

The Mech 6091

Chapter 6091 Alien Bioconstruct Developer

Ves and Alexa continued to go over the research reports on the Emperor Tree's wooden mechs. They talked about all kinds of fascinating observations about these quaint and interesting constructs.

The pair of mech designers also spent their time on examining the Elegant Rage before partially disassembling the machine.

It was only when Ves was able to remove a few exterior plating and take a good look at the interior for him to understand how much of a patchwork the Elegant Rage had become!

It was as if the Elegant Rage partially fused with a wooden mech. A lot of requirements that used to be fulfilled by metallic parts were suddenly being fulfilled by wooden parts.

For example, Ves saw entire banks of energy cells being replaced by wooden equivalents. Each of these wooden cells were able to reach remarkably high energy densities given their limited volume and relatively average material compositions. The tree sap that ran through them had a large part to do with their excellent performance.

The Elegant Rage was filled with many more small wooden wonders. There were parts that replaced anything from artificial musculature to gyroscopes.

"Many of these parts remind me of biomech design," Ves remarked. "I don't know whether it is because of convergent design by the Emperor Tree or other reasons, but there are plenty of design choices that makes me think that many different biomech designers have contributed to this crazy wave of upgrades and modification. Everything works so well despite not looking like it makes sense. I am rather amazed at how efficient the Elegant Rage is able to accommodate these wooden parts and tree sap circulatory system. The utilization of capacity is so good that it is as if Gloriana had made a pass at the living mech's design."

The more Ves and Alexa examined the design, the more mysteries they uncovered.

However, their comprehension of how a mech like the Elegant Rage could possibly work was limited by their limited expertise on biotechnology.

Alexa had dabbled in a few biotechnology and biomech design courses, but she did not put much emphasis on this niche specialization back when she was a mech design student. She had already decided to commit to designing conventional mechs as opposed to anything exotic like smart metal mechs or biomechs.

As for Ves, he was able to gain a more thorough understanding of how the Elegant Rage worked by drawing upon multiple sources of expertise. His understanding of spiritual engineering, Blinky's excellent perception, the basic biotech theories he learned in the past along with the occult knowledge provided by the Blood Cult Scarlet Oak Tree Growth Manual Enlightenment Fruit all allowed him to make a number of accurate inferences on the mechanisms of the Elegant Rage.

Unfortunately, all of it was a bit too scattered to constitute a coherent system. The Elegant Rage possessed much greater depth that Ves was unable to penetrate for the time being.

It appeared that he wouldn't be able to develop a working theoretical framework of Woodsap mechs by performing a cursory examination of the current form of the Elegant Rage.

"This mech is too alien." Alexa commented. "There are too many design principles and mechanisms that fall outside of my areas of expertise. I fear that only a dedicated biomech designer can decipher the Elegant Rage's greater secrets, and that individual must possess a good understanding of exoflora biology as well. There are not many professionals who are well-versed in both fields."

She made a good point. Biomech designers were relatively scarce, especially in the Red Ocean.

A lot of biomech designers mainly studied how to develop organic mechs made of exobeast cells.

In other words, their principal building blocks consisted of metal-reinforced flesh and bones.

It was highly unusual to base mechs out of plant cells, even if they were reinforced with powerful metallic exotics.

A lot of biomech designs were directly inspired by the biologies of powerful exobeasts found in the wild.

It was a lot easier for biomech designers to plagiarize the best results of natural selection than to invent a new biomech framework from scratch.

Before the Age of Dawn, powerful exobeasts were not particularly strong, but they were anything but rare.

However, there was no such thing as a powerful exoplant. Even if there were plenty of alien trees that grew big and old, they always remained firmly rooted to their original locations. They never felt any pressure to evolve the ability to become more flexible and move around.

If a massive environmental crisis ever occurred that deteriorated the living spaces of these exoplants, it was already too late for them. There was no way they could evolve fast enough to outrun disasters that swept up their entire surroundings!

The Age of Dawn permanently changed these rules.

The influx of exotic radiation and the rapid mutation of many lucky organisms led to the rise of rapid self-evolving mutated plants and even more powerful calamity plants.

In just a couple of months or years, these formerly humble organisms completely transformed into strong and intelligent predators!

It was not unheard of to encounter reports of moving trees on the galactic net. Although the Emperor Tree had yet to demonstrate this capability, the development of remarkably fast and mobile wooden mechs showed that it was on the right track.

In other words, the calamity plant had already started to activate and climb its way up this technology tree.

Ves continued to fall into thought as he looked at the many mysterious wooden components that defied his understanding.

"Mrow."

Even Blinky maintained a blank expression as his sharp spiritual senses failed to figure out how the absorption and circulation of wood energy empowered the mutated mech.

Alexa grew a little suspicious when she cast her gaze at her mentor.

"What are you thinking, sir? You look as if you are contemplating a number of questionable ideas."

He chuckled at that. "Your familiarity with my habits are growing with each passing day. How come I have become so easy to read all of a sudden?"

"I think I have begun to understand how you can produce so many radical and successful innovations over the years. Your risk tolerance is higher than every other mech designer that I know of. You are also much more impulsive. Many mech designers would at least conduct feasibility studies and other forms of analysis before following up on their whims. You just take action even if you do not have any concrete proof that your ideas will lead to the desired results."

Ves smiled back at her. "If there is anything I have learned in our industry, it is that every mech designer is capable of doing a lot more than their records suggest. Too many of my colleagues are restraining themselves because they are restricted by their jobs, their employers, lack of resources, lack of time and lack of courage. I don't blame them for being cautious. Nobody wants to dedicate years of research into a project that ended up hopeless from the beginning. However, I think it is still better to actually do something than keep your most interesting ideas in your mind."

"That is easier said than done, sir. Not everyone is able to go independent and steadily work your way up by achieving continual successes over the years. Your career trajectory is impossible to replicate by any other third-class mech designer."

She was right. Perhaps Ves was being too unrealistic about this subject.

"Let's get back to the original subject matter." He said. "You are correct that I have a few unusual ideas in mind. I have used my cranial implant to skim through the LBI's research reports that you have transferred to me. The samples that the ill-fated strike force has collected during the last mission indicate that the calamity plant has made progress into developing a wood-based framework of mech-like constructs. However, its progress is still incomplete."

"That is true, though the existence of the much more superior variant of purple wooden constructs indicates that the Emperor Tree has already reached the second generation of its ambitious project." Alexa reminded Ves.

It was a pity that the strike force was unable to retrieve any intact purple wooden mechs. It had been more important to drag Lanie and Taon out of the danger zone.

"That is why I am thinking about delaying the upcoming offensive operation on the Emperor Tree. Sure, it is powerful and definitely poses a threat against the Larkinsons stationed on the surface of Reticula Corein V. However, if you think about it, the calamity plant is a remarkably competent alien bioconstruct developer. It is a waste to end its life when it can still make a lot of progress in developing stronger and more efficient iterations of wooden mechs! Just imagine the Emperor Tree's fourth or fifth generation of organic products. These advanced wooden constructs may actually succeed in matching the raw power of our expert mechs!"

Alexa was completely taken aback by his radical idea!

"Your clansmen will not like it, sir. They will hate your plan and resent you for stopping them from destroying the enemy that has ruined two of our up-and-coming champions. From what I have heard, Swordmaster Ketis and the other members of Task Force Solus are out for blood. They want to tear down the Emperor Tree and burn down as much of its enormous wooden body as possible.

Venerable Isobel Kotin and the Promethea should have already arrived in preparation for the upcoming strike."

Ves was not ignorant of how much the Larkinsons have come to loathe the Emperor Tree. He resented it as well. He was of two minds on this issue.

On the one hand, he could force the task force to keep the Emperor Tree around for a longer time in the hopes of letting it advance its organic R&D activities.

Though the rewards would definitely be great, the cost would also be heavy. Ves would have to piss off a lot of clansmen while also buying the frighteningly intelligent and adaptive calamity plant a lot of time to grow stronger!

On the other hand, striking at the Emperor Tree sooner rather than later would nip its threat in the bud, both literally and figuratively. It would definitely minimize the chance of accidents and give Chimera Base a lot of breathing space to develop in peace.

Aside from that, the sooner the Larkinsons got rid of the Emperor Tree, the sooner they could start a much larger Solus Gas harvesting operation at a much larger vent.

Since Chimera Base was made up of a lot of modular and semi-modular building parts, it should be easy enough for the task force to disassemble every structure and reassemble them at the Emperor Tree's former seat of power.

Ves had already taken note of the remarkable properties of Solus Gas. Its value was far higher than he initially suspected. Its ability to function like a gaseous form of B-stone not only turned it into an effective counter against living mechs, but also allowed the Larkinsons to counter similar threats in the future!

While Solus Gas could not be used to counter powerful calamity beasts and calamity plants that had evolved alongside this mysterious exotic gas, it was bound to be a lot more effective against powerful beasts that never got into contact with it before!

Ves also saw huge potential in employing it on a wider scale against enemies that were making increasingly more extensive use of hyper technology.

"I need to consider this matter further." He said. "In any case, I don't think I can make much progress in understanding how the Elegant Rage works. That is not good news because I don't think I will be able to convert it into the mech that I have promised to deliver to Venerable Lanie. There are two possible ways I can go forward with this. The easiest solution would be to bring in an external consultant who knows a lot about exoplants. The more difficult one is for me to absorb a lot of knowledge about this subject matter. Which one should I pursue?"

Chapter 6092 Metal Is Weak

Ves was not able to understand how the Elegant Rage worked.

That did not stop him from collecting a lot of data. He set aside many of the aspects of the mutated mech that eluded his understanding and focused on securing more realistic gains.

One of the theories he came up with was that mechs that incorporated aspects of the Emperor Tree's wooden construct technology possessed the ability to regenerate their own battle damage.

Although the Elegant Rage was not a pure wood-based biomech, its extreme transformation had caused it to become a lot more powerful and special than its previous iteration.

Even now, Blinky was able to perceive that the Elegant Rage was quietly growing by absorbing the ambient wood-attributed E energy from the environment.

The wood energies were most present in the patchwork wooden components of the mutated mech.

However, Blinky was also able to perceive that the wood energy ran through the metal components as well.

Somehow, the remaining metallic components of the Elegant Rage suddenly became receptive towards wood energy.

In contrast, the living mech also became less welcoming towards metal energy.

This was a highly unusual shift as every modern living mech was able to cultivate the Lesser or Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra!

As the name of this mech-exclusive cultivation suggested, every living mech was slowly able to strengthen its material frame as well as its spiritual foundation by absorbing metal energy from the environment.

Progress was relatively slow and the effects were not too dramatic, but only a few years had passed since Ves first granted his living mechs more agency in their growth.

It made sense for mechs made predominantly out of metallic alloys to absorb more metal energy.

It did not make sense for a mech that still contained a lot of metallic parts to neglect the value of metal energy!

Why did the Elegant Rage decide to convert to an energy type that did not entirely align with the material composition of the mech frame?

Ves figured that the best way to find out was to get a direct answer from the living mech herself.

He activated a command that slightly powered up the machine and caused the third order living mech to become a little more energetic.

Though the living machine had always remained active even when almost all of her systems had shut down, Ves' action essentially conveyed his willingness to extend more autonomy to the living mech.

The Elegant Rage had previously been restricted from acting by herself due to the potential fear that she may go rogue.

Fortunately, she remained well-behaved after her return from the mission. She never kicked up any fuss during the time she was shipped from the Reticula Corein System to the New Constantinople System.

Though Ves could definitely tell that there was an element of primal rage to her spiritual foundation, the third order living mech demonstrated sufficient control over her impulses.

She had earned his trust.

"Can you answer a few questions for me, Elegant Rage?"

The three eyes of the mutated mech briefly flashed.

"I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU TO SATISFY YOUR CURIOSITY, PROGENITOR. ASK AWAY."

"I am sure you are aware of many of the changes to your mech frame. Do the wooden components feel amiss to you in any way? Do they inflict any pain? Do they feel foreign to you? Would you rather get rid of them and revert to your prior form?"

"I HAVE EVOLVED." The third order living mech expressed her opinion. "I HAVE BECOME STRONGER AND MORE DIFFICULT TO DESTROY THAN EVER BEFORE. WHY WOULD I DISLIKE THESE CHANGES? MAYBE IT IS DIFFICULT FOR YOU AND OTHERS TO ACCEPT A MECH THAT HAS INTEGRATED SO MUCH WOOD, BUT IT FEELS COMPLETELY NATURAL TO ME. I DON'T LIKE METAL ANYMORE. IF I HAD MY WAY, I WOULD BE MADE COMPLETELY OUT OF WOOD."

"What?"

Both Ves and Alexa blanked out for a moment.

What they heard... sounded absurd. As mech designers who worked on many powerful metallic mechs, they possessed a strong and unshakable belief in the power of classical mechs.

The concept of wooden mechs was too strange and weird for their sensibilities. Even if it possessed a couple of unique advantages, metallic mechs had developed far too much to lose their crown.

"Why... do you want to get rid of your remaining metallic components?" Ves questioned.

"BECAUSE THEY FAILED ME." The Elegant Rage succinctly answered. "WHEN THE ZEAL STRUCK MY BACK, MY ARMOR AND STRUCTURE FAILED TO WITHSTAND THE BLOW. EVEN WORSE WAS THAT I HAD NO ABILITY TO REGENERATE MY BATTLE DAMAGE ON MY OWN. I WAS ON THE VERGE OF FAILING MY BATTLE PARTNER. IT WAS ONLY WHEN SHE MANAGED TO BREAK THROUGH THAT I FOUND A BETTER ALTERNATIVE. WITH THE HELP OF LANIE'S POWER, I GRASPED THE POWER OF REBIRTH AND ASSIMILATED A MORE SUPERIOR MATERIAL!"

The living mech meant every word she said. Her spiritual foundation sang with joy and gratitude as the Elegant Rage continued to gush about her transformation.

"UNLIKE THE RIGID AND UNRESTORABLE PIECES OF METAL THAT SIGNIFIED MY WEAKNESS, THE WOOD THAT I MANAGED TO INTEGRATE WITH THE HELP OF LANIE IS VASTLY MORE SUPERIOR. IT IS WARMER AND FILLED WITH LIFE. IT HAS HELPED TO RESTORE LANIE'S BROKEN BODY AND RETURN HER TO A HEALTHY CONDITION. I NO LONGER HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL I RETURN TO BASE IN ORDER TO RECEIVE THE REPAIRS I NEED. I CAN REGENERATE ON MY OWN BY ABSORBING WOOD ENERGY AND LANIE'S WILLPOWER. NO LONGER WILL ANYONE BE ABLE TO REDUCE ME TO A HELPLESS AND INFIRM STATE. THE POWER OF WOOD IS EVERLASTING."

The Elegant Rage had become a complete wood element fangirl after surviving a traumatic event!

From her limited perspective, metal was weak and wood was strong. The latter might not necessarily be any tougher or more resilient, but it was far easier to repair organic matter than inorganic matter!

Though Ves did not necessarily agree with all of the living mech's stances, he did not bother to correct her. There was little point in doing so. Every human and every living mech was different. So long as their opinions did not lead to any harm, it was fine for them to believe in their little delusions.

Besides, Ves loved variety. So what if a living mech had gone astray and became a wood supremacist? The Elegant Rage presented him with a lot of novelties that he had never encountered before!

"Well, I am glad that you have embraced your changes." Ves said in a placating tone. "The problem is that your transformation is incomplete. Now that your battle partner has gone ahead and joined the Red Association, I have been tasked to convert you into a Carmine mech. I intend to do so with your newly obtained wood foundation as its core. Since this is tech that I have yet to develop, I need to conduct extensive examinations and experiments on you. Are you okay with that, Elegant Rage?"

"I TRUST YOU TO DO WHAT IS BEST FOR MYSELF AND LANIE. YOU ARE MY PROGENITOR, AND YOU HAVE NEVER DONE LIVING MECHS ANY WRONG. I AM WILLING TO PUT MYSELF AT YOUR DISPOSAL IN ORDER TO BECOME STRONGER IN THE END. I WOULD LOVE NOTHING MORE THAN TO FORM A PACT FOR LIFE WITH MY ONLY BATTLE PARTNER."

The thorns extending from all over the mech frame was by far the Elegant Rage's most prominent exterior feature. They were considerably sharper and tougher than the rest of the mech frame, and they seem to be a lot more attuned to wood energy as well.

Ves smiled at that. "Very well. Let's start with a few experiments. We need to collect a bunch of empirical data in order to determine what kind of additional properties you have gained since your mutations. I will need to cut off a few of your thorns as well for additional studies. Scans have shown that both your wooden and metallic thorns possess unusual properties that seem to make them more than what they appear on the surface."

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"YOU MAY... COLLECT THE SAMPLES. I BELIEVE THAT I CAN REPAIR THE DAMAGE, THOUGH IT WILL BE HARDER WITHOUT LANIE PILOTING ME. I AM NOT SURE IF IT WILL WORK."

"That is what our studies are for. We experiment and observe in order to turn uncertainties into known variables. You will see what I mean soon enough."

The advantage of bringing the Elegant Rage to his private workshop was that Ves could employ an extensive set of tools and instruments.

Ves and Alexa retreated to a central workstation. From there, they began to activate a series of wall and ceiling-mounted instruments.

Many of them consisted of various sensor and scanning arrays. They came online and began to observe the semi-dormant form of the Elegant Rage in many different ways.

Ves also kept Blinky out in order to serve as his spiritual sensor system.

While Ves made sure that all of the high-tech scanning systems were properly calibrated, Alexa served as his assistant and took manual control over a heavy-duty plasma cutter.

The large mech weapon-sized industrial tool came online and began to form a very thin but hot plasma edge.

Alexa grew a little concerned about using such a hot instrument on a partially organic mech.

"Sir, are you certain that it is wise to employ a plasma cutter on the Elegant Rage? What if her wooden components catch fire?"

"The wood produced by the Emperor Tree and strengthened by forced resonance shouldn't be so weak. The plasma cutter isn't empowered in any special way, so as long as you make the cut fast enough, it shouldn't do much more than scorch the surface of the Elegant Rage. Let's conduct a test by scratching a single metal armor plate."

Alexa promptly executed her instructions. She brought the plasma cutter forward and gently used it to dig a fairly shallow groove onto the thickest frontal chest plating of the Elegant Rage.

"OUCH! THAT IS TOO HOT! THAT HURTS!"

Ves found it interesting that the Elegant Rage gained a heightened sensitivity for pain, even though it shouldn't even possess the nerves to experience this particular sensation.

Both Ves and Alexa carefully examined the thin charred line on the armor plate.

"Can you sense it, Alexa?"

"No. What clue have you found?"

"Zoom in on the damage. Look at how the groove is stirring."

"Wait... is the Elegant Rage truly capable of regenerating its own battle damage despite lacking the high tech self-repair modules?"

Ves smiled. "Blinky can sense a lot of wood energy converging on the damaged sections. The Elegant Rage is right. Wood energy is truly able to promote healing. The outrageous part is that this applies to her metallic components as well as her wooden components!"

Though they had yet to test the same capability on an exposed wooden part, the results would probably be the same!

The Elegant Rage had already managed to conduct drastic repairs on her damaged and broken metallic components immediately after Venerable Lanie's breakthrough.

It shouldn't be much of a surprise that the machine still retained a semblance of this ability.

However, it was not without flaws.

"It is too slow." Alexa concluded. "According to my brief calculations, it will likely take at least a week for the Elegant Rage to repair such a small and trivial scar. It may take years for the living mech to bring herself back to full functionality if she suffered as much damage as last time!"

That was indeed a major flaw. Ves knew that Lanie's companion spirit was able to boost the Elegant Rage's regeneration abilities, but that was not a perfect solution.

"There has to be a solution." Ves stated. "Let's conduct further examinations and see how we can make the Elegant Rage more enduring and unkillable."

The survival of Venerable Lanie was at stake! Given how eagerly the Mace wanted to put his latest protege to the test, it became a matter of life and death to improve the Elegant Rage's core features!

Ves seriously doubted that the Red Association would be able to upgrade all of these features. The mechers did not master his own specializations. This meant that only he possessed the ability to strengthen what made the Elegant Rage unique!

Chapter 6093 Buy 1, Get 9 Free

The base regeneration speed of the Elegant Rage was too slow.

Ves and Alexa conducted further examinations on the unusual third order living mech.

The plasma cutter created a bunch more shallow grooves on different portions of the mech's exterior.

They managed to discover a few rules.

"The Elegant Rage's metallic components have gained regenerative properties, but the effects are so weak that they can be ignored over the course of a single engagement. The reason why the metallic components can restore themselves at all is probably due to the infusion of wood energy. However, the elemental properties are in conflict with each other. According to the RA's internal database on E energy attribute interactions, wood energy has an antagonistic relationship with metal energy. The common saying is that metal cuts wood. It is not a surprise that they are unable to get along."

"The wooden parts of the Elegant Rage are able to restore themselves much faster. Our current working theory is that they are highly compatible with wood energy. The nurturing and healing qualities of wood energy synergize extremely well with the organic wood originally produced by the Emperor Tree. The only issue is that the restoration rate is still too slow to be of significant use in battle. It takes days to repair any significant battle damage."

"The thorns that have spontaneously grown out of the exterior of the Elegant Rage are very special. Their regenerative properties alone are far superior compared to the rest of the mech frame. When they are damaged or cut off, the mutated mech is already able to channel a lot of wood energy to restore the thorn to its original state. According to the living mech herself, she instinctively channels the wood energy without conscious direction, suggesting that her thorns have become an enhanced focus of her metaphysical power."

"When we cut off one of the smallest wooden thorns, it takes about half a day for it to regenerate in full."

"When we cut off one of the smallest metallic thorns, it will probably take multiple days for it to regenerate. This is much slower compared to the wooden thorns, but it is much faster compared to other metallic components."

"Why is there such a massive difference in the regeneration rate between the thorns and the other parts of the mech frame?"

"One of my theories is that the thorns are a pure manifestation of Venerable Lanie and her companion spirit's extraordinary power. Although Lanie has already left the cockpit for several weeks, remnants of her power still reside in the mech and particularly the thorns."

"Another theory is that the Elegant Rage's spiritual foundation has been warped and distorted to the point where her thorns have become her most important parts. Their importance has surpassed that of the power reactor, the mech engine, the flight system, the armaments and so on. Numerous interviews with the Elegant Rage herself support this theory."

"Is it possible to replicate this 'thorn effect'?" Alexa curiously asked as she continued to work alongside Ves to uncover the mutated mech's secrets.

Ves smiled. "I think so. The speed of transformation won't be as fast and the effects probably won't be as exaggerated without the support of an expert pilot, but I think it is doable for me to develop a lesser variant that can be mass produced."

"Truly?! How?!"

"The data we have gathered and the conclusions that we have drawn from them have opened up my eyes." He said in an inspired tone. "I have realized that metaphysical energy has more potential than I thought. Even modest quantities of E energy can produce more drastic and illogical changes."

"You will have to elaborate further. I do not understand, sir."

Ves smirked. He was not surprised.

"Your companion spirit Maia has observed the interaction between the Elegant Rage and E energy all of this time, correct?"

Alexa nodded. "Yes. She is observing the mech from a different perspective just as Blinky."

"Then you should have a good grasp on how much wood Energy the Elegant Rage is absorbing from the environment. Right now, her mech frame is covered by dozens of wounds. She is working hard to repair the damage. Some of the damaged sections are regenerating slowly, but the thorns are repairing a lot faster. Regardless, do you think the throughput of wood E energy is proportional to the regeneration processes?"

The former Terran mech designer hadn't paid attention to this, but now that Ves pointed it out, she quickly deduced what he was trying to convey.

Her eyes widened in realization. "I have grown much more familiar with hyper technology in the past year. I have witnessed many mech systems that absorb similar quantities of E energy, but produce much weaker effects. This is a ceiling that is difficult to break because the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy is positioned hundreds of thousands of light-years away from Messier 87. The exotic radiation that has reached our coordinates has been diluted so many times that the concentration is just a fraction of the concentration at the source."

In other words, the Red Ocean was just a medium-energy environment. Any hyper tech that operated in this dwarf galaxy was only a fraction as powerful as in a high-energy environment like Messier 87!

Ves always assumed that this was a hard limitation that could not be overcome, but the evidence he gathered from the Elegant Rage subverted his views!

"What you have said is largely correct, Alexa, but I believe that it is easier to break this ceiling than I thought. The Elegant Rage possesses a special quality that allows her to drastically increase the utilization of E energy. What is strange is that it is only effective on her thorns. Yet this is already a crucial observation because we can observe the differences with our own eyes! Do you realize what this means? We have hard empirical data that the ceiling can be broken, and if my suspicions are correct, this result is much easier to reproduce than you think!"

"How?!"

"Let's ask the living mech herself." Ves grinned before turning to face the large machine. "You have heard my explanation. Have you formed an idea on what the special quality may be? What allows you to restore your thorns a lot faster than everything else?"

This was a crucial question. The data gathered by the pair of mech designers revealed that even if the Elegant Rage channeled a lot more wood energy to her damaged thorns in order to speed up their regeneration processes, the numbers did add up! The yield was far higher than it should!

It was as if Ves previously needed to spend 100 MTA credits to produce a single mech in the past, but suddenly gained the capability to produce 10 mechs with the same amount of money!

Those were 10 mechs with the same quality and performance parameters as the original machine!

Where did the other 9 mechs come from? How was it possible for 100 MTA credits to achieve results that were an order of magnitude better?

This was exactly the sort of phenomenon that Ves managed to uncover from the Elegant Rage!

It didn't make any sense to him at first.

Nothing came for free! Everything had a cost!

What kind of heavy and hellish price did the Elegant Rage pay in order to gain this reality-defying power? Was Venerable Lanie entirely responsible for this effect, or did her living mech gain a mysterious upgrade that somehow allowed her to utilize wood energy a lot more effectively on a conditional basis?

It was fortunate that Ves had multiple minds to draw upon to increase his thinking capacity. After considering a lot of different clues and variables, he believed he managed to dial in the answer.

"Let's refresh the basics. What are the defining properties of E energy?"

"It is intangible. It possesses both energy and matter characteristics. It is psychoactive and psychoreactive."

"Focus on your third sentence! Think, Alexa. What does it actually mean for E energy to be psychoreactive?"

"E energy reacts to the conscious thought of an intelligent individual. Depending on the strength and purity of thought, E energy can become stronger and produce much more specific effects than usual. Hyper materials already do this to a degree, but since they are lifeless objects, the reactions are mostly static and unchanging in isolation. It is only when there is a conscious mind that greater variance has been observed. Oh..."

Ves grinned wider. "Have you realized it, Alexa?"

"Are you suggesting that... it is the Elegant Rage's own cognition that is responsible for boosting the regeneration of her own thorns?"

"Exactly! It makes too much sense! Let Maia take a deep look at the Elegant Rage's spiritual foundation. The essence of thorns has already taken root in the very spirit of the living mech! That is a clear indication that she is somehow improving the interaction between wood energy and her thorns to a drastic degree."

Although this explanation made a lot of sense, Alexa still felt there were a lot of gaps in this radical theory.

"Each of your living mechs practice the cultivation method that you have devised for them if I recall. That cultivation method is largely centered around the absorption of metal energy. Even if the Elegant Rage ceased to practice it because she has developed a loathing for the metal element, how is the living mech able to produce drastically better results with wood energy?"

The difference in effectiveness was too great!

"The answer is quite simple, Alexa. Let's ask the mech herself. Elegant Rage, have you suspended your practice of the Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra?"

"YES."

"Have you decided to practice a modified version of the cultivation method or any other cultivation method as a substitute?"

"NO."

"Why not?"

"I ALREADY FEEL COMFORTABLE IN MY CURRENT STATE. I AM GROWING EVEN FASTER THAN WHEN I WAS PRACTICING YOUR CULTIVATION METHOD IN THE PAST. I SEE NO REASON TO MAKE ANY FURTHER CHANGES. MY THORNS ARE GROWING SHARPER AND TOUGHER WITH EACH PASSING DAY."

Alexa looked shocked when she heard this. How was the Elegant Rage able to improve at such a notable rate without practicing any cultivation method?

This defied her limited understanding!

"What do you think about thorns?"

"THORNS ARE MY WEAPONS AND ARMOR. THEY CAN NOT ONLY PROTECT LANIE'S LIFE, BUT ALLOWS HER TO RETALIATE WITH THE POWER OF HER ENEMIES. THE HARDER I GET HIT, THE MORE HARMFUL MY THORNS BECOME. THE THORNS COVERING MY EXTERIOR IS AN OBVIOUS WARNING TO ALL THAT THEY MUST PAY A PAINFUL PRICE IF THEY DARE LAY A HAND ON ME OR LANIE AGAIN. MY THORNS HAVE BECOME THE EMBODIMENT OF MY ENTIRE EXISTENCE!"

Alexa flinched as the living mech spoke that last sentence with a much higher volume than normal!

Ves turned to face his direct disciple. "Have you finally figured out the answer?"

"I believe so." Alexa said as she rapidly put all of the facts together. "The Elegant Rage doesn't need to practice a cultivation method because... her distorted cognition already produces the same effect."

If you think about it, a cultivation method is nothing more than a highly focused form of self-hypnosis. The goal is to artificially impose a radically different state of mind in your head for the purpose of producing specific reactions with specific E energy attributes. The Elegant Rage... does not need to do that, because the changes produced by Venerable Lanie's breakthrough has automatically reshaped the living mech's mind state into one that is inherently focused and obsessed with thorns."

"Correct! That is the theory that I have devised! For you to come to the same conclusion after noticing the same clues shows that it is likely correct. Strong cognition produces stronger E energy reactions! The Elegant Rage has grown by a large extent all of a sudden as she was able to leech a portion of Lanie's breakthrough energies. Her greater quantity of Ascension Runes is proof of that. Now, I believe that we have discovered a very important means of strengthening the hyper technology and E technology of all of our living mechs! I need to conduct a bunch of follow up experiments in order to be sure, but if my suspicions are correct, we should be able to drastically strengthen all of our existing and future products!"

Chapter 6094 The Power of Strong Cognition

It had been the right decision to hang on to the Elegant Rage for a while!

Ves managed to harvest a lot of useful gains from the Elegant Rage. The most crucial insight that he managed to obtain from his examinations of this mutated mech was the discovery that strong cognition could replace cultivation methods!

It made sense after a bit of thinking. If active cultivation was like trying to self-hypnotize oneself, possessing a very strong mindset was a superior alternative to such a clumsy and artificial method!

This was probably one of the underlying pillars of willpower cultivation. Both swordmasters and high-ranking mech pilots grew stronger not by engaging in any mysterious voodoo, but by developing an extraordinary mindset that was utterly focused and single-minded.

The stronger the ego of the willpower cultivator, the greater his or her ability to distort psychoreactive energies, thereby forcing reality to bend to their unbreakable will!

This explained what made the Elegant Rage so different from other third order living mechs, even those that managed to ride along the breakthroughs of their pilots.

Compared to other expert pilots, Venerable Lanie Larkinson's breakthrough was especially desperate and traumatic. In her dying state, her mentality became extremely unbalanced and probably fixated really hard on thoughts related to revenge, payback, retribution and etcetera.

Lanie became overwhelmed by her unrestrained negative thoughts and emotions!

During the Age of Mechs, an expert pilot that had completely lost her composure and set aside all of her honor and nobility would never be able to earn the blessing of the Kingdom of Mechs.

The current iteration of the Red Kingdom was different!

The breakthrough did nothing to dispel Lanie's negative obsessions. Instead, the process of apotheosis strengthened them, causing them to become extraordinarily more powerful!

Contaminated by the strong aura, presence and wood energy exuded by the Emperor Tree, Venerable Lanie's extraordinary power further mutated by acquiring a wood-based theme.

This was the reason why her willpower manifested in the shape of thorns.

As the mech that formed an active man-machine connection with Lanie at the time of her traumatic breakthrough, it made sense for the Elegant Rage to freeload off her battle partner's dramatic explosion in strength.

If Lanie was a conventional expert pilot, then her mech would probably absorb a bunch of positive or neutral energies.

This transformed the living mech's cognition and not only caused them to develop a closer bond with their high-ranking pilots, but also increase their compatibility with the latter's E energy attributes.

Now that Ves thought about it, these acquired qualities should also be present among old machines that had been with their partners for a long time such as the Dark Zephyr, the Bastion and the C-Man.

However, these special living mechs did not demonstrate noticeably strong capabilities because it was harder to notice the differences produced by their strong cognitions.

For example, the Dark Zephyr's alignment with Tusa's ideas probably made the living mech faster and more evasive, but how could Ves possibly measure this when the machine was already loaded with a powerful flight system and other parts that boosted his mobility?

There was no way to tell whether the Dark Zephyr Mark III produced a certain increase in acceleration or maneuverability because of a specific reason. It could be due to his superior tech, the true resonance amplification from being piloted by Saint Tusa, a favorable E energy environment or the living mech's own strong cognition!

So even if the effect of acquired cognition played a role in strengthening the performance of a third order living mech, who could truly tell?

The Dark Zephyr and all of his other established third order living mechs all possessed a high trust in their progenitor and diligently practiced the Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra without further question.

At most, they made minor changes to their practice in order to shift a bit of focus towards other E energy attributes, but it was unquestionable that the metal element remained a core feature of this mantra.

It wouldn't have included the word 'metal' in its name if this was not the case!

Ves recalled that he originally created the Lesser and Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra by using another cultivation method as a base template.

The Atmer Guardian Mantra that Ves managed to learn by ingesting an enlightenment fruit not only possessed a strong defensive focus, but could also be adapted for living mechs as the System processed the method to make it more universal.

The latter was an incredibly important hidden benefit. Ves could gain far more from the Tree of Possibilities than by using his capital and influence to collect ancient cultivation records from various different parties.

Even if he managed to obtain a bunch of copies of surviving cultivation manuals, they were usually written in obscure foreign languages that were difficult to interpret.

The conditions of practicing them were also a lot harsher, as many of them had been tailored for primordial humans or people with very rare and specific talents.

One of the greatest advantages of the enlightenment fruits provided by the Tree of Possibilities was to render all of these prerequisites irrelevant and allow the recipients to instantly get started with the corresponding methods!

How was this possible?

Ves had no clue. This was way too advanced and high-level to him. Perhaps he might be able to replicate this effect when he reached the same height as the creator of the Metal Scroll, but that was too far away from his current self.

He focused on the more immediate implications.

The speed of practicing was fairly slow, and it imposed greater demands on the physique than the spirit. Nonetheless, the talent threshold was also lower as a response. Ves gained the distinct impression that the mantra was specifically composed to train a bunch of elite bodyguards.

Was the Atmer Guardian Mantra the best possible template that Ves could utilize in order to develop a cultivation method for his living mechs?

The Atmer Guardian Mantra was quite a good cultivation method. The sanitized version bestowed by the enlightenment fruit was fairly pure and did not possess any major traps or pitfalls.

The speed of practicing was fairly slow, and it imposed greater demands on the physique than the spirit. Nonetheless, the talent threshold was also lower as a response. Ves gained the distinct impression that the mantra was specifically composed to train a bunch of elite bodyguards.

Was the Atmer Guardian Mantra the best possible template that Ves could utilize in order to develop a cultivation method for his living mechs?

No.

For example, the Amaranto definitely got much less out of the Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra than other living mechs.

The expert mech's strong focus on extreme firepower not only caused her to conflict with the central concepts of the Metal Guardian Mantra, but also wasted much of her time and energy on strengthening the least important aspect of her mech frame.

So what if her armor system and internal structure became a little tougher and more resistant towards damage?

The Amaranto was never supposed to get attacked by enemies in the first place!

What was worse about letting the expert marksman mech practice the Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra was that it could produce a conflict in cognition.

The Metal Guardian Mantra could not get away from the fact that it possessed a strong defensive focus.

In order for the Amaranto to grow stronger, she constantly needed to focus on offensive ideas.

Therefore, practicing the Metal Guardian Mantra not only caused the Amaranto to make less progress in strengthening her strongest properties, but also risked the possibility of brainwashing her into becoming a more defense-oriented mech!

"That is a disaster!"

Perhaps the shift towards defense might actually be useful if Gloriana managed to get her hands on a lot of Solarium that she could use to enhance the Amaranto's defenses, but Ves absolutely disagreed with this change in focus.

"The Amaranto and many other living mechs need to stop trying to become a guardian and focus on pursuing a different idea."

Ves should have thought a lot more about these inherent conflicts. His busy schedule and the constant emergence of exciting side projects had caused him to neglect the issue of mech cultivation.

He needed to correct that. Every mech needed to be able to grow completely according to their own inherent inclinations. This was difficult to accomplish with only a single template as a starting point.

Ves grew increasingly more dissatisfied with the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra. It served its purpose at the time of its creation, but several years had passed.

He managed to learn much more about cultivation science, E-technology and hyper technology.

He observed a lot of new phenomena and harvested a huge amount of insights.

According to his current standards, the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra had become an outdated piece of trash!

While it was better than nothing, Ves was definitely capable of producing more superior alternatives nowadays, especially after he discovered what made the Elegant Rage special.

The fact that the thorn-covered mech was able to grow faster and more harmoniously by doing nothing was a strong indictment of the Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra!

As Ves began to think about changing the cultivation strategy of his living mechs, he first tried to think about whether it would be possible to permanently alter the cognitions of his products in a controlled fashion.

There might be a chance.

Unlike humans, mechs were manufactured objects. Ves could exert a lot more control over the properties of the latter.

The reason why humans needed to depend on active cultivation methods was because they were unable to change themselves by relying on their inherent characteristics. Only by distorting their own cognitions through self-hypnosis would they be able to transcend their barriers and become stronger.

Mechs were akin to artifacts. Their designers were able to specify their roles, their forms and even their underlying spiritual foundations to align with a very specific vision.

Ves suddenly understood why high-level artifacts needed to possess a mind of their own. It was because relying on hyper materials and runes to bestow extraordinary properties on objects was not enough to make them powerful.

Only when they were governed by strong and very single-minded spirits would they be able to surpass the boundaries of their physical limitations and increase the power of E energy reactions!

A powerful enough mind and spirit was able to transform an average sword into a god-killing artifact!

Ves began to reevaluate a lot of assumptions about his living mechs.

His latest insights caused him to suspect that he had been going astray.

Third order living mechs were wonderful existences. They most definitely managed to surpass the ordinary and gained traits that helped mech pilots in many ways.

From being able to grow and develop Ascension Runes to being able to cooperate more closely with their mech pilots, third order living mechs undoubtedly proved their usefulness many times over.

However, developing true sapience was a double-edged sword.

Every living mech learned from their mech pilots. The cognition of the former took after the cognition of the latter.

This made it a lot easier for living mechs to get along with their mech pilots, but it also caused the machines to develop far more complicated thoughts and emotions than they should.

This was not necessarily a good development.

Ves made an important realization. While living mechs were capable of acquiring some of the strengths of their mech pilots, they were also capable of inheriting the weaknesses of the latter!

Humans possessed many failings. Their scattered minds, their complex and contradictory thinking and their volatile emotions all produced a lot of chaos in their heads. This was why most of them were inherently unable to grow more powerful by themselves.

When living mechs grew stronger through constant exposure to their mech pilots, their personalities became less single-minded and started to exhibit a lot of complex human characteristics.

The Quint was an extreme example of the effect of human contamination on living mechs!

Multiple mech pilots interfaced with the Quint, causing the very old custom Bright Warrior mech to develop a very complex and deviant personality.

Such a living mech would probably struggle to grow stronger due to the high degree of pollution in his spiritual foundation!

The situation was better for living expert mechs. Their powerful pilots had all managed to develop strong willpower. Each demigod harbored strong obsessions and fixations that reduced their distractions and prevented them from deviating from their true natures.

Even so, expert pilots still retained a lot of their humanity, so it was inevitable that their living expert mechs became afflicted by various complicated ideas.

"All of this is detrimental to their long-term growth and development." Ves frowned. "I think I understand now why the likes of Patriarch Reginald Cross and Venerable Taon Melin killed their own living mechs..."

Chapter 6095 Too Smart Mechs

When Ves thought about what he needed to do in order to rectify the problems that he had overlooked, Alexa Streon looked thoughtful as well.

Compared to her mentor, Alexa was still new to living mech design. She had received a lot of lessons from Ves over the years, but her mastery and ability to design living mechs by herself was far inferior.

There was not only a gap in comprehension, but also a gap in experience.

It couldn't be helped. No matter how quickly she was able to absorb knowledge, mech design had never been a purely theoretical occupation. It was vitally important for her to stay true to her profession and actually design mechs that became desirable by a lot of mech pilots.

For this reason, she did not react as strongly as Ves towards their latest discoveries. She wasn't even able to fabricate a third order living mech, so what did it matter if their cognition affected their cultivation efficiency?

However, Alexa knew enough about her mentor's work to understand that this insight was of great significance to him. This was why he had fallen silent for a few minutes.

"Sir? What do you intend to do now that you have managed to make your theoretical framework more complete?"

"I am not entirely sure." Ves admitted. "I need to think about this a lot more. At the very least, I have already decided to rethink the cultivation methods that I have devised for my living mechs. I think it is best to start over from scratch. I can either devise a single universal method that is a lot more adaptable than the Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra, or I can come up with a bunch of different specialized cultivation methods that align with each individual mech role or mech archetype."

Alexa frowned. "The former approach is difficult to produce optimal results. A one-size-fits-all solution will never be able to fully service the needs of mechs as diverse as the Fey Fianna and the Transcendent Punisher Mark III. The latter approach is far too time consuming if you have to do all of the work yourself. I doubt that any of the researchers over at the T Institute possess the necessary expertise to devise cultivation methods for your living mechs. If you have to make one for each individual mech line and each individual high-ranking mech, you will not have enough time left to design your own mechs."

She was right. Ves found it difficult to decide between the two approaches. That was why he failed to make a decision. He needed to conduct more tests and explore his options a bit further before he committed to a strategy.

"I will figure this out later." Ves said while he made a dismissive shrug. "There is a need for change, but it is not urgent for the time being. All of my existing living mechs are continuing to grow and make progress with the help of the current Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra. Even if they are not

developing their greatest strengths, the gradual boost in resilience at least increases their chances of survival and do a better job at preserving their mech pilots. That is not a useless development."

It was not his preferred solution, though. He was a big believer in the idea that specialized mechs should mainly develop their strengths. Mitigating their weaknesses was not detrimental, but it did not really yield as many benefits, especially if different machines fought together.

Now that Ves was able to make detailed observations on the effectiveness of the Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra on all of his living mechs, he became a lot more confident in his ability to develop a superior solution.

The insights that he managed to obtain from studying the Elegant Rage would definitely play a crucial role in this upcoming endeavor!

The Elegant Rage's brand new focus on thorns had given Ves enough empirical data that strong cognition mattered more than fancy techniques.

In fact, Ves should already be familiar with this dynamic. His mother had already taught him that a lot of cultivation methods placed a huge emphasis on artistic conceptions, but he never fully understood why that was the case.

Now, he knew.

According to his current analysis, the reason why the Elegant Rage was able to passively cultivate at such a high level of efficiency was because Venerable Lanie had forcefully imprinted her own 'artistic conception' into her living mech!

This act was so overbearing that the Elegant Rage's very essence was reshaped into thorns.

Ves wanted to replicate this method. If he was able to succeed...

"If my research bears fruit, then there is a very real possibility that I can comprehensively improve the power of living mechs to a whole new level." He explained to his protege. "The jump in performance should be drastic enough to announce it to the public. The only issue is that this is an improvement related to mech cultivation, which is associated with fifth generation living mechs. Sixth generation living mechs are mostly centered around improvements related to hyper technology and Ultimate Modules. It is not entirely appropriate to consider this to be a refinement of the current generation of living mech development."

"Why not use this as the basis of seventh generation living mechs then?"

"It's not enough." Ves rejected the suggestion. "While I anticipate that any progress in this area will lead to a substantial increase in the growth rate as well as the hard power of all of my living mechs, it is essentially an evolution of an existing mech feature that I have introduced relatively recently. I don't want to declare a new generation of living mechs unless I have managed to devise a new feature that qualitatively improves my products. I am still short of reaching this standard."

"I see. How long will it take for you to complete this research?"

"I don't know, but don't expect any immediate progress. I think that there are still extensive gaps in my understanding of living mechs and cultivation science. I need to conduct more experiments and study more theory. I also need to consult a number of experts in order to clarify a few matters that I am not certain about. It would actually be great if I can consult the opinion of the Evolution Witch."

Ves did not dare to waste her time on trivial matters, but... he felt the urge to do so anyway.

He should have a chance to ask his questions during the next session of the Interim Leadership Council.

However, that would take a bit of time, and the upcoming alien offensive might delay the upcoming session.

Ves and Alexa quickly wrapped up their initial examinations on the Elegant Rage.

Outside of learning about the importance of strong cognition, the two mech designers managed to gain a much better understanding of how the current iteration of the Elegant Rage worked.

Unfortunately, they had yet to figure out the core secrets that explained the existence of a mutated machine that utilized both metallic and wooden components at the same time.

Alexa made a helpful suggestion in this regard. "Instead of spending our time on studying a large amount of knowledge related to exoplant biology and wood-based organic machines, it is better to consult an outside expert. You can leave this responsibility to me, sir. I can contact many different Terran research institutions on your behalf."

Ves hesitated for a moment. Involving outsiders meant leaking valuable information.

However, the Elegant Rage did not contain anything that he desperately needed to hide. He had yet to transform her into a Carmine mech, so it was fine if outsiders took a peek.

"Very well. You can go ahead and do so. Make sure you get someone who is truly qualified to understand what is going on with the Elegant Rage. It is best if you manage to gain the cooperation of a mech designer."

Once they ended their examinations, they left the workshop and left the Elegant Rage alone.

Ves used to think that the answer to this question was an unambiguous yes, but now he started to doubt his direction.

Ves continued to remain in thought as he began to work on his other daily tasks.

He began to get a clearer sense of what he should be working towards. It was all well and good to design living mechs that became increasingly smarter and more capable of forming human-like thoughts and emotions, but was that truly the best way to make them stronger?

Ves used to think that the answer to this question was an unambiguous yes, but now he started to doubt his direction.

"Is it better to dumb them down instead?"

The Elegant Rage arguably already completed this process. Just like Venerable Lanie who had sacrificed parts of her humanity in order to gain extraordinary power, her battle partner also lost aspects of herself in order to 'make room' for her new thorns obsession.

Ves briefly wondered whether it was possible for living mechs to undergo willpower cultivation.

They would undoubtedly grow a lot stronger if that was possible. If their mentalities became increasingly more single-minded and focused, then their cultivation efficiency and power utilization should both skyrocket!

However, Ves had never heard of high-level artifacts developing such exaggeratingly strong willpower. Objects such as the Oceancaller and the Flower Parasol were not only a lot less sapient, but they also possessed inherent cognitive gaps that made them unable to fully emulate actual humans.

"It is impossible for them to strengthen their egos past an extraordinary threshold."

That made Ves consider whether his living mechs were subject to the same restraints.

"Becoming more intelligent and human is not entirely bad." He suddenly thought. "Sure, there are many more opportunities for them to go astray, but if they knowingly and consciously develop their egos, they may be able to break through as willpower cultivators one day!"

This was one of the most outrageous ideas that Ves had formed as of late!

The notion that mechs would actually be capable of breaking through and developing strong willpower that could rival that of expert pilots was absurd!

It was impossible! It could never happen! Mechs were not supposed to break through in the first place!

The reason why everyone held these assumptions was because they all treated mechs as objects. Even his living mechs were just special objects that still did not escape the definition of property rather than people.

Yet what if that was not the case anymore?

What if Ves continued to develop his living mechs according to their current trajectory?

"My third order living mechs are special because they have successfully managed to acquire a myriad of human traits." Ves surmised. "That is both their strength and their weakness. However, an important detail is that not every human is equal. They can be distinguished in many different ways, but the most important one is rank. A human of the first major cultivation rank is not comparable to a human of the second major cultivation rank."

The question now was whether it was possible for living mechs to acquire the traits of much stronger humans.

Ves thought back on the Elegant Rage. What if the mutated mech's repeated exposure to Venerable Lanie allowed the machine to learn how to strengthen her own willpower and obsession?

What if the Elegant Rage successfully managed to break through and develop extraordinary willpower of her own? How much stronger would she become, and how much more exaggerated would the synergy between the living mech and Venerable Lanie become?

The results were bound to be shocking!

Ves even suspected if such a crazy mech could truly emerge, the transcendent machine may have become the first fourth order living mech in existence!

"Fourth order!"

He did not dare to know for certain whether this was even possible. He only knew that if he actively pursued this development direction, he would truly diverge from the ancient traditions of high-level artifact production and truly open up a brand new discipline!

So long as he was able to reproduce this result and teach others how to make such an amazing living mech, Ves was confident that the mech community as a whole would definitely embrace his design philosophy in full!

Chapter 6096 The Return of Gavin

The notion that it might be possible for living mechs to achieve success in willpower cultivators and break through may sound crazy, but it was not an entirely baseless guess.

Ves was already convinced that his third order living mechs did not differ too much from humans in terms of ego, intelligence, learning ability and emotions.

The main reason why living mechs still possessed clear differences was because their 'bodies' were far too different from that of a flesh-and-blood human.

Even then, regular interfacing with their human mech pilots allowed every living mech to gain a more human perspective. The longer the two parties interfaced with each other, the more they started to resemble each other.

Ves even theorized that if mech pilots paired up with their living mechs for over several decades, they would eventually converge to the point where they could naturally attain a state of operation union!

This was like attaining most of the benefits of a Blood Pact without actually committing to a permanent life-changing contract!

He briefly winced.

It was incredibly regrettable that he was only able to turn the Ouroboros into a defective first order living mech at the time.

If the Ouroboros came into life as a proper second order or third order living mech at the time, then Ves would have been able to confirm his latest theory without needing to endure any delays!

Alas, Ves could only wait until his oldest surviving mechs aged for a few decades longer in order to verify whether this theory was correct.

He couldn't wait that long.

It appeared that there was no chance for him to create a fourth order living mech anytime soon.

Since that was the case, Ves set aside his thoughts on this subject and focused on more immediate matters.

As Ves continued to probe the Elegant Rage and work on his other projects in the following days, an important development occurred that compelled him to put down his work for a time.

The reason why he interrupted his work schedule was because a familiar assistant had finally returned!

"You're finally back!"

"I've returned, boss."

Gavin Neumann stepped out of the shuttle that had touched down in Diandi Base and presented himself before his employer before making a formal bow.

"You look... different."

"The Streon Ancient Clan has been generous enough to adequately prepare me for my duties ahead." Gavin said in a slightly stiffer and more formal tone than before. "The custom augmentation suite has digitized my brain to over 60 percent, allowing me to learn and process data much more efficiently than before. The inclusion of a rare and powerful Mentalist Crystal has produced numerous new effects that has not only improved my mental performance even further, but has also mitigated the personality loss effect that is common to heavily digitized minds."

When Ves took a closer look at Gavin, he was able to sense a familiar vibe from his assistant's head. There was a fairly powerful and concentrated hyper material that possessed the very rare mind attribute.

The effect of combining a Mentalist Crystal with a brain augment produced strong synergies that could not be attained by cranial implants developed in the previous age!

Ves had already witnessed Gloriana turning into a genius who became more terrifying than a typical first-class mech designer.

He had good reasons to suspect that Gavin would doubtlessly become immensely more competent as well!

At the very least, Ves no longer had any concerns that the former native of Cloudy Curtain would no longer be able to keep up with and be relegated to a lesser position.

It became increasingly more difficult for Ves to hang onto his old friends and family. People with poor and inadequate backgrounds such as Commander Melkor Larkinson were becoming increasingly more irrelevant because they could only do so much to uplift themselves.

Everyone had a limit. Without a fantastic or outrageously expensive opportunity such as Ednet training or the Streon Ancient Clan's offer to upgrade Gavin, it was difficult to imagine other third-raters and second-raters becoming first-raters.

Ves smiled. "I am glad to see that you have come back healthy and without any obvious personality defects. Tell me about what you are capable of now that you have upgraded your brain and stuff."

"I won't elaborate too much on the hardware upgrades as I they are mainly technical." Gavin said. "What is more important is that the Streon Ancient Clan not only dumped a large amount of information packages in my cybernetic brain, but also spent a few months giving me crash courses on many different subjects. These lesson packages range from the etiquette of every first-rate colonial state to the extremely lengthy history of human civilization starting from the Age of Stars. I should be able to communicate with other first-class parties much better than before. I can even help you establish relations with powerful groups that are usually difficult to approach."

The returning personal assistant continued to explain much of what he gained and learned over the course of his stay at the Streon Ancient Clan.

The two strode through Diandi Base and passed numerous first-class multipurpose mechs until they entered a structure.

Once inside, they moved to an upper office where Gavin would be working from now that he was ready to resume his duties again.

If Gavin had not agreed to augment himself to such an extreme extent, then one of the recent hires would have probably been able to secure a promotion to Ves' chief secretary.

Now that the original personal assistant returned, it probably wasn't necessary to consider this measure anymore.

Gavin briefly reintroduced himself to Ves' secretariat, which had recently undergone an expansion in order to handle the Premier Branch's growing relations with first-class institutions.

If Gavin had not agreed to augment himself to such an extreme extent, then one of the recent hires would have probably been able to secure a promotion to Ves' chief secretary.

Now that the original personal assistant returned, it probably wasn't necessary to consider this measure anymore.

Ves prized loyalty and friendship.

While it was important to have competent and capable subordinates by his side, Ves could not ignore the value of trust and familiarity.

Even if Gavin performed worse than the native first-raters, Ves would still stick with his old assistant because they understood each other the best!

After Gavin reestablished himself in the Premier Branch, he joined Ves to another office where he began to speak more about his experiences as a guest of the Streon Ancient Clan.

"The Streon Ancient Clan's foundation in the Red Ocean is much stronger than that of the Devos Ancient Clan." Gavin described. "The differences in size, strength and wealth are not so exaggerated back in the Greater Terran United Confederation back in the Milky Way, but the Streons have been much more aggressive in establishing colonies in the Red Ocean. The primary driver for that is the Renewer of Terra."

"General Axelar Streon."

"From what I have seen, the Terran ace pilot truly deserves his title. He is driven by the need to reform the stagnant Terran culture and traditions. There are many advantages to possessing a long and storied history, but the Terrans have also become extremely stagnant in many aspects. The Renewer of Terra is hardly the only Terran to diagnose and acknowledge this problem, but he is one of the few who possesses the courage to wage a public reform campaign."

"It is a pity that most Terrans aren't receptive to overthrowing millenia's worth of accumulated wisdom and traditions." Ves scoffed.

00:09

"That was true in the previous age, but the Renewer of Terra is gaining more and more traction. The Terrans that dared to relocate to the Red Ocean are much younger and less vested in the old power structures. The radical changes wrought by the Great Severing has produced an additional impetus for change. Even the stodgiest Terrans are forced to recognize that their reality has changed. The Red War is draining their resources quickly."

"Oh? Are they doing that badly?"

"Don't believe in the news. They always try to put the most positive spin on events." Gavin spoke.

"Since I have received the privilege of accompanying the Senechal on some of his work days, I

have gained an insider look of how the war is being waged from the Terran perspective. From what I am able to surmise, most battles end up in their favor, but there are always losses."

"How bad is it, Gavin?"

"The attrition is not that high, but that is mostly because many Terran forces are relying on the assets and resources they originally imported from the old galaxy. What is concerning is that their replenishment rate is not that high. Once the aliens inflict a large amount of losses onto Terran forces, it becomes much harder to replenish the frontline units with mechs and mech pilots of the same quality."

Ves frowned. He understood what Gavin was describing. He already suspected that this would be the case, but perhaps he underestimated how badly the Terrans would be able to endure the losses.

"I get that the Terrans and the other major forces are unable to replenish their losses over time due to the limited manpower and resources available in human-occupied space. However, there should be enough troops to buy time for us to change the status quo in our favor. There are only a couple more years to go before the Deep Strike Plan can truly kick off. That should dramatically improve our circumstances."

"The native aliens won't give us that time. Have you forgotten about the rumors about an upcoming alien offensive? The Streons are taking it very seriously. They have reasonable suspicions that the Red Cabal will make a serious commitment to break through the border zones. The aliens are done with waiting and accumulating. They want to initiate a strong push to strangle us before we can continue to improve our tech and engage in tricky gambits such as deep strike expeditions. The Streons already managed to collect intelligence that many phase lords and phase whales have gathered on the alien side of the border. Once they go in all at once, there is a strong suspicion that they will attempt to overwhelm our god pilots."

"It's impossible to truly defeat our god pilots." Ves retorted. "Our greatest protectors and champions completely thrashed the ancient phase whales during Operation Night Jazz. I hardly think they can do any better, especially when they are no longer fighting on their home ground anymore."

"Much of the reason why those ancient phase whales turned into giant carcasses is because they were too complacent. They did not respect the threat posed by our god mechs as they should. Now that they know better, they have definitely come more prepared this time. The Red Cabal is prepared to make a sacrifice in order to break our defenses and raid all of our vulnerable colonies and settlements. The native aliens know that as long as thousands of alien fleets invade our star systems at once, there is no possible way that 8 god pilots and 8 dreadnoughts can hunt them all down fast enough."

That was the right strategy to adopt against red humanity. From what it sounded like, the aliens completely gave up on trying to match the humans in quality, and instead went all-out in quantity in order to overwhelm the numerically inferior defenders.

So what if god pilots were invincible in combat? They could never show up on hundreds of different battlefields at once!

"So this is why the Red Two and all of the other major powers are constantly encouraging smaller players such as us to participate in the war effort." Ves realized. "In order to prevent the alien's

shotgun strategy from working, we must try to keep up in quantity as well. However, we won't be able to beat the native aliens in this aspect."

"It is not as bad as it sounds, boss. The native aliens have many more forces than us, but they cannot justify the decision to relocate all of their warships and phasefighters to the front. They still have to defend their core star systems and so on. Still, the native alien races are so much more numerous than the human race that even a fraction of their total military forces are already able to crush us in terms of numbers!"

"If that is the case, how can we possibly keep this offensive at bay?"

"By relying on fortifications, for one."

Chapter 6097 Gavin the Terran

"Meow~"

Lucky purred as he sat on Gavin's lap.

The assistant was highly familiar with the gem cat and knew just the right places to scratch.

Even if Lucky had transformed from a bronze to an obsidian mechanical construct, he was still the same old feline in many ways.

"Is Ves treating you well these days?"

"Meow!"

"Is that a no? It shouldn't be all that bad. There is still Gloriana and the children. Who do you think is better, Ves or Gloriana?"

"Meow meow."

"You actually think Gloriana is worse?"

"Meow!"

"I didn't expect to hear that from you. Why is Ves better?"

"Meow meow meow. Meow meow."

"It is unfortunate that I don't understand cat speech. I have no doubts that you have attempted to give me a deep and thoughtful answer."

Gavin continued to indulge and play with Lucky.

The sight warmed Ves' heart. It also reassured him that his personal assistant was likely genuine.

Though Ves did not think that the Streon Ancient Clan would dare to violate General Axelar Streon's personal guarantee and tamper with Gavin, he couldn't rule out the risk.

Technology had become so advanced that people could mess with people's minds in the most subtle and profound ways. No matter whether the brain was biological or electronic, a group as advanced as the Terrans probably had a million different ways to compromise Gavin!

Ves had already been examining Gavin in secret in dozens of subtle ways. A lot of different scanners had examined his body from top to bottom. Blinky also took a really close look at the assistant's spirituality in order to detect any signs of esoteric subversion.

The good news was that none of the readings gave Ves cause for alarm. His instincts told him that the Streons treated Gavin with utmost sincerity.

Ves could not completely trust these results. He at least wanted his returning assistant to undergo a thorough examination from the mechers of the Bluejay Fleet and the relevant experts of the Premier Branch.

Only then would Ves be willing to entrust Gavin with vital and sensitive duties again.

There was one additional test that he was able to conduct in person.

"Gavin."

"Yes, boss?"

"I want to take a look at your companion spirit."

"Sure. Here he is. Say hello to Simon."

Simon was a rather uninventive name for a dull-looking companion spirit. The black hound that emerged from Gavin possessed a rather harmless and gentle appearance. Ves did not know enough about dogs to recognize the breed, but it made a very strong attempt to appear domesticated.

Ves did not design this companion spirit for his assistant.

Gavin's companion spirit grew out of a seed. This meant that the appearance and character of the companion spirit completely reflected that of his principal.

It was very informative to know that Gavin took his servility to Ves so seriously that his cognition drove him to shape his companion spirit as one of the most classical examples of obedience in animals!

"Wuf. Wuf!"

The black dog sat in the air and presented himself to Ves in an eager and lovable manner.

If Ves was a dog person, his heart would have melted. He probably wouldn't be able to resist the urge to give Simon a hug or a scratch on the head!

Unfortunately, Ves was very much a cat person. He did not particularly dislike dogs, but he did not really feel a strong affinity for them either. Cats were so much cuter in his opinion!

"Mrow."

Blinky emerged from Ves' forehead and quickly approached Simon.

"Wuf... wuf..."

The black dog felt a hint of the enormous power accumulated by Blinky. Simon couldn't help but shake and try to remain still as the powerful Star Cat examined the younger companion spirit up close.

The cat even licked the dog a few times!

Nothing seemed amiss. Ves actually grew disappointed with Simon. The dog was so painfully... average.

Perhaps he shouldn't be so demanding. Blinky was very powerful for a companion spirit, and Ves occasionally got in touch with the companion spirits of high-ranking mech pilots and mech designers. It was natural for these groups of extraordinary professionals to possess much stronger companion spirits than others.

Gavin on the other hand was just a mortal. His augmentations may have upgraded his cognitive functions, but did not do much to strengthen his spirituality.

Perhaps the addition of a Mentalist Crystal may have improved Gavin's cultivation qualifications, but he would have to spend a lot of time on practicing a cultivation method in order to make any progress.

Ves was not even sure whether it was even possible for Gavin to cultivate given that he had heavily digitized his brain.

It should be possible in theory. After all, if living mechs were able to cultivate, then so should a human who had already turned himself into part machine.

The problem was that Gavin's condition deviated so far from the human norm that he had become a unique existence. Only the original Benny who served alongside General Axelar Streon was comparable, but even then there were many differences due to rapid technological progress.

Ves threw this issue aside. There was no need for him to prepare a customized cultivation method for his assistant right away. It was best to observe him for a while.

Besides, Gavin's new condition might be able to produce a few surprises.

The Elegant Rage had already shown Ves that there were more ways to grow stronger than to practice a cultivation method.

Time passed by as Ves continued to chat with Gavin. The two hadn't seen each other for months, so they had a lot of catching up to do. Gavin learned so much while he was staying with the Streons that he really had a lot to say about his experiences.

"There is much about the Streons and the Terrans that I do not agree with, but I can see the shadow of our Larkinson Clan in them. We are still young and in flux, so many of our traditions are still fluid and developing. Once a couple of generations have passed, our clan will become much more settled. Our period of rapid growth will have passed and many of our traditions have become fixed. Once our clan has reached this stage, we will have entered our most prosperous era."

"That sounds good... right?"

"I do not necessarily think so." Gavin shook his head. "Even in the Red Ocean, the Streons are so powerful that they do not experience the same urgencies as other groups. It is entirely because of the Renewer of Terra's charisma and force of personality that his ancient clan is being so proactive about preparing for the coming hardships. Aside from that, the natural state of the Terrans is to wait and see. They are not adventurous by nature. I can truly see why General Axelar Streon wants to reform Terran society. The inertia has become too strong. In an age like this, an unwillingness to change and adapt with the times will lead to extinction."

That was an interesting opinion, but Ves did not entirely believe that Gavin formulated all of these thoughts himself. He probably absorbed it through osmosis by hanging around Axelar and his clique all of the time.

Regardless, inertia was indeed a powerful force that prevented many groups from growing stronger. The Larkinson Clan was currently undergoing rapid growth because it had a lot of room for expansion and still possessed a lot of inadequacies.

Once the Larkinsons grew to a state of comfort, the clan would no longer be able to grow as quickly as before. Too many needs had been met. Many clansmen would doubtlessly change from ambitious adventurers into risk-averse profiteers.

It was not necessarily a mistake to go from rapid expansion to consolidation. There was always a limit to growth. To push any further would turn allies into enemies and threaten the interests of the clan.

"Let me ask you this, Gavin. Given what you have witnessed over at the Streons, what do you think is the greatest shortcoming of our clan? What issues are we neglecting that we must try to address right away?"

That caused Gavin to furrowed his brows in thought. To be honest, he had a lot of ways to answer this question.

He never really understood how young and fragile the Larkinson Clan was compared to its peers.

Now that he had witnessed the grandeur of the Streon Ancient Clan from a very close perspective, he developed a completely different opinion about the Larkinson Clan!

Heritage and accumulation mattered. The Larkinson Clan was so young that it could never fully catch up to the Terran ancient clans and the Rubarthan principalities in so many aspects.

"There are many issues that the clan needs to address, but it is not easy to solve them in the short term." Gavin said. "For example, our clan administration has a severe lack of senior officials and managers. Many of the higher positions are occupied by clansmen who were originally second-raters or third-raters. There shouldn't be anything wrong with that, but as our clan becomes increasingly more integrated into first-class society, this shortcoming will result in drastic failures as our personnel cannot fully keep up with the demands of their jobs."

"I guess this is one of the downsides of rapid growth."

"It might not be a good idea for our clan to straddle between second-class and first-class, boss. None of the other first-class organizations has done so on a wider scale. Their core members are all first-raters. If they have any desire to absorb second-raters into their orbit, they will usually do so through subsidiary organizations."

"We are already doing that by setting up a lot of side branches." Ves retorted. "The Davute Branch and so on are largely autonomous, though they still have to abide by a lot of standards that are central to the clan."

Gavin adopted an impatient expression. "That is not separate enough. If one of the side branches ever gets targeted by a powerful enemy, there is a chance that these problems will not affect our Premier Branch. If the side branches bear completely different names, it becomes much harder for their problems to implicate first-class Larkinsons in the future."

"Is that how the Terrans stay in touch with the rest of society?"

"I can only say that this is the case among the Streons. I am not sure whether the other ancient clans are doing the same. It is probably the case, but the subordinated individuals will feel very reluctant to share their true allegiances.

In any case, Ves saw the merits of this approach, but he didn't think it was necessary to go this far.

"I don't think our circumstances are the same as those Terran ancient clans. Every clansman has a strong attachment and loyalty to our clan. Even if they are pushed onto a side branch that doesn't appear to be related to the Larkinsons on the surface, the Larkinson Network overseen by Goldie should keep the second-raters placated."

The existence of the Larkinson Network broke the rules and allowed for different possibilities. It was not necessary to force greater separation between the clan and its side branches.

It was too late anyway. Everyone knew that they were strongly related to the Larkinsons. Changing their names would not wipe away the memories to those that knew.

Ves actually had a better solution in mind. The side branches should be allowed to exist in their current form, but he would discreetly find a number of secret organizations that could do his dirty work.

It would be difficult to found these secret organizations without exposing their connection to Ves under the auspices of the Red Association.

Ves needed to find a way to reliably beat and fool the constant monitoring on himself. He was way too tired about letting the mechers scrutinize much of his life. It was as if he was starring in a perpetually active reality broadcast!

While he already came up with a few ideas on how to successfully operate behind the backs of the Red Two, he needed to be very careful in his planning and goal setting before he was ready to take concrete steps.

Chapter 6098 Competence Breeds Ambition

Ves had reasons to think about setting up secret organizations.

The most important demands were to ensure they remained totally obedient to him while also hiding their connection to their founder.

This was almost impossible to attain because the Red Association and to a lesser extent the Red Fleet constantly monitored everything within their reach!

Privacy was a nonexistent word to the mechers. They constantly liked to snoop in other people's business. They were especially interested in tracking the exploits of different mech designers.

Ves already knew without asking that he was probably the most compelling mech designer to monitor.

This was because he always managed to come up with crazy and subversive innovations!

To be honest, Ves felt incredibly stifled by all of the RA babysitters hanging over his head.

Compared to the time before the onset of the Age of Dawn, Ves could no longer act as unscrupulous as before!

Although his dramatic rise in status opened up a lot of new doors to him, Ves was not entirely satisfied with the benefits he gained.

He was an innovator by heart. He yearned to develop new technologies and release radical new innovations.

His ability to do so was dependent on many factors. Resources, tech, knowledge, manpower, connections and so on all affected his ability to come up with new stuff.

While he was doing pretty well these days, Ves still felt constrained in his work. There were many instances where he felt the need to hold back. With the Bluejay Fleet literally hanging over his head, there was no way the mechers would turn a blind eye on him like before!

Tier 3 galactic citizenship came with both privileges and obligations. The Red Association designated Ves as a vital contributor to human society. This meant that he had little choice but to play the role imposed by everyone's expectations.

If he dared to behave in a matter that was grossly unbecoming his reputation and status, then the backlash was bound to be fierce!

Ves felt as if the supposedly well-meaning mechers and other people were constantly tying him down with more and more shackles. They wanted to bind him so firmly to the existing order that he would firmly become their slave!

He resented this gilded cage. No matter how high his status had become, what did it matter if he was unable to experiment to his heart's content?

This was why he had already begun to think about developing a few secret organizations.

The difficulty of doing so undetected was high. The Red Two were anything but incompetent, and the future addition of the Red Collective would add another layer of difficulty.

Nonetheless, Ves felt compelled to find a workable outlet of his creative energies. He had so many ideas in his mind that he could never execute in the open that his head would burst if this continued!

Ves only felt true fulfillment when he was allowed to express his true nature. Gavin's suggestion just gave him the impetus to forward his plans.

With his accumulated knowledge, he should be able to create a masterwork avatar and disguise it to the point where no one could possibly associate it with his true identity.

So long as he gave his avatar a bunch of capital to work with before sending it off to one of the more lawless and chaotic places of the Red Ocean, his creation should definitely be able to gain a foothold!

However, Ves needed to choose the time and place carefully. The Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates had eyes and ears everywhere. The cost of exposure was far too great for him to bear.

Ves had two choices to make.

He could wait until the war started to take a serious toll on red humanity. Once the existing order started to deteriorate, the restraint imposed by the mechers and the fleeters should correspondingly weaken.

There should be a lot more room for clandestine operations at that time!

Not just Ves, but also the Terrans, Rubarthans, cosmopolitans and other chaotic forces would definitely pounce on the opening and stir the pot even further.

By that time, Ves' secret organization would definitely be able to blend into the background. So long as it remained discreet enough, no one powerful enough should have any reason to pay close attention to what he was doing.

Ves could also choose to make a bolder and more daring choice.

Who said his secret masterwork avatar had to come in the form of a human?

Since he could choose to make a cat avatar, he could also choose to fabricate an alien avatar!

His eyes shone as he contemplated this radical idea.

The prospect excited him! There was so much more he could do in alien space!

Red humanity only occupied a corner of the Red Ocean. The rest of the dwarf galaxy fell into the hands of the 13 major alien races, with the Red Cabal acting as the closest thing to a galactic council.

However, Ves studied enough news articles, archive entries and intelligence reports to know that the local galactic community was a lot more divided and decentralized than it appeared.

If not for the pressure exerted by the extragalactic human invaders, the Red Cabal would never be able to coordinate all of the alien forces in the Red Ocean!

The 13 major alien races did not like each other at all. There were numerous instances of generational animosity among them. Some races wouldn't hesitate to wipe out their old rivals if they saw an opening!

The individual alien civilizations were not united either. Space was big, and the slow speeds of native warp drive technology had caused a lot of different regions to turn into semi-autonomous fiefs. Local groups ruled their own slice of territories like kings.

The intensifying Red War may have forced a lot of these local and regional alien power blocs to contribute a lot to the war effort, but that did not mean they surrendered all of their power to the Red Cabal.

Just like human powers, the native alien powers possessed their own selfish interests!

The conflicts and rivalries within alien space were just as intense if not more in human space during the Age of Mechs.

Ves loved to operate in this kind of environment. So long as he could hide in the cracks and avoid the attention of any big players, he should have a lot of room to operate!

Compared to trying to be sneaky in human space, Ves had much less compulsions about restraining himself within alien space.

So what if he experimented on the minds, bodies and spirits of orven, puelmer or nunser test subjects?

They were not human, so Ves had no reason to acknowledge their rights!

He could be as ruthless and decisive as he wanted. So long as he possessed a certain amount of military force, he was confident he could handle smaller problems.

As for the larger ones? His alien avatar could always cut its losses and run away.

If his avatar truly became cornered one day, then Ves could always trigger it to self-destruct, blowing up everything with so much power that no evidence would remain to link it back to its creator!

Ves had to work hard to maintain his composure. This was not the time to be hasty!

Even though he was already starting to consider whether he should create an orven or a puelmer avatar, it was useless to consider these matters at this time.

He needed to wait until the alien offensive finally commenced. Human space was too calm at the moment. Ves did not even dare to think about any improper ideas.

He turned his attention back to Gavin.

The assistant was not done gushing about the true splendor of the Terran people. His stay at the Streons had a very strong impact on his views.

"Our clan appears to be doing better every year, but our foundation is still very shallow." Gavin spoke. "Much of our prosperity is propped up by you and several other brilliant mech designers. The breakthrough of Saint Tusa has thankfully given us another pillar that we can depend upon, but we cannot completely count on him now that we are in wartime. We need to speed up the growth and development of the Premier Branch in order to make sure our clan can persist and hold onto its existing assets if you are taken out of the picture."

"What do you have in mind for the Premier Branch? Are you dissatisfied about how it is developing currently?"

Gavin briefly paused. "We are not doing bad per se, but we could be doing a lot more. You are not an ordinary entrant into first-class society. You are a tier 3 galactic citizen and the father of the Red Collective. You should be able to leverage that and more to a much greater extent. One example is debt. Our clan is already borrowing money from the Yem-Tar Trade and Commerce Bank, but we are still severely underleveraged by the standards of other organizations. We should borrow as much funding until we have reached our limit and use the money to expand our foundation. One way to spend it all is to massively increase our colonization efforts of a star system within the territory of the Nayald Ancient Clan! Since you have bought the rights to do this, we should not neglect this opportunity!

Ves recalled that he had traded away 5 percent ownership of the Living Mech Corporation for this speculative opportunity.

The Nayalds already promised to grant an interest-free loan worth 1.5 billion MTA credits to the Larkinson Clan. This was already enough to construct a decent colony settlement on a planet, but it was always better to spend more.

The greater the upfront investment, the faster the colony turned from a money sink into a profitable fief!

"I have neglected this colonization opportunity." Ves admitted to Gavin. "I am too busy with my projects to pay personal attention to this matter. Another department should have taken charge of this responsibility."

"That is true, boss, but the planning and preparation required to build a functional first-class colony settlement is enormous. I have mentioned before that our clan and especially our Premier Branch is lacking in senior administrators and officials. Our progress is terribly slow. At this rate, it may take half a decade before we can build the initial form of our first-class colony."

That was indeed a bit too slow.

"If you think that progress is too slow, then you can intervene on my behalf. You told me that you have become much better at making deals with the Terrans. Let's put your capabilities to good use." Ves decided.

Gavin had been waiting for this answer. "Thank you, Ves! I will try my best to live up to your expectations! Please keep in mind that it will still take a few years for our colony to get up and running. Progress will heavily depend on the stability of the front. If the alien offensive hits us hard, then..."

"I understand. I don't think that our clan should continue to put much effort into building up a colony that will inevitably become vulnerable to alien raids."

To be honest, Ves did not harbor too much interest in such a colony at the moment. He was much more interested in taking control of Reticula Corein V.

Though the planet had recently caused a lot of misery to the Larkinsons, it had also proven the value of Solus Gas.

No matter what, Ves deeply wanted to establish a stable, large-scale gas harvesting operation on the planet!

It should not take long before Task Force Solus decided to take action against the Emperor Tree. The Larkinsons over there wanted to complete this task quickly before the native aliens started their big offensive.

Ves definitely intended to ride along the Everchanger and witness the upcoming assault on the Emperor Tree.

The Larkinsons could not tolerate the existence of this calamity plant anymore!

Chapter 6099 Isobel's Return

Numerous transport shuttles and transport vessels descended from the orbit of Reticula Corein V.

The transport craft all flew under the escort of plenty of Larkinson mechs. The airspace of the untamed planet was not safe. There were times when flocks of avian exobeasts attempted to assault the flying metal vehicles.

According to the information published by the Hunting Association, one of the reasons why exobeasts always took the initiative to attack human mechs and craft was because they were greedy for high-quality metals.

Many human mechs were made out of excellent exotics and hyper materials that had been carefully selected or developed for specialized purposes.

All of this development unintentionally turned mechs into delicacies to the primitive senses of many powerful exobeasts.

So long as they managed to absorb the best alloys that made these human mechs so powerful, the exobeasts would definitely be able to grow stronger and tougher bodies!

Fortunately, the airspace remained clear for the time being. The region surrounding the Emperor Tree had long been emptied of most native wildlife. The escort mechs ended up doing nothing aside from looking intimidating.

There was one mech that stood out from the remaining escorts. This was the only expert mech among the new arrivals.

The Promethea had returned to this untamed planet once again!

As Chimera Base slowly came into view, the Larkinsons stationed on this hostile and inhospitable planet cheered when they saw the resplendent expert rifleman mech arrive with the rest of the reinforcements!

A few minutes later, the Promethea stepped inside a hangar bay and took up a position next to the Everchanger before powering down her systems.

The third order living mech had already begun to swap stories with the Everchanger over a private communication channel.

Meanwhile, a female high-tier expert pilot exited the cockpit and floated down to the surface.

A welcoming party consisting of Venerable Joshua and Venerable Dise greeted their returning colleague.

"It is good to see you again, Isobel." Joshua greeted the woman.

"We will need your fire to burn the tree down." Dise straightforwardly said.

Venerable Isobel maintained a stoic expression. "I cannot guarantee that my fire will be enough to burn the Emperor Tree down."

"I don't think it will be that bad." Joshua responded as the three moved towards the headquarters of Chimera Base. "Sure, the Emperor Tree is huge, but that just means there is more flammable material for you to burn. The tree is enormous and commands a huge amount of wood energy, but it is not good at concentrating all of its power. We truly think you have a good shot at burning it down. We only need to buy you enough time to start a fire and let it spread with as few interruptions as possible. The tree will definitely resist your purple flames with all of its might."

"I see that Saint Tusa is not among the reinforcements. Although I do not like to admit it, the two of us are outmatched by the Emperor Tree. I cannot say for sure whether your participation is enough to tip the scales. We do not have much of a safety margin." Dise remarked.

"The clan decided that it is not necessary to transfer Saint Tusa to this planet." Isobel replied.

"There are more and more signs that the alien offensive has become imminent. If it starts in the next two weeks, then our expeditionary fleet must be ready to defend the vulnerable strongholds that will come under heavy attack. The risks are not small, but every linefighter will receive a massive amount of war merits if they hold back the aliens during the first critical days and weeks."

Profit drove many of the forces fighting in the border regions. The Red Two understood that it was very scary to get in the way of so many invading aliens, so they already promised to triple or quadruple the rewards for defensive assignments.

The cost was bound to be heavy, but the price of losing so much territory was far greater!

In any case, so long as Saint Tusa was ready to move with the expeditionary fleet, the Larkinson Clan would doubtlessly be able to earn a huge amount of war merits and other rewards!

Neither Joshua nor Dise disagreed with this decision, but they inevitably felt more burdened. They would not be able to count on a powerful ace pilot for backup for the upcoming assault.

As the three expert pilots entered the headquarters, they moved to a planning room where a lot of analysts and officers had gathered to formulate a detailed attack plan.

Many of them had studied and analyzed all sorts of data on the Emperor Tree. The previous sample retrieval mission had provided a wealth of data about their adversary. They were no longer as ignorant about the threat posed by the calamity plant as before.

Of course, several weeks had already gone by. It was foolish to take too much stock in all of the estimates. The Emperor Tree most definitely grew stronger and more alert towards the invaders.

When Isobel arrived, she listened to a few briefings and consulted the latest reports.

Her Promethea formed the lynchpin of the upcoming assault.

It was not impossible to attack and take down the Emperor Tree without her intervention, but Strike Force Solus would be forced to make a lot more noise in order to finish off the calamity plant!

"Why are we not deploying as many Transcendent Punishers?" Isobel questioned when she studied the troop composition of the upcoming assault. "The Emperor Tree is a swarm-based calamity plant. Once we go on the attack, it will definitely launch hordes of exobeasts and wooden mechs at us. There is no better way to get rid of all of this cannon fodder by bombarding them with artillery."

"The Transcendent Punishers are not suitable for this offensive mission." Venerable Dise responded. "The previous mission already showed that they will lose many of their advantages. Their range is drastically shortened due to the thick concentration of Solus Gas, and they will all lose their access to their design spirit. Mobility is a large constraint. We may be able to build floater platforms for them all, but they are vulnerable to attacks. Even if we make use of communication relays to transmit targeting data to heavy artillery mechs that are positioned further in the rear, nobody can say for certain whether they are susceptible to mental hijacking. What happened to Zeal serves as a careful warning that we keep ordinary troops away from the tree as much as possible."

There was no way the Larkinsons wanted to give the Emperor Tree to replicate its mischief!

"We are also afraid of further alarming the other calamity beasts on this planet." Venerable Joshua added. "The orbital bombardment that took place during the last mission has somehow provoked reactions from nearby calamity beasts. For now, they are staying put, but if we create too many disturbances, we are afraid of attracting these powerful beasts. All three of us will have to confront the Emperor Tree without any immediate backup or support by our sides."

"Isobel was already aware of this intention, so she did not look surprised.

That did not mean she was happy with the lack of abundant support.

"Why take Fey Fiannas and other ranged mechs along, Joshua?"

"They are all armed with luminar crystal weapons. We can use communication relays or scout mechs to coordinate their fire from a safe but elevated position. They can launch massive salvos of energy beams at the trunk of the Emperor Tree without producing loud and shaky explosions. The massed attacks may not be able to kill the calamity plant, but they will definitely consume its wood energy and other resources."

There was a large chance that the upcoming assault would turn into a contest of attrition.

If that is the case, then the side that got exhausted first would inevitably lose!

It made a lot of sense to attack the Emperor Tree from a distance.

"I hope that you have implemented enough safeguards to prevent the pilots from getting deceived by the Emperor Tree." Isobel stated.

"Don't worry." Venerable Joshua said. "Our ranged mech units will be stationed far away enough to avoid the worst effects of Solus Gas exposure. The Flagrant Vandals have already scouted the areas and confirmed that their mechs can still maintain their connections to their design spirits. Part of the reinforcements consist of Sanctuary and Pacifier mechs. Both models are able to spread out Lufa's glow, which should prevent the Emperor Tree from tampering with the minds of our mech pilots."

The Larkinsons took other precautions. This was not the first time that something like this happened. There were plenty of humans that developed a lot of safeguards against mental subversion.

As Isobel examined the extensive list of precautions, she grew a little more reassured.

Perhaps the Emperor Tree might be able to circumvent a single precaution, but it was doubtful that it could overcome all of them at once!

The Larkinsons did not want to give the Emperor Tree another chance to survive. The upcoming assault had to succeed in order to reduce the danger to the Solus Gas harvesting operation.

"If an emergency happens, will we be able to count on another round of orbital bombardment to bail us out?" Isobel critically asked.

Joshua nodded. "The Transcendent Punisher Mark III's stationed on the Wild Torch will open fire at the Emperor Tree as soon as they receive the command. We don't want to resort to this option if we can help it. Doing it once has already alerted the calamity beasts located on the same hemisphere as the Emperor Tree. There are exobiologists that think that if we attack from orbit yet again, we will attract at least four different calamity beasts at once. We do not know why, but these powerful beasts are very sensitive towards such attacks."

"This planet is their territory." Dise said. "If we limit ourselves to occupying a single site, the rulers of this globe will not care too much. If we reveal any intention of wiping out all of the calamity beasts in order to claim the entire planet, then they will not be stupid enough to let us beat them one by one."

Task Force Solus needed to avoid this outcome at all cost because it did not possess the numbers and firepower to defeat so many calamity beasts at the same time!

The story would have been different if the entire Larkinson Army launched an all-out offensive against the local exobeasts, but that was clearly excessive.

There was no need to escalate the conflict and risk the destruction of the source of all of the Solus Gas.

The upcoming assault also served as a test for this reason. The Larkinsons wanted to know if they could get away with killing the Emperor Tree.

The Larkinsons were already prepared to pack up their most essential goods and evacuate Chimera Base in haste if they guessed wrong.

After hearing that the planners took the possible reactions of other calamity beasts into account, Isobel no longer concerned herself with this risk factor and focused on other variables.

"I see that the patriarch has requested for us to retrieve numerous intact samples if possible."

"That is correct, Isobel. He badly wants us to capture an intact purple wooden mech and any other powerful imitations of our living mechs. Our mech technicians have already equipped our expert mechs with additional capture gear and other gadgets. The patriarch also wants us to capture the core of the beast."

"The tree has a core?"

"That is what the biotech researchers have guessed after studying the samples." Joshua replied. "The thinking is that since the wooden mechs are powered and controlled by a central tree heart, the Emperor Tree probably possesses one as well. If this is the case, we should make a serious attempt at digging it out intact. It has great value to our clan."

"That is going to be difficult. We do not even know where it is located..."

Chapter 6100 Two Third-Raters

Chimera Base grew busier as the Larkinsons stationed on the surface of the untamed planet prepared for the upcoming assault.

A lot of Transcendent Punishers and other mechs would remain behind in order to defend the Larkinson Clan's only foothold.

Hundreds of mechs would set out tomorrow and finish off the Emperor Tree once and for all. Pretty much every Larkinson wanted the calamity plant to die after it had essentially ruined two of their up-and-coming champions.

A lot of Larkinson mech pilots wanted to fight a hearty battle against the Emperor Tree, but they could only play supporting roles tomorrow.

A large number of ranged mechs would keep their distance and pelt the massive Emperor Tree from an elevated position with their luminar crystal weapons.

Melee mechs such as the Stormblade Samurai and the Storm Sword would accompany the ranged machines and protect them from any enemy hordes.

Light mechs were ready to act as scouts and couriers. The greater concentrations of Solus Gas not only compromised visibility, but also interfered with remote communications. The Flagrant Vandals had to make up for this shortcoming and contribute in their own modest ways.

Few Larkinsons expect that this would be enough to kill the Emperor Tree. The massive alien organism had already demonstrated strong regeneration properties.

Even if it was possible to gradually exhaust the Emperor Tree's massive reserves over a lengthy siege, the Larkinsons refused to take any chances.

The Emperor Tree adapted too damn quickly! Time was against the Larkinsons. The longer it took to take this powerful enemy down, the greater the risk that it would develop an effective counter against mechs!

None of the Larkinsons knew for certain what to expect this time. Task Force Solus may have learned a lot of details about their opponent during the last mission, but the Emperor Tree also became a lot more familiar with its human adversaries.

It became important for the Larkinsons to defy the tree's expectations and attack it in ways it did not expect.

Isobel played a key role in this plan. The Promethea may have been stationed on this planet in the past, but the expert rifleman mech never unleashed her full power during her first tour.

Even if the powerful firestarter lit a bunch of mind-controlled exobeasts on fire, the Emperor Tree might not have been able to observe this directly from its distant location.

Venerable Isobel had to endure a lot of pressure for this reason. The expert pilot was not accustomed to this, but her strong willpower compelled her to display plenty of confidence.

No matter what, she could not fail!

As night fell onto this side of the untamed planet, Isobel stood on top of the wall facing the direction of the Emperor Tree.

The Emperor Tree was too far away to be seen with the naked eye. There was so much Solus Gas in the way that everything in the distance grew increasingly hazier and more difficult to discern.

Isobel was not even able to step outside without wearing a protective suit. She did not want to inhale any Solus Gas and other toxic substances in the inhospitable environment.

Since there was nothing to observe from the distance, Isobel swept her gaze at the ground before her. A large amount of craters, burn marks and other messy debris littered the terrain.

The Emperor Tree no longer dispatched beast waves at Chimera Base, but it was clear that the previous attacks resulted in a lot of damage.

Who knew what the Larkinsons would face once they challenged the tree at its home ground in earnest.

"Isobel."

The female expert pilot turned around and greeted her approaching colleague. "Joshua."

The two high-tier expert pilots were already able to sense each other from their willpower. They were so distinctive that they could sense each other before they entered into their vision.

Joshua calmly approached until he stood next to Isobel. He looked out over the wall and took a cursory glance at the scarred terrain.

"Are you confident?"

"I have to be." She said. "Everyone is counting on my fire. I cannot refuse and I cannot fail. If I cannot burn down the Emperor Tree, then why do I even exist?"

Joshua sensed the unusually heavy emotions in her words. "Are you doubting yourself?"

"Expert pilots do not doubt."

"Don't lie to me, Isobel. That is what everyone thinks is the case, but you and I know better. We are still human, mostly. If we lose the ability to doubt, how can we possibly survive all of those battles?"

The female pilot directed a speculative look towards Joshua. It looked as if she did not quite agree with his statement, but did not feel the need to argue the point.

However, Isobel could not deny that she was not entirely certain whether she possessed the strength to take down the Emperor Tree.

"You have fought the Emperor Tree before, haven't you? How difficult was it for you to damage its trunk?"

"It's impossible for the Everchanger in his current state to harm the big tree." Joshua frankly admitted. "It would have been much easier if my expert mech got upgraded and if I could still borrow the power of a design spirit. Since none of that is the case, I don't have the power to inflict more than localized damage. I can break the bark and cut into the trunk, but the Emperor Tree has so much wood and wood energy at his disposal that he is able to regenerate the damage within seconds."

"I am not surprised. Your Everchanger in his base form is not equipped to defeat this type of enemy. Your battle partner is too small in scale compared to the big tree. If your machine was the size of a juggernaut, then your giant sword swings alone would have been able to chop off half of the massive tree trunk at once."

The differences in power between the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan had become an increasingly more controversial subject. Many clansmen clearly noticed that there was a radical difference in combat effectiveness between the oldest and the newest machines.

Joshua chuckled. "That is just a fantasy. I have learned a lot of lessons from the previous battle. My Everchanger is too weak compared to all of the newer expert mechs. I don't like to make excuses for my failures, but I really do not think I would have gotten held up by all of those purple wooden mechs if my machine was as strong as the Lionheart or the Dark Zephyr Mark III."

The differences in power between the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan had become an increasingly more controversial subject. Many clansmen clearly noticed that there was a radical difference in combat effectiveness between the oldest and the newest machines.

The Everchanger was not even the oldest of the expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan, but Joshua deeply experienced the disadvantages of age last time.

He resented the inability to burst out as much power as the newer machines.

"Your time will come soon enough." Isobel consoled her fellow expert pilot. "The patriarch will never forget you. I bet that he has something special in store for the Everchanger."

"I am afraid that it will take at least a year and half before the Design Department before I get my turn." Joshua signed. "The longer I have to wait, the longer I am being held back by my machine. Once the aliens start to invade our border on a massive scale, I will have to fight a lot of battles without the benefit of upgrades. It is going to be frustrating for me to survive those battles without making as many gains as before."

"I don't think it is useless for you to fight while you have reached your bottleneck. If you can't improve vertically, you can still improve laterally. You can master a new skill or weapon."

"I suppose I should widen my horizons." Joshua remarked. "What about you? How will you attempt to improve in the coming months and years?"

"I have so much more to learn. There is a lot of depth in fire that I have yet to explore. I have mainly been focusing on making it easier to spread my flames and burn down every material. Even if my resonance strength has reached its current limit, I can still explore ways to make my flames hotter or increase its effectiveness against transphasic energy shields."

"You sound as if you do not have much hope in breaking through. Shouldn't the upcoming battle be a good opportunity for you to break your limits?"

"I have no expectations for a breakthrough, Joshua. I do not feel I am ready for it. Why should it force it if that is the case? I am still fairly young among expert pilots, and I do not think I have developed my fire powers well enough to earn a promotion. We may have reached our bottlenecks at record speeds, but all of that haste has left us ill-prepared."

"Tusa managed to do it, and he belongs to the same generation as us." Joshua pointed out.

"Some of us can get lucky once in a while." Isobel said. "The Dark Zephyr Mark III is truly a good mech. Maybe we will be able to break through on the spot as well once our machines receive their upgrades, but we will both have to wait longer for that to happen. My Promethea may be newer than your Everchanger, but I don't think it is that much better."

The Promethea belonged to the generation after the first six expert mechs of the Larkinson Clan. It was released at a point where the Larkinson Clan had yet to make so many exaggerated gains in the Red Ocean.

That meant that Isobel had greater reasons to look forward to the Promethea's future upgrade. The Miracle Couple improved so much in the last few years that they could bestow all kinds of powerful new features onto an outdated machine!

"Joshua."

"Yes, Isobel?"

"Before you joined the Larkinson Clan, did you ever imagine that you would grow this powerful at this age?"

"Of course not." Joshua snorted. "I was still a citizen of the Bright Republic at that time. All I wanted back then was to become a good mech pilot. I never dared to think about becoming an expert pilot, let alone reach the point where I actually have a chance of becoming an ace pilot. Nobody in the Bright Republic thought it was possible for third-raters like ourselves to pilot powerful quasi-first-class mechs."

"I was the same as you." Isobel said with a wistful smile on her face. "Do you know where I originally came from, Joshua?"

"You once told me you came from the Sentinel Kingdom."

"That is right. We Sentinels used to take pride in the belief that our Kingdom was the strongest third-rate state in the Komodo Star Sector. It sounds silly now that I think back on it, but we truly thought we were the best. We had to confront the worst of the pirate gangs that emerged from the Nyxian Gap from time to time."

"Why did you join the Larkinson Clan?"

"Because I yearned for more, I think. Many people joined the Larkinson Clan when it promised to take us away and break the boundaries that prevent us from going up in class. So far, I have no regrets in my decision. The patriarch has done a far better job on delivering on his promise. Let alone promoting to second-class, every Larkinson already has a chance to promote to first-class. I am continually grateful to the clan for giving us a more accessible way to uplift ourselves."

"All of those opportunities don't come cheap. We had to fight a lot of battles to get where we are today. Just a month ago, you took part in the Battle of Torment. A lot of soldiers got killed if I recall."

Isobel's expression worsened. "I suppose that is true. Expert pilots like you and I can handle ourselves on the battlefield, but all of those other earnest Larkinsons still have to brave a lot more danger. Thinking about what they have to endure to become stronger is preventing me from feeling satisfied with what I have accomplished so far. I do not want to waste my chances when there are so many other mech pilots who dream of attaining my power."