towards combat.

No one who witnessed this event intended to maintain the status quo after this event had passed.

The enemies of the future would be able to steamroll their way through the new frontier if the Red Two and the other forces failed to adapt to the evolving battlefield.

"The mirror beast is about to succumb!"

"Hold the Rubicon until our ship is within 15 kilometers from the mirror beast!"

The Dominion of Man had especially tried to close the distance for this. She had previously focused on severing the limbs and impairing the six-armed humanoid alien as best as possible in order to weaken it enough to the point where its domain had lost too much strength.

The injured god beast's direct combat capabilities had never posed too much of a threat, and the fleters knew better than to open fire with weapon systems that only caused the mirror beast to reflect the firepower back at the ship.

Once the ship had come close enough, the Rubicon finally teleported a handful of antimatter bombs that promptly exploded just an instant after they appeared around the creature's head and torso!

The fleters had tried to teleport explosive superweapons directly inside the body of the mirror beast several times, but the domain and physical prowess of a True God were so powerful that it remained an impossibility.

Oh well. It was not as if the exterior of the mirror beast was tough. After losing its limbs and exhausting its domain, the god beast had been reduced to a giant alien punching bag.

"Incoming tribulation explosion!"

A huge wave of destruction and creation energy erupted from the dying beast!

As the crew basked in the success of felling their first 'god', everyone began to grunt or moan as powerful waves of tribulation energies swept through the entire hull and induced transformation that Ves could not even begin to explain!

The dreadnought became a little more resplendent than before. Though the baptism's effect on the hull was a bit understated due to the fact that there was so much structure to cover, Ves already noticed that everything around him became a bit tougher and more harmonious. It was as if the ship had long ceased to be a purely mortal creation.

The bridge crew also became a bit more fortified. Their bodies did not look much different, but their minds and spirits had definitely become noticeably firmer and more resistant to the mind attacks that tormented them so much.

Ves also experienced a bit of growth. His phasewater concentration rose a little further and his true body grew a bit bigger.

Perhaps his phasewater concentration might be able to reach 4 percent by the time this entire ordeal was over, but he did not dare to get his hopes up. He had already made enormous strides in his body cultivation, especially given that he never actually cultivated it in a normal fashion. His physique had already reached the limit of how much strain and changes it could bear for the time being.

As everyone worked to mitigate the damage inflicted by the mirror beast and prepare for the penultimate challenge to come, Ves turned to the captain to see how the Argile scion was faring.

A twin red and white corona surrounded the man's Dread Armor. Volkert Argile was more deeply connected to the Dominion of Man. He received a considerably greater share of the benefits.

Just like many of the spacers who forged a Bloodfire Pact with the flagship, the dread captain had turned from a mortal into a dedicated contract cultivator in an instant.

While the Dominion of Man could not be regarded as a proper 'artifact' quite yet, she was certainly evolving into one. The closer the vessel assumed the vestiges of such an object, the more the fleters who tied their spiritualities to the ship benefited from her immense power.

Naturally, there were differences in treatment. The higher the rank, the greater the care and attention from the living warship.

From what Blinky was able to observe, Volkert Argile's spirituality had already grown many times stronger than before.

The differences were enormous. The dread captain had lived for 281 years. His spirituality had long grown ripe and stagnant. It was much more difficult for people who lived for so long to make rapid gains in cultivation due to how they had become so fixed in their ways.

However, the Bloodfire Pact forcefully overcame this resistance and practically engineered a rebirth of Dread Captain Argile's spirituality!

It was as if the man had become at least 2 centuries younger all of a sudden. He had grown in ways that allowed him to gain a much better overview of the Dominion of Man. His ability to navigate crises and make difficult judgment calls had also improved.

It was rather interesting to Ves. He wondered whether Dread Captain Argile's progress in contract cultivation would serve as the template for the other Bloodfire fleters.

In any case, Ves was happy that the crew of the Dominion of Man became cultivators in the end. Even if they had become highly dependent on their own ship to achieve any progress, it was the right fit for loyal servicemen who already engaged in demanding work.

"The next god beast is due to arrive. " Dread Captain Argile spoke in a more empowered and authoritative voice than before. "Your expertise has proven to be valuable enough that the mirror beast attempted to sabotage your efforts. Your input is more important than ever."

The way Argile spoke became increasingly more characteristic of strong mech pilots and mech designers. This was a reflection of his evolving status.

Even now, his deepening bonds with Caramond and Furia induced transformations that enabled him to become an increasingly better spokesperson for the two True Gods.

"I think our confrontation with the mirror beast has shown why the Red Association put so much emphasis on true mechs." Ves began. "I know you don't want to field any mechs on your ship, but you should work on developing stopgap solutions that can achieve similar results. While the chances are low that the subsequent god beasts are good at messing with people's minds, they don't have to excel in this aspect to sap our confidence. The domains of True Gods are so oppressive that they can practically force people to give up as long as the differences in strength are great enough. I don't think that will happen in the final two waves, but even a partial effect can cause your men to perform less than their best."

"Hmmm. You are justified in your concerns about hostile domains. My officers and I have received an extensive data package on this subject. We are reading through all of the material at this very moment, but awareness does not necessarily translate to preparedness. We are still lacking in specific countermeasures. We can seek protection from Caramond and Furia, but that is not a proper solution."

Ves frowned. "Well, the best solution that I can come up with is that each of you begin to practice a qi cultivation method that is aspected towards the fire attribute. However, cultivation has always been a long-term affair. It is impossible for any of you to make sufficient progress when the next wave is set to begin in a matter of seconds."

It just so happened that the tribulation storm began to flare once more!

A significantly more impactful domain began to spread from the storm clouds!

A much larger and more beastly shape emerged from the giant gap in the clouds!

Ves and many other fleters began to look a bit astonished at the enormous bulk that had emerged into view. The sheer physicality of the creature was so oppressive that it seemed as if gravity already began to distort around the body!

Chapter 5900 The Two-headed Beast

Combat resumed shortly after the giant god beast emerged from the storm clouds.

Nobody became startled by the creature's bulk and shape.

The latest lightning manifestation might not be able to match the length of a dreadnought, but it was still a lot larger and bulkier than any of the other enemies that came before.

It also looked distinctly alien. While it initially looked like a brown-furred mammalian quadruped, the god beast soon began to display many unusual traits like the fact that it had two heads!

The beast did not possess any eyes, but its undersized heads did appear to possess cavities that might constitute its nose or ears.

Whatever the case, the giant creature did not appear to possess a mouth, making people wonder how the creature ate its meals.

Its domain was relatively simple compared to that of the mirror beast. The brown-furred monster apparently clung to its savage origins a lot more. Its domain was savage and unrefined. The creature was all about brute force and never felt any desire to change its wild nature.

This was the polar opposite of the mirror beast, who did its best to imitate more civilized beings.

Many fleters relaxed despite the fact that the two-headed beast was stronger in an absolute sense.

At least the beast seemed less likely to play mind tricks on the crew!

"Maintain our distance from the furred beast! Please investigate whether the new enemy is fast enough to intercept us if we are accelerating at full capacity. If not, give me your recommendations on how we can remedy this problem."

It was too much to hope that the two-headed beast was slower than the Dominion of Man.

Even when the latter activated the warp drive functions of her monstrously large and powerful superdrives, a True God could not be shaken off so easily, especially when the enormous creature sacrificed a lot of superfluous powers in exchange for strengthening his fundamental properties.

The more data the dreadnought gathered from the two-headed beast, the more it became clear of how much of a monster it was in a physical sense.

Its body might not possess any phasewater, but it was made out of a multitude of exceedingly high-grade hyper materials that formed lattices that systematically reinforced every part of the body with huge amounts of E energy.

The creature's domain did not possess any offensive component as far as Ves could tell. Instead, it had evolved to support the creature's insanely tough and resilient physique!

"We are likely dealing with a pure body cultivator here." Ves finally spoke. "That doesn't mean we can rule out the possibility that the two-headed beast can mess with our minds, but the chances of that happening is low. I am much more confident that the creature is a pure physical powerhouse. Do not let it get close enough to use its enormous bulk and muscle against the hull of your ship."

"That will pose a challenge to us because its acceleration is remarkably high for its mass and bulk."

The two-headed beast possessed a strong predatory mindset and regarded the Dominion of Man as its prey. This created an effect where the power of heaven blessed its pursuit.

Ves could see that the creature naturally resonated with the power of heaven and used the support from the environment to speed up its interception.

The two-headed beast's domain was flexible enough to borrow as much E energy from the environment as needed to out-accelerate its prey!

What a cheat!

If the beast was by itself, then its heavy bulk wouldn't have allowed it to move so quickly through space.

"Damn." Ves quickly concluded. "The creature is already strong by itself, but it is remarkably good at leveraging E energy radiation to empower its actions. There is no end to the supply of E energy from the environment, so there is no chance this beast will get exhausted."

Dread Captain Argile did not look too upset. "The 8th wave was bound to present its own challenges. We will have to eliminate the two-headed beast before it can use its superior acceleration to fully catch up to our ship."

The Dominion of Man had already begun to open fire at the creature.

Although it was a little awkward for the dreadnought to turn all of her gun turrets backwards and fire at an enemy pursuing from behind, her cigar-like hull shape more or less made it possible.

The dreadnought was never really designed for this mode of combat. She was a flagship, a prestige project and a possible solution against god mechs.

It looked unnatural for her to adopt a kiting strategy, but nobody who possessed a brain advocated an aggressive approach.

The brown-furred creature possessed a lot of strong and obvious muscles!

It was much safer for the dreadnought to fly away from the god beast as best as possible while relying on her formidable ranged armament to whittle down the creature's defenses.

The problem with that plan was that the firepower of the Dominion of Man failed to make any substantial progress.

The dread captain started to frown. "Our secondary gun batteries are unable to penetrate the god beast's unnaturally thick and resilient fur. Most of our primary gun batteries are able to do at least that, but they have failed to penetrate the creature's hide, even when they are concentrating their fire."

The largest and most formidable cannons mounted on the dreadnought were able to wound the creature, but the problem was that the damage was too shallow relative to the bulk of the two-headed beast!

That was not a problem by itself. The Dominion of Man had enormous reserves and could fire her guns on a continuous basis for at least several hours before requiring resupply.

Even then, her energy cannons were able to persist a lot longer until the weapon systems finally started to break down from all of the abuse.

However, the two-furred beast regenerated its wounds so quickly that there was hardly any mark left when the dreadnought unleashed her second salvo.

"Its regeneration is largely fueled by E energy radiation." Ves noted. "Perhaps the god beast's physique has to use up its fat reserves or other resources in order to repair its wounds, but I don't think that this will speed up its exhaustion. It can play this game a lot better than us. Perhaps this is the strategy that the god beast has relied upon to evolve into a True God in its lifetime."

The lack of complexity was a boon rather than a bane. The creature possessed few apparent vulnerabilities that the fleeters could exploit.

"Detecting energy spike from the two-headed beast! Its fur is beginning to absorb more E energy. Incoming attack!"

The azure energy shields of the dreadnought flared to life as they resisted hundreds of thousands of hair follicles that had been transformed into giant needle-like projectiles!

While the power behind each individual hair follicle was rather weak, the quantity was so enormous that they could strain any energy shield!

Fortunately, the projectiles were so dispersed that a large chunk of them not only missed their targets, but also dispersed across multiple segmented energy shields!

"Our shields have held! Our most strained aft shield has lost 60 percent of its integrity. It cannot block an identical salvo of weaponized fur."

The dread captain issued a series of orders to adjust the ship and prepare her for another strike.

The two-headed beast may have launched a lot of its own fur, but its enormous body had already regenerated the missing follicles!

When the two-headed beast launched a second salvo of hair spikes, the crew of the Dominion of Man was much better prepared this time.

The dreadnought altered her heading to make it more difficult for the hair spikes to hit her weakened aft shields.

The maneuver largely worked as a lot of hair spikes ended up striking the segmented shields that previously did not incur any significant damage.

While the ship managed to resolve these attacks without suffering any permanent damage, the two-headed beast looked as if it could keep this up forever.

It had already regenerated its missing fur in preparation for launching yet another strike!

"We cannot allow this situation to persist." Dread Captain Argile remarked. "We have yet to deploy our superweapons, but according to our calculations, the most they can accomplish is inflict slightly deeper wounds. Our firepower is not strong enough to overcome the god beast's absurdly strong constitution."

The god beast possessed the right combination of toughness and regeneration ability to frustrate most enemies!

Ves guessed that if the Guns of Armageddon was in the same position as the Dominion of Man, the former dreadnought's vaunted kinetic cannons still wouldn't be able to slay the beast!

There had to be a way to overcome this problem. Ves frowned as he continued to observe the god beast's performance and tried to figure out potential vulnerabilities.

There were no obvious vulnerabilities.

Teleport attacks were impossible when the god beast's body and domain remained in peak condition.

The only way to inflict actual damage to the creature was by relying on the dreadnought's conventional arsenal, but that brought Ves back to the initial problem, which was lack of firepower.

"Wait a minute."

Ves used his temporary access to the ship's system to access information on the performance of the dreadnought's primary gun batteries.

The large and powerful plasma cannons, gauss cannons, positron cannons and so on were performing better than ever. As long as they hadn't suffered any serious damage in the previous waves, the dreadnought-grade arsenal launched attack salvos with so much power that they should easily be able to obliterate any alien battleship!

Yet for all of their impressive technical performance, their metaphysical performance was awfully simple and crude.

When compared to other warships fielded by the Red Fleet, the Dominion of Man incorporated some of the most luxurious and sophisticated applications of hyper technology.

However, humanity's grasp of hyper technology was like that of a child when compared to the workings of the natives of Messier 87!

While it was impossible to upgrade the hyper technology that augmented the firepower of all of those primary gun batteries in a short amount of time, Ves identified another aspect which could be upgraded with remarkable speed!

"Furia!" Ves shouted! "Can I have your attention?!"

The temperature in the command center rose as Ves felt the gaze of a powerful being on his person!

"SPEAK."

"You should already know that the Dominion of Man lacks the firepower to slay this two-headed beast. The best way to remedy this is by improving your interaction with the primary armaments of the dreadnought. Forget about strengthening the hull or other redundant components. Try to concentrate as much of your fire energy to the main thrusters and the primary gun batteries of the ship. The former will hopefully keep the god beast at bay a little longer, while the latter will hopefully make it harder for our opponent to shrug off our attacks."

"YOUR INPUT IS APPRECIATED."

For all of Furia's raw power and potency, her current incarnation was still fresh and new. She may have inherited bits and pieces of the memory of the creator of the Fire Scroll, but he doubted that she inherited a lot of systematic knowledge on the cultivation of her fire abilities.

In other words, Furia was essentially a natural cultivator as opposed to a qi cultivator. She had gained all of the power through no effort of her own. Her current consciousness had been 'gifted' with all of her strength and domain.

To put it in other words, Furia possessed the raw strength but not the mastery of a True God!

This was the fundamental flaw arising from her highly controversial birth and transformation.

Ves did not regret making her this way, because the alternatives were all worse!

Unfortunately, it also left Ves and the Dominion of Man with a power source that barely knew how to wield her own powers beyond relying on instinct!

The fact that it took this long for Ves to make this realization was a pretty big oversight.