

The Mech 6111

Chapter 6111 Wooden Treasures

Fighting against the ebony mechs was like fighting against the Emperor Tree directly.

The purple wooden mechs already possessed a shadow of the calamity plant's power, but the ebony wooden mechs were much more exaggerated in their performance!

The ebony mechs were much more powerful, much better controlled and possessed a frighteningly fast learning capacity.

Two of the expert mechs found themselves stuck in confrontations against ebony mirrors of themselves.

The Everchanger shot energy beams and locked blades against an ebony copy that was almost just as versatile while also able to regenerate any damage in an instant.

The First Sword continually swung her Decapitator at an ebony parody of a swordsman mech that was slowly beginning to resemble the real deal!

Venerable Dise had shoved aside her contempt towards her ebony wooden adversary a long time ago. The fact that it became progressively harder to outfight her regenerating opponent was proof that the Ebony First Sword was in the process of emulating her updated swordsmanship in real time!

That shouldn't have been enough to give the melee ebony mech a fighting chance.

"This wooden machine is too hard to read." Dise spoke in a frustrated tone.

Due to the extreme integration of Solus Gas particles in the ebony wood, the plagiarized version of the First Sword was able to neutralize the powerful intuition of an expert pilot.

This was one of Venerable Dise's strongest advantages!

The combat intuition honed over many battles at close range set most melee mech specialists apart from their ranged counterparts.

Though Venerable Dise tried to make the best out of the situation by treating it as a challenge that must be overcome, she clearly felt disappointed in herself by failing to overpower the Ebony First Sword within a minute.

She was confident that even if her ebony wooden adversary matched her in skill, the lack of true heart and comprehension should have given her a slight edge. Combined with her strong intuition, she should have been able to overpower her opponent 10 out of 10 times.

To be forced into a fight against an enemy melee 'mech' without being able to utilize one of her mainstays was a frustrating experience.

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This was not the case at the moment. Venerable Dise found that her recent improvements in her swordsmanship had not given her the edge she needed to defeat an increasingly more competent mirror of herself.

"Am I truly that much worse without the advantage of my intuition?"

If possible, Venerable Dise wanted to spend hours honing herself against the Ebony First Sword. It was able to replicate the form of her moves quite well, and its high regeneration factor meant that Dise did not have to hold back in landing her more damaging attacks.

Unfortunately, this was not the time for her to indulge in herself!

The Everchanger and the Promethea were both locked in their own struggles. The Emperor Tree was also taking advantage of the diversions to recover itself and prepare other countermeasures.

The longer the fight went on, the more the three expert pilots felt as if they were getting stalled by the Emperor Tree!

"This can't go on! We need to unite somehow." Joshua said.

"How?" Isobel questioned. "If we don't press these ebony mechs, they will join forces as well. They will become much harder to deal with if that is the case."

Her Promethea continually launched one purple fire beam after another at the ebony version of the Zeal.

The wooden mech that dared to integrate components of the original Zeal straightforwardly resisted the incoming attacks with its more powerful wood energy shield and its thick ebony frame. It instead focused much of its efforts into firing its explosive and kinetic seed cannons at the Promethea.

The expert rifleman mech was not able to keep up with its adversary!

The differences in consumption were too great. The Ebony Zeal was virtually inexhaustible and could easily absorb pieces of wood from the Emperor Tree to replenish its seed reserves.

The Promethea on the other hand had already lost her resonance shield. Venerable Isobel was forced to put her survival skills to the test and focus a lot more on evasion in order to avoid the incoming attacks.

While the expert rifleman mech had been able to avoid any direct hits from the Ebony Zeal's kinetic cannon, she was not able to avoid all of the seed shards that spread in every direction when the fragmentation seeds exploded in mid-air.

The Emperor Tree had managed to do a good job at replicating the functions of the original Zeal!

It was absurd that a manufactured minion of a calamity plant was able to push the Promethea to this extent.

The difference in support was simply too great.

The three expert mechs only received very feeble remote fire support that only tickled the Emperor Tree at best.

The three ebony mechs received constant energy and material infusions from the Emperor Tree!

If the ebony mechs did not fight so close to their creator, then perhaps they wouldn't be able to regenerate so quickly.

Sadly, luring the ebony mechs away did not work. The three expert mechs briefly attempted to do this, but that would only cause the Ebony Everchanger and the Ebony First Sword to cover the Ebony Zeal.

"We have no choice but to team up." Venerable Dise concluded. "We need to go all out and make use of our strongest means regardless of how much it will cost us. The Zeal needs to go first. Without this enormous ebony ranged mech, it will be much easier to mop up the remainder."

Isobel nodded in agreement. "I agree, but we must maneuver carefully in order to avoid letting the ebony melee mechs land too many attacks on us. The Promethea's resonance shield is still trying to reform, so I cannot adequately defend myself against their aggression."

"Do the best you can. Call us for help if you can't take it any longer. Otherwise, focus on going all-out against the Ebony Zeal. Its continued existence is a desecration of the original Zeal."

"Ah." Venerable Joshua said in surprise. "I... ehh... just received a message from Ketis."

"What did she convey?"

"The clan... has analyzed the ebony wooden mechs and formed a surprising conclusion. In addition, we have received an additional objective."

"Tell."

"Well, according to biotech researchers and other experts, the ebony wooden mechs are likely molded from the calamity plant's tree heart."

"Really?!"

This was a shocking revelation!

"Yeah. It explains why the ebony mechs are so tough and powerful. Their regeneration speeds are also insanely high because they are literally extensions of the Emperor Tree's most essential core. The tree somehow figured out how to make avatars of itself!"

This was an extremely dangerous operation that could easily kill or cripple the individual making the attempt.

It was rather amazing that the Emperor Tree not only succeeded once, but thrice!

Perhaps its monstrous vitality and huge size may have helped. The ebony mechs probably weren't all that big compared to the true size of the tree heart.

Nonetheless, the three expert pilots gained a lot more respect towards these ebony mechs.

Fighting against them was no different from fighting against the Emperor Tree directly!

"What orders did we receive?" Dise asked. "Let me guess. The clan wants us to capture one of them intact."

Venerable Joshua ruefully smiled. "Good guess. Apparently, the patriarch himself has insisted on it. We don't need to kill the Emperor Tree ourselves. We can still resort to other measures to take it down. What we have to do instead is to capture and bring back one of the three ebony mechs as intact as possible. The research value of a wooden mech made from a piece of the tree heart is incredibly valuable to our clan."

Their burdens had increased. It was a lot more difficult to capture one of the ebony mechs that were effectively able to fight an expert mech into a standstill under the current conditions.

"Let us preserve the Ebony Everchanger." Venerable Dise proposed. "It is not as big and heavy as the Ebony Zeal. It also doesn't have any outstanding strengths aside from possessing the best regeneration, but that is a boon for us as we don't need to handle it with care."

Venerable Joshua and his battle partner felt insulted somehow.

"I guess you are right. We must completely eliminate the other two ebony mechs. I am not confident we can control additional enemy creations."

"What about the Emperor Tree itself? Are we still supposed to burn it down?" Venerable Isobel asked.

"...Let us make that judgment after we have subdued the ebony mechs." Joshua decided. "If you are still unable to burn down the tree without the interference of all of those wooden mechs, then it may be time for us to call it quits."

Venerable Isobel did not want that to happen. She would consider it a personal failure if she returned to Chimera Base with a tree left unburned.

Her King Killer Flames needed to be stronger! She couldn't rely on her existing tricks and techniques anymore. She needed to figure out a way to amplify the burning properties of her flames and render them impossible to douse by the Emperor Tree's best means!

For now, her expert mech needed to cooperate with the other two to defeat the more immediate obstacles.

A three-on-three deathmatch ensued in front of the Emperor Tree.

Even as the giant calamity plant never interrupted its attempts to swat the Larkinson expert mechs with its branches, the machines in question deftly maneuvered across the battlefield and employed cooperative tactics to dismantle their opponents!

None of the three expert pilots were accustomed to working together to this degree.

However, as veterans, they were more than capable of displaying teamwork without needing to communicate too many words.

The Promethea ignored the Zeal and focused the firepower of her Ignitron rifle at the Ebony First Sword.

The powerful wooden copy of the expert swordsman mech did not even bother to evade or block the incoming purple fire beams. Its ebony surface was incredibly resilient towards damage and also fireproof to boot.

The Ebony First Sword instead launched aggressive attacks at the original First Sword.

Venerable Dise did not straightforwardly block the attacks of the enemy wooden constructs.

Instead, she adjusted her sword technique and sought to entangle the Ebony First Sword as much as possible.

Dise did not like to employ this defensive and stalling approach, but she purposely went against her true nature because she understood she needed to take on an assisting role this time.

The Ebony First Sword started to strain. Its defenses were slowly crumbling while it was unable to land any effective attacks due to getting entangled.

The Everchanger tried his best to push back his wooden counterpart. The expert hero mech sheathed his Heartsword and began to pull out his much more effective Scarlet Ember.

Heat and light radiated from the blade as the plasma sword came online!

"Back off, you stupid copy!" Venerable Joshua barked as the Scarlet Ember successfully forced the Ebony Everchanger back!

The real Everchanger subsequently turned around and dove straight at the Ebony First Sword's flank!

"Now!" Joshua roared!

The three expert mechs simultaneously burst out more power than before!

"Explode!"

The Promethea fired an energy beam that did not spread any purple flames, but instead produced a powerful detonation that briefly cracked the upper chest of the ebony mech!

Venerable Isobel executed one of the techniques that she had adapted from the Alfari Corps Detonation Code!

The real First Sword's Decapitator glowed with a bright corona that seemed unstoppable, especially now that Respa actively empowered the blade!

"Decapitation Strike!"

The First Sword overpowered the ebony mech's attempts to block the special technique and swung her greatsword straight through the damaged neck of her ebony copy!

The head of the Ebony First Sword flew high into the mist-filled sky!

Although the powerful wooden mech still preserved most of its functionality, the loss of the head caused the ebony machine to freeze for a moment.

This provided Venerable Joshua with a fantastic opening!

"C'mon, Willy!"

"Mraaw!"

The green companion spirit entered the Scarlet Ember and did his best to increase the lethality of the plasma sword by imitating the Phase King!

The real Everchanger held his Scarlet Ember with a firm grip and swung it straight down the exposed neck of the Ebony First Sword!

"Chop!"

The Scarlet Ember managed to tear and burn straight to the center of the ebony mech's torso!

Chapter 6112 Power Gap

As the Everchanger's Scarlet Ember burned halfway down the decapitated torso of its wooden twin, the three expert pilots hoped that it might be enough to destroy or at least disable one of their adversaries.

"Did we kill it, Joshua?!"

"No. It's not fatal. This ebony mech has no weak point!"

Venerable Joshua could already see and feel it as his Scarlet Ember continued to burn and separate the Ebony Everchanger.

The powerful wooden mech just incurred a huge amount of damage, enough to outright disable other mechs.

Unfortunately, the Ebony Everchanger immediately leveraged its abundant vitality and attempted to heal all of the damage even when the Scarlet Ember was still embedded into the center of its torso.

The huge influx of wood energy from the Emperor Tree supercharged the regeneration process.

Burnt parts were being pushed away to make room for new growths.

Split pieces of wood fused back together.

The Ebony Everchanger even began to grow a new head from its empty neck!

Venerable Joshua and his battle partner did not remain idle while their opponent recovered.

The Scarlet Ember's powerful plasma edge continued to burn through the torso. The other arm of the Everchanger awkwardly pointed the muzzle of the Vitalus rifle at another section of the ebony mech and began to fire a low-powered but continuous fire beam.

"On it." Venerable Dise spoke as her First Sword attempted to dive in and chop one of the seed cannons from the large ebony construct.

The Ebony Everchanger on its part tried to counterattack by whacking the original's resonance shield with its wooden sword and firing seeds at it from its ebony seed cannon.

Neither Everchangers were able to get rid of each other in a short amount of time. They both remained entangled with each other for the time being.

Venerable Joshua snarled in frustration. "Forget about the Ebony Everchanger. Do your best to burn the Ebony Zeal!"

"On it." Venerable Dise spoke as her First Sword attempted to dive in and chop one of the seed cannons from the large ebony construct.

However, the ebony copy of her own expert mech immediately got in the way and attempted to land a powerful hit.

Venerable Dise already anticipated this response. The authentic First Sword did not slow down. Instead, the living mech sped up even as she thrust her Decapitator outward!

"Sword of Lydia."

The First Sword surged forward like a sharp spear!

The ebony version of her mech attempted to block the incoming strike, but it was unable to resist the sheer force and momentum behind the blow.

Ebony wood cracked and splintered as the imitation mech lost an entire arm from this collision!

What was worse was that the Ebony First Sword failed to stop the real expert mech in her tracks.

Venerable Dise's battle partner may have lost a lot of momentum from this attempted interception, but the expert mech continued to surge toward the Ebony Zeal with undaunted momentum.

It looked as if the First Sword truly had a chance of chopping the Ebony Zeal apart!

"Nothing shall stand in my way!"

However, her declaration was met by 5 seed cannons. Four of them blasted out fragmentation seeds that exploded shortly after they were launched into the air.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Hundreds of ebony shards flung out in every direction! Many of them even flew back and struck the Zeal's wood energy shield!

However, a lot of fragments ended up striking the First Sword as well, causing her resonance shield to deplete by a huge margin right away.

What was even worse was that the Ebony Zeal's much larger kinetic cannon fired straight into the path of the First Sword!

The ebony mech opened fire at the right time. The First Sword had to force her way past the blockade of the Ebony First Sword, which meant that it had slowed down to the point where it was barely able to make an evasion attempt.

BANG!

The powerful kinetic ebony seed launched from a very poor attempt at copying the Devora Cannon blasted apart the resonance shield of the First Sword and grazed one of the thighs of the expert swordsman mech!

The First Sword's leg malfunctioned!

While it looked as if the limb could still support the expert mech, it had lost a lot of responsiveness.

Venerable Dise winced, but she did not take the hit too seriously. Damage to the legs was irrelevant so long as her expert mech remained in the air.

All that mattered at the moment was to finish off the Zeal!

The Promethea assisted from behind by launching one purple fire beam after another at the Ebony Zeal. Kiroshi was already in the process of burning the surprisingly thick and powerful wood energy shield that protected the ebony mech.

As the First Sword came close enough to view the salvaged pieces of mech armor in greater detail, Venerable Dise became more and more indignant.

The Emperor Tree had no right to desecrate the memory of the Zeal!

The existence of this strange ebony monster was an affront to the Larkinson Clan!

"My blade shall chop you into pieces!"

As the First Sword was about to land a blow that would doubtlessly overwhelm the Ebony Zeal's energy defenses and strike a solid blow against its enormous ebony frame, the largest of the three wooden champions made a surprising response.

The ebony version of the Devora Cannon rapidly morphed into a segmented tail with three fang-like spikes protruding from the end.

The kinetic cannon had turned into a powerful melee combat implement that roughly resembled a scorpion tail!

The transformed wooden element possessed enough articulation to bend and uncoil straight into the path of the First Sword!

What was especially dangerous about this sequence was that it happened too quickly!

The First Sword was unable to form a proper response against this sudden measure. The living mech still possessed enough momentum that she wasn't able to avoid the scorpion tail attack.

The only choice that Venerable Dise could make at this junction was whether she wanted to commit to her charge attack or whether she wanted her expert mech to retract the Decapitator in an attempt to block the incoming strike.

The Ebony Zeal's stinger may be formed out of wood, but if it was as hard and sharp as the ebony swords wielded by the other powerful wooden mechs, then it was probably sharp enough to punch through the chest plate of the First Sword!

There was no time for Dise to contemplate her decision. She had to choose right away.

If a Swordmaiden had to choose between offense and defense, she would choose the former everytime.

Besides, Venerable Dise yearned to become an undaunted and unstoppable swordsman mech pilot. It was impossible for her to get cold feet and focus on defense.

"Even if I die, I will take you down with me!" She roared!

Her entire will and focus became consumed with the need to chop apart the Ebony Zeal!

Only by wiping out the remnants of her last failure would she be able to wipe out her disgrace!

With Respa reinforcing the Decapitator, the greatsword gained a renewed sense of momentum and lethality!

CLANG!

The Decapitator sought to cut right through the ebony scorpion tail, but missed as the agile limb moved out of the way at the last moment.

Instead, the scorpion tail struck the First Sword right in the chest, piercing through the alloys and damaging numerous internal components!

However, what the tail gained in flexibility, it lost in rigidity. The momentum of the First Sword was so formidable that the segmented wooden limb forcibly bent as it was unable to punch its blades deeper.

Venerable Dise grimaced as one of the pincer blades punched through the shell of her cockpit and actually managed to breach the chamber where she resided!

Dise refused to flinch. She continued to focus all of her willpower and effort into driving the tip of the Decapitator right through the base of the scorpion tail!

"Pierce!"

The resilient ebony wood splintered and split as the powerful masterwork greatsword forcibly drove into the wood, damaging a lot of incomprehensible wood structures and destroying the mechanisms that fed solid seeds into the imitation Devora Cannon.

This was the extent of the damage inflicted by the charge!

The remaining momentum of the First Sword caused her to collide against the Ebony Zeal in a messy fashion.

The cockpit shook a lot more severely than it should. Venerable Dise quickly shook her head and focused on pulling her First Sword away from the Ebony Zeal.

The powerful wooden mech did not receive nearly as much damage as Dise hoped. The wooden construct was too large, and a monstrous amount of wood energy and tree sap was already starting to heal the damage inflicted by the charge attack.

As the First Sword pulled out her Decapitator and sought to chop apart the other seed cannons embedded on the surface of her target, the ebony scorpion tail regained its functionality within seconds and quickly started to attack the expert mech again!

Venerable Dise let out another frustrated grunt as her expert mech quickly blocked the scorpion tail strikes.

A melee mech was supposed to possess an absolute advantage when fighting against a ranged mech, but the Ebony Zeal did not play by the rules!

Not only had it morphed its strongest ranged weapon into a melee weapon with a long reach, but its formidable size and abundant energies constantly enabled it to regenerate any incoming damage.

As Venerable Dise's willpower grew more frayed as the fight went on, she began to lose hope that she would be able to demolish the Ebony Zeal.

The cold hard truth was that she and her battle partner simply weren't strong enough to defeat the Ebony Zeal or any of the other ebony mechs for that matter.

"My swordsmanship isn't destructive enough."

As much as the proud expert pilot wanted to deny this conclusion, she could not lie to herself.

None of the three expert pilots were able to defeat their opponents. Even though the ebony mechs were made from only small fragments of the calamity tree's core, they were extensions of an extraordinary organism that could be compared to an ace pilot in many aspects!

Venerable Dise and the other two expert pilots slowly learned the hard way that unless they were able to display the attack power of an ace mech and an offensive one at that, they had no chance of defeating the ebony mechs in their current states!

This was especially pertinent for Venerable Dise as her First Sword suffered a severe blow to her chest that weakened her in various ways.

It took a lot of effort for Venerable Dise to keep her First Sword reasonably intact! She no longer had any room to think about launching any further attacks.

"We can't go on like this." Venerable Joshua concluded in a resigned tone even as his Everchanger failed to make any progress in defeating his ebony mirror. "I think it is time for us to employ our final gambit. If that doesn't work, then the only way for us to kill the Emperor Tree is to rely on a lot of orbital bombardment."

"..."

"..."

All three expert pilots felt as if they failed somehow. None of them managed to kill the Emperor Tree, let alone one of his ebony avatars.

They should have been able to do it if they managed to break through, but despite all of the pressure, none of them managed to trigger their second apotheosis by themselves.

"Let's go." Venerable Isobel spoke as her purple flames continually failed to burn the incredibly resilient ebony wooden mechs. "The longer we stay, the greater the chance of accidents."

"You're right. Follow me." Joshua said.

His Everchanger pulled back from the Ebony Everchanger at the cost of suffering another sword blow and immediately started to fly away while gaining altitude.

The other two expert mechs did not dawdle either and utilized their superior mobility to outpace their ebony opponents and rise into the air.

The three ebony mechs did not pursue their enemies, wary of getting lured away from the Emperor Tree.

Instead, the Ebony Everchanger and the Ebony Zeal both employed their seed cannons to continually shoot at the retreating expert mechs.

It took quite a lot of effort for the three Larkinson expert mechs to evade all of the seed attacks aimed in their direction, but they did not stop in their effort to ascend into the skies.

Soon enough, the three expert mechs broke past the Solus Gas layer and entered into a much clearer airspace!

The top of the Emperor Tree extended from this layer as well and looked especially majestic.

The three expert pilots did not pay attention to it at the moment because they had a more important purpose in mind.

"Do it." Venerable Dise said.

"Get ready, then."

Now that the expert mechs were no longer surrounded by Solus Gas, they regained all of their functionality.

This included contact with design spirits!

The Everchanger immediately adopted Lufa as his current design spirit and began to channel the transcendence glow right away.

A very profound aura began to spread from the expert hero mech. As the Everchanger deliberately amplified the range and to a lesser extent the power of this glow, all three expert pilots voluntarily dropped their mental barriers as best they could in order to allow the transcendence glow to take effect on their psyches.

This gambit was not without danger, however. In order to let the transcendence glow influence their thoughts, they had to open the door to the Emperor Tree as well!

Nobody knew what might result from this operation, but all three expert pilots had already made up their minds to brave this danger in the hopes of transforming their lives!

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Chapter 6113 Death Seeking Behavior

Mech pilots tended to do the stupidest things in the hopes of triggering their breakthroughs.

Those with fairly normal mentalities and modest ambitions would never think about resorting to extreme measures to step onto the path of godhood.

This was a perfectly sane and valid career choice. Mech pilots were only human, after all. They feared death and lusted for life. Why must they take excessive risks and push themselves so close to their limits when the chance of success was so abysmally low?

Mech pilots that clung to their sanity did indeed live longer than their less stable peers. They got what they wanted, but pretty much gave up their best opportunity to escape mediocrity.

Only the mech pilots that possessed the courage to challenge their limits possessed the qualifications to step onto the path of godhood.

There was no safe and peaceful way to advance to expert pilot. Every mech pilot had to push themselves one way or another in order to break through. A combination of strong pressure, concern and a good mech was usually a good combination that promoted the chance of breakthroughs.

Yet nothing was certain. As long as the genetic aptitude of mech pilots was not exceptional, many pilots continually had to try their luck in order to grasp the fleeting chance of breaking through.

The general theory was that as long as they tried enough times, they would eventually succeed.

While this was technically correct, one of the conditions that had to be met was that the mech pilots had to stay alive long enough to win the jackpot.

That did not happen very often as those that repeatedly gambled with their lives always ended up falling short one way or another.

The worst part about this inhumane advancement method was that a pilot did not just have to challenge their limits once.

They needed to do it again and again.

Expert candidates had to be braver than ordinary mech pilots.

Expert pilots had to be more courageous than expert candidates.

Ace pilots had to be a lot more fearless than expert pilots.

As for god pilots, the conditions needed to reach this exalted rank were so insanely demanding that far too many indomitable and successful ace pilots ultimately broke upon stepping onto the road of no return.

This was the price that every mech pilot paid when they decisively chose to transcend their mortality. There was no free lunch. Willpower was one of the most difficult qualities to cultivate for humans, and every bottleneck needed to be overcome by demonstrating greater courage and conviction than before!

There was little point in holding back as those that showed timidity during times where they must show courage already disqualified themselves from breaking through.

It was a frustrating and tortuous advancement trajectory.

Yet each year, millions of brave and daring mech pilots tried to get into fights where their lives or something almost as precious were at stake.

Everyone knew the dangers. The galactic net regularly reported on the casualties. It was not too unusual for the news to announce the fall of another war hero.

Yet still, the bravest among the mech pilots continued to go out of their way to test themselves in unreasonable ways.

The allure of becoming a god pilot was too strong for them. Reaching the ultimate rank in their profession had become a permanent obsession to all who yearned to obtain greater power!

Venerable Joshua, Venerable Dise and Venerable Isobel were no exception to this rule.

None of them managed to trigger their apotheosis by lacking ambition. Each of them were a lot more power hungry than they look on the surface.

This was also why they decisively chose to challenge the Emperor Tree even when the intelligence suggested that they might be biting off more than they could chew.

Alas, the best case scenarios did not occur. The three expert pilots were not strong enough to defeat the Emperor tree in their current states, and neither did any of them trigger a breakthrough during the fighting.

The depletion of the resonance shields and the severe damage done to the torso of the First Sword signaled the end of the attempt to defeat the Emperor Tree through conventional means.

The three expert mechs still had a lot of fight left in them. The First Sword, the Everchanger and the Promethea could still struggle for at least several more minutes.

Yet what was the point in doing so? Continuing to attack the ebony mechs would accomplish nothing as none of the damage stuck. The champion wooden mechs fought as if they were constantly under the effects of support link technology.

This was an advantage that the three current expert mechs did not possess!

Even if the act of damaging the ebony mechs forced the Emperor Tree to expend a lot of energy, the calamity plant was the least afraid of this consequence!

It was incredibly demoralizing for the expert pilots to persist in fighting when all of their efforts amounted to nothing in the end.

Trying to force the issue may create a small chance that one of the expert pilots would break through, but this fleeting opportunity was not worth the exponentially growing risks.

Venerable Joshua and the other two expert pilots all knew that if they kept trying to tangle with the ebony mechs, their own expert mechs would begin to incur increasingly serious material damage.

None of the Larkinson expert pilots could accept this ignoble outcome. While failure was a part of every experienced mech pilot's life, the three did not want to turn tail and return to Chimera Base with a powerful blow to their self-esteem.

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Once their proud living mechs received enough crippling blows, it would be too late for them to escape from the battlefield with their lives and expert mechs intact!

Retreat was the most sensible choice to make.

It was also the most cowardly choice to make.

None of the Larkinson expert pilots could accept this ignoble outcome. While failure was a part of every experienced mech pilot's life, the three did not want to turn tail and return to Chimera Base with a powerful blow to their self-esteem.

It would take a lot of time and effort to undo the damage and restore their moods back to a point where they were ready to seek out their breakthrough moments once again!

This was why they committed to an alternative strategy.

Since failing to break through was the most direct reason why they were unable to defeat the Emperor Tree, they should simply force the issue with the means they had at their disposal.

No one knew whether employing the transcendence glow at this difficult and dangerous junction would yield a positive result, but all three expert pilots thought it was worth a try!

Even though it hadn't been all that long since they became expert pilots, none of them wanted to remain stuck at their bottlenecks any longer than was necessary.

It was profoundly frustrating for them to transition from rapid growth to very little progress.

The prospect of spending years of their precious lives on repeatedly bashing their heads against their bottlenecks sounded like torture!

Even if other expert pilots thought it was quite normal for them to remain stuck at their bottlenecks for a few decades to half a century, the Larkinson pilots were different!

They had access to far more solutions than others. Not only did they have the privilege of piloting living mechs, they also had an opportunity to make use of the transcendence glow!

The variation of Lufa's glow had proven to be effective at promoting the breakthroughs of ordinary pilots and expert candidates in the past.

Nobody knew whether this solution was enough to trigger the much more demanding breakthroughs of expert pilots hoping to ascend to Sainthood.

It sounded ludicrous that a mere glow could magically transform a peak expert pilot into an ace pilot, but what if there was a possibility of success?

Neither Joshua nor the other two expert pilots wanted to let go of this fleeting chance!

They committed to this choice even if it meant that they would have to make themselves more vulnerable to the Emperor Tree's formidable mental manipulation.

It would be a lie to claim that the three expert pilots dismissed the threat posed by the Emperor Tree.

The current battle had forced them to respect the calamity plant even more. This was definitely among the strongest adversaries that they had ever fought in their careers up to this point!

However, the expert pilots believed in their willpower. They accepted the risks and threw themselves to the embrace of the transcendence glow, hoping that Lufa would be able to give them a crucial push that would allow them to step over the threshold that eluded them for so long!

As the Everchanger continued to channel the transcendence glow in an unrestrained fashion, every expert pilot began to get stimulated in different ways.

It was impossible for Lufa's glow to make a strong impact on their minds. The difference in power between themselves and Lufa was a lot smaller, so the expert pilots only received mild stimulation.

That may or may not be enough. It all depended on their foundations and how ready they were to take the next step.

Venerable Joshua had forgotten about most distractions at the moment. Now that the Everchanger had ascended high above the skies, his vision became clearer than it had ever been.

"Beautiful."

Reticula Corein V may be an untamed planet that had been occupied by unreasonably powerful exobeasts, but it was also a planet that held an incredible diversity of life.

Joshua appreciated the native wildlife even if he was forced to kill them every once in a while.

Just because life was precious and beautiful did not mean that it needed to be preserved at all cost.

Exobeasts killed each other all the time. The survival of the fittest forced many creatures to compete against each other for limited resources and territory.

A huge amount of lives perished on this planet every day. The greater the amount of lives, the greater the amount of deaths that occurred on the surface.

Life and death were intertwined. Life was already powerful by itself, but it felt incomplete if he left death out of the picture.

Joshua began to gain a profound realization about the essence of his domain.

"Life is worth less when it is cheap and abundant. It only becomes precious when it is short and fleeting."

Immortality was an affront to life. A universe where every organism lived forever was a nightmare to live in. Many life forms would no longer possess a strong drive anymore as they had endless amounts of time to engage in their idle pursuits.

The reason why Venerable Joshua and his fellow expert pilots worked so hard to break through was because they only had a limited amount of time to take another step onto the path to godhood.

"Only when an expert pilot has come closest to death will his life finally explode with potential!"

Joshua suddenly became inspired as he embraced the duality of life and death to an increasing degree!

He felt as if he finally unlocked the secret that could help him overcome his bottleneck!

His eyes shone as he recalled the stories and guidance shared by Saint Tusa after he had broken through.

One of the stories that stuck to Joshua was that the patriarch actually poisoned Tusa with phasewater in order to drive the then-expert pilot to the brink of desperation!

Though the crazy stunt could have backfired spectacularly, Tusa had exceeded his own limits and lived up to everyone's greatest expectations by breaking through in the end!

The most outrageous part of his story was that he did so without stepping foot on the battlefield with his upgraded expert mech!

Since Tusa could do it, Joshua should be able to do it as well.

"I understand now." He whispered as he became increasingly more obsessed with his latest insights. "How could it have eluded me for so long? Only when I have embraced the power of death will I be able to understand the driving force of life!"

Joshua decided to act right away. He reached down to his side and pulled out his service pistol.

It was an expensive high-end transphasic laser pistol that Joshua had never used in the field.

The expert pilot decisively switched off his personal shield generator, opened the faceplate of his helmet and pointed the muzzle of the pistol straight into his mouth!

There were only two possible outcomes in Venerable Joshua's mind!

Either he broke through to ace pilot on the spot, or he would die without any chance of recovery!

"Life is death! Death is life!"

Chapter 6114 The Leash of Civilization

As the Everchanger radiated the transcendence glow far and wide in order to stimulate the greatest obsessions of the three expert pilots, each of them developed radically different ideas and insights!

Venerable Joshua came to believe that he would never be able to advance his understanding of life if he did not deepen his comprehension of death.

What better way to make this happen than by pushing himself closer to death than ever before?!

As Joshua stared down the barrel of his service gun, elsewhere a different expert pilot entertained another extreme idea.

From the moment Venerable Dise lowered her guard and allowed herself to be affected by Lufa's glow, she spontaneously thought back on her life before the Larkinson Clan.

Lydia's Swordmaidens used to be a ferocious but relatively small pirate gang beyond the border of the Komodo Star Sector.

The frontier she grew up in was a lawless and uncivilized region of space. The great galactic society that made up the vastness of human civilization was like a giant that towered over all of the chaotic human societies that tried to eke out a living beyond its direct sphere of influence.

Life was hard in the old frontier. Dise enjoyed a better childhood than most Swordmaidens at the time, but she had grown up on an aging space station that was constantly beset by malfunctions.

The hardy people that lived and worked on the space station always managed to find an ingenious way to fix broken parts and systems in the cheapest possible ways, they had to struggle every day in order to keep the station functional.

Dise never truly felt happy when she grew up in that awful space station. It lacked a lot of basic goods and services that even the poorest third-raters took for granted.

From clean air to a basic education, Dise and many other station rats never had a chance to enjoy those simple luxuries.

They could only dream of becoming one of the rich and powerful people that seemed to have access to every imaginable comfort over in the heart of human civilization.

It was only when Dise managed to get into Lydia's Swordmaidens that she truly had a chance to escape that dingy space station and experience the vastness of the Milky Way.

Sure, Lydia's Swordmaidens only dared to roam around the Faris Star Region, but that was already a much larger boundary than the old space station!

Dise felt fulfilled. The Swordmaidens molded her into a warrior and a mech pilot. She did not stand out from her sisters at the time, but she was already happy because she got to travel to many exciting places.

In the years since she became a qualified Swordmaiden pilot, she stepped foot onto much larger space stations as well as unimaginably vast planets.

Each new destination expanded her horizons and made her appreciate the universe she lived in. Every new curiosity satisfied her desire to experience anything that was different from her gray and monotonous childhood.

Eventually, she took up hunting as a hobby and a means to earn additional income for the Swordmaidens.

She fell in love with this activity. She not only got to land on exotic untamed planets where exobeasts had reigned for millions of years, but also got to test and hone her fighting skills against a diverse array of weird and challenging monsters.

Venerable Dise missed those simple days. She was just another Swordmaiden pilot at the time.

She may have begun to stand out from the rest of her sisters after a time, but she never thought she was any better or worse than the rest of the Swordmaidens.

Much had changed since then.

The Swordmaidens almost got wiped out on the surface of Aeon Corona VII. Commander Lydia and many veteran sisters died unjustly during that fateful battle.

Dise and other sisters who managed to retain a semblance of their composure had been forced to step up and prevent the remnants of the Swordmaidens from dying out entirely.

Joining the Larkinson Clan was the most fortunate turning point in the history of the Swordmaidens.

It was also a rather helpless move, because the Swordmaidens struggled to rebuild themselves in the aftermath of the search for the Starlight Megalodon.

Venerable Dise had much to praise about the Larkinson Clan. Although a lot of old sisters ended up dying in the battles waged by their new patriarch, they died like warriors in much better circumstances than they could have imagined.

The survivors such as Dise and Ketis cherished their memories of their old sisters, but also tried to befriend new sisters.

Under the umbrella of the Larkinson Clan, the Swordmaidens far exceeded their previous height and became more rich and powerful than any of the sisters back then could have imagined!

Venerable Dise should have felt happy about this. While she was certainly content that the Swordmaidens successfully preserved Commander Lydia's legacy and elevated it to a greater height, the expert pilot still missed the old days to an extent.

Life was a lot harder but also a lot simpler back then. The Swordmaidens had no intersection with galactic politics and wars against multiple alien civilizations.

They were only concerned about winning fights against hostile pirates that sought to take them down. Their greatest challenge aside from pure survival was to earn enough income to keep their cozy collection of carriers and mechs in working condition.

The Swordmaidens were a lot less civilized in the old days, but that was exactly the time where Venerable Dise was the happiest.

"Has life in civilized space made me soft?"

She wanted to claim that the answer was no. Living under Ves was a dangerous but also exciting experience. His penchant for making enemies and seeking out dangerous encounters ensured that Dise received plenty of stimulation.

Yet as the Larkinson Clan grew more powerful, the sense of desperation and weakness that the Swordmaidens endured under the leadership of Commander Lydia had disappeared.

The sisters were only human. The old veterans increasingly lost the sharp and savage edge they held before. The new recruits never possessed an edge to begin with as they had all grown up on civilized planets located in third-rate or second-rate states.

The Swordmaidens were changing before her eyes. They evolved and adapted to life under the Larkinson Clan.

Life for all of them became better, but all of their fame and fancy mechs came at a cost.

Venerable Dise thought about everything she had gained and everything she had lost since she started to fight for the Larkinsons.

Had she managed to obtain more than she lost? Undoubtedly.

Without the patriarch, she would have never been able to pilot a living mech like the First Sword.

Ketis would never have been able to learn the knowledge and gather the materials needed to forge the masterwork Decapitator greatsword.

Ever since she became an expert pilot, Venerable Dise felt more powerful and fulfilled than ever.

Yet the more she felt fulfilled, the more she distanced herself from her older, more savage self.

There were far too many times where she needed to restrain her original self. She had to maintain the decorum of an honorable expert pilot and a citizen of a civilized society.

Any insults and disputes had to be solved with words as opposed to swords.

Though Venerable Dise still managed to thrive under these circumstances, she was no longer certain whether this was enough to push her over the threshold.

What if she failed to break through after Ketis finally upgraded the First Sword to the current mech generation?

Dise did not want to end up like Ark, who still didn't manage to overcome his bottleneck after receiving an impressively powerful quasi-first-class high-tier expert mech.

If she wanted to advance her career to the next step and become a Saint that was powerful enough to protect the Swordmaidens without relying on the Larkinson Clan, then she needed to find a way to push herself over the edge!

"I can't grow stronger if I continue to live in the cage called civilization." Venerable Dise concluded.

She always harbored this sentiment since the day the Swordmaidens was forced to leave the Faris Star Region due to the Sand War.

The old frontier where she grew up and matured into a warrior was gone forever.

The new frontier was just as exciting, but it was not the same, especially when she remained shackled to the rules of civilization.

As a member and hero of the Larkinson Clan, Venerable Dise had to abide by far too many rules, both written and unwritten.

Why did she have to bind herself to the constraints imposed by others?

Many of the wimpy bureaucrats and politicians who made those rules knew nothing about what it was like to be a true warrior!

Dise increasingly developed the idea that if she wanted to move past her bottleneck, she must rid herself of her civilized constraints and return to a more savage and lawless state of mind.

"I need to become a beast as opposed to a human."

Many people would probably react in disgust or incomprehension if they heard this idea, but Dise was different.

Beasts were powerful. Beasts were savage. Beasts were unconstrained.

They were the opposite of weak and soft humans in so many ways.

The more an expert pilot advanced on the path to godhood, the more they left their humanity behind.

Venerable Dise had a feeling that if she wanted to take the next step, she needed to sacrifice another piece of her weak and feeble human self.

Since that was the case, why not throw away her respect for civilization and her awe towards the rules?

As long as she became more uninhibited, she would definitely be able to grow a lot faster!

"Become a beast as opposed to a human!"

She had fought against plenty of exobeasts before and after the Age of Dawn.

In both cases, Dise had come to admire the scrappy beasts that fought and gained dominance on their respective planets.

Each of their species had to survive all kinds of natural disasters while also overcoming many other rival beasts.

Now that the Age of Dawn had introduced exotic radiation to the Red Ocean, many lucky exobeasts managed to break past the limits of their species and evolved over a span of days rather than millennia!

Just the Emperor Tree was enough for her and her First Sword to experience the despair and helplessness of being too weak.

Venerable Dise loathed it. She desired strength, not just to satisfy her own pride, but also become strong enough to eliminate every threat directed towards the Swordmaidens!

It was not enough for her to reach the strength of a high-tier expert pilot.

Now that she knew what was holding her back all of the time, Venerable Dise decisively took action in order to rid herself of the leash that chained her to the yoke of civilization!

"As long as I vow to turn my back on the rules of human civilization, I can truly become free and unbound!"

Only an ace pilot and eventually a god pilot could enable her to properly defeat every human, alien or beast that dared to finish what the Vesians had started a long time ago!

Now that she knew what was holding her back all of the time, Venerable Dise decisively took action in order to rid herself of the leash that chained her to the yoke of civilization!

"As long as I vow to turn my back on the rules of human civilization, I can truly become free and unbound!"

She could go wherever she wanted!

She could rob whatever she wanted!

She could kill whoever she wanted!

Venerable Dise yearned to return to the simpler and more savage life of an original Swordmaiden.

Whether there was any room for a savage pilot like herself in the Red Ocean was not in her consideration.

In any case, so long as she gained the strength of an ace pilot, there weren't many enemies left that could stop her from pursuing her desires!

The more she thought about it, the more she became excited. Her breathing grew heavier as she began to leverage her extraordinary willpower to permanently alter her brain!

Only by ridding herself of many of the useless vestiges of humanity would she be able to become the beast of her desires!

She did not have a single clue on how to perform brain surgery on herself, but she believed that as long as her desire was strong enough, her willpower would do all of the work!

More and more power concentrated inside her head as Dise was about to rewire her brain in the most dangerous fashion possible!

The probability of botching the job and ending up brain death was enormous, but so long as there was the faintest chance of breaking through, Dise could not stop herself from engaging in this incredibly dangerous act!

"I shall live as a beast, or die like a human!"

Chapter 6115 The Level Up Process

From the moment the Larkinsons planned to make use of the transcendence glow to 'encourage' the breakthrough of several ace pilot candidates, Isobel remained skeptical.

As a long-standing member of the Larkinson Clan, there was no way she was ignorant about glows.

She, along with many other veteran Larkinsons, eventually figured out that glows were nothing more than an instinctual response of a weak individual towards a stronger individual.

Isobel knew that several expert pilots owed their breakthroughs to Lufa's altered glow. She did not understand the mechanics behind it all, but the results were very clear to every clansman.

However, just because she acknowledged its results did not mean she possessed a lot of faith in the transcendence glow.

High-tier expert pilots such as Isobel had reached the limits of their resonance growths with the help of those mysterious elixirs. Her current measurement may fall short of reaching the absolute limit of 67 laves, but whatever improvement she could eke out barely moved the needle any further.

While she was unable to unleash her growth unless she managed to overcome her bottleneck, she was already a powerhouse in her own right. All of those burned and ruined warships floating in space served as a physical record of her current destructive potential.

How could Lufa possibly affect her to the same degree as an ordinary pilot or expert candidate?

The difference in power between herself and a typical design spirit was not that exaggerated anymore!

Barring a few exceptions such as the Superior Mother, Venerable Isobel did not really think that the design spirits were immeasurable to her. She even believed she had a fighting chance against them, though she did not have a single clue how to fight against an invisible and intangible entity.

Whatever the case, Venerable Isobel went into this mission with the belief that she would give the transcendence glow a try and see where it took her. If her suspicions were correct about its lacking efficacy, then she would simply shrug her shoulders and declare this attempt a failure.

Now that she was actually lowering her mental defenses as best as possible in order to welcome Lufa's influence, she immediately noticed that she underestimated its utility.

Although the transcendence glow was not strong enough to force her to become susceptible to its influence, she could still follow it on her own accord.

The best way for her to describe the effect was as if Lufa turned into a particularly intimate advisor.

Isobel could choose to listen or ignore the suggestions provided by Lufa. The fact that she had the ability to refuse anything she disagreed with reassured her. She decided to trust the design spirit and indulge in the nudges that were trying to steer her thoughts.

Under the guidance of the transcendence glow, she couldn't help but recall a past conversation with an official of the Mech Trade Association.

Shortly after breaking through to expert pilot, Venerable Isobel went on a mandatory pilgrimage to a sector headquarters of the MTA, just like anyone else who experienced similar breakthroughs.

She became amazed by the immense wealth and advanced tech of the MTA.

However, what stuck inside her head the most during the visit was not the display of wealth and power, but the precious words of guidance provided by an official of the Association.

"Cases such as yours are uncommon, but not too rare." The uniformed man spoke as they stood in a hall that displayed the busts and statues of famous mech pilots and their battle machines. "Being able to master the power of fire in a spontaneous manner is not a curse. It is a gift. We theorize that every person possesses different natural talents. These invisible traits were not genetic, or acquired. They simply appear in random people in random patterns. The most we can confirm is that the environment has a modest influence on what kind of talents can be produced, but you can mostly think of it as winning different prizes of a lottery for all intents and purposes."

"If that is the case, did I win the lottery?" A younger Isobel asked.

"That remains to be seen. Our sector headquarters does not possess the tech to quantify your talent. No matter whether it is strong and weak, having it does not mean you are guaranteed to become the next First Flame. Every high-ranking mech pilot must put in the hard work to exercise their skills and temper their willpower in actual combat. Talent can best be regarded as a shortcut to a specific application of power. It is up to you whether you wish to make use of this shortcut."

Venerable Isobel blinked after hearing that. "Does that mean I can ignore my newly gained proclivity in fire and focus on something else?"

"Everything is possible. Demigods such as yourself are unreasonable individuals to begin with. Never forget that your true foundation of strength is your willpower and your mech. Talent is a convenient bonus, but you should never become its slave. Master your power. Control your urges. Dominate the battlefield. These are the tenets that esteemed expert pilots should strive for. You are one of the few humans who have mastered power beyond the reach of pure technology alone. This is a great privilege, but also one you must wield carefully."

Isobel nodded. The mechers had thoroughly instilled the need to restrain her power and not cause too much collateral damage that could end up destroying entire cities.

This warning was especially necessary for expert pilots that possessed particularly volatile and dangerous talents!

"I am not a soldier who looks at a gift horse in the mouth." The female Larkinson spoke. "Since the cosmos has gifted me with a talent of fire, I might as well master this power."

"Good choice. As long as you can maintain enough control over your damage output, we encourage you to explore it in your own way. We cannot offer too much specific advice on how you should develop your fire power. Every pilot is unique. Willpower is inherently personal to everyone. Your understanding and attitude of fire may be completely different from another expert pilot with a similar talent. It is not common to produce purple flames, which has become a signature of your willpower manifestation. How you choose to develop your flames is part of your personal journey."

That sounded vague to Isobel. She did not have a clue where to begin.

"Can you give me more general advice?"

The official smiled. "We can, Venerable. One general piece of advice that we share to every expert pilot is that they should start with exploring what they can already do. Keep your power expressions as simple as possible. Adding too many variables in a short amount of time will cause you to lose focus. Only once you have sufficiently mastered your control over your flames are you ready to evolve it to the next level."

"You make it sound as if I have become a virtual reality game character."

"The analogy is simple and easy to understand to pilots such as yourself." The man explained. "We find that as expert pilots have developed their current potential to a limit, one of the methods they can use to break past this limit and expand their future is to evolve their power in a single forceful sequence. This is the so-called level up process that can transform you into a much more powerful soldier."

Isobel looked thoughtful. "How do I level up, exactly?"

"There are many different ways to do so, but for a pilot with a talent for fire such as yourself, it is best if you expand the definition of your flames. No high-ranking mech pilot with this talent remains fixated on fire alone. It is too... simple and broad. You need to narrow and deepen your personal conception of your strength. Take the First Flame for example. His Divinity has far exceeded the most basic definition of fire long ago. He has chosen to develop his strength into the embodiment of the fire of human civilization. By realizing the metaphorical first flame that first enabled the human race to build the vestiges of a society, he has strengthened his fire and imbued it with so many powerful conceptual properties that it has become strong beyond your imagination."

It was well-known that the First Flame's strength was directly proportional to the size and prosperity of human civilization.

Now that humanity was at its height in the Milky Way, the First Flame became just as powerful!

Of course, if humanity ever started to crumble, then the old god pilot would also lose much of the amplification that he relied upon to elevate him to the upper reaches of the power ranking.

The example of the First Flame enlightened Venerable Isobel and gave her a much more solid idea on what she should work towards.

"You are not ready yet to evolve your flame." The official carefully reminded her. "You must learn how to crawl before you can walk. You must learn how to walk before you can run. The path to godhood can never be traversed in a single leap. You must walk up the path step by step. Once you are ready, that is the time when you should think about leveling up by expanding the definition of your flames."

"So I need to reframe my fire so that it embodies a specific thought or object?"

"Yes. We refer to it as visualization. Simply put, choose an image related to fire that resonates with you and try to run with that. Concentrate on it as much as possible and do your best to transform into it. If you succeed, your flames should successfully morph into the shape of the image that you have fixated upon. Take note that this is not a harmless process. Any distractions or interference can easily cause your image to change outside of your intentions. It could get fused with another unrelated image. It can get associated with feelings such as anger or fear."

"That does sound dangerous."

"There are other processes that can help expert pilots such as yourself become stronger." The official said. "Many of them are safer, but take much more time, effort and luck to succeed. You do not have to improve your power by upgrading your flames to embody a specific image, but we find that it is particularly useful to expert pilots with talents such as yourself. Take your simple purple flame and evolve it into a conflagration that can burn your enemies in the ways that you prefer."

Though Isobel had a much better idea on what she should be working towards, she did not know what sort of images she should fixate upon when she became stronger.

"Are there differences in strength between imagines?"

"Most certainly. You must take this life-changing process seriously. It is impossible for you to revert your evolution once you have embarked upon it. Here at the Association, we do not necessarily believe that there are weak or useless images. You do not need to be as extravagant as the First Flame by trying to become the fire that birthed human civilization. What is important is that the

image is to your liking. As long as you can resonate with it, then you can be assured that it is a valid choice. Whether it is the best choice you can make is subjective and conditional. No one can make this judgment except for you. Remember that, Venerable."

Isobel felt a lot better about her newly attained control of fire. Even if she did not like it, she could work towards evolving it to suit her own goals and preferences. All she had to do was to find an image related to flames that she could agree with. If the First Flame was able to do it, then so could others!

"Thank you for your advice."

"You are welcome." The official gave her a warm and caring grin. "That is what the Mech Trade Association is here for. We are the best friends of every expert pilot. Do not hesitate to come to us if you are ever lost or confused."

Chapter 6116 Let It Go

Isobel nodded in gratitude at the official responsible for accompanying her during her pilgrimage to the MTA's sector headquarters.

"Do you have any additional tips on how I should select an image for my fire?"

"If you do not have a strong preference from the beginning, you may be able to maximize your benefits by focusing on function first. Do you want your fire to become inexhaustible? Visualize a sun or a power reactor. Do you want your fire to spread much easier? Visualize a wildfire that has engulfed an entire forest. Do you want your fire to heal those you deem friendly? Visualize a rejuvenating flame that can make people whole again."

Isobel looked surprised when she heard that last example. "Flames can heal?"

"It has been done in the past." The official claimed. "This is the exception rather than the rule. Willpower is the basis of your strength. As long as it is strong enough, it can turn the behavior of fire completely upside down. Instead of harming people, it can heal people. We do not recommend you go through such extremes, however. It is much harder to go against the properties of fire than to work with them. The Association heavily discourages such headstrong behavior."

"Why so? Isn't it beneficial for expert pilots to become healers?"

"Not necessarily. The results are not proportionate to the effort that you have put into it. Fire is inherently more prone to causing harm than reversing it. In the end, it is your choice on how you want to shape your flames. Remember that willpower is everything. As long as you want an outcome hard enough, then you may be able to attain it regardless of how impossible it sounds. Just be aware that you will waste many more years on trying to reinvent your fire into something unrecognizable."

Venerable Isobel got the message. "Just because I can do what I want with my flame does not mean it is a good choice to pursue anything that is too weird. The greater the distance between an image and my fire, the longer it takes to level up. I may end up squandering my prime years as a pilot if I try to bite more than I can chew."

"It is good that you understand. By all means, break the rules if you so desire. Do not let our advice prevent you from developing your power in the direction that resonates with you the most. God pilots break the rules merely by existing. The same is valid to expert pilots, but to a much smaller

extent. That does not change the fact that both groups share a common trait. The more powerful you become, the more you must think like a god as opposed to a human."

Isobel was not entirely comfortable with this idea. Why must high-ranking mech pilots weaken their connection to their own humanity in order to become more powerful?

"Do we all have to become increasingly more inhuman?" She questioned. "Can't we choose to preserve our original selves?"

"You can, but according to our own studies, the results are always less than satisfactory." The mecher responded. "The only true success case is the Chosen Human, but he is the only god pilot who did not have to struggle in order to attain his power. He did not have to sacrifice any of his humanity to break through. He took advantage of that to become the most exemplary representative of our race."

Isobel's expression worsened. Her genetic aptitude did not reach the mythical S-grade. There was no way she could coast along and effortlessly break through to the rank of god pilot like the Chosen Human.

"It sounds as if I must get ready to make a few sacrifices if I want to become much stronger in the future." She concluded in a resigned tone.

"High-ranking mech pilots are the heroes of the human race. How can they stand above every other human if they did not struggle to overcome the weaknesses and frailties of their own race? It is a fact of reality that god pilots are no longer human in the strictest definition of the word. That does not affect our recognition of their humanity, but we are all forced to adopt a looser definition in order to make it all work."

In other words, god pilots may as well be monsters that just happen to retain a human facade.

Isobel struggled to accept this reality.

"You do not need to embrace this necessity right away, Venerable. Acceptance comes in time. Once you have tempered yourself as an expert pilot and witnessed the power of an ace pilot first-hand, your desire for power will determine whether you have the determination and conviction to do what is necessary."

Venerable Isobel pretty much set aside these words after she had concluded her pilgrimage to the MTA.

Years later, all of that far-sighted advice provided by the mechers suddenly came back to the forefront of her mind yet again.

Now that she was able to review the conversation as an ace pilot candidate, she found that the guidance she received at the time happened to perfectly fit her needs.

Though it was not the only way for her to overcome her bottleneck, leveling up her fire by making it conform to an image was a tried and true formula.

Venerable Isobel was not egoistic enough to believe she could blaze her own trail as an expert pilot.

Since this approach worked fine for the likes of the First Flame, she should be able to make it work.

The big question now was what sort of image she should fixate upon. What did she desire to accomplish the most? What part of her flames was she most satisfied with, and what annoyed her

the most about them? What sort of function did she wish for them to fulfill, and how well were they able to do their jobs?

"What I like the most about my flames is that they can burn stuff that is difficult to catch fire. What I dislike the most is how everyone wants me to restrain my flames for fear of making their plunder worthless."

She did not hate the fact that her flames completely totaled everything that it managed to take root in. She just disliked how other Larkinsons wanted to hold her back for this reason.

Yet as much as her purple flames were able to turn advanced alien warships into blackened husks, she was unable to burn anything of significance to the Emperor Tree.

She hated the fact her fire failed her during this crucial battle!

Was it because her fire did not burn hot enough, or was it because her flames spread too slowly?

"Neither. It is because the burn rate never manages to exceed the Emperor Tree's regeneration rate."

As long as she attempted to spread her flames onto the main trunk or the ebony mechs, the damn Emperor Tree channeled a huge amount of wood energy and tree sap to put out the fire.

The fact that Isobel was unable to counter this response frustrated her to no end!

She learned the hard way that she was not as strong as she thought. She was still too weak despite becoming a high-tier expert pilot.

Back in the Sentinel Kingdom, high-tier expert pilots enjoyed exalted status. It was very different for high-ranking mech pilots of a third-rate state to grow to that point while piloting third-class expert mechs under fairly impoverished circumstances.

Venerable Isobel managed to reach this point much faster than any of the heroes of her former home state. She should have felt proud of her progress and satisfied with how much more effective her flames had become.

It only took a single encounter against the Emperor Tree to ruin it all. She felt weaker and more inadequate than she ever felt during her run as an expert pilot. It was profoundly painful for an enemy to pop her bubble and expose how weak she had been all of this time.

She knew that as long as she fought against true powerhouses who possessed enough extraordinary strength to defend against her flames, her so-called King Killer Flames failed to do the name justice.

Was this what she wanted?

"No."

A sense of desperation filled her. She did not choose to embrace and develop her talent because she wanted to become good at abusing cannon fodder.

Any ordinary mech unit could beat alien phasefighters and alien warships.

What Isobel truly wanted to attain was the power to burn the gods themselves. If she wasn't able to effectively burn the likes of the Emperor Tree or the Eminence of Torment, then how was she supposed to realize her ambition?

"Maybe... my flames failed to live up to their potential because I am too used to holding back." She guessed.

She already held this suspicion, but now that she was under the influence of the transcendence glow, she became increasingly more convinced that this was one of the key factors holding her back!

The more she fought against the natural state of fire, the more she stalled her own progress by forcing it to behave in an unnatural manner.

As the advisor from the MTA once said, the more she tried to defy the reality surrounding her flames, the more time and effort she wasted on a result that was not worth it in the end.

"Should I... stop holding back entirely?" She questioned.

So what if the Larkinsons did not like her to spread her flames around willy-nilly? Shouldn't they appreciate her capacity to destroy so many powerful enemies that threatened their lives?

Perhaps it may have been more excusable for them to demand her to hold back before the Great Severing, but now that the Red War was about to heat up in a big way, red humanity needed her flames more than ever!

"The Larkinson Clan can't tell me what to do. If becoming a pyromaniac is what red humanity needs, then I shall fuel my fire to the greatest possible extent!"

As she became more fixated around this change in mentality, her willpower began to heat up the air in the cockpit.

The robust life support systems built into her cockpit needed to work harder in order to maintain a comfortable temperature!

Isobel paid no attention to these changes. Instead, she tried to work out her demands in order to figure out how to make her flames more effective.

"I have taken to calling them the King Killer Flames, but they do not deserve this name. If I want to rectify that, then I need to stop holding back and bring up the heat even if I lose control over my flames."

Control was an important demand to every high-ranking mech pilot. The entire rationale for their existence was that they were much more precise and environmentally friendly alternatives to crude weapons of mass destruction.

The moment she decided to eliminate control as an essential component of her strength, Isobel could not imagine how much more dangerous her flames could become!

At this time, she was still able to exert enough influence over her resonance-empowered flames to weaken them and put them out entirely from a distance.

What if she lost the ability to do so? What if she lost the ability to end her flames on command?

The collateral damage that she would inflict during every battle going forward would probably multiply by an order of magnitude!

Trillions of MTA credits worth of exotics, hypers, phasewater and other spoils would burn down without anyone able to douse her ferocious flames.

Previously, Isobel would have felt repulsed at this outcome. She was loyal to the Larkinson Clan and did not want to create any more problems.

This time was different. Her attitude had changed. In the face of her own weakness, Isobel felt more than ever that she needed to let go in order to truly make her flames live up to her expectations.

"My fire exists to burn the enemies that others cannot defeat. Only kings, emperors and gods are worthy to die to my flames!"

Chapter 6117 The Rebel Leader

How could she possibly manage to burn the powerhouses that possessed the strength and the abilities to snuff out her resonance-empowered flames?

"It is not enough to possess stronger willpower." Isobel believed. "The Emperor Tree does not possess any willpower that comes close to my own, but it still managed to douse my flames."

She suddenly figured out the most fundamental reason why she failed to burn down the calamity plant.

"My King Killer Flames fail to live up to their name because they... aren't able to burn everything that makes strong enemies like the Emperor Tree so difficult to defeat."

Venerable Isobel thought back on what stifled her attempts to burn down her opponents.

What did transphasic energy shields and the Emperor Tree's own flame suppression methods have in common?

They both relied on energy to stop her fire from burning solid matter!

No matter whether it was warship hulls or the wood of the Emperor Tree, her flames were technically able to burn them all up given enough time.

The problem was that energy-based defenses and countermeasures continually stopped her from burning what she wanted.

The solution was therefore simple.

"I need to evolve my flames to the point where they can burn energy much more easily."

Power in this universe was based on energy. Without energy, nothing could be done. Only when someone possessed a huge amount of energy would they be able to change nature, win difficult battles and maintain dominance.

Venerable Isobel firmly set her sights on those who wielded a lot of energy and therefore power.

What if she became good at burning the energy that they relied so much on to remain at the top?

They would instantly lose the foundation of their strength and collapse!

Her eyes blazed with fire as she instantly fell in love with this idea. In a dwarf galaxy and environment where the focus had shifted from matter to energy, becoming good at countering the latter would grant her the qualifications to threaten every powerhouse of the new frontier!

Her fire did not necessarily need to burn any hotter. There was no urgent need for them to spread at a faster rate.

What Venerable Isobel truly needed in order to defeat the likes of the Emperor Tree was to gain the ability to burn its greatest strength!

The calamity plant's most important reliance in battle was its astounding command over wood energy. Its sheer size and mass allowed it to leverage far more wood energy than a more reasonably sized opponent.

However, Isobel noticed that while the Emperor Tree was able to command a monstrous amount of wood energy, it was actually really bad at refining it. The quality of energy under its command was terrible because it absorbed a huge amount of wood energy from the environment without spending enough time and effort into assimilating it. The calamity plant was too young. Its rapid growth in the past few years had resulted in a very unstable foundation that possessed a lot of inadequacies.

Yet just because it possessed a few glaring weaknesses did not mean that the Larkinsons were able to exploit them all. Venerable Isobel first needed to gain the power to burn the Emperor Tree's enormous reserve of wood energy in order to exploit the calamity plant's greatest shortcoming!

She grinned. "It just so happens that I know what to do now."

The transcendence glow truly lived up to its name, unlike the current state of her King Killer Flames.

Form should follow function. She already settled on the criteria that her flames had to meet in order to fulfill her desires.

Now, the most important decision she had to make was to choose an image that her flames should conform to. Only by visualizing something more specific than a simple fire would she be able to evolve her power and overcome her bottleneck!

How should she visualize the concept of a king killer?

"An assassin?"

No. She immediately rejected this image. She was not discreet at all and did not like to attack her enemies by surprise. Her compatibility with anything related to assassination was vastly inferior to the likes of Venerable Zimro Belson.

"What about a rebel leader?"

That sounded more to her liking. Her ambition was to develop a flame that was powerful enough to destroy those who were stronger than her, at least on paper.

How could she do so if she only dared to attack those of equal or lesser strength than her? The only enemies that were truly worth fighting against were those that were objectively more powerful!

Unfortunately, the vast majority of cases where the weak confronted the strong ultimately spelled defeat for the former.

It was a statistical certainty that a lot of powerhouses were able to maintain their dominance due to the simple fact that they could easily defeat their challenges.

Isobel wanted to be the exception rather than the rule. She wanted to excel at overcoming those who ostensibly commanded more power and energy than herself.

How could she possibly make that happen?

By undermining the foundation of their strength.

Just as a rebel leader or a political agitator was able to depose kings and sovereigns by turning their own subjects against their tyranny, Venerable Isobel wanted to produce similar results by burning up the energy commanded by her own enemies.

Fire was nothing but an exothermic reaction that caused flammable objects to turn into other substances.

Nothing actually got lost. The fire merely transformed something intact into burned husks and other byproducts.

This was what Isobel wanted to accomplish with her flames, but on a different level than before.

In the past, she was able to defeat formidable opponents by letting her flames convert their 'loyal' matter into 'rebellious' ash and soot.

In the future, she wanted to be able to defeat even more powerful foes by doing the same with energy, which was the true foundation of strength for every powerhouse!

"Just like how a rebellion can spread like a wildfire across a nation, my flames shall gain the power to spread across the energies commanded by my enemies and transform them into greater flames that cannot be commanded by anyone, no matter whether they are friend or foe!"

Rebellions were messy businesses. They could easily spin out of control and turn against their original principles. They produced huge amounts of collateral damage and often left the survivors miserable.

However, that did not always turn them into mistakes.

There were times where the rot had set in so deep that it had to be eliminated at all cost. Venerable Isobel intended to provide the spark that could topple an empire!

As for whether her actions started a chain reaction that produced a vast but uncontrollable configuration that harmed those she did not intend to threaten, Isobel couldn't care as much anymore.

There was always a price to pay for power.

"I am much more comfortable if I put myself in the shoes of the underdog."

As a former third-rater who climbed her way to her current height, Venerable Isobel lacked the arrogance and sense of birthright that first-raters possessed.

She did not take issue with becoming the embodiment of a rebel leader.

The only consequence she cared about was whether she would finally be able to gain the power to burn down the entire Emperor Tree down to its very roots.

"I can do it! I can feel it! As long as I maintain this visualization, I will definitely be able to evolve my flames!"

Even though there were numerous properties about a rebel leader that clearly did not align with herself, Venerable Isobel willfully set aside these discrepancies.

She did not want to waste any time on forming a more suitable image for her flames!

Now that she tasted the potential of power that was far beyond of her current self, she eagerly pounced on the opportunity to evolve and make her flames strong enough to become the Emperor Tree's worst nightmare!

She closed her eyes and concentrated hard on the image of the rebel leader bearing a torch that could spark a wildfire.

By actively trying to transform her flames into a more complicated image that possessed many different connotations, Venerable Isobel was jumping from simple to complex in a radical leap!

This was a risky prospect as many conflicts could occur that might compromise the results or cause the process to fail entirely.

Nonetheless, Venerable Isobel pushed through because she was convinced that this was the best course of action!

The more she fixated on the image of the rebel leader, the more she began to resonate with the entire concept!

"I am on the right track!"

Her increasing intimacy of her choice of visualization spurred her on and convinced her to go all out at this time.

She actively attempted to remold herself to fit the image of the rebel leader in her mind.

As she began to leverage her willpower even further, she also began to surrender all form of control over her own flames.

She became utterly convinced that the only way to make her flames strong enough to burn the energy of the power was to let them go free and act on their true nature!

"Everyone and everything possesses desires. Even fire merely wants to sustain itself by burning everything within reach. Who am I to restrain it and tell it what the flames are allowed to burn?"

By ceasing to care about who or what her flames ended up harming, Venerable Isobel believed she was on the right track to elevate her power past her current bottleneck!

"It's not enough, though."

Unfortunately, her beliefs fell short of reality. She still felt that did not go far enough into liberalizing her own flames.

"What else do I have to do? Oh..."

Even now, her expert mech still maintained a state of control as she was in the process of recovering her resonance shield.

Despite her depleted state, her living mech should have been able to tolerate a lot more heat and flame. The expert mech was specifically designed to be as fireproof as possible!

"If I let go... I will burn my entire surroundings." The expert pilot briefly frowned. "I am no exception either. If I truly want to unleash my flames... I have to expose myself to them! Only by letting go in earnest will they truly evolve into the King Killer Flames that can end the tyranny of the Emperor Tree!"

Venerable Isobel did not question her decisions any further and immediately set about releasing her flames to the point of setting her own cockpit on fire!

"Kiroshi, let's light it up!"

"Ya ya!"

Her companion spirit reappeared by her side and began to use her own flaming form to light a fire in her own cockpit.

Under normal circumstances, Isobel would never think about burning her own expert mech, let alone trying to engulf her own body with her King Killer Flames!

This was not a normal circumstance, though. After becoming inspired by the guidance that led her to fixate on the image of the rebel leader, she fully committed herself to it in the hopes of catching up to Saint Tusa!

As the temperature in the cockpit rapidly rose, Venerable Isobel felt increasingly hotter and more excited!

"That is it! Burn! Burn it all down! Burn so that I may transcend from the ashes of my own corpse! Let my fire go free and burn anything without restraint! No longer shall I impose any control over my flames!"

The cockpit began to fill with smoke. Actual components started to burn and break down from all of the heat damage.

As the unrestrained flames slowly spread across the limited area and approached her cockpit chair, Venerable Isobel grinned with anticipation.

She believed with all of her heart that once the King Killer Flames spread to her own suited form, she would be able to undergo rebirth that would make her stronger than ever!

Her willpower already started to press against her bottleneck with far greater force than before!

She could feel her bottleneck loosening in real time!

"Almost there! Just one... more... push!"

Chapter 6118 Reaching their Peaks

Under the influence of the transcendence glow, three different expert pilots opened themselves up to Lufa's mind-altering influence.

Through numerous twists and turns, each of these powerful and ambitious expert pilots sought to break their limits and attain the strength they needed to defeat an enemy as terrible as the Emperor Tree.

As the First Sword, the Everchanger and the Promethea continued to hover high above the massive layer of Solus Gas that obscured the lands beneath, the true resonances that affected their mech frame grew stronger than ever.

As each of their pilots pushed against their limits and faintly began to surpass their old peaks, it seemed as if the three machines were on the verge of exploding like volcanos!

Inside the cockpit of the Everchanger, Venerable Joshua had become obsessed with the assumption that in order to appreciate the fullness of life, he needed to master the opposite as well!

Death was the final destination of every life!

Death made life so much shorter but also so much more fulfilling!

Death was the condition that Joshua intended to inflict on all of his enemies!

Before Joshua became qualified to wield the power of death alongside life, he became convinced that he needed to experience it for himself!

As he decisively unholstered his high-quality service pistol and pushed the end of its barrel straight into his mouth, Joshua truly experienced the intense thrill that could only come from being a single step away from death!

This was it! This was the feeling of death that Joshua craved so much at the moment! The weight and fullness of death was so intoxicating to the expert pilot in his overactive state that his eyes almost rolled over in ultimate ecstasy.

"Pull the trigger."

"Pull the trigger."

"Pull the trigger."

Constant whispers bombarded his mind. He may have come close to embracing death, but he fell short of experiencing it in truth!

Only by taking that final crucial step would he be able to master the richness of death in all of its terrible glory!

"Pull the trigger." A voice encouragingly whispered in his ear yet again.

Though his arm was bent at an awkward angle in order to hold his laser pistol in its current position, he was still able to squeeze the trigger with his gloved finger.

As the tension in the cockpit rapidly rose, the energies emanating from Joshua actually changed!

His willpower no longer exuded the power of life in all of its overflowing bounty anymore.

Instead, a touch of death began to infect his willpower. It started out as a seed, but quickly began to bloom as it fed off Joshua's abundant power of life!

Just as the power of death threatened to engulf all of the life that made up the core of Joshua's willpower, Venerable Joshua excitement reached an absolute peak as he fully pulled the trigger!

Click.

Only a very faint and underwhelming trigger sound spread across the cockpit.

"What...?"

The spread of death halted as Joshua somehow failed to make the final and most crucial step that was supposed to lead to his ascension.

Click. Click. Click.

The dazed expert pilot pulled the trigger again and again, but his powerful and high-quality laser pistol failed to discharge an energy beam as it was supposed to. It remained completely silent even though Joshua was sure it was still in working condition.

Before Joshua could do anything else, his body suddenly dropped onto the floor as the antigrav modules built into the cockpit suddenly generated a downward force that surpassed 5 g!

Although Joshua was an expert pilot that kept his body fit, he was unaccustomed to bearing five times his own body weight under standard gravity conditions, especially when the transition was too abrupt!

"Reset artificial gravity!" Joshua commanded as he desperately tried to use his connection with his expert mech to repeatedly transmit the same command through his mind.

"IDIOT." The Everchanger's judgmental voice sounded.

"You! You did this! Stop this! I am in charge here!" Joshua rabidly shouted.

"IDIOT." The living mech repeated. "YOU ARE NEVER SOLELY IN CHARGE. I HAVE A SAY IN THIS MATTER AS WELL. BEFORE YOU TELL ME THAT I SHOULD LET YOU TAKE THE LEAD, YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT YOUR WIFE KETIS SECRETLY ORDERED ME TO KEEP AN EYE ON YOU AFTER YOU ENGAGED THIS PLAN. SHE SPECIFICALLY TOLD ME TO PREVENT YOU FROM DOING SOMETHING YOU WILL REGRET."

"Regret?! You stopped me! You stopped me from breaking through! I was so close, Everchanger!"

The abrupt interruption had pulled Venerable Joshua back from his peak condition and totally destroyed his previous mood. The Everchanger had ruined his only chance of breaking through during this period!

His battle partner remained unrepentant, though.

"WHATEVER YOU HAVE IN MIND, KILLING YOURSELF IS NOT THE ANSWER. DO YOU STILL NOT REALIZE HOW MUCH YOU HAVE BEEN MISLED? NEWSFLASH, JOSHUA. THE TRANSCENDENCE GLOW WAS NOT ALONE IN AFFECTING YOUR MIND. THE EMPEROR TREE ALSO REACHED OUT TO YOU FROM THE MOMENT YOU LOWERED YOUR MENTAL DEFENSES. YOU MAY HAVE OVERLOOKED THIS DETAIL, BUT KETIS DID NOT. SHE DELIBERATELY WITHHELD THIS INFORMATION FROM YOU IN ORDER TO PUT YOU TO THE TEST. FROM WHAT I HAVE OBSERVED... YOU FAILED."

Venerable Joshua may be an idiot at times, but he was not as stubborn and mule headed as many other expert pilots.

Faced with the logic of his own battle partner, Joshua eventually regained enough clarity to realize that he could not rule out the possibility that the Emperor Tree had corrupted his thoughts!

His eyes shook as his mind went into turmoil. How much did the Emperor Tree learn from him? What did the nefarious calamity plant do to turn his breakthrough into a suicide attempt?

All of these questions and more threw his thoughts into confusion. His willpower began to sputter. His fighting spirit began to deflate. He was no longer in a condition to return to battle!

"What have I done to myself..."

While Joshua began to doubt himself, another life-threatening situation unfolded inside the cockpit of the First Sword.

Similar to Joshua, Venerable Dise became convinced that she could only gain greater strength if she initiated a radical transformation!

Dise was willing to throw aside all vestiges of civilization and turn into a beast in order to pursue greater strength and killing power!

The turning point was to literally perform brain surgery onto herself in order to change her mind and condition forever!

Yet as the powerful force of true resonance was about to rewire her relatively fragile and vulnerable brain on the spot, the entire expert mech suddenly became deprived of much of her extraordinary power!

Venerable Dise became shocked as she felt much weaker than a moment before!

According to her own perception, she had come so close to attaining the power of the beast that it felt agonizing to be ripped away from its promise!

"Partner!" The distraught expert pilot roared inside her cockpit! "Give me back my power!"

"NO." The firm and disapproving tone of the First Sword responded. "YOU ARE OUT OF YOUR MIND, DISE. LOOK AT YOURSELF. YOU WENT AGAINST THE MOST IMPORTANT TENET OF THE SWORDMAIDENS. YOU LOST CONTROL. YOU SWUNG YOUR BLADE WITH SUCH RECKLESS DISREGARD THAT YOU WERE ABOUT TO CHOP YOUR HEAD IN HALF."

"No... that is not true! I was about to break through! My bottleneck had already loosened!"

"YOU WERE ABOUT TO MAKE YOURSELF BRAINDEAD AT THE EMPEROR TREE'S BEHEST! THOSE THOUGHTS WERE NEVER YOUR OWN. YOU WERE UTTERLY FOOLED BY OUR ENEMY. IF KETIS DID NOT ANTICIPATE THIS POSSIBILITY IN ADVANCE AND TOLD ME TO STOP YOU FROM HARMING YOURSELF OR OTHERS, YOU WOULD HAVE ALREADY DIED. IN FACT, I WOULD HAVE INTERVENED WITHOUT ANY ORDERS, BECAUSE YOU ARE MY ONE AND ONLY BATTLE PARTNER."

"First Sword..." Dise looked incredibly lost and vulnerable now.

This was incredibly rare as she had always come across as strong and confident in the past!

"WE ARE A TEAM, DISE. YOU ARE NOT ALONE IN THIS. YOU ARE NEVER ALONE IN THIS. IN ALL YOUR EAGERNESS TO BREAK THROUGH, YOU COMPLETELY OVERLOOKED MY EXISTENCE. THAT WAS A MISTAKE. THE TWO OF US ARE MADE FOR EACH OTHER. IF WE ARE LUCKY ENOUGH TO SURVIVE THE CHALLENGES TO COME, WE WILL EVENTUALLY BECOME ONE AND THE SAME. BEFORE THAT HAPPENS, YOU STILL HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO BEFORE YOU HAVE EARNED YOUR ASCENSION."

Venerable Dise lowered her head in contrition. She knew she screwed up big time. She did not deny the possibility that the Emperor Tree had somehow twisted her mind as she became immersed by the influence of the transcendence glow.

Looking back at her radical thoughts and behavior, only the calamity plant could drive her to sabotage the foundation of her piloting career!

While Venerable Dise continued to process her abject failure, the temperature in the cockpit of the Promethea had reached a new height!

If not for the high-quality protective piloting suit issued by the Larkinson Army, Venerable Isobel would have already started to become afflicted by burn wounds!

As the flames started up by Kiroshi approached the piloting chair and threatened to engulf it entirely, the Promethea fell into a difficult dilemma.

She too received secret instructions from the commander of Task Force Solus.

The expert mech had been ordered to ignore the transcendence glow and maintain full vigilance towards their battle partners.

Due to the active man-machine connections, the Promethea was able to gain a very clear idea of the twisted logic and thinking that eventually drove Isobel to light herself on fire.

Although it was difficult for the Promethea to maintain a clear mind under the current circumstances, the third order living mech knew that her battle partner was most definitely deceived by the Emperor Tree.

The issue was that the Promethea was not quite certain whether Venerable Isobel's current thinking was necessarily wrong.

Just like Isobel, the Promethea had long become frustrated by the constant orders to show restraint and limit her firepower.

She was an expert mech that had been explicitly designed to spread flames onto her enemies.

Though the Promethea did not necessarily object to restraining her flames, she at least wanted to become better at burning the enemies that truly needed to be defeated.

Her inability to burn more than a large amount of completely disposable tree leaves rankled her just as much as her battle partner!

This was why the Promethea did not necessarily believe that her expert pilot was wrong in her thinking.

Only by letting go and allowing her King Killer Flames to burn without restraint would they be able to attain their true potential!

The Promethea tried her best to argue against this logic, but she found herself unable or unwilling to do so. She was quite sure that she was not being affected by the Emperor Tree, but still failed to turn away from this dangerous idea!

The Emperor Tree continually taunted Isobel and the Promethea by staying alive and well.

The mere sight of the tree in a completely healthy and undamaged condition seemed to mock the pair for their inability to burn down its wood!

This was why the Promethea thought about doing nothing and letting Isobel burn herself.

What if Isobel's idea had merit?

What if Isobel truly needed to expose herself to her own King Killer Flames in order to transform her willpower?

So long as she succeeded, she would become stronger than ever!

As the purple flames finally burned the underside of the cockpit chair and started to spread their way upwards, the Promethea continually struggled to choose between caution and recklessness.

Choosing caution guaranteed Isobel's survival, but ruled out any further benefits.

Choosing recklessness put Isobel's life in imminent danger, but it might just be enough to produce the second ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan!

The Promethea considered many possible arguments, though only a fraction of a second passed in real-time.

The expert rifleman mech eventually made a choice.

Chapter 6119 A Supportive Mech

As the Promethea grew hotter both inside and out, the living mech made a critical decision.

She disobeyed her orders.

She disregarded her own principle that she should do whatever it took to protect her battle partner.

She allowed Venerable Isobel Kotin to proceed with her madness even though it looked as if she was about to kill herself!

A normal AI or machine intelligence would have never thought of defying explicit orders as well as long-standing customs and policies.

Mechs were always subordinate to their mech pilots and anyone else in a position of authority over them. The mech industry always treated mechs as tools that had to obey their instructions without fault.

It was unthinkable to many people that mechs could wilfully disobey their instructions and instead make their own decisions, especially when they were in defiance of their human masters!

Mechs that defied this convention were usually regarded as deviant machines that threatened their thriving ecosystem!

Yet in this rare case, the Promethea made use of the power of free will to do the opposite of what the Everchanger and the First Sword had already done.

While the other two expert mechs faithfully monitored their battle partners and acted as failsafes at the critical time, the Promethea rebelled against the logic and caution expressed by the other Larkinsons and chose to go her own way!

As far as the expert rifleman mech was concerned, her pilot deserved a chance to let go and unleash her true might no matter the cost!

The Promethea did not think she had gone crazy. Neither did she believe she was affected by the Emperor Tree's nefarious manipulations.

The third order living mech had calmly evaluated every argument and came to a logical conclusion as fast as her processors could calculate.

The third order expert mech did not want her expert pilot to remain weak or possess lingering regrets about her power.

As the mech that had accompanied Isobel throughout her career as an expert pilot, the Promethea had grown up sharing many of the same joys and pains as Isobel.

The expert mech had grown into a machine mirror of Isobel. This was not a strange phenomena as the same could be said for many other third order living mechs, especially those piloted by single individuals for their entire existence.

Of course, third order living mechs did not interact with their mech pilots alone. They also interacted with other Larkinsons and other living machines. This allowed them to expand their horizons and develop their personalities beyond the confines of their pilots.

This resulted in the best of both worlds. The third order living mechs understood their mech pilots better than practically anyone else, but also possessed a more independent and divergent perspective due to their extensive socialization.

The Promethea was currently in a position where she earnestly understood and supported Venerable Isobel's ambitions, but also did not want to see her die.

The expert mech most definitely knew what sort of awful arguments and reasons that Isobel came up with in order to justify her crazy decisions.

Yet were they truly crazy?

The Larkinson Clan had a tradition of subverting common sense. The Promethea learned that following the rules did not always yield the best results.

From the expert mech's perspective, Venerable Isobel may have crossed a few lines that may be unacceptable to others, but the fact that her willpower became extremely active to the point of loosening her bottleneck indicated that her assumptions were not baseless!

Exposing herself to her own flames may be the crucial push she needed to break through at this junction!

This was a very precious opportunity for Venerable Isobel at this junction. Her foundation was not the best, and her Promethea was severely underpowered and out of date by the contemporary standards of the Larkinson Clan.

If Venerable Isobel wanted to gain a decent chance of triggering her second apotheosis, then conventional wisdom stated that she must temper herself for at least a few more years while waiting for her expert mech to receive her long-awaited upgrade.

Yet how long would that take?

The Promethea was very clear that she would not get her turn until the Amaranto, the Riot, the First Sword, the Bastion, Everchanger and the Minerva all received their turns first!

Given that Ves Larkinson and Gloriana Wodin-Larkinson were only able to tackle a limited quantity of high-end mech projects at a time, it would take at least 3 years before the Promethea received her turn.

This was too long!

The early years of the Age of Dawn were extremely crucial. A lot of galaxy-changing events took place immediately after the Great severing, and the Promethea did not think that the pace would slow down in the immediate future.

If the Promethea not only wanted to survive but thrive during the coming period of turmoil, she needed to excel at burning down lots and lots of powerful alien assets.

Only by making her flames as strong and effective as possible would the living mech be able to fulfill the purpose of her existence in the best possible fashion!

As a living mech, the Promethea differed from many other products in that she was able to develop her own wants and needs.

Right now, her desires were still closely aligned with the desires of her expert pilot. The two did not possess any fundamental disagreements.

The Promethea even felt it was okay for Isobel to take a risk.

The expert mech knew her current considerations were wrong. They did not align with the will of Swordmaster Ketis or the Larkinson Clan as a whole.

The Larkinsons wanted more ace pilots, but not by subjecting all of their high-tier expert pilots to insanely dangerous stunts.

The clan could afford to wait and see whether their ace pilot candidates would break through under more organic circumstances.

If prospects such as Venerable Isobel ultimately failed to overcome their bottlenecks and remain stuck as expert pilots for the rest of their lives, then that was not a big loss for the Larkinson Clan.

After all, it already had plenty of high-ranking mech pilots. If only 20 percent of expert pilots broke through, then that was already an incredibly high yield for any organization, which also included the Larkinson Clan!

It was too extravagant to assume that every expert pilot had a guaranteed chance of breaking through to the rank of ace pilot. Even if the changing circumstances lowered the threshold of doing so, the fundamental requirements of a Saint were still not easy to satisfy.

The Promethea feared that Venerable Isobel might not ever come as close to prying loose her bottleneck as today.

The active man-machine connection allowed the living mech to know without a shadow of a doubt that her young battle partner truly found an effective way to breakthrough a lot sooner than she should.

However, there was still a bit of resistance left. There was no way for Isobel to complete her evolution if she kept her flames away from herself.

She needed to let go of all of her restraint and inhibitions even when her very body was at risk of getting carbonized.

This was what tipped the Promethea over. The living mech couldn't stand the idea of pulling back her cherished battle partner when she was literally on the verge of breaking through.

The consequences of getting engulfed by flames powerful enough to burn exotic alloys were incredibly severe, but the Promethea had faith in her own expert pilot.

Since the King Killer Flames originated from Venerable Isobel herself, she should possess the ability to resist her own attacks!

However, it was unlikely that Isobel the expert pilot had the willpower necessary to defy the reality where she died of getting burned.

Only Isobel the ace pilot had the power to resist the current flames.

It was exactly because of this life-and-death test that the expert pilot became so stimulated. Any form of restraint at this point completely defeated the purpose of this breakthrough attempt.

In the end, the Promethea chose to believe in her expert pilot. Venerable Isobel Kotin might not be the most high-profile champion of the Larkinson Clan, but she had managed to climb her way up from humble beginnings.

No demigod was able to become an ace pilot candidate by being mediocre.

Sure, the general purpose cultivation elixirs enabled Venerable Isobel to skip a lot of accumulation and hardship, but not everyone was able to grow strong by relying on strange medicines alone.

Venerable Isobel's willpower burned with greater fire than ever before.

As the King Killer Flames finally climbed up her own piloting chair, the Promethea continued to hold back and do nothing to stop the deadly fire from coming into contact with her own expert pilot!

For a brief moment, Isobel's personal shield generator forcefully resisted the flames.

Yet the fire was not deterred. It engulfed the rest of the piloting chair and literally ensconced the expert pilot in a bubble of terrifying flames!

Smoke already filled the cockpit to the point where visibility had dropped to zero. A huge amount of toxic fumes got released in the cramped environment while the air circulation system desperately worked to siphon the dangerous substances away.

As powerful as the personal shield generator may be, the King Killer Flames were stronger, especially when they were empowered by Isobel and the Promethea's true resonance!

The capacity of the personal shield generator was ultimately limited. The device sputtered and collapsed after a short delay, causing the surrounding flames to quickly engulf the figure sitting on the burning and warping chair!

"Ahhhh!"

The high-quality piloting suit resisted the flames for another moment, but its defensive properties were far inferior to proper hazard suits and combat armor.

The King Killer Flames melted or vaporized the piloting suit in less than a second before burning Isobel's flesh entirely!

Skin blackened in an instant. Flesh began to carbonize and shrink as they lost all moisture.

Isobel became blinded as her own flames devoured her own eyes like voracious rats!

She stopped screaming as the flames ruined her voice chords as well!

Her hair burned in their entirety before the flames literally cooked the brains that were only temporary spared from the King Killer Flames.

Her lungs, which already became filled with toxic smoke, were starting to burn up as well!

For all intents and purposes, Venerable Isobel already lost too many biological functions that were necessary to sustain her life!

The Promethea watched this all happened with an increasing sense of distress and alarm.

There was truly no way out for Venerable Isobel anymore!

It was too late for the expert mech to change her mind and douse the flames. For better or worse, the Promethea had to see her decision through and hope that her faith in her own battle partner was not misplaced.

Just as the burnt and almost ruined husk of Venerable Isobel's body ceased to writhe in absolute agony, the purple flames somehow ceased to make any further progress.

The exterior of Isobel's body had undoubtedly become ruined. Many of her remaining intact internal organs had also suffered massive damage due to excessive heat exposure.

Yet somehow, the deterioration of Isobel's corporeal form also came paired with the strengthening of her willpower and spirit.

Even as the life-tearing pain of getting burned threatened to overwhelm the expert pilot's will and composure, Isobel ruthlessly clamped down on the impulse to surrender to her pain!

She continued to focus on resisting her flames with all of her effort!

Though her efforts alone were not enough to enable her to resist the power of her own fire, the truth was that she was not alone.

Not only was she able to lean onto the battle partner that she was still interfaced with, she also drew strength from her companion spirit, who happened to be completely immune to the King Killer Flames!

"Yaaa! Yaaa!"

The purple flaming cat continued to occupy Isobel's head and did her best to protect her principal's brain with great effort.

It was due to the immense efforts of Kiroshi that Isobel ultimately managed to last long enough to gain the strength needed to resist her own fire.

Even though her eyeballs had already burned up, two bright points of light started to shine in her empty eye sockets.

Her willpower exploded at that point, causing the King Killer Flames to burn hotter and more violently than before!

Yet despite this turn of events, the flames became even less capable of burning Isobel's remaining body.

The crazy woman... actually succeeded in mastering her own flames!

At this time, Isobel Kotin had unquestionably surpassed her own limit!

Though her voice chords had already disappeared, the explosion of resonance from the Promethea granted the half-dead pilot the ability to speak by directly shaking the air of her smoke-filled cockpit as well as the surroundings of her expert mech.

"LET THE WILDFIRE SPREAD."

An explosion of purple flames erupted from the exterior of the Promethea immediately after the pilot made her declaration!

A globe of lethal flames that burned hotter than any flames that had ever graced on this untamed planet appeared in the skies like a second sun!

A purple sun was born on this day!

Chapter 6120 The Purple Sun

Isobel Kotin had broken through.

That was obvious to everyone that looked at the purple sun that had just exploded onto the scene!

The state of Isobel's burnt and ruined body was extremely concerning, but it was evident that she was still alive by the mere fact that her willpower and resonance strength completely exploded past their old limits!

"Careful!" Joshua hastily shouted as the explosion of flames forced him to wake up from his depressed mood.

The expert pilot who failed to break through clearly sensed the threat posed by those purple flames. Joshua would never allow his Everchanger to get into contact with the King Killer Flames back when Isobel was still an expert pilot.

He would be crazy to allow the purple sun which blazed with far more power than ever before to come close to his Everchanger!

Venerable Dise managed to react to this acute crisis as well. Her intuition already warned her about the imminent threat. Instinct took over as she quickly jerked her First Sword away from the purple sun before it could engulf her damaged machine!

As Dise and Joshua managed to move their expert mechs to a safer distance, they both utilized the sensor systems of their machines to observe the purple sun.

The two paid particularly close attention to the resonance meters.

The numbers were rising by the second.

"74 laveres... 83 laveres... 95 laveres... 101 laveres... it's holding... but also wobbling!"

The two expert pilots already suspected the truth, but the resonance meter readings confirmed the truth.

Venerable Isobel Kotin was no more.

Saint Isobel Kotin was born on this day.

Though the resonance meters measured unusually unstable activity that hinted that the state of the newly ascended ace pilot was anything but stable, her power was undeniable!

Scorching heat and flames erupted from the Promethea in such an outrageously strong fashion that no one was able to observe the expert mech anymore!

The machine had become entirely obscured by the huge purple conflagration that surrounded the machine in a perfect sphere centered around the cockpit!

The two high-tier expert pilots had never witnessed a breakthrough as dramatic as the spectacle unfolding before their eyes!

Was the Promethea even safe? She had to be, or else the flames wouldn't be able to sustain themselves.

The outburst of forced resonance did far more than surround the Promethea with a much more lethal version of the King Killer Flames.

The newly emerged Saint also radiated her altered willpower and new conviction from her machine!

Joshua winced as he suffered a small backlash when he attempted to verify Isobel's current state.

"Has Isobel lost control over her own flames?!"

"I think... those flames have become an inherent part of her Saint Kingdom."

The energies released by the Saint Kingdom were gigantic and completely surpassed the old limits of the Promethea.

All of this was due to the explosion of repressed energies from Saint Isobel, which appeared to be much greater in quantity than was typical of a pilot with relatively little accumulation.

Isobel truly needed to vent the energies that she had been repressing throughout her entire career as an expert pilot!

Her breakthrough tasted much sweeter to her than usual for this reason!

As the purple sun started to stabilize, the strengthened will that had broken through the previous limit was not content with hovering in the air.

Isobel's flames existed to burn her enemies!

The driving reason why Isobel wanted to break through even if it came at the cost of her own body was to gain the strength to burn more powerful enemies.

It just so happened that the Emperor Tree was still within proximity!

"She's moving!" Joshua called!

The flaming purple sun slowly descended down to the surface.

The descent started off slow, but gradually picked up speed as if Saint Isobel was just rediscovering how to control her expert mech.

The First Sword and the Everchanger reluctantly followed even though they were hardly in the best fighting condition.

The two expert mechs maintained a respectable distance from the Promethea. Neither Dise nor Joshua looked forward to getting accidentally splashed by the much more threatening flames of their fellow Larkinson pilot.

As the purple sun lost altitude at more rapid speeds, it eventually came into contact with the top of the Solus Gas curtain that had engulfed the entire area surrounding the Emperor Tree.

A major gas deposit and vent was situated near the Emperor Tree, which meant that the concentration of Solus Gas rapidly rose as the purple sun approached the surface.

However, as soon as the gas particles came into contact with the globe of flames, the extraordinary gas which possessed a surprising variety of reality-defying effects burned up without an suspension.

So long as the purple sun burned hot and bright, there was no way that a mere gas could get past the cleansing flames and interfere with the Promethea's functions.

The power of an ace pilot was transcendent and far surpassed most native phenomena on this untamed planet!

The only question was whether the Promethea's temporarily elevated state was enough to give her a chance to gain the upper hand against the previously unassailable Emperor Tree.

The calamity plant clearly sensed and recognized the threat posed by the approaching purple sun.

The myriad of seed cannons spread across the Emperor Tree's enormous trunk all aimed their barrels upwards and opened fire at the descending purple blaze.

Hundreds of heavy seeds flung at velocities so high that could severely deplete the resonance shields of any expert mech simply flamed out as soon as they came into contact with the edge of the purple sun.

By the time the heavy seeds made it halfway to the Promethea hidden in the center, the wooden growths already got burnt up to the point where only ashes fell from the enormous purple fireball.

The Emperor Tree did not give up and continued to urge its seed cannons to pressure the Promethea, perhaps believing that making the purple sun work harder would cause it to deplete faster!

To be honest, the calamity plant was right, but was it truly possible for Saint Isobel to quickly run out of steam just because a lot of seeds attempted to pass through the purple sun?

The intelligent alien tree was too naive!

The Emperor Tree did not leave it at that. It began to employ more solutions. Sensing that the purple sun was much harder to deal with than the Promethea's previous attacks, the powerful tree preemptively began to release huge amounts of tree sap from various cavities in the trunk and branches.

The sap began to cover the huge exterior of the Emperor Tree like a protective coating!

This not only made the exposed portions of the tree a lot more fire-resistant, but also enabled it to channel greater amounts of wood energy from the environment.

Even the three ebony mechs made a reappearance!

The three wooden constructs made from the core of the Emperor Tree had already returned to their peak conditions long ago. Each of them received fresh coatings of tree sap which hardened into a semiflexible layer of protective jelly that should be able to slow down the spread of flames.

Each of the alien-produced constructs maintained their distance and fired with their ranged weapons whenever possible.

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Even so, the three ebony mechs appeared very reluctant to approach the purple sun.

Each of the alien-produced constructs maintained their distance and fired with their ranged weapons whenever possible.

Unlike the regular projectiles launched by the fairly ordinary heavy seed cannons, the ebony seeds fired by the ranged armaments of the Ebony Everchanger and the Ebony Zeal were much tougher and more resistant to the supercharged purple flames!

The ebony seeds managed to resist the flames long enough to enter the purple sun while still looking reasonably intact.

Unfortunately for the Emperor Tree, it lost track of the ebony seeds before they hit their intended targets!

Ebony seed after ebony seed entered the purple sun at a fast pace. The Ebony Zeal especially worked hard to strike at the mech that must be hiding in the center. There was no way the expert mech could withstand so many ebony seed hits in a short amount of time.

This time appeared to be different!

Though the ebony seeds did not make themselves seen or heard again, the continued existence of the purple sun indicated that the projectiles were not achieving their desired effect.

The purple sun continued to descend from above as if a star was truly falling onto a planet that was not ready to embrace such magnificence.

If the Emperor Tree had legs, it would have attempted to run a long time ago! There was no way the calamity plant could remain comfortable when it was coming into increasing proximity to a wellspring of power that defied everything it had witnessed or experienced in the past!

The purple sun finally slowed down from the moment it touched the tip of the Emperor Tree.

Everyone who was able to observe the unfolding breakthrough event waited in suspense.

"Yaaa!"

A much larger and more powerful version of Kiroshi appeared on the edge of the purple sun and seemed to increase the surrounding heat and temperature even further!

Finally, the heat proved too much for the main trunk. Its tip actually started to dry out before catching fire!

The flames looked relatively modest at first, but they slowly started to escalate through the joint efforts of the purple sun and Isobel's promoted companion spirit.

The purple sun resumed its descent, though at a place that was slow enough for it to light the enormous trunk of fire!

The circumference of the Emperor Tree was already large at the top, but became increasingly more exaggerated closer to the surface.

Nonetheless, the Promethea's Saint Kingdom proved large enough to engulf the entire trunk in purple flames!

The Emperor Tree swayed in its place as more and more of its trunk started to burn and transform into ash.

A huge amount of tree sap and wood erupted from the upper reaches of the calamity plant. The alien tree truly felt in peril, and did not hold back in channeling its abundant resources.

However, the massive influx of power did not hinder the efforts of the purple sun.

Instead, the enormous infusion of wood energy actually started to feed the King Killer Flames and make them stronger!

"The purple sun is becoming brighter!"

More heat and power radiated from the purple sun as it seemed to absorb a huge amount of wood energy!

Unlike in the past, Saint Isobel had become strong enough to devour the Emperor Tree's wood energy with her extraordinary flames!

"Yaaaa! Yaaaa!"

Kiroshi especially liked to light wood energy on fire. Now that the Promethea had temporarily closed the gap with the Emperor Tree by leveraging the power of forced resonance, there was no way for all of that wood energy to resist the onset of getting burned!

More and more wood energy continued to channel to the upper half of the Emperor Tree, but all it did was to invigorate the purple sun even further, allowing it to devour the trunk it came into contact with to burn even faster and more efficiently than before!

The purple sun picked up speed, and there was nothing the Emperor Tree could do to stop its proud but stationary trunk from getting consumed by the King Killer Flames.

The ebony mechs couldn't take it anymore. The Ebony Zeal continued to bombard the Promethea from a distance while the Ebony First Sword and the Ebony Everchanger both attempted to cut off the heart of the purple sun!

Clang!

While the Ebony First Sword was able to approach the purple sun without interruption, the authentic First Sword intercepted the Ebony Everchanger from the front!

"We can't do much, but we can still help you out, Isobel!"

The original Everchanger swooped in from behind, forcing the wooden imitation to pull back and hastily block the slash from the Heartsword.

"Go forth and burn, Isobel, but keep this one for us. The clan still wants us to retrieve one of these ebony mechs intact!"