

The Mech 6051

Chapter 6051 Gloriana the Professor

"Meow~"

"Miaow~"

Lucky and Clixie laid on the foot on the large bed and cuddled against each other while beginning to fall into slumber.

Ves and Gloriana had already changed into their pajamas and slipped into their beds.

Although both of them had augmented so much that they could skip some of their sleeping cycles in order to spend more time at work, neither of the two discounted the value of sleep.

At most, the two shortened their rest times by a few hours in order to squeeze in a bit more work every day.

Both of them were swamped with work and responsibilities.

Gloriana not only had to lead the Design Department, but also allocate a lot of time to research how to adapt archetech to the Amaranto Mark III and Riot Mark III designs.

Ves had to stay on top of the developments of the Larkinson Clan and leave enough time for his studies and mech design work. He was having a particularly hard time in figuring out how to convert the weapons of the Amaranto Mark III into worthy Ultimate Modules.

He hadn't even started to start or resume the next batch of commercial mech design projects!

Though he constantly felt he was short on time, Ves did not worry too much about his design obligations. He knew he could trust his wife to complete most of the design work of the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan. As long as he did a good job in the areas he was responsible for, his wife and other collaborators would be able to finish the rest.

Right now, he had a different topic in mind.

"Now that you have become a Senior Mech Designer, you are expected to take on a teaching position. Have you decided where you want to teach?"

"I have." Gloriana said. "It is not a choice that you expect. You must be thinking that I am considering whether to teach at a well-respected first-class university such as the Eden Institute of Business & Technology, correct? There is certainly a large amount of convenience if I teach classes at the same employer as you. The commute is also short enough."

Ves smiled. "Actually, I think you are too proud of yourself to work at the same school as me. You must have received a lot of invitations from large and renowned institutions. Even if you aren't as prominent as me, you are still a qualified masterwork mech designer in your own right. Your expertise in archetech and ability to design a complete archemach has also made you into an authority in this exotic field. I think that there are definitely a bunch of mech design universities out there that want you to share your insights to their students."

Left unsaid was that a lot of groups also had a strong incentive to befriend Gloriana in an attempt to get through Ves.

Whether his wife was aware of that fact, she did not mention it. "Did you know that the Antus Polytechnic University extended an invitation to me to teach a course on mech fabrication?"

"That's nice."

"Is that all you can say? This is the APU we are talking about! It is the most reputable technical university of the Dostoevsky Ancient Clan! Compared to other Terrans, the Dostoevskys have always invested a large amount of resources into becoming one of the premier leaders in the art and science sectors. The APU employs a large number of renowned Master Mech Designers who are all celebrated in the Terran mech industry."

"Oh. I remember now. I think I read about them a year ago or so." Ves belatedly said. "You shouldn't put much stock in the reputation of educational institutions. A lot of universities have taken over the brands of the original ones based in the old galaxy. They are so rigid and old-fashioned that most of their professors are famed for making contributions decades ago during the Age of Mechs."

"That is not necessarily an argument against them, Ves."

"You might not necessarily fit into these highly traditional and inflexible schools, Gloriana. There are a lot of universities that have only been founded a few years ago, but are able to rise up rapidly due to the brilliance of the professors who have made many brand-new innovations in the current age. The Eden Institute used to be relatively middling, but has now become the premier school in the Terran Alliance because of my presence."

His wife smiled but continued to boast about the invitations she received.

"The Antus Polytechnic University is not the only top school that has reached out to me. The Rubarthans have offered considerably more generous terms for me to teach remote classes at their respected institutions. The most notable offer comes from the Prince Titus Mech Design University. It hires just as many reputable and accomplished Master Mech Designers as the APU, but the Rubarthan school is more generous about allowing me to approach them and learn from them. Compared to the Terrans, the Rubarthans are relatively more welcoming to foreigners and outsiders, but only if they are competent."

Ves did hear a bit more about the PTMDU. Named after the 476th Prince of the Rubarthan Imperial Household, it was the premier workplace of the Master Mech Designers who cooperated closely with the prominent Smokestack Prince.

The invitation from the PTMDU was a clear attempt by the Smokestack Principality to forge a connection with Ves. The Terrans already managed to lay their claim early through the Eden Institute, so the Rubarthans probably felt they needed to regain parity by pouncing on this opportunity.

It would be embarrassing for the Rubarthans if Gloriana opted to accept a job offer at another Terran institution!

"So which ones did you decide to work for?" Ves curiously asked.

"Neither. Instead of teaching at one of these prestigious first-class institutions, I decided to go closer to home. After much thought and discussion with my mother Constance, I concluded that it is better if I start teaching at the Wodin Technical University that is located on the New Scimitar IV."

Ves looked shocked! He had a hard time believing that Gloriana willingly declined the opportunity to teach excellent Terran or Rubarthan mech design students.

Hardly any mech designer had an opportunity to work for the APU or PTMDU. Even if Gloriana rejected them in favor of a less prestigious but more generous first-class university, then Ves had little reason to complain.

However, instead of selecting the offers that gave her the option to build relationships with renowned and highly competent first-class Master Mech Designers, she gave up this opportunity in favor of going back to her roots!

"Far be it for me to criticize your choice, but can't you do better than the Hexers?"

"What is that supposed to mean, Ves?!"

"Erm, there is nothing wrong with the Hexer people! It is just that they are all second-raters. Now that you are becoming a first-class mech designer and starting to tackle design projects that incorporate a lot of high technologies, don't you think it is a better idea to work at those first-class schools instead?"

His wife sighed and shifted her position on the bed. "Your argument is not wrong, but... ever since I became the director of the Design Department, I understood the appeal of being in charge of an important organization. I can do much more to strengthen the Larkinson Clan now that I can exercise the authority of my new position. I feel much more useful than before. If I follow your advice and work by remote at those first-class universities, then I can already determine that none of the Masters over there will regard me as their equal. I will go back to being a student who is primarily occupied with learning as opposed to knowledge sharing."

She sounded a bit bitter about such outcomes. It appeared that she recognized that the main reason why she received so many job offers was because she was married to a certain tier 3 galactic citizen.

In order to escape the trap of her own status, she chose to accept a teaching position in more familiar territory.

"I see. I think I am starting to understand where you are coming from. Have you decided to teach at the WTU because you can assume more authority over an institution run by your family?"

"Correct, but that is not the extent of why I chose to teach over there. The Wodin Technical University may only be second-class, but the students and professors are all Hexers. I used to be one of them, you know. I understand how they think and what they value. They also have immense respect for me, so I can gain their absolute obedience. Even the Master Mech Designers who teach at the WTU will give me a large amount of deference. That is much better than becoming a fish out of water if I accept those other prestigious offers."

Her motivation was clear. She wanted to become the head of a chicken rather than the tail of a phoenix.

Though Ves personally preferred to choose the latter, it was not a bad idea to go for the other option.

"You must have a goal or strategy in mind if you are willing to settle for what most people regard as an inferior choice."

He knew his wife well enough that she was an incredibly prideful woman. It was hard for her to give up the bragging rights of claiming to be a professor of a top Terran or Rubarthan university.

The alternative she chose had to give her even greater benefits in order to justify her selection.

"If my teaching position over at the WTU allows me to become a prominent leader in that community, I can influence the mech industry of an entire state." Gloriana calmly explained. "My voice will weigh heavily among thousands and thousands of Hexer mech designers. Over time, it is my ambition to take effective control over the Hexer mech industry."

"That... is quite an ambitious goal. I guess there are a few benefits to it, but the help that Hexer mech designers can provide is largely constrained by their class."

"I know, but I think there is potential to commanding this industry." She stated. "You should know that you can do the same. Your influence and popularity among the Hexers is greater than mine. Many Hexers wish to replicate your design philosophy so that they can design mechs that carry the blessing of Helena or the Superior Mother. The Odin Technical University would love to have you teach one of its courses."

"No thanks. I'm good. You know my schedule is already packed. Besides, it is irresponsible for me to reduce or suspend my teaching at the Eden Institute. I am getting to know a lot of promising mech design students over there in advance. A few of them are soon going to apply to work in our Design Department."

There was no way he was willing to teach at a Hexer institution! He would rather eat cat food rather than become a part of the Hexer educational establishment!

In any case, while Gloriana's decision certainly surprised Ves, she had clearly set her mind on pursuing her own plan. It was not a bad idea to strengthen her grip on the mech industry of a state that had already become one of the Larkinson Clan's most important trading and military partners.

Just as the couple turned off the lights and started their sleeping cycles, a chime sounded before the bedroom door slid open.

"Miaow?"

"Mama. Papa. I can't sleep. Can I sleep with you?" Marvin's pitiful voice sounded.

"Of course, my dear. Come over here. Mama will keep you safe."

The boy walked over to the bed and climbed up while holding his stuffed mech. His mother pulled him into her arms while showering his head with kisses.

Another day came to an end for the Larkinsons.

Chapter 6052 Designed For Single Fights

As more and more people heard about an upcoming alien offensive and began to prepare for a period of intense fighting, Task Force Solus was still struggling to make progress on Reticula Corein V.

Swordmaster Ketis had been waiting for a response from the strike force that she had sent to the dreaded Emperor Tree located not too far away from Chimera Base.

The small elite strike force was led by her husband Joshua. The goal was to retrieve critical samples of the calamity plant that dominated the entire region surrounding his major Solus Gas deposit.

She hoped she picked the correct time to dispatch the strike force now that there were much less hostile beasts in the entire region.

The waves of maddened exobeast attacks had abated to an extent. The continued drain on the local environment had reached an unsustainable level.

The Emperor Tree had been too ruthless in throwing all of the exobeasts that strayed into his territory against the humans that dared to set up a base near his deposit!

After so many waves of repelling exobeasts, the worst was finally over, at least for the time being.

However, the price of holding back all of those powerful and numerous beasts had not been light.

Many Stormblade Samurais had been damaged and repaired over four times in the past few weeks.

While their mech pilots learned quickly and wielded their shocking stormblades with increasing skill, the frequent pressure and the lack of proper rest was beginning to wear them down.

The pilots of the Storm Swords fared much better by virtue of piloting vastly superior quasi-first-class mechs. The powerful transphasic hyper mechs moved faster, resisted a lot more damage and most importantly killed almost every beast with just a single swing of their blades!

Only the occasional mutated beasts gave these powerful machines a bit more challenge if they fought by themselves, but as long as the Storm Swords teamed up, they could defeat damn near every monster!

That said, accidents could not be avoided. Mutated beasts came in all shapes and sizes, and a few of them developed exotic powers that occasionally bypassed the azure energy shields of Storm Swords and debilitated them directly!

Ketis always studied these encounters carefully. If the incident was serious enough, she even instructed the Swordmaidens to ship the Storm Sword in question back to the Wild Torch so that she could study the damage in person.

She noticed that her mech designs still suffered from a persistent shortcoming. No matter how well she designed her mechs and no matter how much she relied on the contributions of other mech designers, her swordsman mechs still weren't robust enough to withstand frequent and persistent high-intensity combat.

Ketis designed her mechs in a way that made her want to pilot them herself. She always sought to configure and tune her swordsman mechs to offer the best possible performance when they were in their best or almost best states.

She wanted her fellow Swordmaidens and other pilots to experience the joy of fighting the battle of their lives, to perform at their most powerful states and find the spark they needed to push past their limits.

The initial performance of most of the swordsman mechs in the field tended to match her intentions.

The Monster Slayers, the Stormblade Samurais and the Storm Swords all performed smoothly when controlled by mech pilots who knew their way around with swords.

However, after fighting multiple grinding battles against hordes of mindless exobeasts, the escalating degrees of wear and tear started to take a toll on the mech frames that had not been optimized for any form of attrition warfare.

The mech technicians serving aboard the Wild Torch and the other accompanying ships of Task Force Solus were already working as hard as possible to service and repair the hundreds of worn machines.

A part of Ketis regretted that she did not opt to bring along more ranged mechs. The Transcendent Punisher Mark III's of the Eye of Ylvaine had proven to be disproportionately effective at clearing out large amounts of packed and concentrated beast swarms.

Even though the modern heavy artillery mechs required maintenance as well after blasting their artillery cannons and other heavy cannons on a repeated basis, their designs clearly took this kind of scenario into account!

Ketis never really had much interest in examining the designs of other mechs, particularly if they fell outside of her specialization, but the relatively poor showing of her swordsman mechs caused her to make an exception.

The Transcendent Punisher Mark III design was full of charm. The mech was large, robust and contained so many redundancies that it could continue to fire its guns even if over seventy percent of its frame had been wrecked!

What Ketis found most important was how the Transcendent Punisher Mark III had been designed with a very different purpose and idea in mind.

Instead of pursuing the best possible fight in a single important fight, the heavy artillery mech was designed with years of serious usage in mind.

Even if Ketis did not specialize in this kind of machine, she could still trace many instances where Ves or another designer could have pushed performance to a higher level, but at the cost of a lot of stability and reliability.

The Transcendent Punisher Mark III's were generally well taken care of after every serious fight, but Ves accounted for the possibility that they would be fielded in imperfect conditions where regular maintenance became a distant luxury.

If that ever happened, the heavy artillery mechs were able to perform just as reliably as before. They could spend multiple days in a fight without needing to fear that they would malfunction or blow up all of a sudden.

If the Transcendent Punisher Mark III's ever began to succumb to wear and tear, it would be through repeated use over multiple years.

Even that possibility was not likely to happen as the mech technicians of the Larkinson Clan were obligated to provide at least one thorough round of servicing to every Larkinson mech.

She knew that Ves had insisted on this policy after seeing too many mechs break down or underperform due to lacking maintenance.

Mechs may be strong on the surface, but there was a huge amount of logistics and industry that created them and kept them in shape. The larger and more sophisticated the machine, the greater the maintenance demands.

This was a rule that Ketis thought she understood, but it appeared that she had underestimated the severity of constant pressure onto her mech designs.

The contrast became especially obvious when she made comparisons between her machines and that of the other Larkinson mechs.

She felt so bothered by this issue that she took the initiative to call Ves in order to explore his views on this subject.

The physical projection of Ves smiled as he gazed at the workshop environment.

A heavily wrecked and partially disassembled Monster Slayer rested nearby. The relatively older and outdated swordsman mech had been one of the worst performers during this expedition.

The lack of flight capabilities may have caused it to excel more in combat on land, but it made it a lot more difficult for the machine to escape difficult situations in a hurry.

The Larkinsons stationed at Chimera Base had learned the hard way that they needed to provide more fire support for the Monster Slayers in order to prevent them from getting surrounded and overwhelmed from multiple directions.

The vast majority of Monster Slayers did not fall because they lost in a duel against a single exobeast, but usually faltered when struck from two or three directions at the same time!

"I don't think that you have made the wrong design choices." Ves calmly expressed his opinion.

"Your swordsman mechs perform extremely well in the situations they were principally designed to operate in. Whether it is a big space battle, a duel in the mech arena or a challenging hunt on an untamed planet, your swordsman mechs have always served their pilots in ways that make it difficult to think of machines that can do a better job at their price levels. Just because they do not fare too well in the kind of attrition battles that your task force is currently embroiled in is not a fundamental flaw. You cannot expect rifleman mechs to defeat melee mechs at close range."

His arguments made a lot of sense. Ketis was not stupid enough to expect she was capable of designing mechs that could excel in any combat environment.

"I am still proud of my works, but... they are products designed for a different purpose. Maybe now that the Red War is becoming increasingly hotter, it may be better for me to re-specify the Stormblade Samurai Mark II so that it becomes more robust. Its expected performance as a second-class hyper mech is already good enough by most people's standards, so it is worth it to sacrifice peak performance to increase the design's robustness and fault tolerance. It will delay the completion of the design project by at least a month, but I do not want my customers to suffer from my mistakes."

"Again, it is not your fault, Ketis. Every mech has its strengths and weaknesses. Landbound combat has always been an area that the Larkinsons have overlooked. If we waged more ground campaigns, then you would have known about this sooner. It is actually good that I dispatched you to this star system in order to lead the operation to harvest Solus Gas. The losses that our clan has suffered here

is not light, but it could have been worse. These exobeasts are incredibly numerous, but they are pretty stupid. More mech pilots would have fallen if they fought against sapient alien beings."

Ves thought about what he heard about the upcoming offensive and slowly nodded. "I don't regard your design choices as errors, but it is true that it may be a good idea to adapt to changing market circumstances. The Stormblade Samurai and the Storm Swords are explicitly designed for the Larkinson Clan, which always invests a lot of effort into maintaining its mechs. Other customers might not be willing or able to invest as much money, resources and manpower into servicing their machines. You need to account for their behavior as well as try to play it safer. The users of your products may be able to accept slightly less performance, but they will not accept malfunctions and breakdowns that can threaten their lives at critical moments."

Ketis wished she had learned that lesson earlier. Numerous Swordmaiden mech pilots would have been able to live if that was the case. The Reticula Corein V Expedition had taught her more than enough bloody lessons.

"I will do better next time." She vowed.

"Again, it is not your fault, Ketis. Every mech has its strengths and weaknesses. Landbound combat has always been an area that the Larkinsons have overlooked. If we waged more ground campaigns, then you would have known about this sooner. It is actually good that I dispatched you to this star system in order to lead the operation to harvest Solus Gas. The losses that our clan has suffered here is not light, but it could have been worse. These exobeasts are incredibly numerous, but they are pretty stupid. More mech pilots would have fallen if they fought against sapient alien beings."

That was true. The Emperor Tree may possess the power to brainwash every exobeast in the region and send them on a suicide attack, but it could not perfectly control each creature's fighting capabilities.

Ketis' eyes grew sharper. "Speaking of the Emperor Tree, we should be regaining contact with Joshua and the rest of his strike force within a couple of hours if everything goes well. We will finally be able to retrieve samples of that calamity plant and gain a much better understanding of its direct fighting capabilities."

"We don't have to wait that long in order to track their progress."

"Did you forget that the thick concentration of Solus Gas around the Emperor Tree blocks all forms of communication, Ves? This includes E energy or connections, so not even our design spirits can maintain contact with the mechs sent inside."

This property alone made Solus Gas a lot more scary, especially if it was employed against the Larkinson Clan one day!

It practically functioned as an enhanced gas version of B-stone!

Ves smiled. "I haven't forgotten, Ketis. It is true that Solus Gas can block spiritual networks and such, but have you forgotten about masterworks? Each one we make from our own hands carries a tiny part of ourselves. If the masterworks happen to possess growth properties, then these tiny fragments can grow a little more powerful over time. I am not entirely certain about this, but I think we can exploit this intrinsic connection to form at least a tentative connection to our best products within an environment that is saturated with Solus Gas."

Ketis widened her eyes. She hadn't thought about it, but now that she contemplated this theory, it might actually work!

Chapter 6053 Remote Avatar Channeling

Ves actually did not know whether other mech designers were able to employ the same trick with masterwork mechs.

It was not as if he hung around a lot of other masterwork mech designers and inquired about this specific topic.

That caused him suspect that they probably couldn't. One of the reasons why Ves was able to do this was because he could send out his companion spirit to a masterwork mech across vast distances.

Unless other masterwork mech designers also possessed a way to project their spiritualities away from their bodies, it was probably a lot more difficult to get anything done.

Still, Gloriana never demonstrated this particular ability despite possessing a companion spirit of her own. Then again, Alexandria wouldn't have been of much use as she did not possess any strong powers or abilities that could make a difference in a massive fight.

Ketis was a different story. She managed to assist the First Sword through this method in the past. While the expert swordsman mech was not a masterwork per se, the Decapitator greatsword was one of her earliest but also most brilliant pieces!

The excellent and transcendent properties of the Decapitator was one of the main reasons why the First Sword remained competitive to this day. The lastgen expert mech would have struggled to fight against alien warships a lot more if her offensive power hadn't been so outstanding.

Laced with a resonating material known as Bissonat, the cutting power of this already sharp mech greatsword became so outstanding that it enabled its wielder to cut through thick transphasic alloys like a hot knife through butter!

Of course, much of the reason why the Decapitator remained so deadly despite its lack of technological sophistication was due to the growth of Venerable Dise.

The female expert pilot and hunter extraordinaire accrued more combat experience and developed her unique style of extraordinary swordsmanship to a greater height.

Perhaps her self-developed sword style may still be short of reaching the standard of the legendary Heavensword Style, but the high-tier expert pilot's pure skills greatly surpassed that of every other melee expert pilot!

In any case, all of this meant that the Decapitator's value exceeded that of the First Sword.

Since Ketis developed it after she had learned a part of Ves' teachings, the mech greatsword actually possessed some of the traits of a high-level artifact. The fact that it possessed modest growth properties meant that Venerable Dise's willpower baptism consistently nurtured the Decapitator, increasing its ability to channel energy and improving Ketis' ability to connect with it with the help of her companion spirit.

"Let's try it out." Ves' physical projection proposed to the straight-backed uniformed woman. "You sent out the strike force against a mysterious calamity plant we know little about. A few of the mechs and mech pilots are strong, but they won't be enough to defeat the Emperor Tree head-on,

especially when they are predominantly accompanied by light mechs. I can understand why you limited the numbers. The strike force can move much faster, and there are a few good prospects that need a lot of pressure in order to break through. Did you tell Joshua to prepare the transcendence glow?"

The Swordmaster nodded. "I did. I have inspected Lanie Larkinson and Taon Melin multiple times. They have received enough tempering over the years, and their hearts are in the right place. I am quite optimistic about Lanie. She possesses the drive to pursue greater strength. Her main issue is that she doesn't have as much steel in her spine as other expert candidates. This is not a major flaw, and it will likely become irrelevant if she manages to break through with a small amount of help. At worst, she will become an expert pilot similar to my husband, who still needs to find answers to a few questions before he is ready to take the next step."

That was an insightful analysis. Ves believed in the words of a Swordmaster.

"What about Taon? He has tried so hard to break through over the years as well. I originally hoped that he would become part of the same generation of expert pilots as Venerable Jannzi, if not Venerable Vincent Ricklin. Instead, he acts as if he is too weighed down by his burdens to undergo apotheosis."

Ketis grimaced. "Taon Melin's problems are... complex. Even if you tried to apply the transcendence glow to him in the past, it probably wouldn't have made any difference. The good news is that he has steadily managed to work out his issues. He resigned from his command duties and slightly reshaped his relationship with Ylvaine. He still has a tendency to pray to Ylvaine rather than rely on his own strength to overcome all of his obstacles, but Joshua and I have been coaching him in preparation for this mission. This is probably his best opportunity to break through. If he keeps dragging on like this, his willpower will likely deteriorate due to thinking he is not good enough."

Even if the conditions to trigger a breakthrough had been easing due to multiple external factors, that still did not change the fact that high-ranking mech pilots by their very nature had to possess an unreasonably strong amount of confidence in themselves.

Willpower cultivators distinguished themselves from others by constantly believing in their ability to overcome all obstacles.

Expert candidates had already proven that they possessed the courage and mettle to step onto the path of godhood as mech pilots. Now, they needed to develop their willpower and conviction to extraordinary standards in order to truly separate themselves from their first mortal shackles!

Did Lanie and Taon possess the qualities necessary to break through?

They both possess their own companion spirits, so their spiritualities should be in order. Ves didn't even need to take the initiative to augment the two expert candidates this way. They had earned more than enough Larkinson merits to redeem this coveted reward without needing to receive any special favors.

Given that many of their other conditions should be fine, it all came down to their mentalities.

This was exactly the sort of circumstance where the transcendence glow could play the greatest role and quickly make up for this final shortcoming.

At least Ves hoped this would be the case. He still did not understand everything about breakthroughs and the mech piloting profession to believe he was right on everything.

In any case, the two mech designers made themselves comfortable and tried to connect to their familiar masterworks.

"Mrow."

"Sharpie!"

The process was both mysterious and instinctive. It took a bit of effort to reach across immense distances and successfully forge a connection with their masterworks.

Ketis managed to form a connection first. She had an easier time reaching out because she was stationed on a fleet carrier that was orbiting around Reticula Corein V.

As soon as she managed to create a tentative link with her masterwork, Sharpie disappeared from her side and appeared all the way inside a certain mech greatsword carried by an expert mech.

Ves took a bit longer to do the same. He was situated on New Constantinople VIII, so he had to reach out to his favorite masterwork mech across different zones!

The greater the distance, the harder it became to forge a stable and strong connection. Although the Everchanger's remarkable growth over the years made it easier for Ves to latch on, it was still difficult for him to maintain a persistent connection.

When Blinky and Sharpie finally showed up inside the two masterworks, their arrival barely caused a disturbance.

Most of the strike force remained ignorant that the patriarch and the swordmaster of the Larkinson Clan had successfully reached through the cloud of isolating Solus Gas and managed to become present in a sense!

Ves had hoped that the weird rules concerning masterwork mechs created a loophole that he could take advantage of, and he was happy when he found out he succeeded!

In fact, he already became excited when he realized the greater potential of this approach.

The ability to reach out and allow his companion spirits to anchor his awareness to a distant location neatly solved one of his current dilemmas!

Ves was an adventurer at heart. He loved nothing more than to get on a ship and lead his expeditionary fleet into new and interesting places. The more novelty he encountered during his journeys, the more insights and inspiration he harvested which he could use to progress his career.

He happily accompanied his fleet on the Trailblazer Expedition not that long ago.

Unfortunately, his antics had finally attracted the Red Association to the point that the mechers essentially ordered him to retreat from the border regions and keep himself away from danger!

One of his worst nightmares had come true!

The mechers did not bring him back to one of the central star nodes before locking him inside a design lab that served as his cage, but Ves was well aware that he could no longer travel anywhere that the mechers deemed unsafe.

This was agonizing to Ves because the more exciting regions of the Red Ocean all happened to be located on the opposite side of the border!

Even though he could still get his fill of novelty by going on 'business trips' and visiting new and exotic planets, the sense of adventure was not as strong as before.

Ves yearned to visit the true frontier. He dreamed of visiting the planets occupied by the major alien races and taking away any interesting tech and resources that his forces might stumble upon.

It just wouldn't be the same if he stayed 'home' while the other Larkinsons were allowed to roam free.

In order to address his yearning for adventure, Ves had been thinking about various ways he could be present during those adventures somehow.

Relying on the galactic net to remain connected to his fleets was a decent but not great solution. The communication method was notoriously insecure and it could also be cut off through various different means. Ves also wouldn't be able to experience what was on the other side with the greatest degree of fidelity.

Creating a new incarnation might work, but Ves was not eager to split his Spirituality any further for the time being. He intuitively felt that he had already gone a bit too far for the time being. He at least needed to undergo a significant metamorphosis and advance to Master Mech Designer before his Spirituality grew strong enough to support another incarnation.

There were a few other potential solutions, but each of them came with their own flaws.

This was why Ves grew so happy when he concluded that he could maintain a reliable connection with any remote Larkinson force so long as it carried one of his masterworks.

Sure, the quality of the connection was not great for the time being, but Ves strongly believed his ability to project his companion spirit across vast distances would improve as his Spirituality developed further.

As long as Blinky actually managed to reach the other side, the Star Cat and by extension Ves were able to experience what was going on with their full senses.

The only limit was that if Blinky expended a lot of energy, it became harder to keep him in place, but that was not a dealbreaker.

Ves even began to think about designing a robot avatar for himself!

As long as he channeled enough passion and sincerity in this project, the chances were high that he would end up with a masterwork, thereby allowing him to 'participate' in future expeditions once again!

This idea had great potential. Even if it did not work out the way he wished, he still believed it would yield decent results.

The biggest question on his mind was whether he should design the robot avatar in the shape of a cat or a human.

A human avatar would allow him to command respect among the clansmen serving on a distant fleet.

A cat avatar would attract much less attention and allow him to act more like a mascot or a bystander.

"Hmmm..."

Chapter 6054 Without Guidance

While Ves got distracted by thinking about producing a masterwork robot avatar, the strike force sent to scope out the Emperor Tree was about to prepare for a serious confrontation.

At this time, core of the strike force had stopped beside a tall hill that offered at least the illusion of cover.

Nobody could say for certain whether the Emperor Tree had already noticed the intrusion into its territory. The tall calamity plant was able to dominate the minds of exobeasts at considerably greater distances, so it was clear that ordinary ranges no longer applied anymore.

Four prominent living mechs remained on standby next to the hill.

Compared to normal times, the Larkinson mechs appeared significantly more subdued, and that was not only because they were trying to lay low.

The machines had lost their glows. The nearby deposits constantly spewed out Solus Gas that lingered on the surface of the planet and blocked nearly every form of mundane and extraordinary signals.

The fact that this strange exotic gas was able to make every living mech feel alone and cut off from their reassuring design spirits was quite a disconcerting experience!

None of the third order living mechs wanted to stick around in this environment for long. The fact that Solus Gas also poisoned and killed most of the wildlife that remained under its influence also did not help.

The Larkinson mechs tried to remain brave even as they waited for the scouting mechs to return and report on the current state of the Emperor Tree.

The most prominent machine on standby was a green-coated hero mech. The Everchanger was the most representative high-end mech of the Larkinson Clan, and the living machine knew it. Even if the versatile expert hero mech tried his best to suppress his presence, he simply couldn't help but harmonize with the surrounding alien flora.

The Everchanger was the only large mechanical object on the surface of Reticula Corein V that did not look or feel like a hostile invader. If not for the fact that the Emperor Tree had gotten rid of most exobeasts within its vast territory, perhaps a small collection of alien critters would have approached the hero mech by now. The warmth and vitality exuded by the machine generated a unique attraction that no organism on the planet had ever encountered!

Even now, the green expert mech acted in accordance to his famous name by continuing to harmonize and adapt his spiritual foundation with the local environment.

This was a subtle ability that the Everchanger recently thought of without the input of his battle partner. It had actually been quite a long time since the expert mech last set foot on an untamed planet and lingered for a while.

The more time the Everchanger spent on the surface of Reticula Corain V, the more the living mech was able to blend in the local atmosphere. It was as if the highly adaptable machine possessed the outlandish ability to go native as long as he received enough exposure to the same environment!

Although neither Joshua nor the Everchanger figured out what sort of benefits they enjoyed if they managed to blend in with the natives, it didn't seem to do any harm.

However, if a fight broke out, then the Everchanger needed to fall back on his combat capabilities in order to survive.

Although the Everchanger received a modest upgrade during the Phasewater Generation, his technical specifications had fallen behind, just like all of the other early Larkinson expert mechs.

What allowed the hero mech to stay relevant was due to his ability to wield all kinds of handheld weapon systems.

The Everchanger possessed a good variety of armaments, so much so that the living machine looked as if he had brought too much equipment for this mission.

The hero mech's original Vitalus luminar crystal rifle and Heartsword served as his most dependable ranged and melee solutions. Although neither of these weapons received any upgrades over the years, their fundamental performance still held up pretty decently.

The Vitalus did not hit particularly hard, but it was able to cycle between three powerful attack phase crystals that were specially prepared for the weapon.

Ves might not have the time to upgrade the Everchanger as a whole, but he could still reserve a few days on producing a bunch of hyper attack phase crystals for the Vitalus rifle.

The Heartsword did not have this problem because it was too outdated to possess the properties of a blessed weapon. Designed and forged by Ketis, the unassuming Unending alloy sword was far from simple as it seemed.

The current loadout of upgraded crystals allowed the Vitalus to launch fire beams, copper beams and bright light beams.

Despite their fancy names, they were essentially enhanced versions of laser beams, positron beams and light beams that came with a few additional special effects.

Aside from all of these options, the Everchanger also possessed the ability to fire a fourth beam type with the help of the Gray Lotus.

Unfortunately, the thick fog of Solus Gas had temporarily caused the blessed weapon to lose contact with Helena, so much of its potency had been reduced.

The Heartsword did not have this problem because it was too outdated to possess the properties of a blessed weapon. Designed and forged by Ketis, the unassuming Unending alloy sword was far from simple as it seemed.

Not only was it much sharper than it should be, the Heartsword also carried a touch of Ketis' love and affection for Venerable Joshua.

In fact, if Ketis wanted to, she could have sent Sharpie to the Heartsword instead!

She did not prefer to do so because Venerable Joshua never developed the heart of a true swordsman. The expert pilot lacked the dedication and willingness to truly devote himself to mastering a single weapon or fighting style.

Even so, Joshua utilized the Heartsword enough years to learn the basics of the Annihilator Sword Style.

If that was not enough to give the Everchanger the destructive power he needed to cut through a difficult opponent, then the expert mech was able to draw upon his much more powerful Scarlet Ember.

The plasma sword that the Larkinsons had looted from the Neo Amadeus and converted it into a more restrained weapon had turned into one of the Everchanger's trump cards.

It was very difficult for the Everchanger to keep the Scarlet Ember in an active state for long, especially since his power reactor hadn't been upgraded for many years.

Nonetheless, Venerable Joshua was confident that if all of the other armaments of the strike force failed to cut off any important samples from the Emperor Tree, his Scarlet Ember would still be able to burn through a branch or root!

It was best not to resort to this option, though. The Everchanger's power reactor and energy transmission systems always endured serious strain whenever he needed to feed the voraciously hungry Scarlet Ember.

The Everchanger deeply wished that Joshua would break through as quickly as possible so that the living mech would finally be upgraded with a luxurious first-class power reactor.

Once the hero mech integrated an energy source that could not only match the power generation of the Neo Amadeus, but exceed it by at least an order of magnitude, the Scarlet Ember would no longer be able to make the Everchanger feel drained anymore!

The varied armaments gave the Everchanger both power and versatility, but anyone who thought that was all the hero mech was capable of would be sorely mistaken.

It was the aspects about the Everchanger that wasn't visible on the surface that made him so unique and valued by the Larkinson Clan.

Joshua personally wished that there would be no need for him to resort to additional tricks, but he did not want to take anything related to the Emperor Tree for granted.

The sensitive expert pilot was already able to perceive a huge well of vitality in the direction of the calamity plant's known location.

Descriptions could not do it justice. The Emperor Tree might not be as powerful as a phase whale, but Joshua had the illusion that the incredibly tall exoplant could moonlight as a god if it wanted!

Several complicated thoughts went through his mind as he contemplated the difficulty of getting close, collecting a few samples and getting out without losing any of his men and mechs.

That was not the extent of his mission. Ketis also tasked him with pushing the two expert candidates over the edge.

"Taon, is your Zeal in good condition?" Joshua asked over a short-ranged communication channel. "The presence of Solus Gas affects your living mech the most. You won't have Ylvaine's guidance

on hand anymore. The fog is so thick that your heavy artillery mech can't hang back anymore. You will need to get very close to the Emperor Tree in order to provide us with effective fire support."

"I know." Taon said with clear strain in his voice. "I have prepared for this mission for several weeks now. That has given me enough time to prepare for this challenge. My Zeal will not hold you back or slow you down in any way. I can promise you that. It is not as if I have urgent need of Ylvaine's prophetic guidance anymore when my living mech advanced well into visual range of the enormous tree."

Though Taon did his best to sound confident, it was abundantly clear to Joshua that the Ylvainan mech pilot was feeling anything but assured.

This showed that Taon still treated the Great Prophet as an ever-present crutch to an extent.

Taon's reaction to the current circumstances only strengthened the theory that Taon needed to participate in this kind of mission.

Only by forcing the expert candidate to confront a dangerous enemy up close without Ylvaine giving him warnings or targeting guidance would he truly feel desperate enough to force out his hidden potential!

Taon understood this reasoning as well, so he did not object to his participation despite how stupid it seemed to add a heavy artillery mech to an otherwise mobile strike force.

"Is the custom transphasic lifter platform fast and powerful enough for your Zeal?" Joshua asked next.

"It is... acceptable. I am decently satisfied with its traversal speed. What I am not satisfied with is how long it takes to gain altitude."

"It can't be helped. My wife told me that she had tried to do her best with the materials that Task Force Solus had on hand. She put in as much phasewater as she could to make it tougher, but she doesn't know how to use it to increase the effectiveness of its antigrav modules. We will just have to keep in mind to go around hills and other obstacles instead of trying to fly over them. Make sure to memorize the terrain map if you haven't done so already."

Though Ketis and a team of engineers had done their best to put together a thick and massive lifter platform that could levitate an entire heavy artillery mech, Joshua still regarded it as the weakest link of his entire mech unit.

The Transcendent Punisher Mark III that the Zeal was based upon had never been designed with rapid repositioning in mind!

Joshua knew enough about how mech designers worked to figure out that Ves piled up as much mass into the design of the Transcendent Punisher Mark III that he could get away with! Just the gigantic Devora super-heavy high-velocity transphasic hyper gauss cannon alone probably weighed as much as a light mech if not more!

Slotting in the Devora Cannon into 4 of the 8 weapon hardpoints of the Zeal not only weighed the masterwork heavy mech down by a considerable extent, but also caused his center of mass to shift forward!

In comparison, the 4 heavy artillery cannons that had been set in the remaining semi-modular weapon hardpoints hardly looked as if they could pose a serious threat against the Emperor Tree.

They were mainly present in case the strike force needed to clear out a large swarm of exobeasts.

Aside from that, the Zeal had nothing else to defend himself against the hostile alien exoflora and exofauna.

Chapter 6055 The Struggles of Faith

The Zeal was by far the most heavily armed mech out of the standard mechs assigned to the mission.

The heavy artillery mech also happened to be the greatest liability of the strike force.

There was no hope of escape once the Zeal lost the transphasic lifter platform that granted him limited flight capabilities. His enormous mass combined with Reticula Corein V's heavier than usual gravity turned every attempt at gaining altitude into a herculean struggle.

In fact, Task Force Solus could have prepared additional measures if it was willing to delay the start of the mission.

Ketis could have designed a larger and more powerful lifter platform.

She could have fabricated a spare one that could help the Zeal escape if his original platform became inoperable.

The Larkinson Clan also had the ability to order and ship in a much better designed lifter platform developed by a reputable third party company.

Ketis declined to do so because she felt it was better to give Taon additional pressure.

The relatively flawed performance of the lifter platform was partially by design.

The task force commander made a risky decision to turn this element into an additional source of stress.

She was confident that Taon wouldn't break from this kind of pressure, but even she could not guarantee whether the platform would stay in one piece during the encounter against the Emperor Tree.

If the Zeal was left behind or if Taon failed to evacuate from the battlefield, then she would have to take responsibility for these losses!

Losing either or both would be a serious setback to the Larkinson Clan. The Eye of Ylvaine did not have many expert candidates, and Taon was by far the closest to actually becoming the first expert pilot of this special mech legion.

The Ylvainan mech pilots were far more accurate and effective when piloting heavy artillery mechs and lancer mechs than any other mech pilots, whether they were Larkinsons or outsiders.

In fact, it was not an exaggeration to claim that they were by far the most effective second-class mech pilots at their respective jobs!

Paired with excellent living mechs that were all tied to the Great Prophet, the mech pilots of the Eye of Ylvaine had long built a reputation for their ludicrously high hit rates and their ability to nail shots that practically no other mech pilot could achieve.

Unfortunately, everything had a price.

The more the Ylvainan mech pilots relied on outside guidance to artificially land their powerful shots, the less they trained and honed their own native ability to predict targets and adjust the aim of their weapons.

The ugly truth of the matter was that they became so addicted to Ylvaine's help that they lacked the willpower to rely on themselves to achieve the same sort of performance.

Taon Melin was one of the few Ylvainans that slightly broke this pattern. His imminent breakthrough was of great strategic importance to the Larkinson Clan.

As long as Taon managed to break through, he would prove through his own deeds that an Ylvainan still had the qualifications to become equals to the likes of Venerable Jannzi, Commander Casella Ingvar and Venerable Zimro Belson.

More importantly than that, Taon would be able to teach the rest of his fellow Ylvainan mech pilots how they needed to adjust their mentality and train in specific ways to increase their chances of following in his footsteps!

Therefore, the breakthrough of a mech pilot as significant as Taon was far more important than the advancement of practically any other Larkinson mech pilot at the moment.

Who cared about a mediocre mech pilot like Commander Melkor Larkinson when Taon could potentially train a dozen Transcendent Punisher pilots into following his footsteps?

The Larkinson Clan would be happy if all of them managed to survive and grow quickly enough to advance to ace pilots in a couple of decades. The deterrence a group of ace heavy artillery mech specialists could exert was insane! Only certain True Gods would have the courage to attack them head-on, and even that was bound to turn into a tragic battle!

This was why many people in the Larkinson Clan held high expectations for Taon. Venerable Joshua was no exception to this rule.

In order to make sure that Taon had adopted the right mindset to maximize his breakthrough chances, Joshua continued to chat with the Ylvainan expert candidate.

"If my floater platform perishes, do not bother to save my mech. The Zeal will be a lost cause by then. As much as it hurts to lose the masterwork mech that our patriarch has designed and made with great care... I cannot allow my weakness to put you all in greater danger."

Venerable Joshua grimaced at the thought. "Do not think too much about what will happen if you falter. The more you think about doom scenarios, the likelier they will come true. It is enough to form a plan on what you should do when your heavy mech loses his traversal device. After that, you should think about success instead and what you are willing to risk in order to attain it. One of the poorly hidden secrets to expert pilots is that we are optimists. We not only think about victory, but we possess the confidence to make it happen. If you are not thinking about winning most of the time, then you will not have the will and courage to boldly step forward when your moment has come."

"How do you know when the right moment has come, Joshua?"

"You just know." Joshua softly whispered back. "It is an indescribable feeling that you only get to experience when you have been pushed to the brink. At that time, your heart will tell you that you need to commit despite the consequences of failure. Apotheosis will come closer within your reach than ever, but you will need to overcome your fear and face the possibility of dying with confidence. While you may be able to save your life if you take a step back, you may lose the opportunity of a lifetime as a consequence."

Not every expert pilot managed to break through under such extreme circumstances. There were those who lucked out by breaking through outside of life-and-death situations.

It was just that these sorts of extreme circumstances had a much higher chance of producing the most desired result.

Alas, people only paid attention to the success stories. Very few people bothered to look up all of the cases where the mech pilots failed and died in the process.

Neither Joshua nor Taon were naive enough to be ignorant of this fact. They just chose to avoid it because thinking about failure would put them in a negative mood spiral, thereby ruining the probability of a potential breakthrough.

"Have you thought about what you will do if you successfully become an expert pilot?" Joshua asked. "Our clan has recently received a whole batch of expert pilots after the Battle of Torment, but nobody knows whether they'll stand out and become the next big heroes. What about you? What do you intend to do once you have become a name that every Larkinson knows and respects?"

Taon hesitated for a moment before he decided to share the ideas he held in his mind for a long time.

"I think... I want to play a greater part in spreading the faith of Ylvaine. The other Larkinsons haven't been able to do a good job at it. I don't blame them. Director Samandra Avikon was not originally an Ylvainan, and she is too busy with running the Creation Association to care about her former responsibilities. We do not have any other higher ups that are willing to go out of their way to spread our faith. I can change that. As an expert pilot and the only one to emerge from the Eye of Ylvaine, I can sway a lot more people. Venerable Dise and Commander Casella have already shown me what can be done."

"That is a noble goal, I guess. It will work out as long as it is what you really want. How exactly do you want to spread your faith, though? Not many clansmen are willing to convert. Many of them are secularists and have no intention of embracing any faiths. The few newcomers who are already believers usually stick to their own faiths. I really do not see how you can make Ylvaine popular in the clan."

"It has to be done." Taon spoke. "The clan is growing quickly, and so must our faith. The Eye of Ylvaine needs more mech pilots who are sincerely devoted to the Great Prophet if we want to continue to be of service to the rest of the Larkinsons. I do not mean to sound selfish, but we should be the only ones to assume the responsibility of piloting the clan's heavy artillery mechs."

That was a rather extreme and controversial mindset. There had been increasing talk about the need to diversify and allow another mech legion to pilot a different style of heavy artillery mechs.

After all, what if anything went wrong with Ylvaine one day? What if the Eye of Ylvaine became unavailable for whatever reason?

This was why the Larkinson Army seriously thought about issuing a request to the Larkinson Clan to design an alternate heavy artillery mech.

Certain mech legions such as the Battle Criers and the Penitent Sisters were really enthusiastic about adding powerful ranged mechs to their mech rosters!

Taon was certainly not oblivious to this sort of talk, but he refused to believe that the Larkinson Clan would be better served by letting anyone other than Ylvainans discharge this important responsibility.

If other Larkinsons began to pilot heavy artillery mechs without needing to obtain guidance from above, how could Ylvaine possibly maintain a strong enough foundation in the clan?

Taon needed to do everything possible to make sure that the Ylvainan Faith maintained a solid and unshakable presence among the Larkinsons!

"Not everyone will be happy to see the Ylvainan Faith spread its wings." Joshua said in a more concerned voice. "I have read a number of texts and talked to numerous Ylvainans. I have also piloted the original Transcendent Punisher and other Ylvainan mechs. You guys have strange beliefs, the biggest among them is the prophecy that claims that a time will come where every human and alien will come together and transcend into immortal god-like beings. I do not think I need to remind you how much that will get you in trouble with most humans."

Taon actually smirked. "Was Ylvaine wrong, Joshua? Look around you and taste the E energy radiation that is gradually making us all stronger, both human and alien. The prophecy already came true, in a sense. It just happened in a different galaxy than we assumed, in a manner that the rest of us never anticipated and over a time frame that is much larger than we imagined."

"That is... a stretch. You are forcing the prophecy to fit the Age of Dawn when they are not quite the same."

The Ylvainan mech pilot couldn't help but be more asserted when he talked back. "Just face it, Joshua. Ylvaine was right on this. He is right on everything else as well. He has made far more prophecies than you can imagine, and I have been blessed with glimpses of a part of them. If you think this future is already astounding enough, then wait until more great and terrible prophesied events will take place. As the blessed worshiper of Ylvaine, it is my sacred duty to help the Larkinson Clan and any individual who respects his tenets to navigate the trying times ahead!"

Venerable Joshua grew speechless.

Though he was happy that the Ylvainan managed to increase his drive, it was anything but certain whether Taon would see any of his ambitions coming true.

The Ylvainan Faith was far too sympathetic towards the ideals of the infamous Cosmopolitan Movement to gain much traction among most humans.

The reasons why many newcomers but most particularly the first-class ones rejected the offer to convert to the Ylvainan Faith was because they did not want to form any associations with the cosmopolitans!

Chapter 6056 Elegant Rage

"Are you making the rounds, Joshua?"

"You noticed, haven't you, Lanie?"

"I am not as young as before. You are practically an uncle to me, you know?"

The Everchanger approached a mech that seemed remarkably out of place compared to the rest of the strike force.

Lanie Larkinson had piloted a variety of different living mech models over the years.

More recently, she chose to stick with the relatively niche and unconventional Lucid Rage as her mech of choice.

Her breakthrough to expert candidate and her accumulated merits granted her the opportunity to request customization services.

The aftermarket modifications and upgrades applied to the custom version of the Lucid Rage did not allow her to become an equal to a custom mech designed by the patriarch such as the Zeal, but Lanie's battle partner still managed to remain competitive, if only reluctantly.

This enabled the machine that Lanie had taken to calling the Elegant Rage into a slimmer, lighter and more refined melee mech.

Lanie's persistent demands over the years since she began to pilot the Elegant Rage had caused the machine to morph from a masculine to a more feminine silhouette.

The reduction in mass and the slimming of parts she deemed unimportant caused the Elegant Rage to become faster and more agile.

Of course, this also caused the Elegant Rage to lose a bit of armor protection and become more fragile as a whole.

Lanie compensated for these amplified vulnerabilities by relying on a combination of speed and skill to survive on the battlefield.

She apparently chose to follow a similar strategy to the Swordmaidens.

It was a pity that she loved swordsmanship, but not to the point where she was willing to exclude the use of other weapons.

She was similar to Joshua in that regard.

However, trying to master too many weapons at the same time was a bit too ambitious for a mere expert candidate. She had consciously stuck to piloting the Elegant Rage, a customized version of a melee mech that stood out for employing a pair of tonfas as its main armaments.

To be fair, the Lucid Rage was a good concept at the time it was released. The melee mech offered an alternative to melee mech pilots that sought to hone their fighting skills on the battlefield.

The concept of the Lucid Rage centered around combining the glows of Zeigra and Lufa to induce a state of extreme focus where the mech pilot possessed the right mindset to win any duel or bout in front of him. No matter how much the chaos of the battlefield threatened to overwhelm the pilot, the Lucid Rage was always able to keep him focused and bring out the best of his fighting ability.

While this worked out great back when the Larkinson Army fought against human mech forces, the Lucid Rage quickly fell into irrelevance after the start of the Red War.

There was nothing the mech could do. Times had changed. The abundance of shielded alien warships made brilliant displays of skill irrelevant for the most part.

Unless the melee mech pilots had improved their skills to extraordinary levels, it made relatively difference how fancy their mechs swung their weapons!

The huge transphasic energy shields that protected every alien warship from damage could not be overcome by brilliant swordplay or clever mind games.

The best way to overcome the defenses of big alien warships was by leveraging superior tech and relying on the raw application of lots of damage.

The Lucid Rage simply performed worse at this job than many other Larkinson mechs. The tonfas equipped with a low-end version of plasma technology added a bit of punch to the mechs, but were not particularly effective when employed against transphasic energy shields.

The niche melee mech tended to rely more on launching a multitude of well-aimed attacks at weak points than to launch heavy strikes that inflicted much greater impacts at a time.

Due to these reasons and more, many mech pilots who previously enjoyed a considerable amount of success had switched to other melee mechs such as the modular Bright Warriors or the much more direct Redaxes.

There were even mech pilots that chose to pilot the completely different Fey Fiannas just because they wanted to pilot a quasi-first-class mech as soon as possible!

The number of Larkinson mech pilots that continued to cling to the living mechs that they had partnered over the years diminished with each passing month.

No matter how much of a close relationship these pilots had built with their living machines, the former did not want to doom their careers by sticking to a mech type that was becoming increasingly less relevant in the changing times.

It was a difficult decision to make. Other mech pilots would have made the switch as soon as they were offered the choice, but the Larkinsons were different because it was little different from leaving their current spouses for younger and more attractive ones!

Even if switching to another mech model was objectively the best choice, the emotional entanglement between a mech pilot and a living mech could not be overcome so easily!

Each time a separation happened, the mech pilots often found themselves falling in love with their new machines pretty easily. The superior tech and features of the more up to date Larkinson mech models could seduce any mech pilot.

This left the old and largely forgotten Lucid Rages in limbo. They were too functional and old to be scrapped. They were also unsuitable to stick around in the expeditionary fleet because they took up way too much capacity to justify the decision to keep around.

The unwanted Lucid Rages had to be shipped back to the various planetary branches of the Larkinson Clan where they could be mothballed in secure storage facilities.

Perhaps one day, the Design Department released a powerful new upgrade to the Lucid Rage line that magically made them more relevant again.

At that time, it would be more than worthwhile to convert the outdated Lucid Rages into the most modern iteration, thereby allowing their existing growth and development to serve the Larkinson Clan once again!

Lanie most certainly received this choice as well, but she had refused it on repeated occasions.

Joshua knew that Lanie had already set her mind on her willful decision, but he decided to inquire about it just to make sure she was doing this for the right reasons.

"So you have decided to stick to your Elegant Rage? You do know that we are about to launch a dangerous raid on the biggest and most powerful calamity plant on this planet, right?"

The woman sitting in the cockpit caressed the surface of her armrest as if it was her lover.

"I have piloted numerous different mech types before I settled on the Elegant Rage. Do you know why, Joshua?"

"Because you want to hone your weapon skills to a higher level in order to prove your worth as an expert pilot."

"That is part of the story." Lanie admitted. "I still yearn to become so skilled with my arms that I can defeat the strong when I am weak, just like what Venerable Dise and other brilliant duelists have managed to accomplish. You do not know how many times I have been tempted by the superior tech and performance of the Fey Fianna and the Storm Swords. I know I can inflict more damage and make a greater impact on the battlefield, but... I don't think it would be me anymore. I am not a drone mech pilot or a swordsman mech pilot."

"I am Lanie, a girl who wants to be taken seriously. I don't want to become a copycat, Joshua. I want to forge my own path, just like you and all of the other heroes of the clan. I may have received a few special benefits that have helped me reach this point, but if I want to break through, I need to defeat the beast in front of me by force, not by switching to a completely different mech with a personality of a complete stranger. I have always liked to pilot the Elegant Rage, and even if it is not a great choice to deploy against the Emperor Tree, I refuse to let that limit me. I will prove with my courage and my skill that my battle partner and I can still contribute to this mission!"

She sounded confident enough, alright, though that alone might not be enough for her Elegant Rage to turn into an asset when the fighting erupted.

The Emperor Tree was just too big and massive to get hurt by a pair of upgraded plasma tonfas.

"I am glad to hear that you have got the right spirit." Venerable Joshua said in an encouraging tone. "If you manage to break through, what will you focus on? Will you stick to wielding tonfas, or will you branch out and make use of your other weapon skills?"

"I want to branch out." Lanie said with a determined voice. "I want to learn a sword style tailored for my mech from Venerable Dise. I want to learn how to wield spears from Venerable Orfan. I want to become a sharpshooter from Venerable Stark. I even want to learn how to brawl and punch like Venerable Vincent Ricklin."

"That... is a big appetite, Lanie. Normally, I would ask if you are trying to bite more than you can chew, but if you successfully become an expert pilot... then it might just be doable. You won't ever be able to catch up to the expert pilots who train and fight with their chosen weapons every day, though."

Lanie giggled. "I am completely fine with that. I want to master all of the weapons to an acceptable level. I can think about becoming the best at everything much further down the road. For now, I still need to increase my proficiency in many weapon systems that I have neglected for years. Once I build up a decent repertoire, I can become known as an adaptable fighter like you. Nothing will ever make me feel inadequate like today."

That was a good drive, if an unusual one.

"Are you aspiring to pilot a first-class multipurpose mech one day?"

"I am not sure to be honest. I have heard how great and versatile they are, but they are far from what I am used to piloting. The mech type doesn't really make sense to me. Why try to carry 20 different weapon systems when using 2 or 3 larger and stronger weapons is already enough to do the job? All I can say is that I am willing to keep an open mind. Once I get the opportunity to pilot such a great mech, I will be sure to test it out and see whether it is to my liking."

"What if you prefer to pilot a Bright Warrior-style mech that can change its loadout before every fight?"

Lanie shrugged. "Then I will stick to that. I am not that picky, Joshua. I think it would be great if my Elegant Rage gets upgraded into a more universal expert mech that can become a rifleman mech or a spearman mech depending on the weapons she holds."

"That sounds similar to General Ark's Lionheart, but without the part where you absorb the belief of every soldier to power up your moves."

"He is one of my role models." Lanie sighed as her inner fangirl briefly came out. "I do not think I can imitate his unusual command style, and I don't really want to. I want to pursue the pinnacle of weapon skills, both with my body and while piloting my Elegant Rage. Together, my battle partner and I shall one day become known as the premier masters of arms!"

Mech pilots were allowed to dream. Joshua personally believed that Lanie had no chance in hell to realize her ambition, but then again god pilots always seemed to turn impossibilities into reality.

Whether she had what it took to become a god pilot or not, Venerable Joshua quietly wished her good luck. If she actually managed to succeed one day, then the Larkinson Clan would gain another powerful protector!

Chapter 6057 Scouting Results

The scout mechs had returned!

Compared to their previous pristine states, the light mechs of the Flagrant Vandals all looked as if they had gone through a gauntlet of suffering.

Many of their mech frames appeared as if they got struck by a rain of kinetic projectiles. The holes in their thin armor plating went so deep that they exposed broken and damaged internal components.

What made the machines look even more bedraggled compared to just an hour prior was the fact that a couple of Ferocious Piranhas and Light Hunters had lost a couple of limbs.

That was not supposed to happen!

The Flagrant Vandal mechs might not be faring all that great when trying to fly in a 1.3 g environment, but they shouldn't have gotten caught by a stationary exoplant so easily!

Even if the Emperor Tree could not be judged by common sense, the Flagrant Vandal pilots should have known better to get deep within striking range of that abominable alien tree!

The machines reached the enclosure behind the hill before the more intact and operational ones spread out in order to serve as perimeter guards.

The most heavily damaged machines touched down just before the Everchanger and other key mechs.

What attracted a considerable amount of attention was the upper half of the torso of a Ferocious Piranha.

The mech did not look as if it got brutalized by a bunch of deadly alien tree branches, but instead had been cut down to its diminished state by multiple mech knives!

This was obvious enough to see to those who had fought many mech battles in the past. The damage suggested that a bunch of Ferocious Piranhas frantically dismembered one of their own in haste for unknown reasons!

Venerable Joshua and Venerable Dise both went into full alert. Their expert mechs entered into higher power settings while their resonance shields began to glow increasingly brighter.

"What happened?" Venerable Joshua asked in a more authoritative tone.

"The Emperor Tree's detection and anti-mech fighting capabilities exceeded our worst estimates." The somewhat exhausted and high-strung words of Captain Wilton Larkinson spoke over the short-ranged communication channel. "That blasted plant fooled us and lulled us into a false sense of security. It is more intelligent and logical than we feared, and its malice towards our mechs is undisguised. We almost got trapped to the point where I seriously doubt that any of us would have gotten away."

Joshua, Dise, Taon and Lanie all became ready to explode at a moment's notice. They did not think the veteran Vandals had made any mistakes on their end. This meant that the tree truly managed to lay a deliberate trap for the scout mechs.

The implications of that were incredibly scary.

"Continue." Venerable Dise commanded as her expert mech's Decapitator shone with a razor sharp edge.

Captain Wilton quickly summarized the initial approach circumstances.

"We approached at low power and low altitude. We opted not to land on the ground in order to prevent our steps from getting detected by the tree's roots. The concentration of Solus Gas is much thicker at the base of the Emperor Tree, so we assumed that the thick fog obscured our approach. There is still a possibility that the tree managed to sense us anyway, but we consciously maintained

distance and refused to cross the red line that caused the target to go violent and destroy any intruders, whether they are bots or projectiles."

According to past behavior, the Emperor Tree possessed a strong territorial consciousness. Its red line denoted the boundary of its inner domain where the tree possessed the strong compulsion to destroy or dominate everything.

In comparison, the much larger outer domain only enabled the tree to dominate the minds of exobeasts in a relatively crude and superficial manner.

"Our task was to scout and inspect whether the Emperor Tree had not changed in an unexpected fashion." Captain Wilton continued. "We knew where the red line started and made sure to keep our distance from it just in case the Emperor Tree managed to expand it. We assumed that our approach was safe up to this point. Louder and more obvious machines had already generated a violent response in the past. We deployed our latest and smallest miniaturized surveillance drones just before the red line. Their sensors are anything but great, but they may be able to make some useful observations when we aggregate their data."

"None of the drones crossed the red line, correct... at least we thought that was the case." The Vandal Captain reluctantly reported. "In the meantime, our Ferocious Piranhas and Stingrippers patrolled the surroundings for potential threats while our Light Hunters carefully used their Samasel Orbs to take careful directional scans of the nearby terrain features. Their performance was not as great as usual. The Solus Gas is thick enough to interfere with their performance at shorter ranges, and their design spirit isn't on hand to enhance their signal perception. We had to circle around the danger zone at a slow pace in order to collect a broad amount of data."

The Light Hunters had long served as the premier scout mechs of the Flagrant Vandals.

They were so lightly armed that they could only pose a deadly threat against infantry. They were fast enough to outrun damn near any other light machine!

Their signature feature was the powerful Samasel Orb Directional Scanning Module. It was designed to overcome jamming and interference and detect any enemies hiding in stealth.

Unfortunately, the Samasel Orbs lost a bit of effectiveness as soon as the Light Hunters lost their connections to the Illustrious One. This forced the light scout mechs to hover even closer to the ground in order to collect useful scan data without channeling more power in their scanning modules.

The amount and quality of the sensor data collected under these difficult circumstances was terrible to say the least. This was why the main element of the strike force had to wait so long for the scout mechs to return.

Venerable Joshua frowned. "It sounds like you displayed the appropriate sense of caution towards the calamity plant. What exactly went wrong? Did the Emperor Tree grow a big root at your location somehow?"

"Worse. We... got attacked out of the blue. We first got pelted by seed projectiles. The Emperor Tree launched so many of them that it was as if it had a hundred machine guns at its disposal. Root spikes shot off the ground, almost impaling our machines. If not for our combat instincts and the speed of our mechs, we would have gotten impaled."

The expert pilots and expert candidates grew shocked and alarmed.

They were not particularly surprised that the Emperor Tree managed to besiege the scout mechs by employing seed cannons and root spikes. The powerful calamity plant was immensely large, which meant it could devote a lot of room to self-defense measures.

What the foursome were truly concerned about was whether the Emperor Tree had changed its behavioral pattern.

"Did the calamity plant decide to expand its red line?" Venerable Joshua urgently asked. "If that is the case, then none of us are safe. We may have already entered the danger zone without noticing."

"No. When the Emperor Tree launched its attack on us, we had already strayed across the red line."

"That doesn't make any sense!" Lanie interjected. "You clearly made an effort to stay well outside the red line."

"We did." Captain Wilton responded. "At least we thought we did. You see, as our mechs slowly circled around the Emperor Tree, we trusted in our perception of the environment. Both my pilots and their living mechs thought they operated in a reality where they remained perfectly equidistant from the red line. We were fooled. What actually happened was that our forward trajectory slightly curved inward. It was subtle, but as we patiently continued to scan the terrain as well as try to peer past all of the Solus Gas to catch faint glimpses of the tree, we gradually strayed into the red line and crossed it without turning back. If one of our Light Hunter pilots did not notice that what his mech was scanning with the Samasel Orb completely did not match the terrain, we would have continued to spiral closer to the Emperor Tree. I cannot imagine how any of us would get away if that was the case!"

Every Larkinson mech pilot felt horrified at what had happened. The Flagrant Vandals still hadn't recovered from their dangerous ordeals. They moved closer and closer to their deaths without ever noticing anything amiss!

"Did the Emperor Tree... did it affect your minds?"

"There is no other explanation for it, Venerable Joshua." Captain Wilton sounded disappointed at himself. "Looking back at it, it sounds so stupid that the Emperor Tree managed to fool us into thinking that the data we received from our mechs was different from reality. What is especially concerning is that whatever mind tricks the calamity plant played on us also affected our living mechs as well. We have plenty of third order living mechs, but they had no resistance against this effect! As far as we have been able to find out for the time being, their sensor systems recorded the right data, but neither the pilots nor the living mechs registered them accurately. The closer we moved to the Emperor Tree, the greater the discrepancy between accurate data and our false perception of it. The target purely works through our thoughts!"

That sounded both frightening and reassuring.

It was frightening because the attack came without any notice. The Emperor Tree displayed a degree of subtlety and forethought that spoke of worryingly high sapience!

Nobody knew whether the tree only recently evolved the ability to subtly alter the thoughts and perceptions of others.

The fact that it worked on experienced, battle-hardened mech pilots as well as living mechs meant that it was a bad idea to send any ordinary mech units closer to the Emperor Tree!

"Why did you cut off the limbs of your own mechs?" Venerable Dise asked.

"When the seeds launched by the Emperor Tree manage to strike our mechs and remain embedded into the frame... they begin to germinate. The lack of wood doesn't disturb them. They just absorb any metal in their reach and start to grow metallic roots that spread inside our machines at a slow but unstoppable pace. Since our limbs are the least armored sections of our mechs, the seeds took root over there much sooner. By the time we recognized the threat, it was already too late for many of the limbs. At least we managed to dig out most of the seeds that struck the torsos of our mechs before it was too late. The seeds have a much harder time trying to absorb tougher armor plating."

Captain Wilton Larkinson continued to relay a few more preliminary insights and warnings. Even though they fell into a near-fatal trap, the Flagrant Vandals ultimately did what they were supposed to do and collected valuable up-to-date information on the Emperor Tree!

"Thank you, captain." Venerable Joshua said at the end. "You have given us excellent information that can help us avoid a potential tragedy. For safety's sake, please bring your mechs back to Chimera Base and report your findings to the task force commander. The other Larkinsons urgently need to know that the Emperor Tree has evolved and escalated."

"That was not part of the plan, sir. We can still keep an eye on the periphery and warn you of any flanking attacks. Now that we have exposed the Emperor Tree's latest trap, we can take measures to prevent us from getting fooled without our notice."

"No, captain. You know as well as I do that you and your men will continue to remain liabilities until we have developed a proper countermeasure against what just happened. We can take care of ourselves. Dise and I are too strong-willed to get hypnotized by the Emperor Tree. Lanie and Taon are not average pilots either. I have decided to proceed with the mission, but remove any unstable elements just in case. I am sorry, but I cannot afford to second-guess the mental defenses of your mech pilots. Your minds are nothing compared to that of the Emperor Tree."

The scout mechs had little choice but to retreat. Their mechs were not in great shape anymore, so it was better for everyone if they returned to Chimera Base and received the repairs they desperately needed.

Chapter 6058 Solus Gas Isolation

The account of Captain Wilton Larkinson and his men provided Venerable Joshua with crucial intelligence.

The Emperor Tree had not remained static ever since the Larkinsons touched down on the surface and erected Chimera Base within its sphere of influence.

Ever since they touched down, the Larkinsons attempted to test the Emperor Tree in many ways, but the bots and listening devices launched in its direction only yielded limited data.

It was only now that the Larkinsons dispatched real mechs that the Emperor Tree not only demonstrated the capacity for higher logical thought, but also demonstrated a wealth of new capabilities that happened to be remarkably effective against mechs!

As the damaged and partially crippled Flagrant Vandal mechs started their journey back to Chimera Base, the four living mechs that remained all looked poised to initiate a difficult fight.

"You've heard it, guys." Joshua said as he made an effort to project greater calm. "The Emperor Tree's ability to manipulate and dominate minds has improved. That, or the plant has stopped holding back. Dise and I should be able to shrug off any attempts at manipulation, and the same goes for our living mechs. I cannot say the same for you two. Lanie, Taon, do you think your willpower is strong enough to resist the Emperor Tree's manipulation?"

"...I can't say." Lanie replied.

"It is irresponsible for me to say yes." Taon regretfully said.

Each of them understood what expert candidates were like. They had broken through the initial shackles of their mortality, but only opened up a relatively tiny gap.

Expert candidates possessed a hint of extraordinary power, but it was a stretch to call them superhuman.

Perhaps the only reason why expert candidates existed was to prepare them for a much more massive transformation down the line. They were not really supposed to wield great power at their current stage.

That made this mission so risky for Lanie and Taon. If they could not guard their minds well enough, the Emperor Tree might cause them to make a mistake at a critical moment!

The expert candidates all felt conflicted. They had no idea if they would turn into liabilities during the mission. The safest and most logical course of action was to call off the mission or have them retreat just like the Flagrant Vandals.

However, that would defeat the purpose of their participation. As expert candidates, they were just one step away from taking their first true step towards greatness. Retreating now when the threat did not appear to be unbeatable would cause them to lose momentum and replace their confidence with timidity.

These were not the qualities that an expert pilot should possess. Expert candidates were expected to embody the courage, the skill and the overwhelming belief in one's own strength that characterized true heroes.

The dilemma that every expert candidate faced in this was that they lacked the corresponding strength. Without the extraordinary willpower of an expert pilot and a powerful expert mech to resonate with, expert candidates were like paper tigers.

They shared superficial characteristics with expert pilots, but they were much weaker than the real deal!

This puts expert candidates in a tough situation.

Going all-out on tackling the toughest challenges may very well cause them to get killed. It was not unusual for articles to show up on the galactic net that reported on the unfortunate passing of expert candidates that overestimated themselves.

On the other hand, trying to play it safe and relying on the steady accumulation of time and the constant improvement of skills also did not work. Expert candidates whose passions remained cold

and always thought before taking action lacked the decisiveness and hotbloodedness that characterized every expert pilot!

Even the more thoughtful and intellectual individuals of their kind such as Commander Casella knew when it was time to take decisive action.

"We will not fault you if you retreat." Venerable Dise said in a nonjudgmental tone. "Being an expert candidate is not an obligation to commit suicide. The two of you are still fairly young. There are plenty of chances in the future. You should know that Joshua and I cannot fully take care of you when we approach the Emperor Tree. It is too massive and possesses too many ways to attack its enemies for us to guard you all of the time. You will need to learn how to take care of yourselves."

Joshua mentioned another complication. "Don't forget that the Emperor Tree rests upon one of the biggest Solus Gas deposits on the surface of this planet. We still don't know what this gas actually does, but we know that it suppresses pretty much every signal, no matter whether it is mundane or special. One of the things I have noticed is that my intuition isn't really telling me much about the threat posed by the Emperor Tree. All of this Solus Gas is throwing all of our judgments off. It will be even worse if the calamity plant actually managed to absorb and incorporate this exotic gas into its body. You cannot rely on your intuition to give you warnings in time. You need to rely on your mind and your reaction speed to make the correct responses."

That made this situation even more dire. Every good mech pilot had come to develop their intuition into a finely tuned instrument that could reliably detect and warn them of any imminent threats, even if they did not consciously perceive anything dangerous.

Intuition was one of the invisible and intangible qualities that set mech pilots apart from AIs. The latter may perform vastly superior to the former in terms of reaction speed and making the most logical decisions in the heat of combat, but skilled and experienced mech pilots always found ways to beat these formulaic algorithms by behaving illogically and relying on their intuition.

Now, the heavy presence of Solus Gas deprived the expert candidates of this critical tool!

In fact, the expert pilots also suffered from this problem, but they had many more means to compensate for this adverse condition.

Both Lanie and Taon felt profoundly uncomfortable at the thought of confronting a powerful calamity plant while subjecting themselves to numerous handicaps.

Was it really worth it for them to proceed when it started to look like an increasingly worse idea for them to stick around?

"Oh yeah, there is another problem. The Everchanger and I tried really hard to see if we could forcibly make a connection to Lufa and borrow his glow, but we haven't been able to do so. The Solus Gas concentration at this location is already very thick. Since the concentration will be even worse over at the Emperor Tree, my battle partner won't be able to channel the transcendence glow unless I fly high enough for the concentration of Solus Gas to drop. Even then, the two of you will have to follow me in order to benefit from its effects."

That was not realistic for the Zeal. The heavy artillery mech's mobility relied entirely on its heavy lifter platform, which could keep the machine at a stable altitude, but struggled to climb any higher under 1.3 g.

"It is better to rely on yourselves to trigger your apotheosis. Don't put your fate in other people's hands." Venerable Dise spoke with a bit of steel in her voice. "You do not need to feel like a freeloader if you manage to break through with assistance, but you must never feel entitled about it. Expert pilots are expected to face all adversity alone if need be. Don't develop any expectations towards the transcendence glow."

That depressed the confidence of the expert candidates even further.

The absence of glows and the unfathomable powers of the Emperor Tree already caused them to feel more uncertain about their participation in this mission.

Hearing that Solus Gas might actually dampen their intuition was another major setback!

Yet... the two had waited too long to break through. The fact that they had remained stuck as expert candidates for years frustrated them and told them that it wouldn't be as easy for them to undergo apotheosis as some other mech pilots.

They envied the likes of Saint Tusa who had overcome the much more difficult bottleneck that barred his way to becoming an ace pilot outside of an actual battlefield!

There was no point in complaining about the unfairness of the cosmos. Some mech pilots were simply luckier than others. Other mech pilots made the right decisions that sounded brilliant in hindsight.

"I will not back off." Lanie firmly spoke as her Elegant Rage began to radiate a bit more determination. "My living mech can't punch as hard as the others, but she is fast and agile enough to evade most attacks."

"What about you, Taon?"

The male expert candidate took a deep breath. "I don't know what will happen in the future, and that frightens me if I am being honest. Knowing that I cannot depend on Ylvaine's prophecies and foresight is disturbing me more than I thought. This is exactly why I cannot back down, though. You have all told me that one of the reasons why I haven't been able to break through is because I cannot pilot a mech without Ylvaine holding my hand. Now that I am in an environment where that is impossible, this is exactly what I need to test my own limits. I am not too worried about my Zeal. He is a tough and well-armored machine. He can take a lot more hits than practically every other standard mech in our task force."

The expert candidates made their decisions. They committed to going forward and subject themselves to the ire of the Emperor Tree.

From this point onwards, it would be too late for regrets. Whether they lived or died, the expert candidates had to stick by their choices!

"Let us move out." Venerable Joshua instructed. "Maintain a medium altitude from the ground. The Zeal and his lifter platform absolutely cannot afford to get struck by those fast and sharp root spikes. The fact that they strike from below can quickly scrap the only means of levitation for the heavy artillery mech. We must never let that happen."

As the four mechs launched from behind the hill and proceeded to move forward at a steady pace, they also climbed higher and higher in the air.

The Solus Gas concentration steadily increased as they approached the Emperor Tree, but decreased as the mechs flew higher above the ground.

It became much more difficult to navigate through all of the obscuring gas. If not for the fact that the two expert mechs were equipped with superior sensor systems that were empowered by true resonance, they might not even be able to track their own routes anymore!

"We are getting closer. We should be crossing the red line very soon. Can you feel it?" Venerable Joshua asked.

"My Decapitator is looking forward to cutting through the branches of the tree." Dise spoke.

"My living mech and I are completely lost." Lanie admitted.

"Same."

"Get ready!"

The four mechs boldly crossed the red line. Nothing happened at first, but the four pilots still felt a lot more nervous than before.

Surprisingly enough, the Emperor Tree did not launch any immediate attacks, even though it had most definitely noticed their approach.

The four mechs slowed down and began to prepare for battle.

The Everchanger held the Heartsword in one hand and the Vitalus rifle in the other hand.

The First Sword held the Decapitator in preparation to chop through anything made out of wood.

The Elegant Rage held her pair of plasma tonfas at the ready, though it was not certain whether they would be of any use in the coming confrontation.

The Zeal had already prepared his massive Devora Cannon to launch an attack that would likely make the Emperor Tree hurt, if only to a small extent. His four heavy artillery cannons had also been prepared for sequential fire in case there was need to suppress a swarm of exobeasts.

The four mechs faced the thick gas and peered at the very faint silhouette of a massive tree beyond.

"Careful!"

All four living mechs suddenly came under bombardment by a torrent of human-sized seeds!

Chapter 6059 Wooden Contact

The Emperor Tree reacted to the blatant intrusion of the Larkinson mechs by resorting to its most convenient 'organic weapon system'.

Hundreds of wooden cannon muzzles extended from the immense juggernaut-sized trunk of the Emperor Tree. Not all of them faced the same direction, but there were still plenty of wooden cannons that could easily target the mechs flying in the air!

From the moment the seed barrage began, the defenses of every mech started to do their jobs.

The Everchanger and the First Sword effortlessly resisted the tide. The exotic launching method and the strange properties of the seeds did not hide the fact that they were hardly optimized for ranged combat.

Modern cannons developed by humans had gone through millennia of technological evolution and refinement. Even the cheapest of cannons had reached a remarkably high state of performance due to all of the incremental improvements that had been made over the ages.

The Emperor Tree may be an insanely talented exoplant that managed to reach his current level of strength just two years after the start of the Age of Dawn, but that did not change the fact that it was still a wild existence!

Unlike humans and many other civilized races in the cosmos, the Emperor Tree went through life without the benefit of systematic inheritance and education.

Its cannon designs were crude and its seed projectiles were only hard enough to damage mechs because the tree had obviously put effort into making them harder. The muzzle velocities of the wooden cannons were not particularly high due to relying on primitive means.

The projectiles were hardly any better. While the seeds could technically be categorized as hyper projectiles due to the fact that they were all imbued with wood energy, they did not undergo systematic development either.

However, while the expert mechs had little to fear from these relatively mundane massed attacks, the two custom mechs were experiencing greater pressure.

The Zeal had no hope of evading the attacks, so he had to rely entirely on his defenses to withstand the storm.

Fortunately, the quasi-first-class heavy artillery mech was equipped with a powerful azure shield generator. The transphasic properties of this energy shield was especially effective at withstanding attacks that did not possess the same qualities.

The Reticula Corein V was a star system that was almost devoid of phasewater. If the opposite was the case, then it would have been colonized by aliens or humans a long time ago!

The Emperor Tree likely never encountered phasewater directly throughout its existence, so it probably had no idea that the Zeal was able to resist far more seed attacks than usual!

However, the relentless tide of seeds crashing into the heavy mech's azure energy shield still caused it to drain at a gradual but concerning rate.

This was just the start of the fight. If the Zeal kept getting hit like this, he would soon lose his energy protection and become a lot more exposed to the Emperor Tree's attacks.

The Elegant Rage fared the worst out of the four machines. Lanie regretted the decision to pilot a mech with slimmed down armor. While she may have been able to arrange an upgrade to the custom mech's energy shield to modern standards, her battle partner's power reactor had not been able to keep up. The melee mech was not able to withstand too many seed strikes!

The only way for the relatively fragile mech to withstand the seeds was to block the seeds with its much harder tonfas or to evade them with clever maneuvering.

Lanie and the Elegant Rage struggled to evade the projectiles. The tonfa-wielding mech lost the elegance that usually characterized her movement patterns. Compared to past performances, the living mech always started to move or change her course a bit too late!

The lack of intuition due to the strong concentration of Solus Gas deprived Lanie of a tool that she often relied upon to evade danger!

Though she quickly adjusted and learned to respond by relying on her perception and her own judgment, the Elegant Rage clearly struggled to preserve the integrity of her energy shields.

"Get behind me!" Taon suggested. "This is no time to be stubborn, Lanie."

He was right. It was not time yet for the Elegant Rage to shine. Lanie did not stubbornly stick around in order to resist the seed bombardment. She instead guided her beleaguered mech behind the Zeal's massive mech frame.

The azure energy shield projected by the larger machine easily provided full directional coverage from the Emperor Tree's seed attacks!

"How many seeds can this damn tree launch!?" Lanie asked in a frustrated tone. "It has already fired thousands if not tens of thousands of them already!"

There was no way for her Elegant Rage to do anything if she continually needed to brave a rain of seed projectiles.

"It won't run out anytime soon, I think." Taon responded. "The tree is so huge that it should have more than enough wood and other stuff to turn into projectiles. These seeds are tiny compared to the size of its trunk."

"THESE SEEDS ARE NOTHING TO US." The Everchanger boasted that the machine's resonance shield resisted every attack with little strain. "THE ONLY ANNOYING PART IS THAT THE RAIN OF FIREPOWER IS SO DENSE THAT IT IS TOO DIFFICULT TO EVADE THE SEEDS ENTIRELY."

Venerable Joshua took charge again. "Then let us do something about that. Those wooden cannons shouldn't be too tough. We should trim them down! Zeal, use your heavy artillery cannons! Everyone else, keep your distance."

The threat posed by the Emperor Tree should be low so long as they remained at the edge of the red zone. That might change once they got closer, so Joshua did not want to rush forward right away.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Of the 8 semi-modular weapon hardpoints of the Zeal, half of them were taken up by conventional heavy artillery cannons.

Each of them began to launch explosive hyper shells at the massive tree in the distance.

Although it was difficult to target anything with pinpoint accuracy due to all of the Solus Gas, Taon and the Zeal were still able to land their explosive projectiles near the base of the trunk.

Continuous explosions began to engulf the surface of the tree. Huge pieces of bark splintered from the surface while dozens of wooden cannons shattered or deformed.

"The wooden cannons are much more fragile than the main trunk!" Venerable Joshua grinned.

"Keep bombarding them! Even if the tree can regrow them, it will surely take time for them to return!"

The Everchanger did not sit still during this period. He lifted his Vitalus rifle and began to spit out a continuous barrage of resonance-empowered fire beams at the trunk.

The souped-up laser beams struck the trunk and the surrounding wooden cannons with a blaze of thermal energy. The fire E-energy attached to the beams domineeringly engulfed the nearby wood energy and created an even greater conflagration!

It seemed as if the wooden cannons could be cleaned up fairly quickly so long as the two ranged mechs kept up the fire.

However, the Emperor Tree was not weak or passive. It began to channel a large amount of wood energy and forcefully suppressed the fire energy that was raging on its surface!

A completely alien and inhuman presence began to exert more power. Though the thick concentration of Solus Gas made it difficult for the mech pilots to notice it, the Emperor Tree domineeringly forced the fires to subside!

While the Emperor Tree was able to put out the fires through this method, it could do little to prevent its wooden cannons from getting shattered by all of the explosions and energy beams!

The volume of seed attacks gradually lessened. It was amazing how just two mechs could cause the Emperor Tree to lose so many wooden cannons.

However, none of the attacks came close to damaging the main trunk itself. It was simply too huge to become seriously affected by these relatively small-scale attacks.

As the Zeal and the Everchanger continued to remove wooden cannon after wooden cannon, the Emperor Tree did not appear to be in a hurry to regenerate them. New cannons started to grow from the bottom where the first ones had been removed, but it would take many more minutes before they became functional again.

"The Zeal cannot keep this up forever, sir." Taon reported to Venerable Joshua. "As large as my heavy mech's ammunition capacity may be, these explosive shells all take up space. Once they run out, I won't be able to contribute as much firepower."

"I know, but we cannot go forward yet. This tree is capable of doing so much more. We need to tease out its tricks instead of blindly blundering into them. Just wait. Now that the tree understands that it can't get rid of us with its seed cannons alone, it will resort to other measures. Pay attention to the ground in case it is able to grow much longer roots than previously reported."

The next threat did not come from below.

Instead, it came from the front, left, right and even their rear!

Dozens of smaller and less potent seed projectiles assaulted the four Larkinson mechs from many different directions!

Even though their power was clearly worse, the fact that the Emperor Tree was able to attack the mechs from completely different directions caught the mech pilots by surprise!

"Where did those attacks come from!? Did the Emperor Tree plant some of its seeds and have them germinate into miniature versions of itself?!"

"No. The trajectories are not quite right for that. The smaller seeds are launched from the same altitude or higher."

Before the four mech pilots could guess even further, they were all taken by surprise as more than a dozen large wooden monsters of uneven sizes and shapes emerged from the surrounding gas clouds and assailed the mechs with a variety of wooden armaments!

"What?!"

Even though the high-strung mech pilots completely failed to anticipate their approach in advance, they responded quickly enough.

The First Sword made a quick and deceptively simple horizontal sweep with her Decapitator that easily parted the wooden monsters in half.

The Everchanger intercepted half-a-dozen of them with rapid-fire shots of his Vitalus before slashing apart the remainder with his Heartsword.

The Elegant Rage suddenly came into her element again. Under the direction of an eager Lanie, the melee mech actively surged forward to bash and burn the roughly mech-sized monstrosities with a pair of plasma tonfas!

The three mechs dealt with the wooden monsters so efficiently that none of them came close to the Zeal.

The three mech pilots clearly intended for this to happen. They did not forget that the Zeal was the only machine that was unable to adequately defend himself against enemies up close.

"What... did we just fight against? How can these wooden monsters fly?" Lanie wondered.

"Don't you think these wooden monsters look familiar?" Taon said the obvious.

Though the sudden ambush strike started and ended quickly, the mech pilots and their living mechs still managed to get a good impression of all of the attackers sent by the Emperor Tree.

In truth, the living mechs felt much more shocked than their mech pilots at this time!

"THESE ARE NOT WOODEN MONSTERS. THEY ARE WOODEN MECHS." The Everchanger declared as his three eyes glowed brighter. "CAN YOU NOT SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING? THE EMPEROR TREE HAS BEEN LEARNING FROM US. IT HAS NOT ONLY IMITATED OUR RANGED WEAPONS, BUT IT HAS ALSO MADE STRIDES TO REPLICATE OUR MECHS!"

This statement unquestionably rung true in everyone else's minds!

This was because the shapes and contours of those 'wooden monsters' roughly matched the designs of the mech models fielded by Task Force Solus!

From the light and swift Ferocious Piranha to the fierce dual-wielding Stormblade Samurai, the Emperor Tree had somehow managed to set up a wooden mech factory and began to produce blatantly pirated versions of the famous mechs of the Larkinson Clan!

Chapter 6060 It's Learning

The Emperor Tree created its own mechs!

This was a capability that the calamity plant had never shown before!

The fact that the tree felt the need to produce its own version of mechs also indicated that it had adopted a deliberate strategy to deal with the invading humans.

All of this had scary implications. Many thoughts ran through the minds of the mech pilots. Each of them began to feel more and more that they had underestimated the depth of the Emperor Tree.

Even though the initial wave of wooden mechs had been dealt with remarkable ease, none of the mech pilots dared to relax.

"This is just a probing attack." Venerable Dise cautioned everyone. "The Emperor Tree most definitely has many more wooden mechs under its command, and it is possible for the newer ones to be stronger and increasingly harder to handle. Don't forget what kind of enemy it is. The tree did not evolve from a big brutish exobeast that is born with violent and savage instincts. It used to be a passive exoplant that came to learn how to deal with its enemies by controlling other exobeasts. It is a swarm master, similar to the Army of One. It is not supposed to fight by itself. Its true weapons are its minions."

Venerable Joshua widened his eyes. "You're right, Dise. I don't think this Emperor Tree chose to copy our mechs on a whim. It is intelligent and it has been observing our task force defend Chimera Base for several months. From the tree's perspective, we are much stronger than the native beasts. Think about it. We only deployed a few hundred mechs at most, but have you counted how many beasts we killed? We harvested so many giant corpses that we needed to contract a shipping company to transport all of the exobeast carcasses that we had sold in bulk. Every beast wave attack starts out with us being heavily outnumbered, but by the time the battle comes to an end, we have suffered minimal losses while all of the monsters have died!"

None of them thought about it before, but now that Joshua mentioned it, perhaps he made a good point!

Just as the humans were curious and vigilant towards the mysterious capabilities of the Emperor Tree, the calamity plant must have grown alarmed and fascinated by how well the human mechs fought!

Of course, much of the reason why all of the battles ended in total victory for the humans was because the dominated exobeasts fought mindlessly, but that did not change the fact that their enormous quantity failed to threaten Chimera Base!

The evidence so far suggested that the Emperor Tree had lost faith in the local exobeasts. Not only were they beginning to thin out in the surrounding regions, they also weren't strong enough to annihilate the invading human force.

Since the Emperor Tree wasn't able to beat the powerful mechs, it might as well produce its own versions of these powerful and fascinating humanoid constructs!

"If the Emperor Tree had formed this plan more than a month ago... then it must have experimented on many wooden mechs." Lanie guessed. "It may have produced crappy ones at first, but studied what went wrong and tried to make a better one afterwards. I don't know how many times the tree went through this process, but the mechs we just fought are pretty good considering they are made out of wood."

The wood material used for the strange mechs was not as tough as the trunk of the Emperor Tree, but it was not too bad. The wooden mechs would have been able to last a bit longer if they hadn't been deployed against the best mechs of the task force.

The First Sword adopted an anticipatory stance and began to gather energy. The Decapitator greatsword began to glow with deadly intensity.

"Careful. A much larger wave of wooden mechs are coming. This will be a much more serious probe attack."

"How can you tell, Dise? This Solus Gas is messing up my senses. I think those wooden mechs are built with them as well. It was much harder than usual to notice their approach and take them seriously at first."

"Experience. This is far from my first hunt against a swarm master. I think they have come closer!"

Hundreds of wooden mechs suddenly emerged out of the surrounding gas clouds at a frightening short range!

"Elegant Rage, cover the Zeal." Joshua instructed even though the melee mech in question had already assumed the right position. "Don't worry about the enemies away from the Zeal. Dise and I will mop them up. Your only job is to make sure not a single wooden mech gets to touch our heavy artillery mech, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Hundreds of wooden mechs suddenly emerged out of the surrounding gas clouds at a frightening short range!

It was absurd how well they managed to hide their presence until they were almost right on top of the actual mechs!

This could no longer be explained by the high concentration of Solus Gas alone. Venerable Joshua was likely correct in that the wooden mechs had been infused with this exotic substance!

Not all of the wooden mechs that had exposed their existence were armed with melee weapons.

There were also hundreds more ranged mechs positioned further away that had opened fire at the same time. Each of them were modeled after the Stingripper, the Bright Warrior in rifleman mech configuration and even Transcendent Punishers that were firmly rooted on the ground!

Much of the seed projectiles launched by these wooden ranged mechs actually ended up striking their melee counterparts in the back or from below!

It couldn't be helped as the melee mechs did not exhibit a high degree of coordination. They simply swarmed straight at the four mechs like a horde of voracious voribugs!

This actually reduced the pressure on the human mechs and allowed them to deal with this latest threat with a bit less urgency than before.

"Bladestorm."

Venerable Dise unleashed her empowered sword technique at the right moment. The Decapitator slashed into the air multiple times at a dazzling speed, launching a literal storm of sword energy attacks that cut and dissected virtually every wooden mech in a very wide cone in front of the expert mech!

The First Sword alone managed to wipe out a quarter of the wooden melee mechs at once!

The Everchanger did not possess such an exaggerated ability to eliminate lots of enemies at once. The expert hero mech simply fired a multitude of fiery energy beams at low power at a rapid rate. Many wooden mechs either blew apart or caught fire after getting hit just once!

The enemy constructs that managed to get close simply got brutally chopped apart by single swings of the Heartsword.

Even though the Heartsword was arguably the least advanced weapon in the expert mech's arsenal, its sharpness could not be underestimated!

The slaughter inflicted by the two expert mechs was impressive, especially when considering that each wooden mech was roughly as tough as a typical second-class mech.

As a result, Lanie and Taon did not experience an excessive amount of pressure. They still needed to take care of the wooden mechs that targeted their machines, but they did not need to exchange words with each other to figure out a form of cooperation that worked out for them both.

The Zeal began to lob explosive shells at large concentrations of wooden ranged mechs in the distance.

Even though the thick Solus Gas concentration made it impossible for his sensor systems to detect their locations, the Zeal was more than capable enough to trace the trajectories of the incoming seed projectiles and form many estimates of the approximate coordinates of their origins.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Very faint and distant explosions sounded in the distance. The incoming fire abated almost immediately, proving that the heavy artillery mech was on the right track!

Taon found it must be easier to eliminate all of the wooden ranged mechs as they stupidly clumped together.

However, what was special about the Emperor Tree was that it often made a lot of mistakes at the beginning, but always demonstrated enough intelligence to correct its greatest shortcomings at a remarkable pace!

By the time more than half of the wooden ranged mechs got pulverized, the remaining ones not only spread out their formations, but also fired in a more irregular pattern, making it considerably harder to trace their locations!

While the Zeal continued to deal with the ranged threats, the Elegant Rage diligently wiped out the wooden melee mechs that got close.

Unlike the two expert mechs, the Elegant Rage did not possess the power to eliminate every threat with a single blow.

This quickly caused Lanie's mech to become surrounded by multiple threats. Each of them swung or stabbed their weapons against the custom mech's energy shield, causing its integrity to drop at a worrying rate.

Lanie felt much more pressured as she noticed the drop in shield integrity and urged her machine to eliminate the enemy threats faster and more efficiently!

Unfortunately, this was very hard to do. The wooden mechs displayed greater resilience against blunt attacks. Only the plasma emitters built into the tonfas could wipe out the wooden enemies

with a single hit, but they required constant delays before they were ready to discharge a lot of energy again.

The Elegant Rage also fought best when she was on the move. The need to cover for the Zeal forced the melee to stay close around the heavy mech, thereby limiting how much she could avoid attacks through pure maneuvering.

"You don't need to take so many hits on my behalf, Lanie! My heavy mech's azure energy shield is much stronger! The Zeal can take the abuse!"

"NO!" Lanie shouted back. "I am not going to let these wooden dummies force me to compromise my mission. I will defend you even if these wooden mechs begin to dent my Elegant Rage!"

Her resolve pushed her to concentrate and enter a state of heightened focus that she was only able to achieve with the help of her mech model's dual glow in the past.

Her mind became filled with nothing but combat instincts and techniques. Her judgment in combat became sharper, allowing her to navigate the swarm of enemies more skillfully and optimally than before.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The tonfas wielded by the Elegant Rage began to slam against the wooden mechs with brutal but efficient strokes. The melee mech also kicked out with her legs in order to temporarily push back some of the wooden mechs.

If not for the fact that the Emperor Tree's minions did not appear to possess any identifiable weak points, the Elegant Rage would have found a way to eliminate each of them with single blows!

Soon enough, the wave of wooden enemies subsided.

Before the human mechs eliminated the last of the wooden imitation copies, Joshua issued a quick command.

"Zeal, load an immobilizer shell and launch it towards one of the surviving wooden mechs. We need to preserve one of these wooden mechs and drag it back to Chimera Base."

"On it, sir."

The heavy artillery mech launched a single at a wooden copy of the Storm Sword. The poor construct had no defense against the explosion of slime that rapidly engulfed its form and hardened into a very tough resin-like material.

Before the trapped and immobilized wooden Storm Sword could crash onto the ground, the First Sword sheathed her greatsword and picked up the wooden mech with both of her arms.

"Bring it out of the red zone and drop it onto the ground. If the Emperor Tree doesn't reclaim it, we can take it along when we are on our way out. Don't forget to plant a tracking beacon."

"I will not forget."

The First Sword's flight system activated at full blast, causing the expert swordsman mech to disappear in an instant despite carrying a hefty prize.

The remaining three mechs tried their best to recover from the earlier bout and prepare for the next clash.

"Get ready." Joshua spoke. "Once the First Sword returns, we will advance right away. I think the Emperor Tree is done with probing us. Instead of waiting for it to launch an all-out attack, we should get close and start the process of harvesting samples. Get ready for a tough fight, and don't underestimate those wooden mechs. It will be much more difficult for us to deal with thousands of them at the same time, and the Emperor Tree itself also has a lot of means to defend itself."

The mech pilots already gained a more up to date glimpse of the threat posed by the Emperor Tree, yet all of them were aware that they had only perceived the tip of the iceberg.

Even though the tree undoubtedly had many more surprises in store, they could not continue to linger at a distance while they steadily lost more energy and ammunition.

The mechs clearly wouldn't be able to win a battle of attrition against a gigantic calamity plant in the latter's home turf, so the mission needed to be concluded sooner rather than later!