

Mech Touch 6721

Chapter 6721: Impatient Client

"Why must I wait so long for my expert mech to get upgraded to a proper first-class ace mech? Don't you know how critical the coming months may be, nephew?! Red humanity has been driven back to its final defensive line. If ace pilots such as myself aren't able to unleash our full strength, the enemy phase lords and warships will breach our fortification and put all of our clansmen in danger! The Larkinsons of Davute will be forced to abandon the community they built and become space refugees!"

"What's so bad about becoming a space refugee?" Ves shrugged his shoulders. "At least they are able to run away from the enemy. Haven't you learned the lesson from our repeated persecution in the old galaxy? No fixed location is truly secure. What is happening right now is like a rerun of the Sand War but on a much larger and grandiose scale. Those who survived were those who possessed their own starships or had easy access to them. Don't worry. We still have enough warships to accommodate every member of the Larkinson Clan, though don't expect too much comfort as there isn't enough premium living space at the moment."

The physical projection of the new 'Saint General' shook his head. "Since you don't care for the plight of our branch members, let us set this issue aside. My remaining point still stands. As an ace pilot, I cannot keep piloting an expert mech. I appreciate the work that you and your wife has done with the Lionheart, but the fact of the matter is that it has now turned into a cage that is preventing me from exercising my new Saint Kingdom to the fullest. My resonance growth has stalled as well. The longer I remain in this condition, the more I will miss out on the rapid growth period that happens after every breakthrough."

Ves heard Ark's complaints, but he remained unmoved.

"Look, Ark, if you were the only high-ranking pilot in our clan that has a demand for a new or upgraded machine, then my wife and I will be happy to prioritize the Lionheart Mark II Project. However, your breakthrough came at an inconvenient time as far as logistics goes. Our Design Department is already committed to working on and completing the Minerva Mark II Project, the Riot Mark III Project and the Promethea Mark II Project. We are not going to disappoint Saint Commander Casella Ingvar and Saint Isobel Kotin by delaying the completion of their new machines by half a year or so. They became saints earlier than you. Their growth has stalled much longer than

you, and I don't hear them complaining to me a few days after becoming saints. Why don't you take a page out of their book and learn to be patient?"

Ark could not justify the decision to place the Lionheart Mark Project ahead of the other ongoing ace mech design projects.

"Then why not reschedule the Riot Mark III Project instead? Venerable Rosa Orfan has been waiting for a long time to receive an upgraded expert mech, but she can wait a little longer as well. Our clan needs an effective ace mech more than an effective expert mech, especially during a period as turbulent and dangerous as this. I will personally speak to Venerable Orfan about this. I am sure she will take the greater situation into account and agree to a swap."

"No."

"Are you being serious, Ves?"

"Yes. I am being very serious." Ves said with a stern expression. "Ace pilot or not, you are overstepping your boundaries, my dear uncle. As far as I know, Gloriana is in charge of the Design Department. She has final say on our project scheduling. There is only one higher authority that she has to answer to, and that is me. Both of us have already discussed our planning for the coming two years. Neither of us have any intention of changing our schedule any further even if more breakthroughs occur later on. As mech designers, we take our commitments seriously. When we start a mech design project for any client, we have a professional obligation to work on it and complete it in a timely manner. Venerable Orfan may still be just an expert pilot, but she is a Larkinson, just like you. She deserves to be treated with dignity and respect."

"She is injured and her expert mech is broken."

"So?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "She is currently undergoing a high standard of treatment. She'll be up and running within half a year at most. While that is great, that is still a long period of inactivity. It would make her much happier if she knows that she will not have to wait much longer to pilot a fully functional expert mech that is fully repaired and upgraded. Besides, she has made so many gains in the last battle that when she finally obtains a new expert mech, her chances of breaking through in the next battles should be a lot higher than usual."

"You are being too optimistic." General Ark shook his head. "I have piloted my Lionheart over the course of many battles, but I only managed to overcome my bottleneck now. Receiving a new and improved machine is not a guarantee for breakthroughs. What happened to Saint Davia Stark is the exception rather than the rule."

"That may be true in the past, but I am not so sure that it will hold in the future." Ves smirked. "The timing of Stark and your own breakthroughs is quite suspicious, you know. Both of you have made profound attainments in raising your Heaven score according to Ketis' theory. If there is any validity to her theoretical model, then Rosa Orfan should be able to overcome her bottleneck pretty easily, especially when she is able to raise her Earth score with the Riot Mark III. Our clan will gain more benefits by welcoming an extra ace pilot as opposed to delivering an ace mech."

Ark frowned deeper. "The fate of Davute may rest on how quickly I can unleash my full strength as an ace pilot."

"The needs of the Larkinson Clan come first. Please get your priorities in order. The Colonial Federation of Davute can solve its own problems. We are not responsible for saving it. Besides, the current iteration of your Lionheart is hardly as weak as the First Sword Mark II. It is a quasi-first-class high-tier expert mech that we have deliberately designed to have a bit of headroom in case you advance to the rank of ace pilot. The leap in combat power between the Lionheart Mark I and the Mark II will not be as significant as the leap in combat power between the Minerva Mark I and its soon-to-be-completed Mark II iteration. Your machine is much more modern and powerful, so even if it is a cage that constrains your strength, it is a very luxurious one if I have to say so myself."

The two kept arguing over this issue, but Ark was not able to rely on nepotism or family affection to cut in line.

Ves remained unmoved by his uncle's repeated pleas!

The Saint General's expression did not look good by the time he finally acknowledged the reality of the situation.

"Fine. If this is how you want to play it, then maybe I should look towards commissioning other mech designers to upgrade my machine. There are plenty of

Master Mech Designers who are eager to invest their best tech and materials in a work that will become famous and celebrated throughout human-occupied space."

"You are welcome to turn to others, but I will have to remind you of the terms and conditions of using the Lionheart." Ves nonchalantly shrugged. "Perhaps you have overlooked this little fact, but the expert mech that has massively contributed to your success as of late is not your property. Technically speaking, the Lionheart is 100 percent owned by the Larkinson Clan. In other words, it is mine. You don't have the right to just shove it to third parties and tell them to upgrade it on your behalf. It will completely ruin our vision and transform it into other people's work."

Ark's expression turned even uglier. "Then sell it to me. I am more than capable of paying its market value for it. If not, I can ask other backers such as Davute to assist with the financing."

Ves couldn't help but feel disappointed in his uncle. As powerful as he may have become, he still possessed dreadfully poor understanding of mech designers.

"This is not about money, Ark. It's about art and principles. The Lionheart is not for sale. I can promise you that the Lionheart Mark II will be great. Your machine will be converted to a full archemeh, just like the Amaranto Mark III. We are also thinking of acquiring another Mentalist Crystal to enhance your ability to play the crowd. We have all of this and more in store for your ace mech, but all good things take time to come together. My wife and I do not want to cut any corners and rush this project in any way. I promise you that the long wait will be worth it, just like how Saint Tusa is having the time of his life after receiving his Dark Zephyr Mark III."

If possible, General Ark would truly like to pilot the Lionheart Mark II as described by his nephew, but if he had to wait more than a year to obtain a machine that he needed tomorrow, then it would be unbearable for him to get stalled when the Red War was just about to reach a critical phase!

"Can't you apply a stopgap solution?" Ark requested. "It shouldn't take much time for you to swap the expert mech-grade resonating exotics with ace mech-grade equivalents."

"You are vastly oversimplifying the effort it takes to convert an expert mech to an ace mech. It is not as straightforward as that. What you have just described is just one important step in a multi-step plan. You can't ignore the other factors, or else the

Lionheart will become horribly unbalanced and may even break after you accidentally overexert your machine. It will still take at least a month or two to complete a shallower upgrade. This is not a worthwhile investment from the perspective of the Design Department, so you will just have to wait in line."

"Is there anything else you can do to help me grow stronger faster?"

Ves let out an exasperated breath. "Look, if you are really eager to pilot an ace mech in a short timeframe, then you can commission a generic but serviceable ace mech from Davute, the Red Association or any of your other contacts. An ace mech designed from scratch in so little time will be a poor match to your capabilities. The piloting experience will also be completely different due to the fact that it is not a post-living mech like the Lionheart. However, as long as it meets all of the essential criteria of an ace mech, your Saint Kingdom will no longer be constrained, so your resonance strength should be able to grow freely."

This was a perfectly viable if wasteful solution. There was no rule that prevented ace pilots from using multiple machines. They often did when they upgraded from an older machine to a new ace mech.

However, Ark was very reluctant to separate himself from the Lionheart. It may not be as new anymore, but he didn't think that the products developed by other mech designers could fit him better!

"I will look into this suggestion further." Ark said in a noncommittal tone. "Regardless of what I choose, I still expect you to work on the Lionheart Mark II Project and deliver my upgraded machine no later than one-and-a-half years."

"That is a difficult request to fulfill." Ves frowned. "I can only promise you that we will get it done in 2 years."

"..."

Chapter 6722: Bunkermania

It was not easy to deal with family on certain occasions.

The root of the problem laid in how long it took to complete a high-end mech design project and how many of them could be worked on at the same time.

The pipeline was too small and limited. The Design Department in its current state was not able to keep up with the progress of the best combat talents of the clan.

Ves had already spoken to Gloriana about this, but there were no easy fixes to this pipeline problem.

The Larkinson Clan was built from the high-ranking living mechs designed by Ves and Gloriana. Everyone in the clan had developed a fanatical degree of love and appreciation for iconic machines such as the Dark Zephyr and the Everchanger.

While all of this made Ves feel great, the problem was that as demand continued to rise, he became increasingly more pressed for time.

This problem was even more severe for Gloriana as she shouldered most of the workload!

This was why Ves advised her to step up and work harder on raising a bunch of qualified disciples.

So long as more mech designers emerged who could roughly do the same jobs, then that would relieve the limitations that delayed the arrival of the Lionheart Mark II and other powerful machines.

There was another way to solve the problem. That was to let other mech designers with different specializations form their own design teams to work on high-ranking mech design projects.

This meant that there may be a future where not all of the Larkinson Clan's expert mechs and ace mechs may be alive and made out of archemetal.

While that sounded like a definite downgrade, Ves did not think so. He had never underestimated the competence of other mech designers.

Talents on the same level as Alexa Streon and Jovy Armalon were rare, but they definitely existed.

Then there were Master Mech Designers who had accrued a lot of experience and developed a rich understanding of their specializations.

Ves did not necessarily object to delegating a few high-ranking mech design projects to these people.

The only conditions that needed to be met was whether the mech pilots agreed with the decision and whether the mech designers were loyal and trustworthy enough.

However, he already knew that Gloriana would shoot down this suggestion with all of her might!

Designing high-ranking mechs was her passion and her lifeblood.

It had already been difficult for her to let go of the responsibility to design low-tier expert mechs for mech pilots that had undergone their first apotheosis.

At this stage, her workload may be high, but it was not unbearable enough to make her give up on a portion of her precious projects!

Ves sighed. "Is there a way to increase our productivity further?"

He felt tempted to research a solution that would allow Gloriana to form another incarnation.

Ves was able to keep up with Gloriana's high pace by borrowing the minds of Blinky, Vulcan and Veronica.

Perhaps she could step up by creating an extra incarnation.

He quickly shot down this stupid idea. He was able to succeed easily enough because of his special circumstances.

The only viable way for Gloriana to create another incarnation was to learn and develop her own orven ritual sacrifice altar. She would then have to conduct a life-threatening ritual that required her to carve out a piece of her Divine Core and insert it into her altar while breathing life into the object that she had shaped.

The probability of success when performing this ritual blindly was exceedingly low.

She at least needed to be inducted in the Mech Designer System so that she could observe and manipulate her own Divine Core.

Ves would be able to take care of steps that involved breathing life into the soul fragment, but it would be safer if Gloriana completed this step herself.

He shook his head. "This is not a good idea."

It was also not necessary in his opinion. Gloriana's productivity had already reached a high level after she upgraded her cranial implant. The Mentalist Crystal fragments were constantly stimulating her mind, allowing her to process more data and perform faster deductions.

Her improvement was so impressive that even Ves felt envious. Perhaps he should look into whether it is possible for him to implant a whole Mentalist Crystal in the center of his brain.

"It's too risky. There's too many ways for this to go wrong."

Ves shoved aside his unrealistic fantasies and tried to focus on the job at hand.

He still had to deal with plenty of matters related to the aftermath of the final battle that took place in the Viola Magnifica System.

From approving personnel transfers to signing funding requests, Ves had to handle a lot of paperwork in his capacity as the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan.

He also attended a handful of planning sessions related to the next moves of the expeditionary fleet.

Saint Commander Casella Ingvar sounded grim as she shared her analysis on what might happen in the coming months.

"Now that the native aliens are ready to assault the fifth defensive band, we expect our enemies to throw everything at us short of weapons of mass destruction." She explained to the senior staff and officers of the expeditionary fleet. "The Torald Middle Zone will fall faster than we would prefer. This means that the Krakatoa Middle Zone will come under immediate threat. We must minimize the amount of time we spend on recovery and repairs. To that end, we have no choice but to make hard decisions."

"Hard decisions like what, ma'am?"

"Living mechs that require too much time and labor to repair will be transferred elsewhere along with their pilots if they are unwilling to switch. Freshly fabricated living mechs will take their place. We will also pick up a large number of Larkinson mech pilots that were previously assigned to our planetary branches. This will minimize the friction and the adaptation period that is normal when transferring lots of newcomers to our carriers."

The Saint Commander continued to list out various emergency measures that were aimed at increasing the combat readiness of the expeditionary fleet as soon as possible.

"Where will we fight? I heard that we are on our way to Davute."

"We are indeed withdrawing to Davute." Casella confirmed. "Due to our large branch on that planet, we have access to extensive repair facilities over at Davute. The large manufacturing hub owned by the Davute Branch has also redirected their production away from commercial mechs to Larkinson-exclusive mechs. We will be able to replenish our mech roster much faster over there. It is not certain whether we will stay and defend the Colonial Federation of Davute. There are other states and strategic locations that also require our protection."

"I think we should strongly consider the latter." Ves voiced his own opinion. "The Larkinson Clan must exist as a sovereign entity. It is fine for us to establish branches in many different states, but we must never become too dependent or committed to any single one of them. No matter how well they treat us, their ruling powers

ultimately only prioritize their own interests. It is best if the forces of our clan fight where they can make the greatest difference rather than try to earn favors from an individual state. Besides, the 77th Warborn are already committed to defending Davute and its citizens, so as far as I am concerned, our clan is already doing enough."

The expeditionary fleet had not set a final destination. The Golden Skull Alliance needed to wait and see how the frontlines developed. It may be better for them to transfer to another Middle Zone if it turned out that the Krakatoa Middle Zone was able to handle the influx of hostile alien warships.

Speaking of warships, another important development was taking place.

Ves received a private briefing from Head Naval Design Director Vivian Tsai and Chief Shipwright Keziramous Demodian of the E-66 Experimental Yard.

Both of them had worked extensively on leading extensive overhaul, conversion and rework of a captured orven battleship.

"In line with your latest orders, we have hired additional naval engineers and other shipbuilding personnel to speed up the refit of the Torturous Scream." Vivian Tsai reported to Ves. "We have paid special attention to adaptations that go beyond the standard features. This demanded a large amount of additional work under less than ideal circumstances. The E-66 Experimental Yard is not equipped to work on a vessel with the size and dimensions of a 3.6 kilometer alien battleship with a vertical deck layout, but this is okay since much of the refit work does not require drydock facilities."

"Have you managed to make our temporary flagship accommodate mechs?" Ves asked the most critical question.

Kezi, the man who was actually in charge of the E-66 Experimental Yard, nodded in response.

"The Torturous Scream may be alien, but her hull design is fairly modern and clearly influenced by lessons taught by the cosmopolitans. We have removed many tertiary and secondary gun batteries in order to make room for many bunkers. Each of them are compliant with the specifications that you have set."

The physical projection of the chief shipwright displayed a blueprint of the orven battleship that showed all of the gun batteries that had been removed to make place for well-protected bunkers.

"As you can see, there are 155 bunkers spread across the hull in total." Kezi explained. "Each of them can fit one heavy artillery mech, and are especially designed to accommodate the Devora Cannon mounted on every Transcendent Punisher Mark III. In order to raise the firing rates of both the energy and kinetic weapons mounted on the heavy artillery mechs, the bunkers can directly feed ammunition and energy to them through specially designed channels. They can also connect to the data network of the Torturous Scream. The Transcendent Punishers only need to slot themselves into place before they can fire at targets with extensive support from the battleship herself."

The legality of feeding energy directly into a bunker mech was highly dubious and controversial to say the least.

It should be a bit more acceptable to allow Transcendent Punishers to link up with warships, as the latter were already armed with much larger and more powerful guns.

However, the mechers vehemently disagreed with this. Most of them had long formed the consensus that mechs need to remain independent and solve their enemies the old-fashioned way.

Whatever the case, Ves was pretty certain that none of the Red Three would object to what the shipbuilders had done to the Torturous Scream!

Kezi highlighted four thicker bunkers at various points at the sides.

"In addition to the 155 heavy artillery bunkers, my men and I have all installed 4 bunkers of more robust quality. These sniper bunkers are more specialized and designed to contain the Amaranto Mark III but potentially other humanoid mechs such as the Everchanger. Aside from that, they also offer space for an optional defensive mech such as the Bastion."

Just like with the heavy artillery mechs, the Amaranto Mark III could slot herself into the bunker to become connected to the converted battleship.

"After her minor overhaul that is scheduled to begin shortly, the Amaranto Mark III will turn into a proper first-class ace mech." Ves remarked with a smile. "She will already become considerably more powerful than when she fought in Viola Magnifica. If the Amaranto can also draw power from the Torturous Scream while simultaneously dumping all of her heat into the massive hull, I can scarcely imagine how high her damage output will be. I bet that she can easily out-damage any of the battleship's primary gun batteries!"

This was one of the biggest reasons why he ordered the E-66 Experimental Shipyard to install so many bunkers onto his future flagship!

Many of his mechs had become so powerful that they were able to outperform warship-grade cannons in multiple criteria!

Ves was eager to turn the Torturous Scream into the most powerful base and flagship of his clan. He believed it was more than worthwhile to commission the extra hull work in order to obtain a much more threatening battleship!

Chapter 6723: Future Home

Ves had very high hopes for the sniper bunkers. They would offer fixed and highly secure positions for the Amaranto Mark III to attack her targets.

Being able to draw on the much larger and much more impressive power generators of the Torturous Scream should allow the ace marksman mech to charge her Instrument of Vengeance to full power a lot faster than if she relied on her own internal power generation.

The extensive surface contact with the enormous hull of the Torturous Scream should also allow the Amaranto Mark III to have virtually no concerns about heat buildup.

Unless the Amaranto was generating an astronomical amount of heat in a very small time frame, she should have no issue with dumping her excessive waste energy directly into the battleship. The Torturous Scream would be more than happy to serve as her gigantic heatsink!

Another benefit was that the Amaranto Mark III would have much fewer concerns about defending herself against enemy retaliation. She would remain well-protected behind multiple layers of azure energy shields as well as thick slabs of metal.

If a sniper bunker was ever at risk of getting destroyed, then the Amaranto Mark III could always evacuate in two different directions. She could either blow open the top cover and flee outward or move deeper into the hull via newly installed corridors.

Adding enough space to embed a heavy defensive mech such as the Bastion was a nice touch. It made the sniper bunkers a lot larger and more complicated in design, but Ves considered the effort to be worth the additional work and delays.

His only regret was that the Larkinson Clan only had one ace marksman mech in its possession!

Well, the Promethea Mark II would become available later this year. Adding her firepower to the Torturous Scream should make the converted battleship even stronger!

The only question was what Saint Isobel Kotin thought about it when she came back to the clan after completing her full-body reconstruction and physical therapy sessions.

Would she be willing to huddle inside a bunker during combat, or was she the sort that preferred to maneuver around on the battlefield in order to attack her targets from different angles?

Ves already knew that Saint Davia Stark had no objections to using bunkers as her Amaranto Mark III was inherently designed to remain stationary most of the time.

The Promethea and her next iteration were supposed to function like traditional rifleman mechs, so there may be many times where it was better for the fiery ace rifleman mech to deploy in the field.

Ves actually preferred it if more ace mechs stuck to the hull of the Torturous Scream because their Saint Kingdoms could provide a huge amount of additional protection.

This was why he insisted on installing at least four sniper bunkers onto the hull. They were distributed in places that would allow each of them to deploy their own Saint Kingdoms with low chances of pressing against each other.

This should provide excellent coverage to the battleship as well!

After Ves completed his inspection of the implementation of the sniper bunkers, he moved on to inspecting the other upgrades made to the converted battleship.

"Have you been able to implement the command mech bridge concept?" Ves asked the two shipbuilders.

The projections of the two displayed uncertain expressions.

"We tried our best given that we don't have an idea of what we are working with." Vivian Tsai responded as she zoomed in the projected blueprint to the bridge section. "As you can see, we have freed up space to allow for the entry and physical interface of an ace command mech to the bridge systems. Our programmers have already altered the code of the main ship systems to grant access to the Minerva Mark II or other potential command mechs, but the work is still immature. We simply do not know how Saint Commander Casella Ingvar and the Minerva Mark II will be able to handle the strain of connecting to the computer systems of a battleship that is only partially converted to human usage."

He understood the concerns and doubts. This was one of his more dubious requests. It may end up a failure or disappointment, but it was worth a try.

His vision for the Torturous Scream was to enhance her capabilities with the help of expert mechs and ace mechs as much as possible.

It had rarely been done in the past as most people liked to keep mechs and warships strictly separate from each other.

After all, concentrating so many high-value assets in a single warship would definitely turn the vessel into the highest priority target!

Ves believed that it would still make sense to station the Amaranto Mark III and the Minerva Mark II inside the hull of the future flagship of the Larkinson Clan.

The two ace mechs were never designed for brawling, and it was not necessary for them to maneuver around on the battlefield.

In fact, as high-value targets with immense strategic value to any force they fought alongside with, it was important to protect them as much as possible!

A strong rationale existed to keep them away from the field. The Torturous Scream should be able to provide them with a lot of protection and other forms of assistance.

"Have you been able to implement the other modifications?"

"We have only partially fulfilled your list, sir." Kezi answered. "The deadline that you have set for us has forced our engineers to drop a number of demands in order to ensure we have properly implemented the rest. According to our schedule, the conversion of the Torturous Scream will be ready for trials in two months or less. That does not necessarily mean that she will be ready for service. We are expecting higher rates of bugs, faults and errors during her initial deployment as we have many doubts about whether we have properly adapted and connected intact alien systems to human systems. Many of the officers and ratings that your clan has hired to crew the Torturous Scream will also require years to fully master their new stations. Whatever previous work experience they might have will not translate perfectly to their new stations as most of them will have to learn how to operate orven warship systems as well."

This was a pretty huge burden, but they had no choice. The Larkinson Clan needed to get its hands on a first-class warship as quickly as possible to avoid wasting the unrestricted RF Battlecruiser Token that Ves had managed to obtain.

After many months of waiting, the wait was almost over! The Premier Branch would finally gain the qualifications to fight opponents at the highest level of warfare in the Red Ocean!

Ves continued to listen to the briefing of the two shipwrights. Their crews had done their best to update inferior alien tech with superior human tech whenever possible, which did not happen a lot.

The time pressure was too great to allow for more extensive overhauls. The Torturous Scream would probably become a nightmare to operate for many crew members, but this was why the Larkinson Clan was prepared to pay considerable bonuses to the personnel who were willing to put up with wrangling orven tech.

Overall, Ves grew satisfied with the overall projections on her estimated performance. Even without including any embedded ace mechs, the Torturous Scream was still a fairly modern and powerful alien battleship that should at least be able to fight against other alien battleships!

She still required plenty of support from mechs and other assets in order to prevent any accidents, but this applied to nearly every warship aside from dreadnoughts.

"How extensively is the Torturous Scream able to accommodate productive activities?"

"Well, as you know, orven battleships are actually homeships that are meant to house entire populations. We have been able to hastily refit one of the larger internal sections into a production hall. Although there is less internal space for production machines, the use of first-class materializers and superfabs fed by first-class power generators should allow for a faster rate of production of second-class mechs and other productions. They can also be used to produce first-class mechs, but the circumstances are not ideal. Production will take longer and impose more costs."

"That's fine." Ves said. "We can afford to pay this price in order to gain self-sufficiency. At least the Torturous Scream should be able to fabricate her spare parts for her own use. What about the mech lab and mech workshops?"

"We have made sure to set them up according to your specifications. We have made sure that they are not directly linked to the other computing systems of the converted battleship to increase the information security of your workplaces. We have yet to install any high-tech instruments and production machines as we believe that you and your wife may want to make the arrangements yourselves."

"You are right. You can leave them empty for now. Once the Torturous Scream is in operation and arrives in New Constantinople, we will probably transfer all of our existing stuff in Diandi Base to our new flagship."

"You do not intend to stay in New Constantinople or relocate to Yernstall?" Vivian Tsai asked.

"Hey, you have been with us since the early years. You should know that whenever war begins to spread, no place is safe. The Devos Ancient Clan has been a great host these past few years, but I am not going to wait until the fight defensive band

collapses to preemptively evacuate from New Constantinople. It is better to err on the side of caution and move out sooner rather than later."

If possible, Ves preferred to stay on New Constantinople VIII much longer. He wanted to give his children a fixed place to live and grow up. He wanted them to attend excellent schools in person and make friends with Terran kids their own age.

He could argue that the Agamemnon Upper Zone was not under immediate risk as the alien invaders still had to pass through other zones.

However, red humanity had yet to establish new lines of fortifications that could systematically stop the native aliens from pressing deeper inside human-occupied space.

The aliens should freely be able to commence deep raids into the hinterland where all of the biggest and most productive industrial facilities were located!

The New Constantinople System was no exception to this as it was a port system and the capital system of the Riston Territory.

As the central location of the Devos Ancient Clan, razing the port system was equivalent to inflicting a crippling blow to the Devosans!

This was why he already considered the Torturous Scream to be his new home in the coming years. He vastly preferred the security of being able to move wherever he wanted.

After all, the best way to avoid danger was to put distance between himself and the source.

As the remote briefing came to an end, Vivian Tsai wanted to bring one more matter to his attention.

"Since the date of the relaunch of the converted battleship draws closer, we should begin to explore new names for her. We have all been referring to her as the Torturous Scream, but this is a shorthand for the full translated name. It is not appropriate

anymore for us to keep using the names that match orven sensibilities rather than human sensibilities."

"I disagree." Ves quickly replied.

"Pardon?"

"The Torturous Scream of a Human Dying in Agony over a Span of 46.7 Hours is a rather unusual and exotic name for an alien battleship. I am sure it sounds much more poetic in orven language, but it doesn't sound that bad when translated into standard language. I think it is funny, actually. Just think about it. The orvens want to torture and kill humans so much that they dedicated the name of one of their more powerful warships to this cause. What better way than to claim this name for ourselves and allow our captured and converted battleship to wear it with pride? We've already pissed off the orvens big time. Fighting them with this specific vessel will surely drive them insane, haha!"

Chapter 6724: TE Wood

While Ves was awaiting the arrival of his overhauled warship, he did not neglect his core responsibilities as a mech designer.

Aside from helping Gloriana complete the much-anticipated Minerva Mark II Project, he also had to deal with a number of other projects.

One of the projects that saw very little progress due to all of the distractions and events that took place over the last few months was his collaboration with the Devos Ancient Clan.

While Ves was not certain whether this was the right time to embark on this project, he needed to make tangible progress in realizing his design philosophy.

He had already identified at least two different research directions to meet the conditions to advance to the rank of Master mech Designer.

One of them required the cooperation of Alexa Streon. Ves did not expect to make any headway into this research anytime soon, so he may as well pursue the other direction for the time being.

One of his ambitious goals was to design 5 Elemental Carmine mechs that corresponded to the 5 classical elements.

In order to meet his high expectations, the Carmine mechs based on fire, earth, water, metal and wood needed to be far more special than basic Carmine mechs in order to justify his heightened expectations for the collection.

He already witnessed what Woodsap mechs could do from the infamous friendly fire incident where Venerable Lanie Larkinson and Venerable Taon Melin turned against each other.

Though Ves had lost access to the woodified Elegant Rage, his clan still managed to retrieve a rich amount of spoils from the aftermath of that unfortunate incident.

Though Saint Isobel Kotin had burned down most of the Emperor Tree and some of the surroundings, the Larkinsons managed to salvage the remains of wooden mechs, huge chunks of wood that used to be a part of the calamity plant, burnt tree core fragments and the remains of the Ebony Zeal and the remains of both the Ebony Zeal and a relatively intact Ebony Everchanger.

The latter two were the most special prizes by far. They were the most powerful copies of the then-expert mechs that the Emperor Tree was able to produce with the highest quality of wood material that he could synthesize.

The very deep integration with Solus Gas caused all of the wooden mechs to be surprisingly difficult to detect. They also possessed excellent regeneration capabilities so long as they had access to enough high-quality materials and E energy of the right attributes.

This was important as the intact nature of the Ebony Everchanger meant that it could potentially serve as a sustainable producer of ebony wood!

Unfortunately, its deep dependence on the Emperor Tree meant that it had lost access to the conditions that previously enabled it to repair itself quickly in the middle of a battle against the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan.

On its own, the much smaller Ebony Everchanger was only able to reproduce new ebony wood cells at a relatively glacial pace.

Venerable Joshua and the researchers of both the Larkinson Biotech Institute and the T Institute had tried to make sense of the Ebony Everchanger.

They already knew that it was actually a backup measure of the Emperor Tree. In a desperate bid to save itself, it had split off a piece of its spirituality and merged it into the Ebony Everchanger, causing the wooden construct to become alive and independent.

The Larkinson researchers spent a long time to confirm that the Ebony Everchanger was not secretly an underhanded means for the Emperor Tree to revive itself. They tentatively ascertained that the Ebony Everchanger truly started off as a blank slate.

It had also been bioprogrammed to act as non-aggressively as possible to its new masters. This provided the Larkinsons with a lot of convenience as they were essentially able to train the Ebony Everchanger like an obedient puppy.

The living wooden construct possessed a dull personality, but it was able to pick up many lessons at a reasonable pace.

Its living personality was very much not comparable to that of a human or a living mech, but that was good in this instance. None of the Larkinsons wanted to deal with an alien wooden entity that was too clever and scheming for his own good.

As much as the Ebony Everchanger provided Ves and the Larkinson Clan with rich research data, there was a limit to how extensively the LBI and the TI was able to figure out the underlying mechanisms of how it worked and how it was able to constitute an independent life form.

In order for Ves to design a proper Woodsap mech, he needed far more insight and understanding how ebony wood worked. He also needed to scale up the production of ebony wood or a similar organic material.

The Larkinson Clan's research institutes were not equipped for such a job. It may take years if not decades for them to achieve a breakthrough in their R&D projects.

This was why Ves readily agreed to outsource much of the research burden to the Devos Ancient Clan.

As one of the many ruling powers of the Terran Alliance, the Devos Ancient Clan of the Red Ocean possessed much more extensive R&D capabilities.

It might not be as powerful as its mother clan back in the Milky Way, but it employed a lot more researchers, of which many of them possessed vastly superior qualifications than the researchers working for the Larkinson Clan!

It couldn't be helped. The Devosans built up their foundation over many generations. They existed as a continuous family organization several ages prior. Such clans had a way of ensuring the continuity of their core talents and assets no matter what happened.

The Great Severing affected the Devosans on the side of the Red Ocean a lot more heavily than they had ever anticipated, but at least they still had the capital to retain their hold over the Riston Territory.

The relative calm and stability of the hinterland of human-occupied space granted the Devosans precious buffer time to reorganize their ancient clan and adapt to the circumstances of the Red Ocean.

As long as the Devos Ancient Clan had a decade or two to sort out their situation, there would be little question about its ability to fully reestablish themselves as one of the premier powers of the Terran Alliance.

However, the progress made by the native aliens during the Red Tide Offensive cast a darker shadow over the Devosans. They feared that they may not be granted enough time for them to fully establish a foothold in this dwarf galaxy.

Ves feared that recent events may have caused them to doubt the wisdom of channeling lots of funding and R&D resources into their collaboration project, but it turned out that he worried in vain.

If anything, the crisis had prompted them to commit even more resources into this effort!

When Ves boarded a shuttle and traveled under escort to a well-guarded underground research facility built underneath a mountain range, he finally met with Master Laila Rebecca Devos in person again.

"I didn't expect you to be present here today." Ves said as soon as he stepped out of his armored shuttle with Lucky in his arms.

"Meow." The archemetal cat raised his paw in greeting.

The Master Mech Designer smiled and reached out to scratch the gem cat in the head as she responded to Ves.

"It is true that my schedule has become busier than ever, but our clan holds our collaboration project in high regard. We have important matters to talk about, especially after we have managed to gain a breakthrough in our research."

Her excitement was palpable. This breakthrough must clearly be a big deal for her to mention it so soon.

"Details?"

"It is better to show you first. Follow me. We will have to move deeper into this facility."

They passed through a number of well-shielded corridors that were packed with hardened security measures.

The sensors focused much of their attention on the bodyguards that vigilantly shadowed their principal.

As soon as they reached the third security checkpoint, Master Laila directed a wordless glance at Ves.

He got the hint, but refused to park his bodyguards outside. No matter how well he got along with the Devosans, he would never be stupid enough to assume that he could handle every threat by himself.

"My guards hail from the 2nd Apocalypse Warden Battalion. They are militarized qi cultivators whose loyalty and dedication are verified by the Red Collective. Given how well you Terrans get along with the collies, there is no need to fear their indiscretion. Besides, I don't think this research of yours merits so many excessive precautions. The Red Association also has the mutated Elegant Rage in their possession. The mechers must have studied the partially wooden mech extensively before upgrading her to an expert mech."

Master Laila reluctantly accepted these arguments. "Very well. I would still like to reiterate to you that the leaders of not just the Devos Ancient Clan, but also the rest of the Terran Alliance have raised the priority of our collaboration project. This is a period of time where we need powerful mechs and more acutely powerful Carmine mechs the most."

"That is what the Yellow Jackets are for." Ves remarked. "Sure, the base model of the first-class version of my Carmine mech is rather cheap, but you can easily develop superior variants."

"The first-class version of the Yellow Jacket is serviceable and affordable to mass produce, but that makes it difficult for us to develop a truly premium variant of it. We have long concluded that if we want to obtain a proper first-class Carmine mech, we will have to develop it from the beginning. For this purpose, we have done our best to research a means to upgrade or develop a superior substitute of the interesting 'ebony wood' material that you have presented to us. We must spare no effort and resources to develop the best Carmine mechs for our colonial superstate."

They finally entered a highly secure experimental chamber that possessed a very unique ambiance.

Ves did not notice anything while he was still outside, but as soon as the double gates slid open, he became assaulted by a high concentration of water and wood energy!

A forest biome greeted his senses. The Devosans had completely reformed the entire experimental chamber into an artificial forest environment.

The Terran researchers transplanted remarkable plants and trees in this biome.

In order to make them prosper, the walls and ceiling had been lined with thick layers of medium and high-grade wood hyper materials!

The Terrans also applied a bit of cultivation science to the layout by also implanting the floor with lots of water hyper materials. The earth and soil layer covered it all up, but the water hypers attracted enough water E energy to nurture all of the plants and trees.

Ves continued to gaze at his surroundings with wonder until Master Laila eventually led him to a clearing in the center.

He became reunited with the Ebony Everchanger once again.

"You... upgraded the wooden construct."

The Terran Master Mech Designer nodded. "We did. After a considerable amount of effort, we have successfully developed a reliable process to impregnate ebony wood with phasewater. We subsequently applied this process to the Ebony Everchanger with great care. Transphasic Ebony Wood or TE Wood is vastly superior in many ways. It is much more resistant towards damage. What is particularly helpful is that its resistance against thermal weapons and fire-attributed hyper weapons is vastly improved. This makes TE Wood a more balanced and universally applicable high-end resource to use in the construction of premium biomechs."

"What about the production rate?"

"We have improved that as well." Master Laila Rebecca Devos swept her arm across the biome. "Why do you think we have placed your Ebony Everchanger in a chamber that is surrounded by wood and water hypers? We have discovered through trial and error that this environment best simulates the support that used to be provided by the Emperor Tree. In this favorable environment, your Ebony Everchanger is able to convert the necessary raw materials into TE wood in a remarkably short amount of time."

Although the Terrans failed to improve the base material itself, ebony wood was already one of the better non-transphasic organic materials known to red humanity!

There were more superior wood materials available, but the cost of producing them in large quantities was prohibitive!

TE Wood happened to strike a balance between performance and cost effectiveness. As long as the Terrans had enough phasewater to spare, they could produce or rather grow enough TE wood to outfit multiple elite Carmine mech divisions!

Chapter 6725: Bare Essentials

Ves was not a fan of the name that the Devosans had bestowed on their variant of ebony wood.

"Meow." Lucky yawned as he sat on Ves' shoulder.

The gem cat did not like the name either.

TE Wood was perhaps the most unimaginable label they could have attached to transphasic ebony wood short of using code letters.

However, rather than paying attention to the suboptimal name choice, Ves instead delved deep into the properties of TE Wood.

The material was truly as good as the Terrans boasted. Successfully integrating ebony wood with phasewater required changes to the material in order to accommodate the special exotic liquid, but there were specialized researchers who had done this sort of work many times since the start of the Phasewater Generation.

"The most difficult hurdle in making it happen is to overcome the remarkable ability for ebony wood to resist most scans." Master Laila said. "The substance that you refer to as Solus Gas possesses interesting and even unique properties that have opened up our vision on what is possible. I can already tell you that our intelligence agencies have expressed great interest in negotiating a supply agreement for this exotic gas."

"Our clan is open to negotiate a deal." Ves said with a smile. "I have to warn you that we have only found one source of Solus Gas so far. It is produced on an untamed planet with unique and most probably irreplicable circumstances. While our clan is harvesting far more Solus Gas than we could feasibly make use of in the coming years, I imagine that you Terrans have a vastly greater demand for it. I am open to

trading much of our existing stock since you guys could make better use of it than us, but you have to take into account that the supply of Solus Gas may ultimately be finite if the native aliens breach the fifth defensive band. In fact, the Reticula Corein System is already vulnerable to alien raids."

"We are aware of the risks, professor. We are reliant on many rare exotics and hypers that can only be found in certain star systems. This is why the loss of the four defensive bands is so damaging to us. The loss of territory and living space for colonists is one matter, but losing access to star systems that previously yielded strategic resources is more damaging to our warmaking potential in the long run."

That was an interesting perspective on the Red War that Ves had yet to consider.

"Are you saying that if we don't have as many materials to develop our products, we won't be as good?"

"Perhaps not in a number of specific cases, but it is most certainly the case from a macro perspective. Human technology is strong because mech designers such as ourselves have a rich variety of resources to choose from. If our selection of materials decrease as a result of losing access to strategic resource nodes, then our mech industry and other industries will suffer as a consequence. Once we are reduced to only a hundred or so star systems, then it doesn't matter how resource rich they are. If there is a shortage of strategic materials such as phasewater, then our prospects of making a comeback are virtually zero."

This explained how crucial it was to prevent the native aliens from breaching the fifth defensive band and overrun the zones closest to the border.

If the star systems in those regions all fell to the native alien invasion, then red humanity would no longer be able to reproduce many powerful mechs that relied on certain strategic resources to enable their gimmicks!

This actually reminded Ves that it was almost time for Ketis to unveil her 'ability' to use the Heavensword to create dimensional breaches.

So long as she created a temporary breach in the right higher dimension, the Larkinson Clan would be able to harvest a large bounty of unique materials that may possess considerable strategic value!

This would definitely be a good way to mitigate the loss of access to a greater variety of valuable resources.

However, Ves doubted that the Dimension Observatory would be able to find a source of Solus Gas in another dimension. He was pretty sure that Reticula Corain V would remain the only source of this exotic material.

"Since you are aware that the supply of Solus Gas can be cut off at any time, are you still willing to proceed with designing a Woodsap mech with TE wood at its basis?" Ves asked.

"After much consideration, we have decided to take a gamble on this material." Master Laila affirmed. "Reticula Corain V may fall under the sway of the native aliens in the near future, but the planet will not go away. Our enemies have left it alone before our entry into the Red Ocean, and we do not expect that to change if they gain full control over the Torald Middle Zone. Besides, the harvesting rate of Solus Gas at your clan's current site is so high that our ancient clan will have more than enough to equip at least one full mech corps with Woodsap mechs that are primarily comprised of TE wood. Our future demand for Solus Gas will depend on how the Red War develops."

He understood what she was talking about. If red humanity failed to regain any momentum and kept losing territory at a distressing rate, then there was no need to talk about producing more Woodsap mechs.

Because red humanity would have lost the Red War by that time!

If the native aliens got pushed back, then red humanity would easily be able to regain control over the Reticula Corein System. The Larkinsons would be able to come back and resume their Solus Gas harvesting operation without any issue.

At the same time, the Terrans should have ample resources and opportunities to raise additional Woodsap mech units.

"I get it. So for now, you want us to design a Woodsap mech that will comprise of one elite mech corps in the hopes of adding another powerful military force to your clan, is that correct?"

Master Laila nodded. "That is so. We would prefer it if the Woodsap mech is designed to fulfill the specific criteria that is most favorable to my ancient clan, as we have priority on this new product. If there is any Solus Gas left that you are willing to part with, you can consider supplying them to the other ancient clans so that they can produce their own Woodsap mechs. However, their needs come second to our own, as we are ready to invest significant resources and highly skilled manpower to this collaboration project."

"That is fair. I don't care how you distribute the Woodsap mechs within the Terran Alliance. My job is to help with the design process. What you do with the output is up to you guys. Just remember that our clan will also have the right to produce and make use of Woodsap mechs. By the way, what sort of candidates are you considering to pilot the first 50,000 or so biomechs made out of TE Wood?"

"We are not entrusting them to norms, obviously." Master Laila Devos answered. "It will take too long to train them into acceptable Carmine mech pilots. We do not want to reduce our pool of mech pilots who are already producing good results with first-class multipurpose mechs. We are instead recruiting from the pool of mech pilots with slightly inferior C or possibly even D-grade genetic aptitudes. There are enough of them that have attended and graduated from inferior mech academies before finding gainful employment by becoming security guards, mech athletes or law enforcement officers."

"Will they be ready to pilot a Woodsap mech on the frontlines during a time of war?"

"We are upgrading their augmentations when necessary and providing them with accelerated training courses as we speak. Their combat experience will still be lacking, but their fundamental skills should be solid enough to guarantee acceptable performance once they fight for the first time."

Ves furrowed his brow in thought. "How well they adapt to their Woodsap mechs will depend on how complex we make the design. I know you Terrans are big fans of first-class multipurpose mechs, but given the circumstances, I highly advise against applying this template to our collaboration work."

"There is no need for concern. We agree with you. It takes many strategic resources and extensive training of scarce A and B-grade genetic aptitude potentates in order to raise a new first-class multipurpose mech corps. Our ancient clan had little issue with doing so when we still had access to our deep foundation in the Milky Way Galaxy,

but now we must adapt ourselves to the much more limited conditions of human-occupied space in the Red Ocean."

Ves was glad to hear this. He would have liked to design a first-class multipurpose mech, but only under the right circumstances. This was clearly not the right situation for such a complicated machine.

"Do you have any thoughts on what mech archetype you wish to adopt for the Woodsap mech?" He asked.

"We do. Based on the properties of TE Wood as well as the state of the Terran Alliance at this time, I have stripped down every superfluous demand in order to minimize our time and resource expenditures. Our goal is not to design the best Carmine mech made out of TE Wood, but to develop an efficient and combat capable biomech that can fight well at close range and from afar. If we limit the scope and complexity of the Woodsap mech to minimum, we will end up with a product similar to this draft design."

Master Laila Devos projected a sketch of a very familiar-looking TE Wood mech.

"That... is nearly identical to the upgraded version of the Ebony Everchanger." Ves remarked.

"Hero mech designs are not common in the Terran Alliance, professor. The Ouroboros is famous, but very few mech pilots see the need to pilot hero mechs of their own. However, the choice of hero mechs is appropriate for our collaboration project. We initially wanted to design a hybrid mech and rely on a combination of integrated energy weapons and handheld melee weapons to arm our work. We discovered later on that doing so in a mech frame made out of TE WOOD is... more difficult than we anticipated. We have therefore decided that the simplest alternative is to develop a Woodsap mech based on the hero mech archetype. It can already handle most encounters with the native aliens by relying on a single melee weapon or a single ranged weapon. It is not essential for the hero mech to rely on anything further. If there is still demand for different weapons, then our clients can swap the weapons loadout of their Woodsap mechs themselves."

This was the advantage of designing humanoid mechs that relied on external gear to equip themselves with weapons.

It was easy for clients to replace the default armaments with their own mech weapons. A hero mech made more sense than a hybrid mech for that reason. So long as the new Woodsap mech design did not remain exclusive to the Devos Ancient Clan and the Larkinson Clan, then other Terrans would definitely have their own ideas on how to best equip their new Elemental Carmine mechs.

"What are these armaments?" Ves inquired. "I can see that the firearm in one hand is a plasma rifle, but there is something funny about the spear in the other hand."

"It is a plasma spear. It is a more affordable alternative to a plasma sword. The weapon choices for the Woodsap mech is not fixed. This is only a proposal."

"I think it would be good to pair this hero mech with such a spear." Ves said.

"Powering a plasma melee weapon is very energy intensive, so making the plasma edge as small as possible will substantially increase the longevity of the Woodsap mech. It will also preserve more energy for field regeneration so long as we are able to develop a way to make that happen."

"Our researchers already developed a number of ideas to make that possible."

Chapter 6726: Arboreal Project

The collaborative project that they already decided to call the Arboreal Project was not as ambitious as Ves expected.

That was a good choice as the Devos Ancient Clan set aside its typical Terran extravagance.

Master Laila Rebecca Devos and her extensive team had all become affected by the dark clouds generated by the escalating Red War. As the bleak reality settled in their minds, the Devosans did not foolishly attempt to waste their limited resources on unnecessary weapon systems and other luxuries.

Designing a hero mech was a good decision because they could readily use the Everchanger, the Ebony Everchanger as well as the much more powerful Ouroboros as references for the Arboreal Project.

The Woodsap mech was not supposed to be a pale imitation of any of them. The new Elemental Carmine mech had to acquire its own identity and strengths.

However, it was not necessarily problematic to borrow existing homework as long as there was enough of a justification. The mech designers could save a significant amount of time by recycling existing solutions.

After Ves, Lucky and Master Laila moved to an empty design lab, the two mech designers began to hash out their vision for the first proper Woodspa mech design.

"The overall theme of the Arboreal Project should center around persistence." Master Laila Rebecca Devos explained her ideas to Ves. "Having watched the archival footage of your clan's operation against the Emperor Tree, we have found that the Ebony Everchanger and other wooden mechs were able to pose significant difficulties to several expert mechs piloted by high-tier expert pilots. The wooden constructs did so despite lacking true resonance, skilled piloting and many other advantages enjoyed by their metallic counterparts. The reason why they were able to do all of this was because they could not be effectively killed by your machines at the time. It took seconds for every damage they sustained to disappear as they regenerated back to their peak conditions."

She was right. The absurd regeneration properties of the ebony wooden mechs and to a lesser extent the purple wooden mechs had given the mech strike force a lot of grief at the time.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that the Ebony Everchanger and so on could put up so much a fight by themselves.

"You have a point, but the conditions to enable this absurd degree of regeneration are harsh." Ves responded as he leaned back on his chair and stroked Lucky's back. "My expert mechs were not fighting the Ebony mechs alone. They were fighting remote extensions of the massive Emperor Tree. The Ebony Everchanger fought more like a spur made of ebony wood. As soon as the Emperor Tree got burned by Saint Isobel Kotin, all of the wooden mechs lost their strong regenerative properties, which proved that this had never been their inherent trait."

Master Laila Devos smiled. "This is why we have started a parallel research project. We believe we can vastly promote the endurance and the staying power of Woodspa mechs if we enable them to fight in proximity to a construct that resembles the Emperor Tree. After consulting with our own resident cultivation scientists, we have developed a promising proposal that will complement the Arboreal Project."

She activated a projection that displayed a tree.

Yes, a tree.

Ves waited for a few seconds. "Is this... supposed to be anything special?"

"Ahem, the projection does not do our proposal justice. This... is a highly inadequate representation of a Gaia Tree."

Ves sat up straighter when he heard that. "A Gaia Tree?! Wait, are you trying to develop trees that are blessed by Gaia?!"

"That is correct." Master Laila smiled. "We have already conducted experiments on the Ebony Everchanger where we exposed the mech to Gaia's glow. The interaction between the two produced positive results, so much so that we have already concluded that their compatibility with each other is extremely high. This has led us to begin the development of what currently only exists in theory. The general premise is to develop a new sort of tree that is inherently connected to Gaia. This will allow us to rapidly grow these Gaia Trees on a large scale. Once the special trees have reached maturity, we will transplant them into their own heavily armored and climate controlled containers and drag them onto the battlefield. Their primary purpose is to serve a similar purpose to the Emperor Tree back when it was alive."

This... this proposal had a lot of promise. Even though it sounded crazy to drag trees out onto the battlefield just to serve as additional support for Woodsap mechs, it could truly work as long as the Gaia Trees could truly substitute for the Emperor Tree!

Ves looked at the projection of the seemingly plain-looking tree with much greater interest.

"I see. Are the Gaia Trees made out of TE Woo?"

Master Laila Devos nodded. "That is the plan. It will be resource intensive to grow enough trees to support the operations of our Woodsap mechs for multiple years, but this is the sacrifice that we need to make if we want to raise a large force of biomechs that can outlast nearly any enemy force. The Woodsap mechs will become nearly

unkillable under the most favorable conditions, allowing them to win the battles of attrition that the native aliens favor so much."

That was an excellent argument. Ves actually looked forward to turning the tables against the enemy.

As far as he could surmise, the Gaia Trees should be able to support the Woodsap mechs by feeding both wood energy as well as TE Wood to damaged biomech for as long as their resources lasted!

If the battle became too intensive, then there was a real risk that the Gaia Trees would exhaust themselves even if they were blessed by a True God.

There was only so much TE Wood available, and Ves did not believe that Gaia could convert enough energy to produce large amounts of this highly valuable organic material on the spot.

This was why the Terrans needed to grow these Gaia Trees in advance.

Their tree trunks directly equated to their energy and material reserves.

The smaller the trunk, the less resources they had left to support the regeneration of damaged Woodsap mechs!

There were very obvious problems related to dragging trees onto the battlefield, but Ves was sure that the Terrans could easily solve them in multiple different ways.

They could deploy stealth fields that could hide the trees and their large containers from enemy detection.

They could also escort the Gaia Trees with defensive mechs that could deploy large azure energy shields around the critical assets.

A more elegant solution would be to design a large biomech that also doubled as a 'Gaia Tree'!

It would be best if it reached the size of a juggernaut!

Whatever the case, the Terrans should be able to figure out how to develop Gaia Trees and how to deploy them safely on the battlefield by themselves. There was no need for Ves to intervene.

He focused his attention back to the Arboreal Project.

"If our Woodsap mechs can truly fight in the presence of these Gaia Trees, then that will vastly increase their combat power. Being able to drastically decrease their casualty rate means that as long as there is enough wood energy and TE wood to spare, the biomech units will always remain at full strength. They will not steadily become less and less effective as they lose numbers over the course of a battle. The longer a fight drags on, the greater the disparity in numbers between our Woodsap mechs and the enemy units."

This could make a huge difference under the right circumstances!

The biggest threat to Woodsap mechs was getting targeted by weapons that were powerful enough to blow them up at once.

This could range from getting struck by the primary and secondary gun batteries of larger warships, transphasic missiles, or direct attacks from phase lords.

The presence of Gaia Trees would not magically make the Arboreal Project invincible, but it would vastly increase the survival rate of the Woodsap mechs!

This would especially become important once the Red War took a bad turn. If the mech forces of the Terran Alliance fought so many battles that they had lost too many machines, they may not be able to replenish their numbers in a short amount of time.

This could embolden the native aliens and encourage them to intensify their offensive, thereby giving the Terrans less time to recover!

Fielding Woodsap mechs that had a much better chance to survive a battle regardless of whether it ended in victory or defeat could mitigate this problem!

The only resources that would get expended after every battle were Gaia Trees, but they should be much easier to mass produce and replenish as they had little to no technical content.

Ves and Master Laia Devos continued their discussion on the vision and direction of the Arboreal Project in light of the development of these so-called Gaia Trees.

The choice of hero mechs made better sense as the Woodsap mechs did not necessarily need to pile up on thicker armor.

Additional defenses were certainly welcome, but they weren't entirely necessary as a first-class biomech of this caliber was already capable of withstanding a lot of powerful attacks.

As long as there was enough protection for the cockpit, the Woodsap mech should be able to restore to its original condition fairly quickly in the presence of a Gaia Tree!

"This is a completely different approach to mech warfare." Ves remarked. "I have heard about mech doctrines where mech forces brought support units along that constructed temporary fortifications and supply depots on the battlefield and such. The creation of a dependency relationship between the Arboreal Project and these Gaia Trees is practically the biotech implementation of this concept."

"That is a good comparison. We are trying to tip the scales in our favor by manipulating the environment to our advantage. If we were fighting the native aliens a decade or half a decade ago, then it wouldn't have been necessary for us to resort to such tedious strategies. Now that we are being driven back by increasingly more focused and technologically advanced alien fleets, we have no choice but to resort to measures that we previously thought were beneath us. This is the mindset that humans during the Age of Stars and the early years of the Age of Conquest adopted. It is what we must return to if we wish to survive the Red War."

The Arboreal Project held great significance to the Devos Ancient Clan and potentially the Terran Alliance as a whole.

It was hardly the only project the Terrans relied upon to find their 'holy grail'.

They were desperate for a killer solution that could reverse the losing trend and allow the Terrans to push back the native aliens.

Ves did not forget that the Terran Alliance fared worse than the Rubarthan Pact so far. The former was only protected by a single god pilot while the latter enjoyed the protection of two god pilots.

This had massive consequences for the Terrans as their colonial superstate had clearly been identified as a potential breakthrough channel by the Red Cabal!

While the Red Fleet had taken the initiative to support the Terran frontlines by dispatching several dreadnoughts, their threat level was undoubtedly lower than that of god mechs.

Dreadnoughts were slower, less damaging and more easy to track and circumvent. Their deterrence was considerably more limited, especially since none of the ones deployed in the frontlines had been converted into Carmine dreadnoughts.

The Terrans disliked the fact that they had to rely on the charity of the RF to prop up their borders.

It was no secret that the Terrans were hoping to take advantage of the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape to fight for independence.

However, if they wanted to prove to themselves and others that they were ready to form an independent and sovereign star nation once again, then the Terrans needed to prove they were strong enough to defend their own territories!

The Arboreal Project may be able to facilitate their ambitions!

Chapter 6727: Contrasting Conditions

The visit to the Devos Ancient Clan's secret facility yielded a lot of gains to Ves.

He left the research site with a satisfied expression. His Terran collaborators were practically doing most of the necessary research on his behalf without requiring any

handholding from him. The Devosans had many capable researchers in their employ that provided a massive amount of assistance to the design team.

Ves and Master Devos mutually agreed that it would be better if Ves took a step back and took on a more supervisory role for the Arboreal Project.

Though Ves had conceived of the idea of a Woodsap mech, he did not have the time to babysit the project every day.

It was not that difficult for him to decide to restrain himself and allow the Terrans to settle stuff by themselves.

It was a matter of prioritization. Ves had other projects on his agenda that deserved his time as well. They would pretty much get stalled or slow down to an unacceptable degree if he did not contribute them on a regular and frequent basis.

This time, Ves was able to let go because his Terran collaborators sounded and behaved as if they had a much greater stake in the success of the project!

Ves had come to know and befriend Master Laila Rebecca Devos for a few years now. The two might not be as close as each other as his relationship with Master Moira Willix, but he trusted the Terran Master Mech Designer to do the Arboreal Project justice.

The two had already discussed their joint vision and overall research direction for the design project in advance. Ves had put in his own demands, and as long as Master Laila made sure to respect them, then he did not feel the need to micromanage the mech design project.

Of course, he could not remain completely hands-off either. He still needed to put in the minimum amount of work to make the Arboreal Project come to life. He had to make sure to maintain enough ownership in the mech design in order to provide the necessary building blocks to enable the formation of a Carmine mech that excelled at interacting with the wood element.

That was not a big deal to Ves and Master Laila. Both had lots of experience with working on collaborative mech designs. They knew what to do in order to forestall common problems and ensure the project progressed on schedule more or less.

Since the Arboreal Project was a bit more radical and innovative than usual mech designs, both Ves and Master Laila added a buffer in order to account for extra delays.

Even then, Ves expected the work to be done within half a year!

"It's really nice to design a mech with such an immense first-class support structure. When will my Larkinson Clan be able to provide this level of R&D and infrastructural assistance?"

It would take too long, especially given how Ves chose to develop his clan.

He repeatedly rejected development strategies that could have enabled the Larkinson Clan to expand several times faster. Founding a colony on a planet and building up multiple industrialized settlements was a great way to expand the membership rolls!

"It's also a great way to dilute my clan and make me lose control over it." He muttered under his breath.

"Meow?"

"Oh, it's nothing." He responded to his gem cat. "So what did you think about the progress the Terrans have made on the first Woodsap mech design?"

Lucky looked thoughtful as he cutely rested on Ves' lap. His tail lazily swished back and forth as he looked as if he was reflecting deeply on what he saw.

"Meow..."

Ves rolled his eyes. "It figures that you would think that. Just because the vast majority of mechs are made out of refined metals doesn't mean that it is the only valid choice. Biomechs are perfectly valid machines as well. They are just a little bit more troublesome to produce and maintain. Mech designers must justify their existence in order to make them worthwhile. I think the Arboreal Project more than satisfies this demand."

The special properties of TE Wood and the insanely promising synergies with Gaia Trees were more than enough to make his first proper Woodsap mech a lot more effective than nearly any other first-class hero mech model!

Of course, it was not easy to realize all of this potential. The Terrans definitely had to do a lot of heavy lifting in order to figure out how to mass produce TE Wood and how to utilize it as effectively as possible in a Woodsap mech.

There were also many challenges concerning the special implementation of the Carmine System.

Ves had gained a bit more insight in the nature of Blood Pacts as well as Life Sword Pacts.

Blood was a very convenient medium to connect a Carmine mech and mech pilot together, but it was hardly the only valid choice.

The advantages of using blood to bind the two parties together was that it was easy, more controllable and least prone to accidents despite pumping a lot of artificial blood into the Carmine mech pilot's body.

The disadvantages was that the basic version of the Carmine System was clunky and not very functional. It occupied valuable real estate in the internal architecture that could have been used to make the mech a little stronger in many different areas.

Blood also had its limits in terms of data and energy transmission.

Ves just had to look at the explosive example of the Dominion of Man to witness how much the first Carmine dreadnought in existence raised her upper boundaries after getting juiced up with so much fire energy!

Of course, this was a special case that could not easily be reproduced with mechs.

The example set by Venerable Joshua and the Everchanger served as a more representative case. The two primarily managed to form a Blood Pact by using life-attributed energy as the connecting medium.

Ves had already examined this variation of the Blood Pact by remote. He felt that it should be easy enough to produce similar outcomes with his Woodsap mechs by using wood energy, which was not all that different from life energy.

The only problem was that Venerable Joshua was already a high-tier expert pilot that extensively developed his affinity for life after piloting living mechs and the Everchanger specifically for many years.

The Carmine mech pilots that the Devosans were prepping for the Arboreal Project did not possess such qualifications.

"Luckily, this problem isn't as insurmountable as before."

The Red Collective had released a bunch of auxiliary qi cultivation methods that enabled mech pilots as well as Carmine mech pilots to develop a basic affinity for a specific E energy attribute.

The Devosans already looked into requiring their future Carmine mech pilots to practice the auxiliary qi cultivation method that enabled them to develop a closer affinity for wood.

In fact, the Terrans employed large amounts of cultivation scientists themselves. Master Laila had already shared to Ves that they would attempt to develop their own auxiliary qi cultivation method that should enable the Carmine mech pilots to raise all of the useful criteria that could allow them to make better use of Woodsap mechs.

The rising trend of systematic cultivation had not replaced mech piloting as many mech insiders had feared.

Instead, the many benefits introduced by systematic cultivation ended up complementing mech pilots!

If cultivation remained taboo like before, then Ves and the Devosans would have very little choice but to resort to much more dangerous and invasive alternatives.

For example, when Ves initially came up with the concept of Elemental Carmine mechs, he assumed that every Carmine mech pilot that wanted to pilot these powerful machines had to transform their bodies and replace their blood with an alternative substance that was laced with fire, water, earth, wood or metal hyper particles!

Such transformations were highly invasive and doubtlessly produced a lot of undesirable side effects.

Ves found it troubling to a candidate to trade his humanity for an opportunity to pilot a stronger and more special Elemental Carmine mech.

Fortunately, the rise of the Red Collective had thoroughly reformed red humanity's stance towards systematic cultivation. The RC completely tore down the taboo towards this previously controversial subject and modernized it so that it turned into an upright scientific discipline!

As his armored shuttle returned to Diandi Base, Ves kept thinking about the many relationships that connected the Woodsap mechs, the Carmine mech pilots, Gaia and systematic cultivation together.

Each of them were fairly strong by themselves, but they could produce vastly superior results by combining their strengths!

"Is this what I should think about when designing the other four Elemental Carmine mechs?"

The Arboreal Project was not the only Elemental Carmine mech design that Ves wanted to work on in the foreseeable future.

He had also made a promise to the Hunting Association to design a so-called Mergewater mech for them. The Hunters didn't seem to be in as much of a hurry as the Terrans, so the preparations for this initiative had not progressed as much.

That should change in the near future. Demand for Carmine mechs was universal among humans.

Hunters were humans as well.

There were plenty of exobeasts and mutated beasts in the wild that Hunters loved to hunt, but could not do so because their infantry-grade armaments simply couldn't inflict enough damage to save them from getting trampled by their angry prey!

Ves had already received reports about a number of Hunters adopting the Yellow Jackets.

The reason why their adoption rate was not higher was because the Yellow Jacket model was not a suitable mech for hunting.

Mergewater mechs promised to be completely different. Not only would he design it to excel in hunting down powerful exobeasts, but they would also grant Hunters a war machine that could grow by assimilating the remains of their organic foes!

To Ves, Mergewater mechs combined the strengths of the Evolution Witch and the Huntsman in a single mech model.

This comparison alone should be enough to persuade a lot of Hunters into trying out his Mergewater mechs!

"It will take more time, though." Ves frowned.

He had a good feeling that he wouldn't be able to entrust the design of his first Mergewater mech from any of the mech designers affiliated with the Hunting Association.

Ves might have to take the lead on this project and figure out all of the complicated mechanisms that made his Mergewater mechs so promising.

"That will squeeze my time even further."

He was glad that he was not short of interesting and meaningful work, but he felt as if he hardly enjoyed any free time anymore.

As Ves wondered how he could optimize his work schedule, he just received an important notification.

"The detachment from the expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance has just entered the New Constantinople System. Saint Davia Stark, the Amaranto Mark III and the remains of the Riot Mark III will soon arrive at Diandi Base."

Ves set aside all of his thoughts and prepared for the arrival of the ace pilot and mechs.

When a large transport touched down on a designated landing zone, the main hatch slowly slid open to reveal two completely different machines.

The Amaranto Mark III virtually suffered no damage during the last battle and looked more resplendent than ever.

Now that Saint Davia Stark had broken through, she could finally pull her weight and pilot her supremely powerful ace marksman mech to the fullest!

In contrast, the Riot Mark III or what was left of him was in complete shambles. Limbs had been severed. The torso section was almost severed in half. Melted and deformed plating and structural components dominated the front side.

Yet despite ejecting his cockpit and suffering catastrophic damage on a level that would cause most people to dismiss any thought about restoring an old wreck when it was easier to build a new machine from scratch, the Riot Mark II stubbornly managed to cling to life!

His spiritual foundation had suffered severe damage, but as long as he was not outright dead, he could still be saved as far as Ves was concerned!

Chapter 6728: D-Arm Temptations

The Amaranto Mark III had reached her strongest state since her creation.

Even if Saint Davia Stark did not actively resonate with her powerful machine, her passive willpower still resonated with the recently updated mech on automatic basis!

Ves could feel how Saint Stark had weaponized the power of light.

While her domain was largely centered around the concept of vengeance, she did not pursue any simple grievances.

She instead carried herself with the bearing of an adjudicator who did her job not because she liked to kill powerful enemies, but because she felt a responsibility to deliver retribution to those that carried out injustices against the people!

This was why Saint Stark was able to retain a greater semblance of control and rationality over herself. She did not lose her sense of nobility and justice. The light that had become her favored element shone so harshly that it not only vaporized her enemies, but also put her under her own spotlight.

She could never bring herself to perpetuate the injustices committed by her targets!

If one day a future came to pass where she became no different from the cruel leaders who made the lessers suffer, then Saint Stark would not hesitate to end her own life lest she made the people she protected further!

This was a matter to consider more deeply in the future. For now, the Amarnanto Mark III could use a light amount of servicing as well as a configuration change. The machine was optimized for use by Venerable Stark rather than Saint Stark.

It shouldn't take too long to make the necessary modifications and recalibrate the Amaranto Mark III, but it would be a time consuming process where he and his wife would remain busy for a few days.

The Amaranto Mark III slowly powered down. Though the living mech always remained active, lowering the activity of her power reactor minimized the chance of accidents.

Also, it made the mech technicians and other crew members a lot less nervous to work around the powerful machine.

"Stark." Ves greeted the new ace pilot.

Just as expected, Saint Stark couldn't help but point her harsh light to Ves. Her Saint Kingdom had lost a lot of its power and potency after she left her cockpit, but she was still able to alter the rules in a short area around her physical body.

Ves could feel Saint Stark judging him. Her expression told him that whatever results she expected to attain, she did not expect them to be so confusing!

"Do you know how rude it is for you to judge my soul or weigh my karma or whatever?" Ves spoke.

Saint Stark showed no remorse. "I am only continuing to observe whether you are still a leader who is worth following. So far, I have sensed both extreme merit and extreme punishment inside of you. I... cannot judge whether one is more powerful than the other, but the way the two mix and counterbalance each other is... I have never witnessed such a phenomenon in the past."

Ves pressed his hands in his pant pockets and smiled in a conceited fashion. "You are not ready yet to judge me. Besides, I am not afraid of you. I know what I am fighting for. My hands may not be clean anymore, but you can trust that I am doing everything I can to help red humanity survive the current storm. I have a stake in the survival of my people as well, you know. Rather than using your fancy new Saint Kingdom to judge your fellow human, you should save up your energy and direct your hostility towards the hostile aliens who unquestionably demand your retribution."

His words sunk into Saint Stark's thick skull. Her breakthrough and drastic increase in strength had significantly altered her mentality.

Was it for the better? That remained to be seen, but Ves wanted to teach the overconfident ace pilot a lesson in order to rein in her overbearing behavior.

The ace pilot closed her eyes and remained still for a moment. She exhaled and deliberately tried to relax her posture. The harsh and judgemental light of her domain grew softer and duller.

This was a good development. Saint Stark demonstrated a capacity to withdraw her aggression and focus during times when it was not necessary for her to assume a combative posture.

She should learn to conserve her power and save it for their real enemies. All forms of human infighting had to take a backseat against the threat of total extinction at the hands of the native aliens.

Now that the posturing phase was over, the two could finally begin to talk about actual useful topics.

Ves first quizzed Saint Stark about her short but highly impactful performance at the start of the final battle of Viola Magnifica.

In the meantime, automated elevators and other systems slowly brought the Amaranto Mark III and the remains of the Riot Mark II to an underground workshop chamber.

High-powered scanners were already at work trying to map out the current physical parameters of the two drastically different machines.

The Amaranto Mark III had become even stronger than when she exited the workshop not too long ago. The powerful marksman mech had endured a potent wave of willpower baptism. This caused the machine's performance to increase further past what her actual parts should be capable of producing.

It was all fascinating, but of limited use to Ves. He could not reproduce these parts because he lacked the means to replicate willpower baptism. That remained an exclusive ability to willpower cultivators for the time being.

As for the Riot Mark II...

"Venerable Rosa Orfan is lucky that enough of the torso remains intact for her battle partner to cling to life." He said as he approached the pile of loose debris. "Even so, it is rather sad to see one of my works reduced to such a state. While I will refrain from performing a complete rebuild and reconstruction of this expert mech until our Design Department has completed the Riot Mark III Project, I can at least spend half a day to quickly weld the relatively intact pieces together again. That should relieve the living mech's suffering and make it more bearable for him to survive the months it takes for us to be ready to upgrade him to a much greater state."

"Orfan will be happy." Saint Stark smiled. "She has shown admirable courage and valor in the last battle. She cares much about the Riot, as she considers him the best

living mech that she has ever piloted. It would be a great loss to her if he ends up beyond salvaging."

"Don't worry. When we complete the Mark III iteration of the Riot, we will make sure to upgrade him to a seventh generation living mech. One of the new features of this generation is the installation of a hyper keystone. This will ensure that even if the mech is destroyed beyond recovery, a seed of the living mech will still be preserved by the keystone. I originally designed this to give Carmine mech pilots a chance to preserve their ability to pilot a mech, but it holds value to those who have not formed a Blood Pact with their machines."

The mention of a new generation of living mechs clearly intrigued the older woman.

"Given that my Amaranto Mark III lacks this hyper keystone, she should still be a product of the previous generation, I assume."

"That is correct, Stark. Don't worry. Since we are already scheduled to reconfigure your machine, I will take the time to upgrade her into a seventh generation living mech. It shouldn't take much time to install a larger and more powerful version of a hyper keystone. As for the other characteristic of the seventh generation, its application will slightly be different for an ace pilot as yourself."

"How so, sir?"

"I originally chose to embed an auxiliary qi cultivation method to help the mech pilot develop his talents in a useful area, but this is redundant for you. However, I can still allow this new feature to benefit your companion spirit. Can you present her to me for a moment? I need to take a good look at your Witch Crow in order to match her with the right auxiliary qi cultivation method. I may need to develop one myself if it is too obscure."

"Chip chip!"

Vail appeared to be in a good mood as the ominous crow made an appearance.

She served as another means for Saint Stark to control her darker thoughts and impulses. By shunting them over to her Witch Crow, Saint Stark was better able to maintain her stability.

The contrast between Saint Stark and her rapidly grown companion spirit was strong. The two looked like they could not possibly be the same person!

Ves briefly smirked. "I see. Curses, huh? I am pretty familiar with those. I think I know how to implement that in your expert mech. There is an important discussion we need to talk, and I prefer to hold it before Gloriana comes down and dominates the conversation."

He activated a projection that showed a few edited clips of the Everchanger in action.

What came into prominence was the expert mech's new mech scimitar. It was a weapon that exuded a lot of menace. Anyone who had gotten physically close to this new blade clearly felt that they were being stared at with great hostility!

However, as much as the D-arm had driven Joshua in a corner that he saw no other choice but to make a few pacts, its power when it was able to unleash its full potential was massive!

Saint Stark quickly figured out what Ves intended to do after showing her this example.

She did not reject the idea entirely, but...

"This transformation clearly comes with peril, or else Joshua wouldn't have to struggle for so long to wrangle his new scimitar. I am not certain it is wise to add greater instability to the weapon that I rely on to launch critical shots from afar."

She made a good point. Ves really wanted to give the ace marksman mech a more powerful edge, and equipping it with a D-arm that was tailored for her use could increase her firepower even further!

Saint Stark did not allow herself to get obsessed by this offer. "I fear the Amaranto Mark III cannot keep up. She can only accumulate so many energies before hitting an upper limit. Adding in a transformed and much more powerful firearm will not change that limit."

"Hmm, you have made a good point. I will look into possibilities to raise her upper limit, but without access to super-class materials, it will be difficult."

There was still plenty of time to conduct research and collect her own data. That would determine whether it was feasible for him to go through with his plan to add a D-arm to the Amaranto Mark III's loadout.

As for the Riot... for whatever reason, he considered the crippled machine an ideal candidate for the development of her first true D-mech!

Ves felt annoyed that Rosa Orfen had been evacuated to a well-equipped hospital and was undergoing intensive treatments.

That meant that she remained out of contact and not in the right mind for the entire duration of her stay.

He needed to share his ambitious plans for the Riot mark III to her and win her approval to realize his vision for a D-mech!

Alas, since Rosa Orfan was still stuck in recovery, Ves would shelve the plan for the time being and deal with more urgent affairs.

"Given what I know about Orfan, she will yearn for greater power after suffering such a devastating defeat at the hands of a lesser phase lord." Saint Stark said. "She should welcome a solution to make the Riot Mark III as threatening as the current Everchanger if not more."

"Mhmm. You make a good point. High-ranking mech pilots are always good at recovering after getting defeated. So long as they survive, their drive for greater power will become much stronger than before."

Chapter 6729: Preparing for First-Class Combat

Now that the Amaranto Mark III had returned to their makers, she received a quick but significant overhaul.

Gloriana already prepared the plans to upgrade her to a fully fledged first-class ace mech during the design process of the current iteration. Her memories of making these

preparations were still fresh, so she was able to implement many of the changes right away.

Ves meanwhile worked towards upgrading the Amaranto to a seventh generation living mech. He also made a few tweaks here and there based on his own feelings and judgment.

It did not take too long to complete upgrades due to all of the prior preparations they made. The most significant upgrade by far was the replacement of the power reactor.

Swapping out the severely underpowered second-class hyper power reactor for a genuine high-end Terran-developed hyper power reactor instantly elevated the performance of the Amaranto Mark III!

"This is a big change, Stark." Ves said with a satisfied expression as he studied the telemetry of the newly installed power reactor after its first activation. "The new power reactor won't be able to increase the maximum charge limit of your Instrument of Vengeance, but it should enable you to charge up your marksman rifle considerably faster than before. In other words, as long as you can aim fast enough, your firing rate should easily triple under the right circumstances. You can eliminate more cannon fodder with accurate strikes, or take down a lesser phase lord much faster than usual. Of course, you can charge your weapon even faster if you draw power directly from a warship like the Torturous Scream."

The ace pilot understood quite well what an advantage this represented. Being able to increase her firing rate would definitely allow her to raise her impact on the battlefield. She could swing entire battles around by eliminating key targets faster than before.

However, she did not look entirely satisfied with the gains.

"What about heat buildup?" She asked.

"There's no improvement on that front." Ves admitted. "We have already incorporated excellent heatsinks into the Amaranto, but they are not the best. It would be great if we can get our hands on dimensional heatsinks. They basically allow you to toss heat energy into a different dimension, thereby allowing you to get rid of the problem with the fewest possible issues. The problem is that our clan does not have access to the tech that allows us to reproduce them. We can only purchase them from first-class

powers, but each of them are reserving the limited amount of dimensional heatsinks for their own high-ranking mechs."

"I see. That is... disappointing to hear."

"I have already issued a standing order to snap up any dimensional heatsink that becomes available for sale or exchange. I don't expect to be able to purchase one in the short term. The more red humanity is driven to a corner, the less resources these groups have access to that allow them to produce more dimensional heatsinks."

Saint Stark frowned. The new power reactor would roughly allow the Amaranto Mark III to increase her firing rate by at least 3 times.

That also meant that the Amaranto Mark III would generate heat 3 times faster as well!

In fact, the problem was more severe than that because the slow firing rate of the original Amaranto Mark III meant that the machine had plenty of time to distribute and dissipate all of the heat buildup.

If the Amaranto Mark III Version 2 began to fire her Instrument of Vengeance at a very fast pace, then the machine wouldn't be giving itself enough time to cool down between shots!

"How should I handle the heat problem, then?" Davia Stark asked.

"You rely on an external heatsink. Any big piece of matter will do" Ves replied. "For example, if you enter one of the 4 sniper bunkers of the Torturous Scream, numerous mechanisms will attach to your mech frame and act as heat pipes that will drain the excess heat building from your Amaranto in a highly effective manner. The entire alien battleship is more than happy to serve as your ace mech's heatsink."

"What about the Bastion? Can the Amaranto Mark III still be mounted behind her back?"

"Yup, though it is less effective than usual due to potential interferences from hyper materials. I do not recommend you rely on the Bastion to serve as an aiming platform,

a defensive bulwark and a heatsink. However, your Amaranto will still be fine if you try it out anyway."

"Can asteroids serve as makeshift heatsinks?"

"Not always. You need to scan the asteroids and make sure it can withstand the enormous influx of heat. If the asteroid composition is too poor, then the surface will melt far sooner than you find convenient. The heat generated by the current version of the Amaranto is formidable."

This was an annoying but understanding restriction. There was no easy way to increase the Amaranto's ability to deal with heat.

Ves changed to another topic. "You asked me several times earlier whether it is possible to raise the maximum charge limit of your Instrument of Vengeance. We have already employed every trick that we could find to maximize the single-shot output of your Instrument of Vengeance. There is only one realistic way to make it qualitatively stronger, which is to let me convert your weapon into a D-arm."

The temptation was strong. Saint Davia Stark wanted to pit herself against the toughest and most horrible enemies.

Being able to wield a weapon that carried a much greater punch than usual should definitely catch the attention of both allies and enemies!

Yet... she did not exactly gain the best vibe out of the Bitter Scimitar when she had a chance of getting close enough to it. The Everchanger struggled for quite a while until the expert mech somehow managed to stop his D-arm from causing any further trouble.

"I cannot accept the notion of surrendering too much control." Saint Davia Stark said. "If transforming the Instrument of Vengeance into a D-arm will generate years worth of friction, then I would rather take my chances off your existing technologies. All of your works are reliable and helpful enough to help us fight better. Introducing a disruptive element that I cannot fully control may lead to fumbles during a critical moment in the future. I do not wish for others to question my reliability."

"These are... reasonable arguments. Very well, if that is your wish, then I shall refrain from offering this option to you in the future. If you change your mind, you can come back to me anytime and we can discuss solutions."

Though Ves was disappointed that Saint Stark did not feel tempted to convert the Instrument of Vengeance into a D-arm, perhaps it was for the best.

He would have plenty of time to improve his Demoncasting abilities.

When the new saint started to fight against enough overwhelming phase lords and other formidable alien units, she should definitely develop a stronger urge to upgrade the firepower of her Amaranto Mark III!

Ves would hopefully have a more mature solution prepared for her. The Amaranto Mark III already served as an extremely powerful deterrent against any enemies who sought to assassinate him or disrupt large swathes of alien space.

The two soon changed topics. They chatted about various aspects related to the Amaranto Mark III and other Larkinson mechs.

"After we are done with upgrading the Amaranto Mark III, you have a choice on what to do next." Ves said. "As an ace pilot, our clan will not impose any unnecessary restrictions on what you are allowed to do. Well, you are a guest pilot anyway, so you are not fully subject to our rules. Have you already thought about how you want to spend your next months? There are many different battlefronts that could use the help of a deadly ace marksman mech."

Saint Stark had indeed put a lot of thought behind this consequential decision.

"I prefer to follow Saint Tusa's example and rotate among the frontlines. I would like to fight alongside him and his Dark Zephyr Mark III as well, but I would also like to explore other pairings."

Ves nodded. "Our clan does not have too many objections about your plan. We want to remind you that when our first-class mech force and accompanying warships are ready for action, we would vastly prefer it if you come back to us. We can fight as an independent troop and strike at our own targets. Your Amaranto Mark III will also

enjoy the best fighting conditions by occupying one of the sniper bunkers of our flagship."

"I am not opposed to returning to your side, but I would prefer it if my Instrument of Vengeance does not remain idle for a long time. We must fight against the native aliens in a proactive manner if we want to drive them back."

In other words, the fleet better be good at picking fights, or else Saint Davia Stark and other like-minded ace pilots might bail and fight elsewhere!

"What do you think about gathering all of the ace pilots of the Larkinson Clan together in a single fleet and operating as a single powerful first-class strike force?" Ves proposed. "We'll combine the excellent firepower of the Torturous Scream with the speed of the Dark Zephyr Mark III, the purple conflagrations of the Promethea Mark II, the Knights and Barons of the Minerva Mark II, the razor-sharp blade of the First Sword Mark III and finally the ultra-long-range dominance of your Amaranto Mark III. What do you think we can accomplish with this combination?"

"You missed the Lionheart."

"I did. Saint General Ark Larkinson doesn't get along with Saint Commander Casella Ingvar. Besides, my uncle is better suited to lead his own unit. He needs to be the brightest presence on the battlefield in order to fight at his best. He will be competing far too much for attention if he joins our party."

"Hm, you are right, sir. I would say that the lineup that you have mentioned earlier sounds extremely impressive to me. I cannot imagine how so many ace pilots with living ace mechs can accomplish on the battlefield. I have a strong suspicion that if we were able to field so many ace mechs, we would have been able to crush the native aliens that successfully conquered the Viola Magnifica System."

Ves smiled. "That goes without saying. If we are truly able to amass so much concentration of high-end combat strength, then it is a waste of time for us to linger in the Middle Zones. We will have to participate in the much more intensive fights in the Upper Zones. The native aliens are bringing out their best assets in those battlegrounds. Ace pilot or not, you all need to curb your arrogance, because the native aliens have learned enough about how we operate to develop many tricks and counters."

The stronger his clan become, the more he set his sights on the battles that would truly decide the future course of red humanity.

He refused to let his fate be dictated by the performance of third parties. The Larkinsons needed to participate and do whatever was necessary to win the battles that red humanity could not afford to lose!

"However, it would take way longer for the Torturous Scream to get delivered to New Constantinople to form such an elite force.

They still needed to complete the upgrade projects for the Minerva Mark II, the First Sword Mark III and the Promethea Mark III!

All of that would take a lot of time. Ves would prefer it if his Premier Branch could start fighting only when it had amassed at least 5 ace mechs, but if the Red Tide Offensive continues to make drastic gains, then the Larkinsons may have to make do with just 2 or maybe 3 ace mechs.

Chapter 6730: The Curse Master

Ves and Gloriana completed their overhaul of the Larkinson Clan's only ace marksman mech.

The Amaranto Mark III Revision 2 encapsulated the concept of extreme firepower much better than before.

Although the Larkinson Clan regrettably lacked the super-class materials to further enhance the lethality of the Instrument of Vengeance, her practicality and damage output over time had drastically improved.

No longer was the Amaranto forced to cycle her oversized luminar crystal rifle and wait for it to charge up to full capacity before firing a shot at maximum power.

She was able to drastically increase her firing rate while sacrificing nothing aside from depleting her energy reserves faster and building up a huge amount of heat!

These were serious problems to be sure, but they were manageable. Saint Stark did not have to fire her weapon at its fastest rate.

She could exercise trigger discipline and wait until the situation had gone critical before furiously launching as many shots as possible in a very short time interval.

Another way to deal with the energy and heat problems was to anchor the Amaranto Mark III to a compatible warship such as the soon-to-be-overhauled Torturous Scream. The shipwrights designed the sniper bunkers in such a way that they offered maximum accommodation to high-ranking mechs.

As far as Ves was concerned, ranged powerhouses such as the Amaranto Mark III and the upcoming Promethea Mark II were more valuable than any warship primary gun battery!

The latter may possess much more firepower according to the data, but the resonance-empowered attacks launched by ace mechs could not be judged according to common sense!

Ves therefore had a strong incentive to make the Amaranto Mark III as strong as feasibly possible.

This was why he found it regretful that Saint Davia Stark denied the offer to convert the Instrument of Vengeance into a D-arm. Letting the luminar crystal rifle mutate into a much stronger and more formidable form through the process of Demoncasting should have turned the Amaranto Mark III into a much more powerful threat!

However, as Joshua's example already showed, there were definite downsides to wielding a D-arm.

Perhaps Saint Stark would have been able to suppress the uppity behavior of a D-arm by virtue of being an ace pilot with much stronger willpower than an expert pilot, but as long as the troublesome weapon grew stronger by absorbing lots of feedback, it would definitely pose a greater problem in the future!

This instance taught Ves that not every ace pilot blindly pursued power regardless of the cost. He needed to be more mindful of which high-ranking mech pilot was willing to make use of D-arms in order to give them an edge in combat.

He already harbored ambitions to convert the Riot Mark III into a D-mech, but he needed to approach it in a thoughtful manner.

One of the biggest problems related to doing this was to preserve the existing personality of the mech to the greatest possible extent. Ves was already certain that Venerable Orfan would reject the option if it entailed outright killing and replacing her existing battle partner!

Fortunately, Ves still had plenty of time to think on how to handle this sensitive subject. It would take a few weeks for Venerable Orfan to recover to the point where she could talk and move around again. Ves and Gloriana also needed to complete the Minerva Mark III Project before they could tackle the Riot Mark III Project.

It would have been simpler for Ves if he Demoncasted a mech from scratch, but that was not an option for his older and more established living mechs. He truly needed to work on a solution if he wanted to introduce Demoncasting to a whole mech frame instead of just a module or an external piece of equipment.

In any case, once Ves and Gloriana carefully completed the Amaranto Mark III Rev 2, they decided to move out into space and visit the nearest asteroid belt in order to test the performance of this much-anticipated machine.

The pair currently stood behind the workstations of the main mech labs of the Tarrasque.

Naturally, Jovie Armalon and Vector Loban also joined the party. They voluntarily assisted with the data collection and analysis effort and occupied their own workstations.

"The Amaranto has deployed into space."

"The acceleration rate of the Amaranto has improved by a considerable extent."

"This is impressive! She is able to move at full acceleration, maintain her azure energy shield at its maximum strength, keep her active sensor systems at full power while only slightly reducing the new maximum charge rate of her Instrument of Vengeance."

"Heat levels are rising faster than the Amaranto's previous baseline, but they are less than calculated."

"Saint Stark's resonance strength has grown by a noticeable extent. She is able to resonate more effectively with HeatMate, thereby increasing the heat dissipation rate of the Amaranto."

"Look at her shots! Her full-powered light beams are tearing apart the asteroid target!"

Back when Saint Stark initially broke through, the Amaranto Mark III became affected by forced resonance.

This was usually considered a rare moment for everyone to witness how much stronger the ace pilot became after he or she piloted a proper ace mech for a couple of years.

The performance of an ace pilot and a mech in a forced resonance state was never supposed to represent their baseline performance.

Just as expected, the power behind every full-powered attack blessed by the Phase King was indeed noticeably lower than the attacks that felled a lesser phase lord from an enormous distance.

However, the increase in firing rate more than made up for this lacking parameter!

Being able to charge up her rifle and pull the trigger at least 3 times faster than normal amplified the lethality of the Amaranto Mark III so much that she was able to destroy an asteroid significantly faster than before!

"Welcome to the world of true first-class mechs." Jovy said with a smile. "First-class ace mechs are considered the strongest individual fighting assets after god mechs and dreadnoughts depending on the definition that you use. That doesn't necessarily mean that the Amaranto Mark III has reached her limit. She has not. The Terran power reactor that you have opted to install into your masterwork mech is a fine product, but it cannot compete against the more advanced power reactors especially developed for ace mechs by our in-house R&D teams."

"Those power reactors are also a lot more difficult to obtain." Ves said. "Last I inquired, the RA is currently suffering a shortage of your top-tier power reactors. The waiting list was 6 months long and I am sure that it has grown worse in the present day. I am fine with using a more modest Terran power reactor as long as it is reliable enough."

One of the other reasons why he and Gloriana chose to make use of a less complex model was because it was more 'standardized'.

The reliability of the power reactor model was high as the Terrans already employed it in numerous other recently produced or updated ace mechs.

The power reactor also offered greater room for customization. This was important because Gloriana wanted to convert as much of the reactor design to archetech as possible.

It would have been considerably more troublesome to do this on a more complex and high-end reactor model like the ones favored by the mechers.

"We need to conduct one more test if possible." Gloriana announced shortly after the Amaranto Mark III Rev 2 made short work of an asteroid. "Ves, you told me that part of the upgrade to a seventh generation living mech entails greater support for the integration of a companion spirit. Is it possible to show this difference?"

Ves shook his head. "Not really. Too little time has passed. One of the new features of seventh generation living mechs is the optional teaching and guidance on how to practice auxiliary qi cultivation methods. For companion spirits, it is possible to guide them into practicing and mastering more serious qi cultivation methods."

"What cultivation method did you add to the Amaranto?"

"I composed the Larkinson Curse Master Qi Cultivation Method as a way for practitioners to specialize in casting curses onto distant opponents. I based it on my own knowledge of curses and qi cultivation methods, but since I was in a rush, its initial application is relatively basic for the time being. This should be a good introduction for Vail as the companion spirit has a lot of power but lacks refinement."

As far as Ves was concerned, it was enough to transfer his relatively basic but solid foundation on curses to Vail. The companion spirit only needed to know the basic theories before she could branch out and develop herself by improving her current arsenal of curses or inventing new ones that debilitated enemies in more interesting ways.

Even though the improvements from this design feature had yet to bear fruit, Ves still instructed Gloriana to apply her companion spirit's powers against a target dummy.

The Tarrasque launched a disposable bot that was roughly the size of a corvette out into space. The construct served no other purpose than serving as a pretty resilient target dummy, so it had been piled up with lots of thick and sturdy salvaged transphasic alien warship hull plating.

Ves did not expect to recycle any of the valuable materials, but he figured that it was worthwhile to destroy the bot in exchange for obtaining detailed data on the Amaranto's current performance.

"Start."

Just like before, the Amaranto glowed brightly as her Instrument of Vengeance charged up at a fairly rapid pace.

Saint Stark did not need to put any special effort to aim her weapon at a static target that was also not too far away.

Once she pulled the trigger, an extremely bright and penetrating light beam shot out from her weapon's muzzle and almost seemed to core right through the target dummy!

Despite the incredible thickness of the frontal armor, the attack easily punched through multiple layers of transphasic armor plating.

"Again. Target a different section. I don't want you to eliminate the bot straight away."

It only took a relatively short amount of time before the Amaranto was ready to fire another full-powered shot!

This time, the Amaranto left a nearly identical hole in the armor layers. The attack managed to punch a little deeper, but the differences were still relatively minor.

"Keep firing according to the previous parameters. Try to spread your shots as much as possible."

The corvette-sized target dummy kept acquiring new holes in its structure. At first, the damage inflicted by the attacks were relatively stable, but as the condition of the large bot worsened, the damage inflicted by the resonance-empowered light beam attacks became worse!

Part of it was because the Amaranto had already vaporized a lot of armor plating and could only attack the softer internal structure of the bot.

However, Ves already controlled for these changes. The data still showed that the Amaranto inflicted increasingly more damage. It was as if her light beams had become 10, 20 or even 30 percent more powerful!

As the bot retained only 25 percent of its original integrity, the final resonance-empowered light beam attack abruptly caused the construct to suffer a critical failure and fall apart!

"The target is dead." Saint Davia Stark coolly reported. "My companion spirit could feel that the Execution Curse applied on it had reached a critical level. In the last attack, she had the option to 'detonate' the curse, for a lack of a better word. This turned my damaging shot into a killing shot."

"Interesting."

If Vail was able to replicate these effects onto larger and more powerful targets such as alien battleships and phase lords, then the Amaranto would become the perfect executioner!

No priority enemy would be able to flee from her sight! All of the Amaranto's attacks would be augmented by a curse that drastically compounded the damage suffered by targets that had already sustained heavy injuries!