

The Mech 6061

Chapter 6061 Immature Wooden Constructs

During the time the four mechs faced the Emperor Tree's probes, two mech designers quietly observed the proceedings from afar.

Ketis and Ves had successfully employed a remote avatar channeling technique to deposit their respective companion spirits into their masterworks.

For now, Blinky remained quietly embedded inside the Everchanger while Sharpie continued to ride inside the Decapitator.

Neither companion spirits spent any effort to aid the expert mechs. There was no need to provide any assistance as the high-tier expert pilots were already strong enough to take care of themselves.

So far, the probing attacks allowed the two sides to gather a lot of information from each other.

The Emperor Tree gained a very clear understanding of the individual combat capabilities of each of the four mechs.

The two expert mechs stood out for their remarkable attack power and their incredibly strong resonance shields.

The two custom mechs were remarkably weaker, but they excelled in either melee or ranged combat.

The combination of the four mechs was very difficult to deal with, but the Emperor Tree apparently did not perceive an acute threat towards its life, or else it would have gone all-out a lot sooner.

If the calamity plant was truly a sapient being with the capacity to think in a logical manner, then it should understand the importance of planning and timing.

It became apparent that neither side intended to fight a decisive battle that would decide the overlord of this region on this day.

That did not mean that the Emperor Tree intended to be lenient towards the invading mechs!

Whether it understood that the mechs needed to return to Chimera Base in order to supply valuable data and tissue samples to the Larkinson Biotech Institute, the Emperor Tree was not about to let them return alive!

In the meantime, the human mech pilots grew more and more vigilant towards the Emperor Tree.

Their understanding of calamity beasts was relatively poor. The galactic net hardly supplied any detailed and reliable information on these mysterious twice-evolved creatures. The Hunting Association probably conducted the most research on them, but its most valuable data was only available to hunters and cooperating biotech organizations.

If the Larkinsons really wanted to, they could probably gain access to that valuable data, but that would require them to pay a price and become more entangled with the recently reformed and expanded association.

When Task Force Solus initially arrived in orbit of Reticula Corein V, the Larkinsons chose to collect information about calamity beasts themselves. There were over a dozen of them on this untamed planet alone, so that should make it easier to figure out their capabilities.

At least that was what they thought.

What the Larkinsons did not account for was that the calamity beasts were considerably more intelligent, powerful and adaptive than they thought.

Compared to mutated beasts, the difference was like night and day!

The Larkinsons learned the hard way that despite the lack of an overpowering Saint Kingdom, the claim that calamity beasts should be regarded as beings on the same level as ace pilots became more and more justified!

Perhaps the only consolation to Venerable Joshua and the other three mech pilots was that the Emperor Tree's comprehensive power did not exceed that of a junior ace pilot.

That was still a powerful being, but it was not entirely unbearable as Venerable Joshua and Venerable Dise were already ace pilot candidates.

Only a single barrier separated them from Sainthood!

Still, the Emperor Tree had not yet demonstrated all of its capabilities.

The ability to replicate mechs with its own wooden variant was the biggest surprise of this encounter so far.

How many wooden mechs did it manage to produce?

Were any of them stronger than the ones shown before?

What exactly controlled these mechs in battle?

More importantly, what could Ves learn from these remarkable creations?

Ves fixated on the latter question the most. From the moment he observed the wooden mechs emerging from the clouds, he instantly became fixated as if he had just come across an entire basin filled with phasewater.

As a man who craved novelty, how could he not become charmed by the Emperor Tree's weird attempt at replicating mechs?

Even though the calamity plant obviously did not possess a systematic understanding of basic science and engineering, the massive creature clearly possessed its own special talent and abilities. For it to be able to make a poor but relatively functional imitation of mechs already elevated the Emperor Tree far beyond any other calamity beasts and plants as far as Ves was concerned!

Ves even developed a strong urge to preserve the Emperor Tree and maybe even seek cooperation with it. From his perspective, it would be a waste to destroy such a magnificent and productive entity!

However, according to the Hunting Association and other sources, calamity beasts and to a certain extent plants were fundamentally hostile towards civilized life forms. They had proven to be utterly unreliable and untameable.

Many forces had already attempted to do so, but it had always ended in disaster!

Perhaps the reasons for all of these failures was because of lack of knowledge. There were still a lot of groups out there who stomached the losses and continued to perform different experiments.

The hope was that they would finally be able to develop their own proprietary taming method through trial and error.

Still, even if it was possible to form peaceful coexistence with a calamity beast or plant, it would take time for red humanity to develop an established and proven methodology.

If the Larkinsons wanted to tame their own calamity beast, then they had to take a lot of risks and potentially incur a lot of losses before they could get everything right!

This was clearly not an easy task to say the least. Ves did not dare to think about it any further. This was not the right time and place to harbor wild ambitions.

"What do you think about the wooden mechs, Ketis?" Ves asked over the still-active communication channel.

Deep inside the Wild Torch, the swordmaster furrowed her brows as she continued to think about what Sharpie managed to perceive of the strange imitation products.

"They cannot be defined as mechs." She spoke with certainty. "Sharpie is not as good at sensing life as you, but she has only sensed one controlling spirit inside each wooden construct, and it is not too strong either. They were all spawned by the Emperor Tree a relatively short time ago and developed to their present size and strength in haste. It would be more accurate to say that they are wooden battle bots."

Ves nodded in agreement. "I concur. Blinky is able to perceive a lot of interesting details about these wooden constructs. What I can tell you is that they are all strongly infused by fairly high-quality wood E energy. What is special is that the constructs themselves are not strong or developed enough to generate all of this wood energy. It is instead supplied by the Emperor Tree from remote. Whether accidentally or through deliberate attempts to imitate my living mechs, it has found a way to assume a role similar to a design spirit. Since it is the creator of its own wooden constructs, it is trivially easy for the Emperor Tree to forge a strong bond with these detached products."

In fact, becoming a design spirit was not very difficult so long as the receiving party was sufficiently alive.

The wooden constructs may be awful at replicating the full brilliance of their authentic mech counterparts, but they were alive in a sense!

Combined with their fantastic affinity with wood energy, it became easy for the Emperor Tree to convert its creations into tiny wooden extensions of itself.

"So the wooden mechs are not completely independent, but they are not directly controlled by the Emperor Tree either." Ketis summarized. "Either way, neither option is good at piloting mechs. The calamity plant may have attained some success in replicating our mechs, but it is much less able to replicate the decades of education, training and combat experience of actual mech pilots."

"It is learning quickly, though. Have you noticed that the second wave of wooden mechs started off the previous bout with absolutely no sign of any deliberate tactics and positioning, but gradually

began to adjust their operations as they suffered disproportionate losses? By the time the four mechs finished off the last of their wooden opponents, the Emperor Tree seemingly mastered some of the basics of tactics and formation theory."

That was scary. The Emperor Tree may have emerged from a low starting point, but its frightening capacity to learn from its enemies had raised its upper limit!

The Emperor Tree would definitely become a fearsome opponent if it ever managed to evolve into a god plant, especially now that it had already become exposed to human fighting methods!

Ketis narrowed her eyes. "After our mechs have collected the necessary samples, I won't wait too long for the LBI to present me with all of their data and conclusions. We need to get ready to mobilize a kill force in order to take this tree down once and for all. The longer we delay, the harder it becomes to defeat it without generating lots of noise."

Generating too much noise would alarm all of the other calamity beasts on the planet. In the worst case scenario, they might spontaneously decide to band together to demolish the extraterrestrial invaders!

"It won't be easy to kill the Emperor Tree in a short amount of time without relying on massed firepower." Ves noted. "Saint Tusa can't help even if his Dark Zephyr has been upgraded to an ace mech because his machine simply isn't configured for mass destruction. You are better off fielding the Promethea instead."

Ketis frowned. "In hindsight, I shouldn't have let Venerable Isobel Kotin transfer back to the expeditionary fleet."

"She went back in time to speed up the downfall of the Torment Fleet and prevent multiple alien warships from eliminating a lot of good mechs and mech pilots. In any case, the expeditionary fleet has retreated from the frontlines, so there is no problem with transferring the Promethea back to your task force. You will need her firepower now that burning a huge amount of biomass in a short amount of time has become desirable again."

The reason why the Promethea only fought on the surface for a short time was because the Larkinsons did not want her to burn all of the exobeast carcasses.

Even if Venerable Isobel and the Promethea went against their nature and deliberately suppressed the propagation of their purple flames, it was too difficult to completely tame such a volatile force.

Far too many valuable beast carcasses got burned into worthless ash due to the Promethea's fiery firepower!

"Are you willing to let the Promethea burn down the entire Emperor Tree?" Ketis asked.

"To be honest, no. I have a strong suspicion that I can harvest unimaginable gains if I can capture the Emperor Tree alive. It would be irresponsible for me to request your task force to subjugate it to the point where it has completely surrendered to our control. Just do your best to harvest as many gains as possible. Even if the tree is lost to us forever, we will most certainly encounter other calamity trees in the future. We don't need to get too hung up over missing a lot of opportunities this time."

It was not quite certain what Ves could gain out of studying the Emperor Tree anyway.

Perhaps its wooden constructs did not really possess anything significant that was worth studying and reverse engineering.

Wait. That was not quite true. Ves could think of one benefit that elevated the research value of these wooden creations!

"Did you notice that both the Emperor Tree and these wooden constructs have infused Solus Gas into their structures? This has made them a lot more difficult to detect and read through different means. The effect is remarkably stable and consistent. We may be able to learn a thing or two about how to make practical use of Solus Gas by studying the powerful tree's methods."

Depending on the supply of Solus Gas and the ease of integrating this exotic substance into metallic mechs, this could potentially make every Larkinson mech harder to detect and read!

Chapter 6062 The Potential of Elemental Mechs

There was one other idea that Ves had in mind.

It was such an outlandish one that he did not dare to share it with Ketis.

The idea was simple. Although the technical properties of the wooden constructs were not too strong and impressive, they were mainly limited due to the suboptimal circumstances of their creation.

The Emperor Tree did not have access to top materials. It knew nothing about systematic mech design. It lacked the most fundamental understanding of the concepts behind mechs.

What if a real mech designer took this method and designed a proper 'wooden mech'?

Was it possible for Ves to collaborate with the Emperor Tree or use it as an organic mech production facility to create all kinds of strange and exotic wooden constructs that could be piloted like conventional mechs?

Ves grew incredibly curious about this possibility!

Although the current wooden mechs produced by the Emperor Tree did not have a lot of remarkable properties so far, they did have a few merits that were hard to replicate by ordinary metallic mechs.

First, the wooden mechs seemed to possess regenerating qualities.

This was hard to notice at first because all of the Larkinson mechs demolished the wooden constructs far too quickly for the regeneration to become noticeable.

It was only when Ves paid attention to the wooden mechs damaged by the Elegant Rage that he noticed this quality.

The wooden mechs recovered relatively rapidly with the help of an abundant infusion of wood energy!

What was even more remarkable was that the efficiency was remarkably high! The Emperor Tree only had to inject a bit of wood energy to regenerate a major wound!

How could this be possible? Why was the wood produced by the Emperor Tree so malleable and easy to manipulate?

After going through his observations, Ves believed that one of the secrets may be the remarkable sap that was circulating inside the wooden constructs.

This sap produced an undeniable attraction to Ves. It was filled with such a high concentration of wood and possibly even life energy that he couldn't help but develop new ideas.

Different from metallic mechs, the wooden mechs were undoubtedly a lot more compatible with life energy. Ves believed he could explore a lot of interesting facets about living mechs if he started to experiment by applying his design philosophy to the Emperor Tree's exotic creations.

Aside from that, Ves also developed a bolder and more daring idea.

What would it be like if he combined the Carmine System with a wooden mech?

The new and potentially greater synergies produced from this unusual combination might actually spark the birth of an entirely new subcategory of Carmine mechs!

Ves already came up with the concept of Bloodfire mechs as a potential upgrade path for regular Carmine mechs. Just like the Dominion of Man, Bloodfire mechs theoretically had the ability to utilize fire energy as a substitute for blood as a binding medium.

When he looked at the crude wooden mechs produced by the Emperor Tree, he had a feeling he could use the organic circulation system of these constructs as another substitute of blood!

If he had to call it by a name, then he would call these hypothetical creations Woodsap mechs, as they derived their power from the incredibly nurturing Woodsap Pact between a Carmine mech and a mech pilot.

In fact, he speculated that he did not even need to design and grow a full wooden mech in order to develop a Woodsap Pact. Only the internal circulating system that was normally used to circulate human blood had to be replaced by a special wooden version.

So long as the compatibility between a wooden version of the Carmine System and the mech was not too bad, the two should be able to get along well.

Ves widened his eyes.

"This is an excellent addition to the upcoming Everchanger Mark III Project!"

The Everchanger was the only Larkinson expert mech that was biased towards life. While that did not necessarily align him towards the wood attribute, the compatibility between the two concepts was high.

At the very least, an upgrade in this direction would truly turn the Everchanger into a regenerating powerhouse that possessed enhanced nurturing properties!

Ves was pretty sure that no other mech like this could ever exist! The Everchanger would be an utterly unique and unforgettable living mech that had developed in a unique trajectory!

His excitement suddenly dropped when he reminded himself that the decision to convert any machine to a Carmine mech had to depend on the will of the mech pilot.

Even if the Everchanger was technically the property of the Larkinson Clan, thereby granting Ves the absolute right to do anything he wanted to his asset, Venerable Joshua had long regarded his battle partner as his possession.

If he ever advanced to the rank of ace pilot, then it was practically unthinkable to recall an ace mech from a Saint regardless of who owned the machine on paper!

The extraordinary high status of ace pilots along with the incredibly unfair preferential treatment provided by the Red Association had firmly cemented this precedent!

It was the privilege of a mech designer to be able to supply an excellent mech to an excellent mech pilot.

In any case, even if Venerable Joshua wanted to keep his options open for whatever reason, Ves could just design a Woodsap mech from scratch.

Perhaps it was better this way as he could account for the presence of a Woodsap System in a mech from the start instead of trying to cram it into an existing machine.

Ves' breathing grew heavier. He wanted to work on such a project right away. He needed to gain the power of the Emperor Tree in order to get started on such a profoundly exciting extension of the Carmine System! He could feel his design flame shaking as if his design philosophy might actually be able to progress by another step once he successfully realized this innovative concept!

His eyes suddenly widened as he made another shocking inference.

"Wait, is this a potential way for me to realize my design philosophy? Can I become a Master Mech Designer by developing variations of the Carmine System based on the five classical elements?"

At first, the entire notion sounded stupid and arbitrary to Ves. Why would developing five seemingly random elemental variations of the Carmine System allow him to realize his design philosophy?

Then he thought about what it would be like if 5 Carmine mechs that were strongly aspected towards 5 classical elements joined up and fought alongside each other.

Ves could not imagine how powerful they would become when their respective elements synergized with each other in the most astonishing manner!

So long as their teamwork was not too bad, they should easily be able to take advantage of the mutual transformations and other interactions between the 5 elements to exert power far beyond their individual capabilities!

Ves imagined that it would be similar to bringing a split version of the ill-fated Elemental Lord to life!

An outrageous notion suddenly entered his mind!

"It may even be possible for the combination of 5 ace mechs with different Elemental Carmine Systems to gain the effective combat power of a god mech!"

That was a crazy idea! It was far too unrealistic! It could never happen in reality! The chasm between ace mechs and god mechs was so wide that it could not be bridged by relying on quantity alone.

No matter whether there were 5 or 50 ace mechs, each of them were as weak as babies in front of a single god mech!

Ves needed to temper his expectations.

Even though the synergies could not be maximized due to the fact that the 5 elements were all rooted in different mechs, they should still be a lot higher than nearly anything else that other mech designers could produce!

"It's not going to be easy, though." He muttered to himself. "I need to develop a Carmine mech based on the water, earth and metal element as well in order to round out my collection."

Ves was not sure whether this was even feasible or possible on a technical level.

He only coincidentally came up with the concept of Woodsap mechs by having Blinky ride along the Everchanger during this mission.

If Ves did not glimpse the Emperor Tree's wooden constructs and drew all kinds of inspiration from their remarkable properties, he may have never been able to come up with a promising idea to combine the wood element with the Carmine System!

Personally, Ves was not quite certain whether he wanted to embed the five classical elements into his design philosophy. It would make his work a lot more convoluted and difficult to learn by other mech designers. It may also make his subsequent attempt to become a Star Designer exponentially more difficult!

The boost in power and the humongous synergies may be worth all of the added complications. Ves was nothing if not ambitious.

As long as he was lucky and proactive enough, he may be able to figure out the water, earth and metal variations of the Carmine System within a decade. It might take even less time since each of these elemental variations may share a lot of commonalities that could save him a lot of work.

So long as he met the other requirements for promotion, Ves was reasonably confident he could quickly advance to Master Mech Designer!

"If I go down this route, I am pretty sure that I have to successfully design and fabricate a working version of the Elemental Lord in order to become a Star Designer!"

That was a very shocking guess!

He knew exactly what he needed to do in order to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer and Star Designer!

This was a very luxurious benefit as most Senior Mech Designers still remained lost in the fog. It was not unusual for them to waste decades if not centuries of their valuable lifespans in order to realize their design philosophies.

It also had massive implications if it was true!

The advantage of going down this route was that Ves had removed most if not all of the ambiguity about his future development trajectory.

He knew exactly what he needed to do in order to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer and Star Designer!

This was a very luxurious benefit as most Senior Mech Designers still remained lost in the fog. It was not unusual for them to waste decades if not centuries of their valuable lifespans in order to realize their design philosophies.

As for figuring out how to become a Star Designer? No way! This exalted rank was way too far away to these poor Seniors.

To be honest, Ves shouldn't be thinking about how to plan his subsequent advancement to Star Designer either, but he couldn't help it. Making up for his past regrets and creating a viable version of the Elemental Lord was the natural step to take.

Ves still felt rather reluctant to commit to this path. His dream was to become a proper mech designer, but getting too entangled with the five elements would yank him way too far into cultivator territory.

This was not necessarily a bad development, but Ves was not quite sure whether it matched his style and inclinations.

In his heart, he would much rather focus on improving the more fundamental life aspect of his living mechs.

He much preferred to pursue his previous potential advancement opportunity by collaborating with Alexa Streon on combining the Carmine System with her living legacy mechs.

The intended outcome was to create Carmine mech pilots that could freely interface with every Carmine mech that belonged to the same living mech dynasty.

This not only justified the existence of Alexa's works, but also circumvented the greatest shortcoming of Carmine mechs, which was that mech pilots were normally bound to a single partner for the rest of their lives!

"The issue is that this research direction won't make my Carmine mechs stronger. It just increases the fault tolerance of my clients and customers."

Was that truly what red humanity needed in order to repel apocalyptic threats such as the incoming Subjugation King?

Another disadvantage of this trajectory was that Ves would have to wait for Alexa to grow up and develop her design philosophy further.

He was not sure whether it was a good idea to depend on another individual to trigger his advancement to the rank of Master Mech Designer.

Even if he trusted Alexa a lot for multiple reasons, what if they had a falling out in the next few years?

If he was unable to gain her cooperation anymore, then that would strand his attempt to realize his design philosophy according to his original plan!

"Ugh. What a difficult choice."

Ves could still work on both trajectories in parallel. That would allow him to break through to the next rank... eventually.

"I can't wait that long."

He knew his faults. He knew that he had a tendency to be scatterbrained, but there had to be a limit.

If he wanted to become a Star Designer within the next 5 decades, he needed to rein in his excesses and exert at least some focus in his work.

Which research direction should he choose?

Should he dedicate his time to developing Carmine mechs in a way that would promote a huge quantity of Carmine mech pilots?

Or should he devote his time to developing Carmine mechs that were much more unforgiving but also capable of nurturing a smaller group of much more powerful champions?

Chapter 6063 Without Assistance

While Ves became distracted by the ideas sprung from observing the wooden constructs, the battle on Reticula Corein V resumed.

The First Sword was a fast machine and did not take too long to deposit the captured and preserved 'wooden mech' outside of the red line.

Once the expert swordsman mech rejoined the other three living mechs, the mech pilots all prepared for a much tougher confrontation ahead.

There was no need for too much discussion as they already held an extensive briefing before the start of the mission.

They only needed to take into account the possibility that they might get swarmed by a lot of wooden mechs in the process of collecting the samples.

"The good news is that we have tentatively secured at least one sample, and it is probably the most valuable one of all as far as our clan is concerned." Venerable Joshua spoke. "If we fail to gather any other samples for the remainder of this mission, we won't return empty-handed."

Although he did not mention it, the expert pilot clearly detected the presence of Blinky and even Sharpie.

With his heightened sensitivity towards life, Joshua was even able to sense Blinky's constrained excitement towards the wooden mechs!

It was not difficult to conclude that the wooden constructs produced by the Emperor Tree held a lot of research value to Ves. This was also the reason why Joshua ordered the First Sword to bring the captured specimen out of the red zone right away.

"Agree." Venerable Dise said. "We cannot afford to linger too long here. The Emperor Tree is not strictly an ambush predator. It is a tree version of a persistence hunter. It wants us to stay as long as possible and outlast us in a battle of attrition. It may even be smart enough to present attractive bait to us. We cannot fall for its trap."

"It is better to collect as much data about this calamity plant as possible. To that end, we should proceed to harvest all of the samples demanded by our biotechs. We need to take away a tree branch, a tree root and a piece of bark. The larger the samples, the better. We also need to collect as many leaves and seeds as possible. We have limited equipment that we can use to contain or carry all of that stuff, but there are only four of us, so don't obsess too much with trying to overcomplete the mission. As far as I am concerned, it is better to settle for smaller samples, because we need to go in and out as quickly as possible."

"Agree." Venerable Dise said. "We cannot afford to linger too long here. The Emperor Tree is not strictly an ambush predator. It is a tree version of a persistence hunter. It wants us to stay as long as

possible and outlast us in a battle of attrition. It may even be smart enough to present attractive bait to us. We cannot fall for its trap."

"Three minutes." Joshua stated. "We stay for three minutes at most. Regardless of how many samples we have collected, we need to get out of the danger zone before the deadline passes."

"Will we still prioritize the collection of a tree root above all other objectives?"

"No, Lanie. There is a change of plans. We must return with at least one fluid container filled with the sap of the main trunk."

That caused the other three pilots to frown as it was the riskiest objective by far. Anyone could tell that lingering close to the trunk would provoke the most violent reaction from the Emperor Tree!

"I will do it." Venerable Dise proposed. "My Decapitator should be able to cut straight through the thick back."

Joshua shook his head. "No. My mech and I will do it. Your First Sword is harder to hit, but this mission requires your living mech to linger at a single location for a longer period of time. My Everchanger is not a defensive machine, but he is tougher and better able to recover from serious hits. Focus on the roots instead. Those look like they are just as hard to cut through."

"WE SHALL NOT FAIL." The First Sword answered on behalf of her mech pilot as her greatsword glowed with increasing sharpness.

"What about us?" Lanie asked.

"Stick to the original plan, but with adaptations. The Zeal should focus his Devora Cannon on trying to sever one of the tree branches, but reserve his heavy artillery cannons to mopping up the seed cannons and wooden mechs. The Elegant Rage must guard our only heavy artillery mech and be ready to act as an emergency porter if necessary."

In fact, the latter shouldn't happen now that the Emperor Tree exposed its wooden mechs.

It was far more important to protect the Zeal than to collect more samples!

After issuing a few instructions, Joshua finally gave the command.

"Start!"

The four mechs blasted directly towards the Emperor Tree!

Even though the machines had already crossed the red line, they had maintained enough distance to slightly lower the calamity plant's vigilance.

Their bold and unconstrained approach changed all of that and caused the Emperor Tree to go all-out in repelling the incoming intruders!

Loud wooden groans and cracking noises sounded as the gigantic tree began to sway!

Its humongous branches began to swing back and forth at a seemingly slow but incredibly powerful manner!

Winds whipped and leaves flew into the air as the turbulence produced by the violent motions completely turned the airspace around the Emperor Tree into a no-fly-zone!

The thick Solus Gas did not help matters either. The concentration began to fluctuate as the Emperor Tree stirred up the exotic gas and caused sensor systems to struggle to perceive details at further distances.

This did not stop the four mechs as the Emperor Tree was just too damn big.

"Careful!"

The Emperor Tree had managed to summon a lot of additional seed cannons.

The difference this time was that they were a lot larger!

Not only that, but the Emperor Tree had spread them out along its entire bark so that a dozen of them could no longer be eliminated with a single explosive strike.

If that was not bad enough, the seeds launched by these wooden cannons were thrice as massive and struck with considerably greater power than before!

The Zeal's floater platform stabilized in the air, allowing the heavy artillery mech to assume a stable firing position and begin to open fire.

The living mech's four heavy artillery cannons immediately engaged in counter-battery fire, although he was also the focus of much of the incoming projectiles.

Since neither of the two sides of this artillery duel were mobile, this confrontation had turned into a test of their offensive and defensive power.

The larger wooden cannons were able to endure greater punishment before reaching their limits, so the Zeal had to launch far more transphasic explosive shells in order to eliminate the larger seed cannons one by one.

Yet just after the Zeal eliminated one of the isolated seed cannons, the nearby bark would retract, causing another hidden seed cannon to emerge from its protective enclosure before opening fire!

"I cannot suppress the Emperor Tree's firepower." Taon reported. "It has far more seed cannons in reserve, but it knows better than to expose them all at once."

That did not stop the Ylvainan pilot from continuing to fire the heavy artillery cannons while at the same time taking aim with the massive Devora Cannon.

The oversized super-heavy gauss cannon began to exude a lot of threat as it took aim at one of the swaying branches of the Emperor Tree.

It was actually quite hard to track individual branches through the motion of millions of branches of different sizes.

Taon also had no guarantee that a hit would cause a branch to get severed in one or two heavy kinetic impacts. He tried his best to aim for the smaller and less sturdy looking branches, but the problem with that approach was that these were far more flexible and difficult to target as a consequence.

It was times like these that Taon missed the Guided Aim ability the most. Having to pilot the Zeal without the presence of the Great Prophet at hand was like trying to dance with one foot.

His eyes sharpened as he and his living mech tried their best to focus on the job and sever one of the branches from the Emperor Tree.

"We can do this, Zeal."

The two worked together like they had always done in the past.

The Zeal performed all of the calculations and adjusted the aim of the massive forward-facing super-heavy gauss cannon.

Taon relied on his intuition, judgment and training to minutely shift the angles of the Devora Cannon.

Once he felt that the timing was right, he mentally pulled the trigger, causing the massive kinetic cannon to launch a transphasic super-heavy gauss round straight into the mass of branches and leaves of the massive Emperor Tree!

BOOOOM!

Although the power of this attack was impressive, the transphasic super-heavy round actually missed the target by over half a meter!

"How could we miss?!"

Instead of striking a branch that looked small and thin enough to get separated in a single hit, the massive transphasic round proceeded to push through a lot of leaves before striking a much larger tree branch!

Bark and wooden splinters immediately erupted from the crater, yet the branch still remained mostly intact!

What was worse was that a powerful infusion of wood energy from the Emperor Tree caused the branch to regenerate from the impact damage at a remarkable speed!

"What?!"

The regeneration speed of the main body of the Emperor Tree was much greater than that of its wooden mechs!

The tree branch became whole again in no time!

Both Taon and the Zeal became dismayed. The Emperor Tree's vitality and recovery ability were just so damn strong that it was effectively impossible to sever one of its branches with two or more sequential attacks.

Unless Taon decided to give up and shift his responsibility to the other mech pilots, he needed to stick to his initial plan and focus on hitting the smaller and more vulnerable branches!

This was going to be tough. He was already allocating a part of his focus on making sure the heavy artillery cannons continued to demolish the large seed cannons that constantly emerged from different parts of the trunk.

The azure energy shield of the Zeal might be able to withstand a lot more attacks than other standard mechs, but it was visibly losing integrity as each large seed strike drained it a little bit further!

What was even worse was that the wooden mechs had made a return!

Hundreds of them emerged from the upper canopy of the Emperor Tree. The calamity plant had apparently converted parts of it into production facilities and hangar bays.

The sight of so many wooden mechs appearing from the thick Solus Gas and besetting the Zeal and the other mechs from above was intimidating!

"Break for me!" Lanie shouted as her Elegant Rage flew above the Zeal and intercepted the descending wooden mechs with brutal and efficient tonfa strikes!

Occasionally, the Elegant Rage was forced to push or kick away the falling wooden constructs to prevent them from crashing on top of the Zeal's increasingly more strained azure energy shield.

However, the Elegant Rage was unable to prevent the wooden mechs descending further away from attacking the Zeal at other angles.

The heavy artillery mech was forced to divert his firepower into blasting the wooden mechs that approached from every other direction.

Though the constructs were just as fragile as the ones that showed up in the last waves, the problem was that their quantity was far too great this time!

"The Emperor Tree is targeting one of my Zeal's weaknesses!" Taon gasped. "It is attempting to swarm my battle partner with cannon fodder!"

The combination between the Elegant Rage and the Zeal was not enough to cope with such a massive quantity of enemy units.

The Zeal might possess the ability to wipe out large amounts of enemies at a time, but that was only when the latter were clumped up and positioned much further away.

As soon as the swarm of enemies came close enough, it became a lot more difficult for the Zeal to defend itself.

Lanie had no choice but to direct her Elegant Rage to fly closer to the Zeal and mop up the wooden mechs that had come close as fast as possible!

Chapter 6064 Killing Efficiency

The tide of wooden mechs threatened to drown the two custom mechs.

While the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan could easily clear up a swarm of weak mech-like opponents, the story was different for more ordinary mech pilots and machines!

Both Lanie and Taon had trained their skills to the point where they exceeded the limitations of ordinary humans in a few aspects.

Yet to consider their piloting skills close to that of an expert pilot was a complete fantasy!

To be honest, the capabilities of their mechs mattered a lot more. If they were armed with an abundance of weapons or possessed excellent swarm-clearing capabilities, they should be able to deal with this tide with considerably less difficulty.

Mobility was another advantage that mechs could use. As long as they were fast and agile when maneuvering under 1.3 g, they could still evade a lot of seed projectiles while deftly preventing the wooden mechs from forming a complete envelopment.

Unfortunately for the two expert candidates, the strengths and weaknesses constrained their ability to cope in this situation!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Equipped with only 4 heavy artillery cannons, the semi-modular Zeal was fantastic at clearing weaker opponents from afar, but it was never designed to repel so many enemies up close!

Taon and the Zeal had to manually override the safety protocols of the explosive shells and forcibly program to detonate almost the instant they exited the muzzles of the cannons.

Still, it relieved the Zeal's immediate crisis. The adaption successfully cleared a lot of swarming wooden mechs that approached from above and several other directions, but the problem was that the weapon hardpoints of the custom Transcendent Punisher were all located on his 'back'!

01:13

Although most of the power of the explosions ended up killing lots of wooden mechs at once, they also inflicted a certain amount of damage to the originator's own azure energy shield, thereby turning this into an unsustainable tactic.

Still, it relieved the Zeal's immediate crisis. The adaption successfully cleared a lot of swarming wooden mechs that approached from above and several other directions, but the problem was that the weapon hardpoints of the custom Transcendent Punisher were all located on his 'back'!

Similar to an oval turtle shell, any guns mounted on the upper surface had no way of aiming their guns downwards!

The firing angle of the much more massive Devora Cannon was even worse. The oversized gauss cannon was mounted on a demiturret-like construction that had been affixed to 4 whole weapon hardpoints.

The immense size and power of the super-heavy cannon made it so that it could only aim forward at very limited angles.

Even then, it was not a suitable weapon for swarm clearing purposes as it had an enormous tendency to overpenetrate weaker targets, especially when all of its kinetic rounds were transphasic in nature!.

The Devora Cannon was mainly designed to burst transphasic energy shields and pierce through the thickest armor plating. Even if a bunch of wooden mechs attacked from the front, the powerful kinetic weapon was only able to clear up a very narrow lane!

"They are coming from below!" Taon yelled as he came under much greater pressure. "The Zeal's azure energy shield won't last long at this rate! You need to wipe them out faster!"

The Zeal may be a masterwork mech, but it still could not escape the fundamental fact that it was a heavy artillery mech!

As far as specialized mechs went, heavy artillery mechs were notoriously powerful when they were in their element, but also incredibly weak when enemies managed to exploit their weak points!

If the Zeal was placed on the ground, then it wouldn't have to expose its bottom side to the enemy, but Taon did not dare to plant his living mech on the surface.

The Emperor Tree had not yet employed its root spikes so far, but the Larkinsons had already learned of their existence. The damage they could inflict was bound to be greater!

The expert candidate felt deeply uncomfortable about this situation. He and his battle partner had volunteered for a mission where they were placed as far away from their ideal circumstances as possible!

Instead of being safely ensconced in a sturdy and solid bunker on a capital ship, the Zeal was completely exposed from every direction.

Instead of being guarded by hundreds if not thousands of friendly mechs, the Zeal could only count on the inadequate protection of the Elegant Rage.

Instead of being able to eliminate swarms of enemies from tens if not hundreds of kilometers away, the Zeal was forced to repel many of them at close to point-blank range!

All of these conditions piled up a huge amount of stress on the Ylvainan expert candidate's shoulders. He felt like a fish out of water that was desperately trying to breathe in water, only to suck in pure air instead.

If that was not bad enough, Taon wasn't even able to complete his original assignment, which was to sever a branch from the Emperor Tree!

Even though one of the expert pilots should be able to complete this task with ease, Taon did not want to distract them and add an extra burden to their shoulders.

"My energy shield has less than 50 percent integrity left!"

Taon understood the appeal of first-class multipurpose mechs a lot better now that he had ended up in this dire predicament.

They might not be particularly outstanding in any aspect, but their lack of obvious weaknesses made them a lot safer!

Taon had not ended up in such a dire life-threatening situation for years. His breathing grew a lot heavier while sweat poured from his brows.

Though Lanie's ability to keep her Elegant Rage intact was a lot better, the melee mech was also out of her element at the moment!

01:25

During previous battles, the Elegant Rage always fought alongside thousands if not tens of thousands of mechs of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Though his Zeal remained stable on top of the floater platform, this illusion of stability would not last forever. If the wooden mechs from below were not dealt with soon, the Zeal would definitely lose its ability to levitate in the air!

"Lanie!"

"I am doing my best, Taon, but my killing efficiency is too low!"

Though Lanie's ability to keep her Elegant Rage intact was a lot better, the melee mech was also out of her element at the moment!

During previous battles, the Elegant Rage always fought alongside thousands if not tens of thousands of mechs of the Golden Skull Alliance.

There were so many swordsman mechs, space knights, lancer mechs, rifleman mechs, heavy artillery mechs and so on that they fulfilled every important role.

Lanie Larkinson and the Elegant Rage served as an independent champion unit that was able to pick and choose their battles. This allowed the pair to always fight in the places where they could make the greatest contributions according to their capabilities.

This was not possible anymore!

There was no other melee mech that was free enough to cover the Zeal's enormous blind spots.

The Emperor Tree which controlled or directed the wooden constructs from remote did not miss this glaring fact, and directed an increasing amount of wooden mechs to attack from below!

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The Elegant Rage efficiently employed single strikes to crack or burn the wooden mechs modeled after light mechs such as the Ferocious Piranha.

However, the wooden mechs modeled after the Stormblade Samurai, the Storm Sword and the Bright Warrior took two or three hits to eliminate.

All of this slowed down the Elegant Rage's killing speed and steadily caused the quantity of wooden mechs to pile up around the two Larkinson mechs.

There was so much wood in the way that more constructs were unable to approach due to the growing amount of congestion!

With so many enemies around the Elegant Rage, her energy shield which was much less powerful than that of the Zeal already began to flicker!

Once the Elegant Rage lost her energy barrier, her relatively fragile mech frame would not be able to block or parry every strike with her pair of tonfas. She would most definitely get crippled within seconds!

If Lanie abandoned her duty to protect the Zeal's blindspots, then the Elegant Rage might be able to last a dozen or so seconds longer, but maneuvering around was not a solution when there were still lots of ranged wooden mechs firing lots of seeds at the intruding mechs.

Lanie couldn't take it any longer!

"JOSHUA! I NEED HELP!"

The response came in an instant. While the Everchanger was embroiled in his own difficulties, the expert hero mech explosively pushed back the branches and the much more powerful wooden mechs assailing him from multiple sides before bailing out the two expert candidates!

The Everchanger raised the arm holding the Vitalus and began to unleash a staccato of more powerful resonance-empowered fire beams at the wooden constructs threatening to overwhelm the Zeal and the Elegant Rage.

This time, the powerful energy beams punched through dozens of wooden mechs with every piercing shot!

The wooden mechs that did not collapse right after they got struck burst into flames and fell to the ground like flaming sparks.

The congestion of the wooden mechs worked against them for once as the hyper laser beams fired by the Vitalus easily saved the two customs from their immediate predicament and gave them a small reprieve!

Everyone knew it was only temporary, though. The Emperor Tree had launched thousands of wooden mechs from its canopy and continued to release them as soon as they had been formed.

"Lanie! Catch my blade!"

"What?!"

Joshua did not explain any further. He simply commanded his Everchanger to swing back his other arm before tossing his Heartsword towards the Elegant Rage in a parabolic trajectory!

The control and aim of the weapon toss was excellent. The Everchanger did not throw the weapon out at full strength, but controlled it carefully so that it traversed in the air at a more manageable speed.

Due to the Everchanger's ranged barrage, there were no wooden mechs in the vicinity that could intercept the tossed mech sword!

It turned out that the main reason why the Everchanger cleared out all of the wooden mechs was for this purpose!

The Elegant Rage quickly stowed away its mediocre tonfas and flew up to meet and catch the Heartsword by the grip!

From the moment the melee mech clutched the sword that had accompanied a famous hero mech for many years, the Elegant Rage and her pilot immediately felt the power contained within!

"It's so powerful!"

Under normal circumstances, it was possible for standard mechs to wield weapons originally designed to be utilized by expert mechs.

The Heartsword was not a high-tier Destroyer weapon, so it was not necessarily capable of producing a backlash that could destroy an unqualified wielder.

However, it had not only been baptized by Venerable Joshua's willpower and domain for a long time, but still carried enough true resonance to maintain its unnaturally sharp edge!

All of that energy and power caused Lanie to groan. She felt as if she was repeatedly slamming her head against the Everchanger's resonance shield

Even if Joshua never meant to hurt Lanie, he and his living mech imprinted themselves onto the Heartsword so much that it naturally attempted to overpower Lanie's psyche.

This was why standard mechs rarely if ever took the initiative to borrow the weapons of powerful expert mechs!

The phenomena that exerted a lot of strain on Lanie's mind and will was called willpower contamination.

If Lanie's willpower was unable to withstand the erosion from the Heartsword, then she will assimilate a part of Joshua's power.

This might not sound like a bad deal, but it was awful to ordinary mech pilots!

The basis of breaking through to expert pilot was to develop supreme confidence in themselves and their own ability.

If pilots intentionally or unintentionally became contaminated by the willpower of another expert pilot, they would no longer retain their own identities anymore. They became so confused about their own selves that they were unable to transform their willpower anymore!

Lanie understood the risks quite well, but her Elegant Rage did not let go of the Heartsword.

"I shall not fail!"

With such a powerful weapon in hand, the Elegant Rage seemed to gain a lot of renewed energy.

The machine held the Heartsword with two hands and began to charge straight at the newer waves of wooden mechs approaching from below!

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

A multitude of wooden mechs broke in half or shattered into multiple pieces as the Heartsword easily cut through them in a single swing!

Millions of wooden splinters exploded in the air, slightly obscuring the Elegant Rage as she began to charge towards other wooden mechs before rampaging in their midst!

"This... this is real power!" Lanie ecstatically yelled as her Elegant Rage's killing efficiency skyrocketed!

She became so buoyed by the superior performance of the Heartsword that her good mood made the pressure of holding this expert mech sword more bearable.

Now that the Zeal was no longer getting assailed from all sides, Taon was finally able to allocate greater focus towards severing one of the swaying tree branches!

Chapter 6065 Am I Not As Good As I Thought?

The Elegant Rage gained new life after she had obtained a new weapon.

The Heartsword may be the least fanciest weapon in the Everchanger's arsenal, but that did not change the fact that it was far tougher and sharper than practically any other blade wielded by a standard mech!

It was a disproportionately powerful weapon when wielded by a standard mech. Lanie completely forgot about her custom mech's tonfas and eagerly began to revive all of the swordsmanship skills that she had accumulated and 'inherited' in the past!

The Heartsword was explicitly designed as a handy alloy sword that was meant to be wielded by a single hand.

Unlike the long and massive greatswords wielded by many Swordmaiden mechs, the Heartsword's mass and length was not particularly high.

The Elegant Rage possessed enough physical power to cut through one wooden mech with the Heartsword, but it was a lot more difficult to cleave through other enemies with the same blow.

This was not a failure on the part of the Heartsword. It was already a sharp weapon on its own, and the true resonance imbued by Venerable Joshua directly enhanced this trait.

However, now that the Heartsword had left the Everchanger's hand, the weapon was not able to maintain a solid connection to Joshua's willpower. The empowerment from true resonance had become feebler as it needed to last for the remainder of the engagement.

This forced Lanie to make adaptations to her combat approach.

Her Elegant Rage began to maneuver more violently in the air. Only by building up momentum was she able to generate the greater forces required to cut through multiple wooden mechs at once.

Though Lanie did not have much practice with wielding such a powerful weapon with limited reach with two hands, she applied all of her relevant skills and adapted them according to the situation.

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Holding the weapon with two hands also allowed the melee mech to maintain a firmer grip on the Heartsword. Lanie did not dare to wield the Heartsword with a single arm. Her mech had become a weak point at this time.

It was very much possible for the expert mech-grade weapon to slip out of Elegant Rage's grasp if it was only held with a single hand!

Though Lanie did not have much practice with wielding such a powerful weapon with limited reach with two hands, she applied all of her relevant skills and adapted them according to the situation.

Her melee mech's killing efficiency steadily rose while also getting hit much less in return. The living mech regained some of the elegance that characterized her performance in previous battles.

"Ma-aow!"

A spiritual Burmese cat helped Lanie improve her control over her mech and borrowed weapon by inhabiting the Elegant Rage.

Kelly usually occupied one of the tonfas in order to give the expert candidate greater control over the weapon, but the companion spirit did not dare to get too close to the Heartsword.

Venerable Joshua's lingering willpower was so strong that Kelly would most definitely suffer a heavy blow if she came too close!

The cat only dared to inhabit one of the arms of the Elegant Rage, but that was already enough to subtly improve Lanie's killing efficiency.

Broken wooden mechs continued to fall from the air as the enhanced melee mech went on a rampage.

The sword-wielding machine even found opportunities to clear out the wooden mechs that swarmed the Zeal from above and the sides!

The Zeal may have gained a reprieve, but the danger to the heavy artillery mech had not yet passed!

A lot of wooden ranged mechs had deployed in the field. Now that their melee counterparts no longer blocked their firing lines, a multitude of seed volleys struck the Zeal's heavily strained azure energy shield.

Each of them possessed many different cannon configurations, but the most outrageous variation was the one that looked like a close copy of the Zeal!

Not only were they mounted with four relatively standard seed cannons, they also bore an oversized version that looked like a wooden imitation of the Devora Cannon!

The wooden imitations of the Transcendent Punisher Mark III were particularly threatening!

Each of them possessed many different cannon configurations, but the most outrageous variation was the one that looked like a close copy of the Zeal!

Not only were they mounted with four relatively standard seed cannons, they also bore an oversized version that looked like a wooden imitation of the Devora Cannon!

Fortunately, the Emperor Tree might be able to replicate the size and shape of the Devora Cannon, but it was completely unable to replicate the principles of electromagnetism and phasewater technology.

Aside from launching oversized seeds that dealt a bit more kinetic damage than usual, the wooden imitations of the Transcendent Punisher Mark III was not even close as threatening as an actual quasi-first-class mech.

Even so, the Emperor Tree had spawned over 60 of them, indicating that it had invested a lot of resources to create this batch!

More wooden heavy artillery mechs continued to drop from the upper canopy and landed straight onto the ground where they took root and bombarded the Zeal from below.

It took a lot of time and effort for the Zeal to clean up these annoying wooden copies of himself. This was especially the case when the Emperor Tree had dispersed their positions, preventing them from getting mowed down with ease.

Taon quickly looked at the gauge that indicated the integrity of the azure energy shield and saw that it had already dipped below 20 percent.

However, most of his concentration was put on aiming the massive Devora Cannon of his heavy artillery mech.

He aimed the massive super-heavy gauss cannon with great care. Seconds passed by as Taon and the Zeal conducted different processes to adjust the angle of the kinetic cannon in the hopes that it would sever one of the Emperor Tree's many branches.

It was anything but easy to complete this seemingly simple task.

The Emperor Tree was so huge that it possessed a huge quantity of branches. Several of them were large and thick, but there were also many more that were relatively small and slender.

However, the Emperor Tree made it very difficult to target these smaller branches. Not only was it somehow aware of what Taon was trying to accomplish, but it also swung all of its branches in an attempt to stir up the Solus Gas and swat the Everchanger from its trunk!

Each time the Zeal fired the Devora Cannon, the super-heavy transphasic gauss round always missed the smaller branches and only struck the thicker ones instead, which promptly regenerated from the heavy impact.

If the Zeal missed once or twice, then Taon would not take too much notice of these outcomes.

After all, it was not that easy to land a hit on a moving target when the Zeal was assailed by lots of wooden mechs.

When the Zeal missed 6 times in a row, that was when Taon started to feel that his situation was not right!

He gritted his teeth when he guessed what was the case.

"The Emperor Tree is disturbing our perception! We have been aiming the Devora Cannon wrong the whole time!"

"I THINK SO AS WELL. THE EFFECT IS SUBTLE, BUT THAT IS ALREADY ENOUGH TO MESS UP OUR AIM."

What an insidious calamity plant! It had already figured out how to achieve a powerful effect with very little effort!

"Let us get it right this time!"

Now that the mech pilot and living mech became aware of the Emperor Tree's sabotage, they both firmed up their minds and tried to resist foreign intrusion as much as possible.

It became a lot easier for them to focus on the task of aiming as the Elegant Rage's efforts prevented a lot of wooden mechs from swarming the heavy artillery mech.

Another source of help was Taon's owl-based companion spirit.

"Hoot hoot!"

Sirca had already inhabited the Devora Cannon and did his best to give Taon a more direct feel of the powerful weapon.

Although Sirca was too young and weak to grant the Devora Cannon a direct power boost, the spiritual owl was still able to extend Taon's control over the massive weapon.

Sirca also possessed a mind of his own. He was therefore able to help Taon split his focus and pay attention to multiple different actions at the same time.

Now, Taon, Sirca and the Zeal all put most of their focus on accomplishing a single goal.

Under normal circumstances, Ylvaine should have been a part of this effort as well, but the high concentration of Solus Gas continued to cut off the Zeal from this familiar presence.

"Now!"

Once Taon felt that the perfect moment had come, he decisively pulled the trigger.

BOOOOM!

"Miss! How could we miss again?!"

Taon felt absolute despair when the super-heavy gauss round did nothing but shoot through a lot of leaves.

The heavy projectile did not even smack into a larger branch this time. It threaded through all of the leaves before soaring far away from the Emperor Tree!

It was as if the damn calamity plant was mocking Taon!

The expert candidate was sure that his willpower was strong enough to resist the Emperor Tree's mental influence.

However, because the effect was so subtle, he had no proof whether his judgment was correct.

What if he was wrong?

What if his perception was still being disturbed by the Emperor Tree?

The implications of that possibility did not bode well for Taon!

Even if the Emperor Tree did nothing else but slightly nudge his aim off, that was already enough to prevent the Devora Cannon from achieving anything meaningful.

"I am not incompetent! I can do better than this! I have struck far more difficult targets in the past!"

Was that truly the case?

Taon may have been in control of the mech, but it had always been Ylvaine helping him finetune his aim.

It was impossible for Taon to deny the indispensable aid provided by the design spirit.

If he did so, he would not only be lying to himself, but also discounting the power of the Great Prophet!

Neither of these two consequences were acceptable to Taon, so he had no other choice but to consider two possibilities.

Either his mind was too weak to resist the Emperor Tree's manipulation, or his skills were not as good as he thought.

Perhaps both might be true at the same time!

As Taon was met with repeated failure, he began to suspect that he was failing all-around.

So what if he was an expert candidate? Taon felt as if he was barely better than a typical mech pilot. He was still too far away from acquiring the qualities of a genuine expert pilot.

Despair began to overtake his mind.

Just as Taon was able to sink into a pit of darkness, a light shone from above.

A familiar presence appeared when Taon yearned for it the most. His mood rose as he began to sense a familiar source of guidance!

He even began to regress by pleading for help from Ylvaine!

"Where are you, my prophet? Please give a sign to this lost lamb."

"TAON! GET YOUR MIND TOGETHER! FOCUS ON THE MISSION, NOT YOUR MISERY!"

Though the Zeal tried his best to shake Taon from his growing depression, the expert candidate was deaf to these pleas!

Just as Taon was able to sink into a pit of darkness, a light shone from above.

A familiar presence appeared when Taon yearned for it the most. His mood rose as he began to sense a familiar source of guidance!

Even though it was much weaker and less responsive than before, Taon had worked with Ylvaine often enough to recognize his glow!

"Hahaha! You have not forsaken me! I knew it! You have never left me! You were always there, but I was never able to hear your guidance before! The only way for me to hear you across every barrier was to have more faith and zeal than anyone else!"

Taon grasped at the fleeting connection to Ylvaine like a man possessed. He hungrily devoured the scattered guidance from the Great Prophet and quickly adjusted the parameters of the targeting system of the Devora Cannon.

The heavy artillery mech's Devora Cannon aimed at the Emperor Tree with a much stronger intensity than before.

Taon became so enraptured by his own piety that he had narrowed his focus to the point of drowning out nearly everything else aside from his controls and the mystical guidance from above.

When the Great Prophet finally told him to pull the trigger, the expert candidate did so without hesitation!

BOOOOM!

The impact noise was much different than before!

Just as Taon saw that his mech's attack had finally managed to sever one of the Emperor Tree's branches, a powerful shock went through his mind!

His vision and perception of the environment shifted as he was met with a different reality from before!

"This..."

"TAAAAAOOON!" Venerable Joshua roared as his Everchanger literally glowed with rage!

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?! HOW COULD YOU HAVE STRUCK THE ELEGANT RAGE IN THE BACK?!"

"What?!" Taon couldn't believe what he just heard! "No! I didn't!"

"YOU HAVE JUST SNEAK ATTACKED YOUR OWN CLANSMAN!"

Chapter 6066 Broken

"No! I didn't hit her! It's not true! I struck the Emperor Tree! I swear it, Joshua!"

It shouldn't be possible. Taon was sure he had aimed his weapon correctly. A short time ago, his focus had reached a new level of intensity. Ylvaine had returned to him at a critical moment and helped him overcome the Emperor Tree's attempts to distort his cognition.

At least, that was supposed to be the case.

Taon still could not accept that he had accidentally struck the Elegant Rage from behind.

While it was true that the Elegant Rage occasionally flew in front of the Zeal in order to intercept the wooden mechs approaching from this direction, the melee mech never crossed directly in front of the Devora Cannon.

Even if Lanie had overlooked the potential for friendly fire, Taon always kept himself from pulling the trigger whenever the Elegant Rage or any other friendly mech strayed into risky territory.

As a well-trained and battle-hardened mech pilot, Taon had encountered similar situations many times in the past. He and his fellow Ylvainan mech pilots also put themselves through mandatory simulation training in order to train themselves into withholding fire whenever friendly mechs accidentally moved in front of a heavy artillery mech's sights.

Venerable Joshua's accusation should be false. The expert pilot misjudged the situation!

Even though an increasingly more desperate Taon could figure out that this was an absurd conclusion, he still held out a faint amount of hope that the Emperor Tree managed to subvert Joshua instead of himself!

"You... you are wrong, Joshua! I never laid a hand on Lanie's mech! She shouldn't be dead!"

"THEN WHAT JUST DROPPED TO THE GROUND?!"

The Zeal's sensors had difficulty trying to perceive stuff further away, but the concentration of Solus Gas was not enough to hide all of the details of the crumpled pieces of a very metallic mech.

There was no way for Taon to mistake the wrecked and scattered pieces for anything else than the remnants of a proper machine!

Unlike the wooden mechs that the Emperor Tree had produced by the thousands, the Elegant Rage was a proper human-developed mech that was predominately made out of many different alloys!

Any non-metallic components in the design of the custom mech were made out of composites with specialized properties. None of them should ever resemble wood.

As Taon unwillingly spotted numerous distinct shapes that he was able to recognize from the intact form of the Elegant Rage, his heart sank to the bottom.

"Did... did I do this? Did I... kill a fellow sister?"

There was no way for the Elegant Rage to survive such a catastrophic blow. Even if Lanie spent a lot of Larkinson merits on requesting lots of incremental upgrades to the custom version of the Lucid Rage, the better alloys and stronger tech could only do so much in elevating the performance of a standard mech.

The earlier fighting had already drained the Elegant Rage's small and outdated transphasic energy shield by a large extent. It was unable to withstand a single powerful blow.

In fact, if the Elegant Rage was struck by any other serious attack, her armor system should have been able to withstand the remaining energy of the strike at least once.

Unfortunately, the slimmed-down mech that wielded the Heartsword was not only struck from behind where her armor was the weakest, but was completely outmatched by the firepower of the Devora Cannon!

Larger and more powerful than the Ultimatum's famous Onyx Cannon, the Zeal's powerful masterwork super-heavy high-velocity transphasic hyper gauss cannon was able to shatter any standard mech, including the Elegant Rage!

Perhaps one mercy of getting struck by the Devora Cannon was that the super-heavy gauss round overpenetrated the Elegant Rage.

This was why the broken machine hadn't been shattered into billions of tiny metal shards.

However, the kinetic energy transferred by the powerful round was more than enough to break the Elegant Rage!

As the mech dropped onto the ground, it had broken up into multiple pieces. Its legs and lower waist had separated from the upper half. Every single component from both halves of the broken machine was either shattered or deformed.

This included the cockpit, which most certainly suffered from the blow as well!

Just as Taon thought that he had killed a fellow Larkinson, soldier and expert candidate, a sudden change occurred.

One of the heavily damaged and deformed arms of the upper half of the Elegant Rage began to switch and reach towards the Heartsword that had fallen a short distance away!

"Lanie... she..."

"No. It can't be. It's the living mech... Lanie should be dead..."

No matter who was in control, the feeble movements showed that the Elegant Rage was not completely dead!

Just as the Larkinsons tried to figure out whether Lanie was still alive in the cockpit that had most certainly been breeched, an explosion of power erupted from the upper half of the Elegant Rage!

The eruption of power emanating from the fallen machine was so great that it had even pushed away a lot of Solus Gas!

"What?!"

"Apotheosis!"

"It's Lanie! She... she's still alive!"

The resonance meters had difficulty trying to measure the resonance phenomenon acting on the broken but reviving mech, but the fact that the numbers were constantly going up suggested that Lanie was finally making a breakthrough!

Hope began to well up in Taon's heart.

The breakthrough meant that Lanie had not died, at least not yet!

As long as the damage to her body was not too severe, she could still be saved!

As the breakthrough phenomenon continued, it soon became clear that the process began to go off-script!

Whether it was due to Lanie's heavily injured state, the backstab from Taon, the Elegant Rage's awful condition, the influence of the Emperor Tree, the heavy presence of Solus Gas or other extraordinary factors, the forced resonance acting upon the custom mech began to go out of control!

The Elegant Rage's mech frame started to break even further as the violent forces acting upon the living mech exceeded her tolerance!

Before the upper half of the Elegant Rage broke entirely, the machine suddenly utilized her half-disabled arms to push herself to the side.

Soon enough, a mech arm grasped the hilt of the Heartsword.

A shocking turn of events took place!

Instead of trying to resist the willpower contamination of the weapon of the Everchanger, the living mech embraced it, allowing Joshua's true resonance to intrude into the machine and distort Lanie's cognition, all the while she was still undergoing an unstable breakthrough process!

Another mutation occurred!

"MA-AOW!"

"It's Kelly! It's Lanie's companion spirit!"

The willpower and life energy belonging to a high-tier expert pilot blended into the upper half of the Elegant Rage and began to merge with a part of Lanie!

Whether the evolving pilot planned it or not, the energies originating from the Heartsword began to merge into Kelly. The feline companion spirit grew in size and began to undergo an incredibly profound transformation that caused her to become more and more similar to Venerable Joshua in nature!

Just as Kelly painfully endured this transformation, the companion spirit already started to make her newfound power felt by affecting the upper half of the Elegant Rage with her power!

"The broken mech... is repairing!"

This was a power that the Everchanger only rarely showed off, mostly because the expert mech rarely lost the protection of both his resonance shield and transphasic energy shield.

However, few Larkinson mech pilots could forget the few instances where the Everchanger miraculously repaired the damage to his mech frame despite the fact that he had never been installed with any technological repair systems of such potency!

After Kelly absorbed the energies from the Heartsword, she had mysteriously inherited this particular ability from Venerable Joshua!

Not only that, but she was actively using the accumulated breakthrough energies from Lanie to fuel the mech regeneration process.

That was not all. The upper half of the Elegant Rage had lost a lot of components. The duplicated regeneration power may be able to restore a lot of broken metal components, but it was not as good as the real deal.

The Elegant Rage needed more components in order to fully restore into a complete mech!

The mech continuously began to absorb a lot of E energy from the environment. The Elegant Rage had no qualms about absorbing the abundant wood energy attracted and affected by the Emperor Tree!

This not only extended the breakthrough process, but also allowed Lanie, Kelly and the Elegant Rage to take additional measures to repair the damage!

Powerful resonance flares stretched from the upper half of the broken mech frame and began to connect to the lower half of the body.

The latter, which consisted of multiple tons of damaged alloy parts, miraculously moved back to the upper half and messily snapped back into place!

"The Elegant Rage is putting herself back together again!"

That was not quite the case. Even though both halves of the machine had reunited with each other again, there was a massive hole where the mech engine and other critical components used to be located.

Aside from that, both halves had lost so many smaller components that it became too implausible for the Elegant Rage to become functional enough to move again.

Instead of letting this unfortunate truth hold back her recovery, the frantic living mech began to flare out her forced resonance and reach out to other materials!

It began to grab any other material that could take the place of the missing and unrecoverable metallic components.

It just happened that the Elegant Rage had fallen in the middle of a large wooden debris field.

The remains of many shattered and burned wooden mechs happened to be within reach, and the Elegant Rage mindlessly took hold of broken splinters and other wooden remnants!

Each of these broken pieces of wood got pulled back into the Elegant Rage and haphazardly took the place of many delicate and precise metallic instruments.

Normally, there was no way that such a crude and illogical substitution would work.

However, under the reality-defying effects of Lanie's extraordinary willpower and Kelly's newly acquired life domain, the Elegant Rage somehow drew strength from these newly merged wooden parts!

The state of forced resonance had originally caused the Elegant Rage to come closer to breaking, but under these exceptional circumstances, the opposite was taking place!

Lanie's mech slowly grew whole and healthy again, but with an obvious twist as the forced integration of the wood originating from the Emperor Tree had caused the Elegant Rage to show increasingly more wooden components!

The entire living mech had turned into a macabre patchwork of modern alloys and mysterious wooden materials!

Once the Elegant Rage looked close to whole again, the miraculously resurrected machine actually began to stand up to her feet again!

"Lanie..." Taon hoarsely whispered. "I am sorry. Are you... are you okay?"

A crackle sounded from the noisy communication channel.

A hazy voice sounded in the Ylvainan mech pilot's ears.

"A tooth for a tooth..."

"What?"

"YOU BETRAYED ME TAON! I WILL NOT REST UNTIL I HAVE BROKEN YOUR MECH AND BODY MYSELF!"

The mutated Elegant Rage blasted off the ground and aggressively charged towards the Zeal!

The speed of the mech in a state of forced resonance was so fast that neither the Everchanger nor the First Sword could respond in time to stop the machine that had so obviously gone out of control!

There was nothing in Lanie's sights except for the pilot that had broken one of the most sacred rules of the Larkinson Clan and almost became responsible for her death!

Now, the only thing left in the mind of the newly ascended expert pilot was taking revenge for the near-death of herself and her living mech!

With the extraordinary potent power of forced resonance, the Elegant Rage advanced towards the Zeal with so much speed and momentum that her borrowed Heartsword broke through the Zeal's failing azure energy shield with ease and sank into the huge metal frame of the heavy artillery mech at once!

First-class alloys or not, the unstable power of the Elegant Rage was enough to part through layers of armor plating and sever a lot of internal components!

"LANIE! HAVE YOU GONE MAD?!"

The entire mission had gone sideways!

Chapter 6067 Purple Wood.

What did he do to deserve this?

Why had Taon incurred this punishment?

He did not mean to hurt Lanie!

Yet how could he possibly explain himself to a maddened pilot who just broke through and became consumed by madness?

As the unbridled rage of his fellow Larkinson swept over the Zeal like an unstoppable firestorm, Taon reflexively tried to keep his precious masterwork mech alive by any means possible!

Even as the razor-sharp Heartsword sunk deep into the transphasic alloys of the massive quasi-first-class mech and severed entire subsystems, all 5 guns of the Zeal fired at once!

The shells detonated even faster than before, thereby instantly engulfing the unshielded heavy artillery mechs with explosions!

At the same time, the Zeal also endured a lot of recoil just after firing his Devora Cannon!

Even if the recoil of a gauss cannon was not as severe as other kinetic weapons, its immense size and power still produced a lot of consequences.

Normally, the heavy lifter platform tried to compensate for the recoil, but after receiving Taon's desperate command, the device did the reverse!

The Zeal successfully managed to wrench himself out of the reach of the empowered Elegant Rage!

"TAAAAAAOOON!" Lanie's distorted voice roared over the damaged and imperfectly repaired speakers of the Elegant Rage! "YOUR TREACHERY IS THE LAST MISTAKE THAT YOU WILL EVER MAKE!"

It became abundantly clear to everyone that Lanie had completely lost her rationality!

Losing one's mind was a big taboo on the battlefield. Years of piloting a personalized version of the Lucid Rage model had taught Lanie how to achieve a perfect balance between rage and rationality. Even if Zeiga and Lufa were temporarily blocked from lending their glows to her living mech, the female mech pilot should have been able to keep her growing rage contained behind a wall of logic and purpose.

Now, that wall had been completely breached by the super-heavy gauss shell that punched straight through the Elegant Rage's abdomen section.

The melee mech no longer displayed any of the elegance that characterized her past performance.

Instead, the overflowing forced resonance empowering the spontaneously repaired machine caused the mech frame to not only fuse with the wood produced by the Emperor Tree, but also mutate further according to Lanie and her companion spirit's most deepest thoughts and desires!

Right now, Lanie had become overwhelmed with rage and a desire to enact revenge!

This had far-reaching consequences as her unstable extraordinary willpower shaped the forced resonance acting on her machine and caused her Elegant Rage to mutate increasingly further over time!

The partially wooden mech began to grow dark and spiky branches around her exterior. The previously normal pieces of armor plating steadily deformed until they acquired sharper and more aggressive angles.

Spikes extended from the shoulder plates, knee plates and even the head of the Lucid Rage!

"MA-AOW!"

Kelly yowled in pain and rage as she directly helped to fuel this transformation by absorbing the abundant wood and life energies originally attracted by the Emperor Tree!

As the Elegant Rage continued to morph further and further away from the original intentions of the designers of the original Lucid Rage model, the Zeal quickly managed to stabilize himself further away at a lower altitude.

By this time, Taon hardly cared about the threat of getting attacked by the Emperor Tree's root spikes.

"Stop it, Lanie! I did not mean to attack you! It was an accident! The Emperor Tree is the true culprit!"

"TTTAAAAAAAOOOOOONNNNN!"

There was no way Taon could reason with Lanie anymore!

The Zeal had already oriented all of his guns towards the Elegant Rage, yet Taon had little confidence that the attacks would be able to stop the melee mech from tearing his machine apart.

A state of forced resonance resulting from a breakthrough was one of the most mysterious and magical phenomena in the mech community!

The duration always varied depending on factors such as the accumulation of the mech pilot, but the power boost was always significant!

It always seemed to elevate the performance of a standard mech to the parameters of an expert mech, if only barely.

Yet even if the restored and mutated Elegant Rage only reached the strength of a shabby low-tier expert mech, that was still an entire level higher than a custom mech like the Zeal!

Taon's heart beat faster. His face began to redden as he could feel the unambiguous hostility of Lanie radiating from her killing machine.

He did not exactly know why Lanie temporarily stopped to accumulate more energy, but the reprieve granted him a faint amount of hope that he might be able to avoid getting killed by a fellow Larkinson!

"Joshua! Dise! I need your help! Please keep her away from my mech!"

"I can't! The Emperor Tree is hindering our escape!"

The Zeal's accidental sneak attack onto the Elegant Rage had completely caught Venerable Joshua and Venerable Dise off-guard!

Then there was all of the Solus Gas. Since the Emperor Tree rested right on top of a major deposit of this mysterious gas, neither expert pilots operated at their best conditions anymore.

Even though their intuitions had been honed over many battles, their unnaturally high sensitivity towards threats were still primarily centered around themselves. The two expert pilots needed to allocate much of their focus towards dealing with the difficulties introduced by the calamity plant.

It was also a lot more difficult to anticipate impending threats towards other people and mechs, especially if they were located further away.

Then there was all of the Solus Gas. Since the Emperor Tree rested right on top of a major deposit of this mysterious gas, neither expert pilots operated at their best conditions anymore.

The all-round dampening of the sensor systems of their mechs and the perception that they depended on so much caused them to fight as if they had become near-sighted!

Yet now that Joshua and Dise noticed that something had gone horribly wrong, they both tried their very best to take away the samples they had been tasked to collect and reach the two damaged mechs.

However, the Emperor Tree hindered their advance!

Having just collected a piece of bark and a container of sap, the Everchanger frantically tried to move away from the massive trunk, but a forest of tree branches surrounded the expert mech in a thick and multi-layered cage!

Searing hot fire beams struck the branches and either managed to vaporize them in an instant or caused them to catch fire!

Unfortunately, the Emperor Tree's immense wood energy and other fire suppression measures quickly doused the flames before they could reach a greater scale.

Having thrown out the Heartsword, the Everchanger had already taken hold of the Scarlet Ember and activated its burning hot edge.

"BREAK FOR ME!" Joshua roared as his anger at letting the Zeal strike the Elegant Rage increased the potency of his strikes!

The powerful plasma sword vaporized through the branches with much greater ease!

Unless the branches were particularly thick and reinforced, the weapon that was originally designed for an ace mech was able to remove practically every obstacle within reach!

However, just as the Everchanger managed to make it halfway out of the cage of branches, half-a-dozen purple wooden mechs descended from above and began to assail the Everchanger up close and from afar!

"Damn!"

Different from the normal wooden mechs, the ones that came in purple were much stronger and more difficult to fight against!

This was because the Emperor Tree invested a lot of high-quality resources into replicating the expert mechs of Task Force Solus!

They were probably one of the trump cards that the Emperor Tree had been working on in the past few months. They were clearly still in development as their performance was still too far away from matching that of the authentic versions, but it was already frightening enough to see that a wild calamity plant managed to make so much progress in so little time!

The biggest flaw of the purple mechs was that they were not yet capable of independent operation. The Emperor Tree had to attach thin and flexible branches onto their backs in order to control them more directly and supply a vast amount of energy and vitality into their resilient frames.

Since the purple mechs acted more like direct extensions of the Emperor Tree, they also happened to share much of the calamity plant's strengths, which included its extremely powerful regeneration!

When the Everchanger struck the purple mechs with his Vitalus rifle, the energy beams only scorched or damaged a third of their wooden construction before a powerful infusion of sap and wood energy caused them to become as good as new!

The purple mechs did not allow themselves to get struck for free. The copies of the First Sword wielded their enormous wood energy-infused swords that were made out of the same purple organic material and slammed them against the Everchanger's resonance shield!

Even though the wooden swords carried such a poor edge that they functioned more like blunt objects, they still functioned similar to hyper weapons!

When empowered by a calamity plant, the damage inflicted by these purple wooden sword strikes was not small!

"ANNIHILATE!"

The only effective way for the Everchanger to get rid of these purple wooden mechs was by striking them head-on with the powerful Scarlet Ember!

The Everchanger channeled the weapon at the highest sustainable setting and felt his energy reserves draining at a rapid rate.

Joshua and his battle partner couldn't care less about their consumption as they needed to speed up their evacuation as quickly as possible!

The plasma sword allowed them to cut down one purple mech after another, but once the copies of the First Sword collapsed, the ones that imitated the Everchanger continued to fire their purple seed rifles while closing in to strike at the original with their one-handed swords!

Thankfully, the Emperor Tree had not been able to imitate the Scarlet Ember, but that did not mean that the purple wooden bootleg versions of the Everchanger were easy to defeat.

If the imitation First Swords excelled in attack, the imitation Everchangers excelled in regeneration!

Anything but a heavy strike was unable to put down the purple wooden hero mechs down for good!

Joshua felt like he was fighting against mirrors of his own expert mech. He never really appreciated how frustrating it was to fight against opponents that just wouldn't stay down!

The Everchanger had fallen behind the times!

If he had been upgraded to the standards of the current Dark Zephyr, the expert hero mech would never allow himself to get stalled by a bunch of branches and purple mechs!

"Dise! I can't get out! Can you go ahead and separate Lanie from Taon?!"

"I am in no better position than you. The Emperor Tree is attempting to cage me with its roots."

Close to the surface, the First Sword continually slashed away at the thick and resilient roots that attempted to slam into the expert swordsman mech.

While the Decapitator was sharp and powerful enough to cut through these thick black roots with relative ease, the First Sword lacked the power and momentum to create a gap large enough to leap out this trap!

The Emperor Tree did not bother to dispatch any purple mechs to hinder the First Sword further. The expert mech had already cut down multiple imitations of herself with contemptuous ease.

The only way the calamity plant could hinder the expert swordsman mech was to employ its own roots.

Since they were a core part of the calamity plant's main body, they were far thicker and more resilient than its branches or its purple mechs!

This effectively consumed the First Sword's high attack power. What was worse was that the roots seriously put the expert mech at risk of getting enveloped to the point where she could no longer exert any leverage to swing her greatsword!

In any case, the Emperor Tree's deliberate attempts to trap and potentially crush the two expert mechs prevented them from stopping the ongoing tragedy!

When Taon realized that help would not be forthcoming, his heart sank into a greater pit of despair!

Chapter 6068 Fallen

After learning that neither the Everchanger nor the First Sword could come to Taon's rescue, the Ylvainan mech pilot knew that he could only rely on himself and his battle partner.

"WE NEED TO OPEN FIRE!" The Zeal urged. "I KNOW SHE IS YOUR CLANSMAN, BUT WE NEED TO DEFEND OURSELVES! WE ONLY NEED TO HOLD OFF THE ELEGANT RAGE UNTIL THE FORCED RESONANCE STATE HAS RUN ITS COURSE."

"It won't work... Lanie and her mech have become too powerful... they will finish us off in seconds..."

Despite being connected to the Zeal, Taon no longer responded to his heavy artillery mech's urgings anymore.

In fact, ever since he had been misled by the Emperor Tree, he had become deaf to most outside voices.

He could no longer trust their words anymore. How could he determine whether they were true or false?

Taon had no way of distinguishing one from the other!

His mind was in a mess and his emotions were roiling. His condition had deteriorated so much that he completely lacked the confidence to stop the Elegant Rage, let alone land a hit on the mutated mech when she was finally on the move!

Lanie may have become lost in her rage, but her piloting skills had become better than ever!

The earlier move showed that she had not only gained the power of an expert pilot, but also did not receive any hindrance from the Elegant Rage despite the fact that the living mech had recovered in a haphazard manner!

The unstable corona of power surrounding the Elegant Rage vibrated in a volatile manner. Taon could sense that Lanie's rage was building up towards another peak.

Her next attack run was bound to cripple if not outright destroy the Zeal!

"STOP IT, LANIE!" Venerable Joshua roared over the communication channel. "CALM DOWN AND RETREAT! THE LAST THING WE NEED IS TO FIGHT AGAINST EACH OTHER!"

The newly advanced expert pilot showed no indication of listening. Her fury continued to stimulate her willpower, causing her to grow stronger and more intent on taking revenge at Taon!

The resentment she gained from almost getting killed by a comrade she trusted with her back could not be resolved with mere words!

"OPEN FIRE, TAON!" The Zeal urged again!

When the living mech saw that his battle partner failed to shake himself out of his stupor, the machine decided to take unilateral action and wanted to pull the trigger himself!

However, the Zeal failed to attack the Elegant Rage! Neither his heavy artillery cannons nor his powerful Devora Cannon did anything to harm the enemy mech that had turned herself into a stationary target.

This was the perfect time to strike! There was no better opportunity to resolve the threat than to strike at the Elegant Rage when Lanie became paralyzed for whatever reason!

Unfortunately, his mech pilot refused to cooperate!

"No! I can't make the same mistake again!" Taon insisted! "I almost killed her once. How would I be able to prove my innocence when I attack her again?"

A part of Taon wanted to do whatever it took to survive, but another part of him felt guilty about what he had done to Lanie.

He almost killed her.

If not for her fortuitous breakthrough, she probably would have died for certain.

As his guilt continued to well up in his shaken mind, Taon was no longer able to maintain his focus on the immediate confrontation.

Perhaps... it would be better if he accepted the punishment he deserved.

If Lanie's resentment towards him could be dispelled by slicing apart his body, then perhaps... this was Taon's fate.

"YOU ARE GOING TO DIE IF WE DO NOT START FIGHTING BACK! LOOK! LANIE IS ABOUT TO LAUNCH HER ATTACK!"

Though Lanie briefly delayed her attack, the wait had done her a bit of good. Not only did her Elegant Rage complete a transformation that allowed her to channel forced resonance a lot smoother, but her entire mech frame seemed to have turned into a weapon!

The melee mech became covered by so many wooden thorns and metal spikes that just rolling her mech frame was enough to turn any target into a pincushion!

Of course, Lanie still relied on the Heartsword most of all to launch her attacks.

The weapon borrowed from the Everchanger was the only part of the Elegant Rage that retained its original form and qualities.

The Heartsword lost much of the true resonance that Joshua had invested into the weapon. The Elegant Rage and Kelly had somehow managed to absorb most of it, causing them to swell with the power of life, though it was also contaminated by other sources such as the Emperor Tree.

The diminished Heartsword was no longer as sharp as before. In addition, the remaining true resonance also began to actively resist its current wielder.

The Heartsword refused to be turned into a tool responsible for taking away the life of another Larkinson!

It obeyed Joshua's will and tried to make itself as difficult to hold as possible.

Yet in the face of the resonance state of the Elegant Rage, the Heartsword unwillingly remained a killing tool in the hands of an enraged female expert pilot!

Many dark and chaotic thoughts went through Lanie's mind. Her rage literally shaped her domain and caused her unstable resonance shield to shift in color!

It had started off silver shortly after her breakthrough, but it had continually turned redder with each passing second.

At this time, her resonance shield seemed to have grown as aggressive and thorny as the visible appearance of the Elegant Rage!

"TAAAAAAAHOON! I SHALL TAKE YOUR LIFE IN RECOMPENSE FOR MY PAIN!"

The mutated melee mech blitzed her way forward and reached the Zeal in an instant!

This time, Elegant Rage flew low and chopped her unwilling Heartsword at the underside of the floater platform!

The device developed by Ketis to allow Taon and his living mech to participate in this mission was not as flimsy as it looked, but it was unable to offer enough resistance to prevent itself from getting cut in half!

The Zeal instantly lost the ability to maintain his altitude. The broken floater platform had turned from a reliable means of levitation into completely useless pieces of metal!

As the Elegant Rage completed her attack run and looped around, Lanie did not want to wait for the heavy mech to crash to the ground.

The empowered melee mech swiftly dove towards her falling target and swung back the Heartsword in preparation to cut straight into the torso of the Zeal and reach the cockpit that was buried deep inside!

At this time, Taon had been shaken out of his stupor.

He did not feel shocked when the Elegant Rage dared to charge towards his heavy artillery mech and complete another attack run.

What he did not expect was for Lanie to target the floater platform that kept the Zeal aloft!

Eliminating it pretty much doomed the Zeal, but this was not how Taon wanted to lose his mech!

"TAON! OPEN FIRE AT THE ELEGANT RAGE! SHE IS COMING IN TO FINISH THE JOB!"

The Ylvainan mech pilot did not pay attention to the panicked pleas of his living mech.

He did not fixate on the Elegant Rage that was actively channeling all of Lanie's hostility towards his life.

Instead, he began to experience fear yet again as he felt his living mech falling to the ground.

This was a profoundly frightening experience to Taon. His expert mech did not possess any flight capabilities that could arrest his fall. Hardly any heavy artillery mech was equipped with a flight system for that matter.

Taon was not afraid of heights. He did not possess a phobia against falling either. He piloted multiple mobile mechs equipped with flight systems in the past.

However, heavy artillery mechs were never supposed to fall.

The Zeal would most certainly not come away from a fall unscathed. His armor system might be able to remain in one piece for the most part, but many of his more delicate internals would probably get shaken to the point where they malfunctioned!

What was worse was that losing mobility in the middle of enemy territory was a death sentence to Taon.

Taon might not have to wait for the Elegant Rage to land the killing blow onto his mech.

The Emperor Tree may be poised to launch its root spikes from below at any time.

The lost mech pilot might not have much objection towards losing his life at the hands of Lanie, but he did not want the Emperor Tree to enjoy the same satisfaction!

The fear induced by falling suddenly caused him to think about what he was doing with his life.

Why must he die?

Why was he pushed into this unwinnable situation?

Why had Ylvaine failed to warn him of this trap?

Why had he been so foolish to fall for the Emperor Tree's manipulations?!

Something broke inside Taon's heart.

This might be the most inopportune moment for Taon to suffer a mental breakdown, but as the Elegant Rage's borrowed weapon was closing in on the helpless mech frame of the Zeal, the pilot finally snapped!

"If everything is a lie... THEN EVERYTHING MUST GO TO RUIN!"

The Zeal somehow managed to adjust his Devora Cannon so that the muzzle pointed straight at the incoming mutated mech!

BOOOOOOOOOOM!

The falling heavy artillery mech unleashed an attack unlike any other!

A normal attack from the Devora Cannon should have shaken the temporary resonance shield of the Elegant Rage at most.

What happened instead was that the resonance-empowered super-heavy transphasic gauss round overpowered the mutated mech's resonance shield and almost impacted against the hybrid wood and metal chest plate!

"TAON!"

If not for the fact that Lanie's excellent piloting skills and plentiful combat experience allowed her to place the flat of the blade of the Heartsword against the chest of her living mech in time, the potent projectile would have penetrated through the cockpit without a doubt!

As it was, the Heartsword managed to resist a part of the enormous force before the mech hand that held the weapon broke and lost its grip!

The Heartsword amazingly launched away with only a minor dent onto the blade.

Meanwhile, the Devora gauss round attempted to resume its attempt to pierce through the chest plate and shatter the cockpit, but it had lost just enough power for it to heavily dent and deform the armor layers instead.

An instant and desperate infusion of forced resonance hastily reinforced the cockpit and absorbed much of the remaining concussive forces from the powerful kinetic strike.

Lanie managed to preserve her life, though her Elegant Rage was drained of much of her forced resonance as a consequence!

Of course, this only fueled the maddened mech pilot's fury and caused her to develop an even stronger animosity towards the traitor!

The difference now was that Taon was no longer unable to resist!

"He broke through?! How?!"

As the Zeal approached the ground, the Emperor Tree finally unleashed a swathe of root spikes, each of which looked eager to impale or at least pummel the falling machine!

However, the brown resonance glow surrounding the heavy artillery mech not only blocked these spikes, but also caused them to weaken and crumble into dust!

BANG!

The Zeal finally crashed into the ground, yet miraculously managed to stay remarkably intact!

Even though the heavy mech was unable to prevent all damage, the Zeal managed to cushion his fall by expending much of his own recently acquired forced resonance state.

As an ominous and corrosive brown corona continued to surround the Zeal, the heavy artillery mech began to undergo his own mutations!

The armor plating seemed to rust despite the fact that it was not supposed to be susceptible to corrosion.

In addition to that, the heavy artillery cannons began to grow thicker, shorter and fatter!

"Hoot hoot!"

The Devora Cannon experienced a more radical transformation. The base grew thicker but the end of the barrel grew thinner. The entire cannon seemed to turn into a spike, though the purpose for this transformation remained unclear.

As Sirca possessed the transformed weapon, the mutated Devora Cannon seemed to have lost all signs of threat, but that only made it scarier!

However, the most extreme change occurred outside of view.

From the moment Taon snapped and broke through to the rank of expert pilot, all of his emotions became amplified by at least ten times if not more!

His fatalism towards his own life, his lack of satisfaction at how little he accomplished in his life, his distrust towards everything aside from himself and his vindictive desire to tear everything down that had led him on this path of doom all blended together and distorted his ascension to demigod!

The Zeal was not prepared for this. The third order living mech tried his best to support his pilot and absorb the breakthrough energies to serve his partner better, but the problem was that Taon's willpower had become far too corrosive and hostile towards other entities!

This included the living mech that Taon previously trusted with life!

"TAON! YOU ARE HURTING ME! STOP THIS NOW! I WILL DIE IF YOU KEEP DISTRUSTING ME! SNAP OUT OF IT, PARTNER! REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE! YOU ARE YLVAIN'S CHOSEN!"

"You... are not my partner anymore... No one... can ever be my partner anymore... As for Ylvaine, I will never have faith in him again. As far as I am concerned... all gods and prophets must fall to ruin. Only then will I have given my life meaning!"

"TAAAAAOOOooooonnn..."

A sacred partnership came to an end today.

As Taon's willpower kept reshaping the Zeal to the expert pilot's liking, there are appeared to be no place anymore for a battle partner that had previously served the pilot with complete dedication.

As Taon's willpower kept reshaping the Zeal to the expert pilot's liking, there are appeared to be no place anymore for a battle partner that had previously served the pilot with complete dedication.

Chapter 6069 Irreconcilable Enemies

Two distorted mechs faced each other.

Though both of their forced resonance states had diminished by a large extent, the two machines still looked vigorous enough to support at least one more exchange of blows!

Their clash was inevitable. The original causes that had led them to stand opposite to each other no longer mattered anymore.

Both recently ascended demigods had their own reasons to turn hostile against each other!

At the very least, if they wanted to live, they instinctively felt they needed to see this battle through the end!

It was strange for them to become utterly fixated on each other as the Emperor Tree was not a negligible threat.

Even if it had redirected much of its attention and resources towards capturing or destroying the First Sword and the Everchanger, the calamity plant still directed a bit of effort towards crushing the other two mechs!

However, its ability to distort the perceptions of the two mech pilots no longer worked now that their willpower had undergone a qualitative evolution.

The surviving wooden mechs that kept their distance and launched hardened seeds at the two mechs accomplished nothing as the temporary resonance shields resisted all of the sporadic damage.

The root spikes that Taon and his living mech previously feared not too long ago literally did nothing to shake the mutated Zeal.

In their worlds, Lanie and Taon only registered each other as their ultimate foes.

The two expert pilots appeared like polar opposites in many ways.

Lanie burned hot with rage. Her willpower flared with unrelenting fury towards the perpetrator that had almost caused her to lose her life!

Her extraordinary rage literally remolded the Elegant Rage into a mech of thorns. The fused metals and wood clad the broken and spontaneously repaired with armor that seemed to be expressly designed to hurt anyone who dared to lay a hand on Lanie again!

In fact, the resonance-empowered Devora Cannon strike that almost managed to overpower the Elegant Rage's defenses had caused the latter's spikes to grow even sharper and deadlier!

The Elegant Rage's thorns looked as if they could pierce the Zeal full of devastating holes just by rolling around!

"Ma-aow!"

Kelly had become irrevocably changed by her principal's desperate breakthrough.

Her appearance changed from a normal Burmese cat coloring to a dark green form that resembled the color of the Emperor Tree's leaves.

The reason for this visual mutation was quite obvious. The spiritual cat had become filled with life that originally belonged to others. By stealing a minute proportion of Joshua and the Emperor Tree's energies, Kelly had embarked on a path of predation where the most effective way to promote her strength was to leech it away from others!

The cat had currently forced her way into one of the thorns that covered the Elegant Rage, giving it a hungry green glow. The companion spirit looked forward to draining all of the life out of Taon and Sirca's miserable forms!

In contrast to his adversary's unbridled rage, Taon had descended into an exceptionally negative mood at the moment.

An extraordinarily powerful air of gloom surrounded his mutated heavy artillery mech. The root spikes and everything else surrounding the Zeal seemed to age and crumble into ruin one way or another.

Even the dirt where the Zeal was resting upon was drying out and growing feebler than before!

The only substance that remained untouched by the Zeal's aura of ruin was the particles of Solus Gas that engulfed the surroundings.

The Zeal actually seemed comfortable in the midst of all of this exotic gas. It had even absorbed portions of Solus Gas as the mech frame mutated into a rusted form.

The malaise produced by Taon's willpower rejected everything else aside from his own companion spirit.

"Hoot hoot."

The evolved owl looked a lot different than before. The owl grew more mysterious and less defined. It was as if any attempts to observe it through multiple different senses would only result in a dark fog that vaguely resembled the previous form of Sirca!

Not only did Sirca become more difficult to perceive, but when he blended into the Zeal, the mech became a bit more difficult to probe and track!

The companion spirit's influence caused the Zeal to exude a profound rejection towards reality. It was as if the heavy artillery mech rejected any form of attention or friendship from others and wanted to disappear from their sights.

Of course, that did not affect Lanie's tracking. She was too close and her hatred towards Taon was too strong for her to lose such a large and obvious target!

There was one more obvious discrepancy that set the two crazed expert pilots apart from each other.

Lanie stuck by the Elegant Rage. She never lost her trust and camaraderie towards her battle partner. Kelly even put a lot of effort into piecing the mech back together.

For her part, the living mech unconditionally supported her battle partner. The Elegant Rage had suffered not one, but two catastrophic blows, each of which possessed the power to shatter her frame and cause her pilot to lose her life.

Threatening her own existence was one thing. Threatening to take away Lanie's life was another thing!

There was no way the Elegant Rage could tolerate Taon's outrageous attempts of murdering her battle partner!

Together, the mech and pilot became of one mind.

Only by joining forces would they be able to exact retribution!

"Taon must die!"

"TAON MUST PERISH!"

In contrast to Lanie, Taon had evidently decided to go alone.

Only Sirca remained by his side, but that was because his companion spirit was just another part of himself.

Different from before, the Zeal had lost signs of independent life. While it was still technically a living mech, it had lost the most essential spark of life that defined its former existence.

The passing of the Zeal was an unmitigated tragedy!

The third order living mech had lost its personality and turned into a spiritual shell that Taon and Sirca claimed as their own.

Even though the expert pilot and his mutated companion spirit were able to fill the void adequately enough, they were ultimately very different from the existence that had previously been born upon the creation of the masterwork mech!

Though the death of the Zeal's independent personality undoubtedly represented a massive loss to the Larkinson Clan, Taon remained completely unmoved by this development.

He exhibited no remorse or guilt towards the brazen murder of his former battle partner.

From Taon's perspective, nobody else could be trusted anymore. He had been misled and brought to ruin because of his propensity to depend on others.

Taon was done with relying on them. He had completely lost faith in Ylvaine. The former object of his worship was no better than the Emperor Tree as far as he was concerned. Both of them were manipulative gods that brought nothing good to his life!

Having seen the truth of their deceptive practices, Taon had taken upon himself to bring them all down to his level!

He would never rest until each and every false god had been ruined at his hands!

Neither the Great Prophet nor his living mech could be trusted to support him anymore!

If they were not with him, then they were against him. There was no way his old friends and family would support his cause, particularly when he wanted to ruin some of their precious design spirits!

"Lanie..."

The two irreconcilable enemies seemed poised to attack each other.

As their unstable willpower honed in on each other's machines, the two mechs simultaneously took action!

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Four resonance-empowered heavy artillery shells launched from the Zeal's mutated cannons and blasted the entire air space above into explosions that corroded the very air!

The Elegant Rage charged forward and had become partially affected by all of the explosions.

Though the living mech's unstable resonance shield became even shakier, the melee mech at least managed to avoid getting too close to the powerful blasts.

In fact, the explosions may have depleted the Elegant Rage's defenses, but they had also fed her thorns, causing them to grow longer and accumulate more counterattack energy!

There was no way that Lanie would allow her target to live long enough to unleash another salvo of explosive attacks!

There was only one chance left for the Zeal to repel the Elegant Rage, but there was so little time left that it seemed impossible for Taon to land a direct hit on the much faster and more maneuverable melee mech!

The Elegant Rage in her transformed and temporarily empowered state had become a much more potent instrument in the hands of Lanie!

Her breakthrough may have gone off-track, but she still gained all of the power and the skill expected of a newly ascended expert pilot!

If Taon still had access to a handy prophet like Ylvaine, then perhaps he might have been able to accomplish the impossible and land a precision blow on the blazingly fast Elegant Rage.

However, Taon had already forsaken Ylvaine and every other false god that was undeserving of his faith and piety.

If he wanted to do a job right, then he could only rely on himself!

BOOOOOOM!

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

The mutated shape of the Zeal fundamentally altered the Devora Cannon to the point where it transformed into a completely different weapon system!

Instead of launching a single solid super-heavy transphasic hyper gauss round, it launched a flechette of sharp and messy flechettes that possessed much of the same properties as the original projectile!

Over a hundred different sharp and jagged metal shards sprayed from the muzzle and shot upwards in a wide spread!

Many shards struck nothing and continued to soar through the Solus Gas until they disappeared from sight.

However, several dozen still managed to strike the charging Elegant Rage!

Her faltering resonance shield broke entirely, causing her thorn-covered mech frame to suffer multiple serious punctures!

Some of the flechettes even managed to penetrate straight through the limbs, causing an arm and a leg to almost become severed from the rest of the frame!

While the mutated Devora Cannon strike had definitely inflicted severe damage to the Elegant Rage, it failed to disable the aggressive living mech, let alone arrest her momentum!

"TAAAAAAOOON!"

CRASH!

The two mechs collided against each other!

The Elegant Rage most definitely incurred much more impact damage than the opposing heavy mech, but Lanie did not care as her enemy was finally in her grasp!

Unfortunately, the melee mech had lost her grip on the Heartsword, but the long and energetic thorns that had grown out of the mech frame finally had a chance to serve their purpose!

The Elegant Rage rabidly embraced the much larger Zeal and tried to roll and press in all of her thorns through the resonance shield and into the solid layers of first-class alloys.

"Ahh! It hurts!"

Taon strangely screamed in pain despite the fact that none of the thorns were long enough to affect his body!

It appeared that the power of Lanie's revenge-fueled counterattacks mysteriously acquired the ability to induce pain on a conceptual level!

In this sense, Taon's decision to kill the Zeal and take over its shell had backfired on him! There was no living personality anymore that could suffer the pain in his stead!

However, Taon was not a little girl who was vulnerable to passing out after suffering a single scrape.

He forcibly endured the pain, having already suffered much worse not too long ago. How could the pain of feeling betrayed by Ylvaine and his own senses compare to the stings of Lanie's thorns?

While the Elegant Rage struggled to cause more serious harm to the Zeal and more importantly its pilot, Taon still retained enough sense to know that he was in deep trouble.

If he was not able to dislodge the melee mech, Lanie would get to him sooner or later!

Unfortunately, it was already too late to stop the Elegant Rage now that she was literally hugging a heavy artillery mech!

The thorns had already punctured and disabled the four heavy artillery cannons. Lanie's mech was currently focusing on disabling the mutated Devora Cannon at this time!

If not for the fact that the weapon barrel had become so much thicker at the base, the Elegant Rage would have been able cripple it sooner!

The mutated Zeal may be able to exert a corrosive effect on nearby objects, but the Elegant Rage's inherent resilience and constant regeneration prevented it from suffering damage through this method.

There was nothing the Zeal could do to stop the enemy machine from rampaging.

The mutated Zeal may be able to exert a corrosive effect on nearby objects, but the Elegant Rage's inherent resilience and constant regeneration prevented it from suffering damage through this method.

This caused Taon to grow more desperate. His eyes grew more gloomy as he began to think about taking more desperate measures.

His eyes suddenly flashed when he gained an idea.

"If you won't let go... then I will take you down with me, Lanie!"

Taon did not really think his idea through. He just wanted to get the Elegant Rage off him at all cost!

With a single command, he forcibly deactivated the safeties of all of the remaining explosive shells that the Zeal retained.

With another command, Taon forcibly armed all of the shells. He programmed them to detonate all at once after receiving a single signal.

Just as the maddened expert pilot was about to issue a command that might very well cause his own mech and his body to explode into pieces, a sudden development occurred that shook the entire battlefield!

"INCOMING!"

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Five exceptionally powerful streaks rapidly descended from orbit and struck the trunk as well as the ground around the Emperor Tree!

The sudden orbital bombardment and subsequent shockwaves completely interrupted every action and shook every mech and mech pilot!

Even the tree shook as its massive trunk suffered significant damage that caused a part of its inner core to become exposed, if only briefly!

The shockwaves of the orbital bombardment had forcibly flung the Elegant Rage away from her prey. The mutated metal and wooden mech tumbled away and rolled on the ground until her thorn-covered form finally came to a stop.

The Zeal on the other hand had been pushed away to the point where it had tipped sideways!

The damaged and crippled machine had lost all of its ability to move or do anything useful.

Lanie did not miss this important fact. Her Elegant Rage may have gotten banged up from the strike from orbit, but the melee mech soon bounced back into the air.

The mech's flight system suffered a lot of damage and had almost become inoperable.

That did not stop her from boosting towards the Zeal.

As the Elegant Rage moved closer in order to finish the job once and for all, a pair of searing light beams coming from afar punched through the mech's already damaged flight system and completely shut it down!

"THAT IS ENOUGH, YOU TWO!"

The Everchanger and the First Sword had finally returned!

The two expert pilots took advantage of the orbital bombardment to escape their predicaments and return with whatever samples they managed to drag away!

Right now, both Joshua and Dise felt profoundly disappointed by the former expert candidates.

Neither Lanie nor Taon had behaved in a manner befitting a champion of the Larkinson Clan!

This was not the time to sort out their guilt and mistakes. The Everchanger had managed to pick up his dented Heartsword and used it to chop away the damaged and redundant limbs of the Elegant Rage.

The mutated mech was pretty much spent at this point, so she did not attempt to regenerate the damage.

After neutralizing the mech and trimming away the excess mass, the Everchanger utilized both of his arms to lift up the downsized Elegant Rage and move out of the danger zone.

Meanwhile, Venerable Dise dealt with the Zeal in a much more direct fashion.

The Decapitator roughly cut through all of the alloys surrounding the cockpit and quickly severed it from the rest of the broken and crippled heavy artillery mech.

It was too difficult to drag out this massive machine, and there was no particular reason to preserve it now that Taon had killed his own living mech.

Once the First Sword dragged away the cockpit, a barrage of resonance-empowered fire beams struck the remains of the Zeal.

Soon enough, the fiery laser beams managed to strike the ammunition reserves and caused the primed explosive shells to detonate at once!

BOOOOOOOOOM!

Whatever remained intact of the mutated Zeal completely blew apart and turned into millions of useless shards!

There was no sense in leaving anything intact behind for the Emperor Tree. The Larkinsons absolutely did not want the calamity plant to improve its imitation heavy artillery mechs any further!

Chapter 6070 The Taste of Failure

"This is a mess."

A certain Swordmaster glowered as she stood before an armored cell door.

The corridor of the brig of the Wild Torch was dimly lit, as if to evoke the atmosphere of a dungeon. The lack of lighting and the abundance of shadows made most people who entered this department feel as if they had entered an anachronistic dungeon.

In reality, the main reason why the brig was dimly lit was because it was never used. The Larkinsons were extraordinarily well-behaved, and everyone assigned to Task Force Solus consisted of professional servicemen. There were relatively few civilians who accompanied their family members, and they were not the sort of people who misbehaved on a ship with a ubiquitous monitoring system.

At most, the brig occasionally came into use when a bunch of drunken hotheads got into a fight, or when a few feuding rivals went a little too far in their sparring matches.

This time, two of the cells had become occupied again. These were not the normal cages where the security officers stuffed a few delinquents in after they committed a few infractions.

These were the more well-equipped cells. Not only were their security and isolation parameters a lot better, but they were able to provide medical care to those who needed the assistance.

Though Ketis felt it was overkill to transfer the two prisoners in these special cells aboard the Wild Torch shortly after they had received emergency care at Chimera Base, she could not treat these two individuals with common sense.

Too much had happened that defied both common sense and historical patterns. Her mind turned into a mess as she found herself unable to find any answers to her questions.

"How could this mission go so horribly wrong?"

Ketis' expression turned grim as Task Force Solus was still in the process of dealing with the aftermath of the botched sample retrieval mission.

When the Everchanger and the First Sword returned from the confrontation against the Emperor Tree, the rest of the Larkinson Clan quickly found out that a series of terrible events had taken place!

The Zeal was no more. Instead, the First Sword was forced to drag away a damaged cockpit that had clearly been pried off the former heavy artillery mech.

This was a devastating loss to the Larkinson Clan!

The Zeal was one of the few masterwork mechs that Ves had personally fabricated for Taon Melin!

Even though masterwork mechs were gradually becoming more and more common among the Larkinsons, that did not mean that they had lost their value and prestige.

Regardless of the effects of Gloriana's god body method, a masterwork that emerged through gradual evolution was not the same as a masterwork that the patriarch of the Larkinson Clan had personally put together!

The Zeal was an exquisite machine that Ves had invested multiple days into piecing together. He had invested his love, his passion and his very ethos into building up the custom version of the Transcendent Punisher Mark III.

In fact, almost no one among the Larkinson Clan knew that the Zeal was actually a lot more special than was apparent on the surface.

The exterior of the Zeal used to be covered by mysterious prophetic visions painted by Ves and Ylvaine.

It was a pity that the Red Association commanded the images to be removed. If not for this development, the Eye of Ylvaine would have taken a lot more pride in this very special masterwork mech!

Now, it was gone. The damage was utterly total. The First Sword had already cut it to pieces, and the Everchanger's parting shots had detonated all of the explosive shells at once, utterly blowing up the remnant of the Zeal from within!

In fact, the Zeal was already dead as far as Joshua and Dise were concerned. What they had done was nothing more than to cremate the corpse of this once-proud third order living mech.

As for the Elegant Rage...

When the crippled melee mech got shipped back into orbit, Ketis truly did not know what she was looking at. From the moment she glimpsed at the living mech's integration of wood and the spontaneous emergence of thorns, she knew that she was completely unqualified to understand such a machine!

All she knew was that the Elegant Rage had mutated far beyond her previous state. Ketis still recalled the look and feel of the original custom mech. Somehow, Lanie's breakthrough had caused it to mutate into an entirely different machine, one that became filled with life, but also unrelenting fury!

To be honest, Ketis did not like the Elegant Rage. The machine had unquestionably become more powerful, but it had become stained with Lanie's darkest impulses. The mutated mech was no longer as upright as before.

The living mech no longer deserved her current name. There was no way Ketis could ever attach the word 'elegant' to the mech with thorns.

Perhaps others might disagree, but to her, Lanie's mech had become corrupted by malevolent energies. The machine radiated so much menace and threat that even Ketis felt threatened!

For a mech to display such open hostility towards a fellow Larkinson was a sad state of affairs!

"I can't blame the Elegant Rage." Ketis sighed.

The living mech had fundamentally lost her trust in her fellow Larkinsons. Taon and the Zeal had struck at her back in a moment where she and her battle partner had completely dropped their guard against such a surprise attack.

After getting betrayed in such a devastating manner that Lanie and her living mech almost got killed in the process, it should not have been surprising that they lost the ability to feel comfortable in the presence of other Larkinsons!

As Ketis wondered what she should do about this mess, the physical projection of Ves appeared by her side.

"You have returned."

"Sorry for the delay, Ketis. This is an unprecedentedly serious incident, so I needed to be extra thorough in starting up the right processes. I have already arranged the follow-up matters for Taon and Lanie. As soon as we have confirmed that their conditions have improved, we will ship them back to the expeditionary fleet where they will have to account for their actions."

Ketis narrowed her eyes. The Larkinson Clan had already set up the protocols for instances where Larkinsons made serious missteps.

Although there were many complications and mitigating factors at the time, these issues should all be explored at the appropriate occasions.

"Will you make it public, or will you try to keep it quiet?" Ketis asked.

"There is no choice but to make it public, Ketis." The physical projection of Ves replied with a stern expression. "We can obscure a few details, but this mission isn't sensitive or important enough to go through the effort of hiding it. Our clansmen deserve answers. Both Taon and Lanie are high-profile expert candidates in the clan. Their breakthroughs should ordinarily be causes for celebration, but if they vanish from the public all of a sudden, our clan will clamor for answers. Besides... too many soldiers over at Chimera Base have already seen what had happened to the mechs or lack thereof. It is unreasonable to force them all into silence."

Ketis' expression softened. "I think you have made the right decision. This is a shameful incident to our clan, but the Larkinsons have a right to know about it. Only by being honest and transparent about our failings will our other clansmen be able to learn from Taon and Lanie's mistakes. It won't be easy for those two, though. No matter the verdict that our clan will reach, the two will most definitely have to carry this burden for the rest of their lives."

"Life is not fair." Ves sighed.

A brief pause ensued as the two continued to think about the tragedies that took place.

"I shouldn't have sent them to the Emperor Tree." Ketis spoke with a self-recriminating expression. "The calamity plant was equivalent to an ace mech in some ways, so it shouldn't have been

appropriate to expose a pair of expert candidates to this monstrosity. They weren't ready. It is already a small miracle that they came back alive."

Ves surprisingly shook his head. "I don't agree. No mission will proceed smoothly all of the time. As a commander, you must accept the possibility of adverse outcomes. The information that you had at the time made sense. Yes, we underestimated the danger posed by the Emperor Tree, but it is exactly because we know too little about it that we insisted on collecting samples. In a way, we got what we came for. We not only collected a lot of interesting biological specimens from the giant tree, but we also learned about its cunning, its intelligence and its combat strategies."

"All of that information isn't worth the loss of a masterwork mech and the tarnishing of two promising Larkinson mech pilots."

"I don't see it that way. Yes, we have suffered losses, but we have made far greater gains than I would have hoped. The breakthroughs of Taon and Lanie are clearly abnormal and unprecedented in our clan. It is very clear that the rules governing pilot breakthroughs have recently changed. The Age of Dawn has opened up a lot of new possibilities. Numerous mechers have told me that it has become easier to trigger breakthroughs. Now, I understand a bit better what they mean. Even if the breakthroughs became crooked due to the presence of negative factors, it is better for Taon and Lanie to become distorted but retain their lives than to remain pure but also die in the process."

Ketis was not entirely certain whether she believed the current outcome was better. Lanie might still be redeemable, but Taon may be better off dead than... whatever he has turned into. The mere thought of the once-promising Ylvainain expert candidate and legion commander made her snarl.

She pinned the physical projection with a critical stare.

"You sound like you are enjoying the outcome. You like this, don't you? This must all seem like an accidental but fortuitous experiment in your eyes. You love nothing more to collect brand-new empirical data that does not conform to previous data points. You were even willing to sacrifice the Zeal just to witness the birth of two deviant expert pilots that were very different from their normal counterparts. Don't lie to me, Ves. I know your inclinations far too well. We could have intervened through our design spirits. Why did you refuse to take action and order me to do the same?"

Perhaps Ves might try to lie or make excuses in front of everybody else, but he saw little point in doing so in front of his former student.

"I admit that I have more selfish motives in mind, but I am also doing this for the good of the clan." Ves responded without shame or guilt. "First, no matter what, all of the mech pilots managed to get out alive. That is the most important part. The death of the Zeal is regrettable, but... do not forget that it is a mech. It is the job of mechs to protect and possibly die for their mech pilots. Second, both expert candidates successfully managed to realize their potential and advanced to expert pilots. Sure, they may have become distorted, but I think that they have also become considerably stronger compared to conventional expert pilots. Even if they will never have a chance to make use of your newfound talents, we can still study them and enrich our internal database."

"Is that all you care about, Ves? Have Taon and Lanie become nothing more than experimental subjects from your perspective?"

"Hardly! You are mistaken if you think I am only paying attention to the two of them. Do you want to know why I did not allow for either of us to intervene directly? I wanted to teach every Larkinson but especially Joshua that actions have consequences. Do you agree?"

Ketis grimaced again. She knew her husband well.

"Joshua has been rather... complacent when it comes to his progression. He is diligent enough in his training, but when it comes to his mentality... he is much further behind in this aspect. I do not see him working on refining his convocation as much as the other ace pilot candidates."

"I think so as well. He lacked a strong impetus to improve his strength. This is not a surprise as his life has been a little too smooth as of late. Now that he has personally tasted the consequences of being too weak to stop a tragedy from unfolding, I think that your husband has gained a renewed sense of urgency. Today, he was stumped by the Emperor Tree. Tomorrow, another unfathomable enemy might come and kill a lot of Larkinsons in front of his eyes. If he continues to remain stuck as a high-tier expert pilot for a decade or so, then he will not be able to keep up with the best of us anymore. I do not want this to happen. His Everchanger is too important to remain shackled to a floundering demigod."

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"I... will have a good talk with him after this." Ketis promised.