

The Mech 6121

Chapter 6121 Burning Wood

The Larkinson Clan gained its second ace pilot.

Although the journey that Isobel took to smash through her bottleneck was highly unorthodox and fraught with far greater peril than usual, her strength was undeniable.

By forming a purple sun around her expert mech through the explosion of forced resonance, Saint Isobel Kotin gave the Larkinson Clan a short preview of how she wielded her power now that she had unlocked an entirely new tier of strength.

As the purple sun continued to burn the large and extremely tall main trunk of the Emperor Tree, it looked as if nothing could stop the Promethea in her supercharged state from completing her goal.

The tree clearly suffered from the overwhelming heat spread by the purple sun.

Any part of its trunk that came in direct contact with Saint Isobel's exaggaratingly energetic Saint Kingdom burned within seconds!

Nothing could stop the purple sun from devouring the tough and metal-reinforced wood from drying up before crumbling into ash.

What was worse for the Emperor Tree was that its wood actively fed the purple sun!

The Saint Kingdom behaved like a starved beast that eagerly inflated as it devoured more and more of its prey. The purple sun visibly glowed hotter until its violent flames started to look like a bright magenta star!

Not even the ebony mechs could do anything to stop the purple sun from devouring everything related to the calamity tree.

When the Ebony First Sword courageously charged into the purple sun, it disappeared without any fluctuations!

When the Ebony Zeal attempted to bombard the Promethea that was at the center of the purple sun, the ebony seeds accomplished nothing of note!

So much heat radiated from the increasingly more fed purple star that the previously untouched sections of the Emperor Tree also started to dry up and burst into flames!

More and more purple flames started to spread from the purple sun.

The Emperor Tree was clever enough to understand it was almost hopeless to stop the purple sun from burning its trunk.

However, the descent of the purple sun had slowed down. It would take minutes for the supercharged Promethea to reach the surface.

This gave the calamity plant a chance to survive this encounter, especially if it was smart and informed enough to know that Saint Isobel could only sustain this outburst of power for a relatively short amount of time!

The tree did not work to attain an immediate victory, but instead shifted its strategy in order to outlast its most threatening opponent.

The supply of tree sap and wood energy no longer reached the purple sun. The Emperor Tree had clearly written off the parts of the trunk that came into direct contact with the purple sun.

Instead of trying to do the impossible, the tree instead focused on transferring its resources to repair and maintain the health of the trunk below that point.

The overwhelming heat radiated by the purple sun no longer burned up the bark and wood lower down the length of the trunk.

The abundance of tree sap covering the vulnerable wood and the wood energy nurturing all of the organic matter successfully formed an improvised fire barrier that prevented the entire trunk from burning down at an accelerated pace!

If this went on, it truly looked as if the Emperor Tree would outlast the purple sun's attempt to kill the calamity plant before Saint Isobel ran out of steam!

Unfortunately for the target of the Promethea's ire, its thoughts were too simple.

Though it looked as if Saint Isobel had gone crazy to the point where she had lost all awareness, there was definitely at least one intelligence driving the current state of the Promethea.

Saint Isobel may have gained the sheer power necessary to burn the Emperor Tree to death, but her endurance was seriously in doubt!

Forced resonance never lasted long. Newly ascended ace pilots always required a period of adaptation and consolidation before they could truly exert the power of their rank. They also needed a proper ace mech that was fully configured and calibrated for their extraordinary willpower.

Right now, Saint Isobel's circumstances were undoubtedly worse than that of Saint Tusa.

Unlike the Dark Zephyr Mark III which was the most modern high-end mech that the best mech designers of the Larkinson Clan were able to develop and deliver in recent times, the Promethea was a much older product of the Phasewater Generation.

Combined with the fact that the Promethea was much more of a second-class expert mech rather than a quasi-first-class expert mech, the machine was overstraining her mech frame to a horrendous degree.

Forced resonance was never a gentle phenomena!

Any mech that was not designed to perform at a power level that surpassed the pilot's current rank would inevitably suffer!

It was not an unusual phenomenon for heavily abused mechs to break entirely after the forced resonance state had run its course!

Combined with Saint Isobel's terrible physical state, the foundation of the purple sun was surprisingly fragile and brittle!

Yet still, the power of the duo could not be underestimated while they remained in this forcefully elevated state.

Right in the center of the purple sun, the Promethea finally did more than radiate her Saint Kingdom like a destructive aura.

The Ignitron rifle, which Saint Isobel forcefully shielded from the ruinous heat of her own purple sun with the help of her own willpower, quickly started to accumulate energy while pointing downwards.

The Promethea was supposed to be a ranged mech. Saint Isobel finally chose to utilize her battle partner in accordance with her role.

The Emperor Tree sensed the sharp buildup of heat and power inside the purple sun. It quickly started to release a waterfall of tree sap, uncaring about depleting its reserves!

"My flames can not be stopped."

Saint Isobel put truth to these words as a purple resonance-empowered energy beam that surpassed all of the ones launched by the Ignitron rifle shot straight out the purple sun and soared straight downwards!

All of the Solus Gas particles, tree branches and leaves that got in the way spontaneously ignited in an instant before beginning to propagate more purple flames in every direction!

The Emperor Tree was past the point of caring about the condition of its branches and leaves. Multiple conflagrations of purple flames broke out and started to light multiple layers of the tree crown on fire!

If the Emperor Tree did not do anything to retard the King Killer Flames, they would most certainly devour the rest of the branches and leaves that stuck out of the main trunk.

Yet that was not the intent of the shot.

When the supercharged purple fire beam passed through the crown, it continued to surge downwards at the speed of light until it finally struck the enormous mass of roots that were sticking out from the surface!

What happened next was completely outside of the expectations of the observers.

Instead of bursting out a huge amount of King Killer Flames that devoured all of the nearby roots as if they were flammable tinder, the energy beam instead produced an enormous explosion that outright blasted apart the roots and even managed to produce a large hole in the side of the trunk!

The Alfari Corps Detonation Corps!

Saint Isobel's comprehension and mastery of the mysterious techniques bestowed by an enlightenment fruit had not improved upon her breakthrough.

However, there was a world of difference between the power of a high-tier expert pilot and an ace pilot.

In her current forced resonance state, the explosion produced by the combustion of all of the potential energy locked inside the energy beam was one if not two orders of magnitude more powerful than before!

The Promethea was not done with firing her luminar crystal rifle.

Soon, a second flaming purple energy beam shot out of the purple soon!

This time, the attack did not produce an immediate explosion.

Instead, it exploded into a firestorm from the moment it made contact with the crater of dirt, damaged roots and tree sap on the surface of the planet!

The Emperor Tree's massive trunk seemed to vibrate in pain. It immediately began to redirect massive amounts of tree sap to drown out the purple flames, knowing that if the King Killer Flames burned out the entire base of the trunk, there would be nothing left intact aside from its enormous root structure!

The mass and volume of the calamity plant was so gigantic in scale that it was easily able to dump a torrent of tree sap onto its burning roots.

Although the King Killer Flames had proven to be a lot more effective at burning the Emperor Tree than before, they were not omnipotent so long as they lacked the support of the Promethea's Saint Kingdom.

Yet just as the Emperor Tree was prepared to expend a lot of tree sap and other moisture to douse the threatening flames, a second source of fiery power emerged from the fire that had taken root at the base of the trunk!

"Yaaaaaaa!"

A much larger and more evolved version of Kiroshi had finally made a reappearance!

The cat's presence completely changed the dynamic of the flames. Not only was she able to extend Saint Isobel's powerful forced resonance away from the purple sun, but she was also able to nurture and encourage the spread of all of the surrounding fires!

"Yaaa! Yaaa! Yaaa!"

All of the tree sap that threatened to douse the King Killer Flames forcibly evaporated before all of the extraordinary liquid could do its job.

Much of the wood energy that the Emperor Tree attempted to leverage in an attempt to stifle the purple flames instead went on to feed them due to Kiroshi's empowerment!

The actions of the companion spirit that had promoted to the second major cultivation rank at the same time as Isobel's breakthrough completely threatened the survival of the Emperor Tree!

Two powerful sources of King Killer Flames soon began to operate in concert to fell the Emperor Tree as quickly as possible.

From above, the Promethea continued to leverage its absolutely powerful Saint Kingdom to devour the trunk from above.

From below, Kiroshi mainly focused on burning down the entire base to the point of amputating the enormous trunk from the even more gigantic root system!

Together, the two also sought to locate and burn down their adversary's most crucial tree heart.

So long as they managed to destroy the core of the massive calamity plant before the forced resonance state ran its course, the Emperor Tree would undoubtedly die!

Time was running out, though. The Promethea may be releasing so much energy that it was able to sustain an extremely powerful purple sun, but the sheer waste and inefficiency of producing such a spectacle added an enormous drain on Saint Isobel's limited accumulation.

Regardless of how coherent the newly ascended ace pilot was at the moment, she clearly understood the need for haste.

The purple sun started to pick up the pace and descend at a faster rate, even if it came at the cost of preserving the innermost layers of the trunk.

In the meantime, Kiroshi actively tried to burn her way to the very center of the massive root system. This was the most likely location of the critical tree heart.

If the Emperor Tree was more cunning than it appeared and successfully managed to displace its tree heart in a distant root, then it might be able to survive this ruinous ordeal!

This was unacceptable to the pilot who vowed to burn down the Emperor Tree through her own efforts.

"Where is your heart?!"

Saint Isobel decided to make a bet. She abandoned her current approach and rapidly instructed her straining Promethea to descend to the ground!

The purple sun reunited with Kiroshi and worked together to burn the wood that kept the massive trunk connected to the roots!

Even if Saint Isobel was not able to find and destroy the tree heart with this measure, she would undoubtedly be able to inflict crippling damage to the calamity plant!

"Yaaaaa!"

The purple sun burned hotter and with more direction after Kiroshi returned again. More and more wood outside of the range of the Saint Kingdom started to ignite and burn.

The Emperor Tree's massive trunk shook with increasing intensity as its base quickly lost stability!

Chapter 6122 The Sputtering Sun

The Emperor Tree was burning.

The sight was both beautiful and awe-inspiring to the Larkinsons.

The crown of the massive calamity plant became increasingly more engulfed in flames. Entire branches fell and collapsed even as they burned up themselves. An astronomical amount of leaves literally went up in smoke, causing the suffering tree to lose all of the sense of greenery it held before.

The King Killer Flames had spread so extensively across the tree's massive but vulnerable body that large amounts of Solus Gas got burned as well!

The high concentration of Solus Gas that normally surrounded the tree rapidly deteriorated as the flames did not let off the gas particles either. Nothing proved to be impervious to the hungry flames that were actively being driven by a newly ascended Saint who actively maintained an artistic conception that was purpose built to produce the most voracious of flames.

The burning tree formed the hottest and most spectacular backdrop for a much smaller and less energetic fight.

Compared to Saint Isobel's efforts to burn down the entire tree once and for all, Venerable Dise and Venerable Joshua both performed a lot more mutedly.

The First Sword and the Everchanger teamed up to disable and capture the Ebony Everchanger.

Although it was still difficult to fight against this powerful machine on an individual basis in their relatively exhausted states, the two expert pilots had a much easier time when they shamelessly ganged up on the champion wooden machine.

The fight was anything but honorable, but Dise and Joshua simply didn't care about such superfluous considerations anymore.

The mission took precedence. Both of them felt genuinely happy for Isobel's successful breakthrough, but they were also concerned that their promoted colleague could not sustain her amazing output of energy.

What if Saint Isobel emptied her reserves and the Promethea suddenly fell apart?

The two expert mechs had to move quickly in order to salvage as many gains as possible from this volatile battle situation.

In order to ensure that the Larkinson Clan secured additional gains besides another ace pilot, Venerable Dise and Venerable Joshua tried hard to beat the Ebony Everchanger to the point of submission.

This was easier said than done as the ebony machine was incredibly resilient. It continually absorbed wood energy from the environment to speed up its regeneration and return to perfect condition!

No matter whether the two expert mechs succeeded in chopping off the limbs or wrenching out the wooden sword and seed cannon from the ebony wooden constructs hands, the Ebony Everchanger would just grow out whatever it was missing in a matter of seconds!

It was as if the two Larkinsons were fighting against an especially obnoxious version of the Everchanger!

However, just because it was able to resist capture for a time did not mean that the ebony mech was invincible.

The fake Everchanger may be wielding two weapons at the same time like the real machine, but its skill in utilizing them in active combat was not good enough to fend off two opponents at the same time.

After a bit of struggle, Joshua finally came up with a containment strategy for the Ebony Everchanger.

"We can't keep fighting it like this! It will just absorb a lot of wood energy and return to peak condition again. If we want to disable this annoying ebony mech, we need to cut it off from the source of its energy. Let's push it away from the Emperor Tree. The further we move away from this location, the less wood energy the Ebony Everchanger is able to draw upon."

Dise easily understood this logic and agreed. "Good idea. Let us begin."

The two expert mechs changed their combat approach. They no longer focused on crippling the ebony mech, but instead utilized short charges to physically impart their momentum against their target.

The Ebony Everchanger may be strong and possess a lot of exceptional properties, but it was not able to withstand physical pushes from its two opponents!

The powerful ebony wooden construct helplessly began to move further and further away from the Emperor Tree. Each time it attempted to fly back to its origin, one of the two expert mechs would always be ready to halt its advance!

Eventually, the ebony mech crossed the red line, where the concentration of wood energy drastically dropped.

After all, Solus Gas was toxic to most organisms. Many plants could not survive continuous exposure to the substance. The Emperor Tree also took the initiative to eliminate any rival plants that somehow managed to occupy its territory after it had grown into its power.

The increased distance along with the scarcity of wood energy finally weakened the isolated ebony mech to the point where it no longer regenerated as quickly as before.

It had not lost the ability to regenerate entirely, but it took so much energy to regrow its resilient ebony wood that the enemy construct had lost its greatest advantage!

The First Sword and the Everchanger deftly disarmed the ebony mech and beat it up to the point where it had lost most of its functionality for the time being.

Before the Ebony Everchanger could restore its damaged wooden frame and resume its struggle, a large contingent of Larkinson melee mechs arrived from afar.

The Storm Swords and other melee mechs all threw out nets and wires that trapped and immobilized the valuable biological specimen.

Pacifiers equipped with fluid projectors began to spray the Ebony Everchanger with quick-hardening slime. The same solution used to immobilize mechs that had gone out of control soon began to encase the wooden construct.

The mech pilots of the law enforcement mechs made sure to spray an excess of slime in order to make sure the ebony mech had no chance of breaking out by relying on its own power.

Once a thick layer of slime had completely hardened around the Ebony Everchanger, over a dozen mechs began to lift up their latest prize by pulling up the wires that they had thrown earlier.

Soon enough, the procession of mechs began to fly straight back to Chimera Base at a cautious and completely synchronized pace.

"Do any of us need to accompany the Ebony Everchanger in case it breaks out somehow?" Venerable Joshua asked.

"No. We can take care of it. You and Dise should go back to the Emperor Tree." Ketis instructed from the cockpit of one of the Storm Swords. "I am afraid that Isobel's condition is anything but good. According to the Promethea's log transmissions, she has resorted to extreme measures in order to break through. When our new Saint crashes, which she inevitably will, you must do your utmost to catch her damaged mech and bring her back alive, is that understood?"

"What about the Emperor Tree?"

"It would be best if you can finish it off if Isobel hasn't managed to kill it outright. Do not sweat it if you can't do that. We will resort to orbital bombardment if we have no other choice. Under no circumstances will we allow the tree to survive past this day. It will definitely learn from this encounter and be more prepared to fight us back if it has a chance to live."

Resorting to orbital bombardment was a risky move. At worst, the calamity beasts of the untamed planet may be alarmed to the point where they joined forces to drive away the human presence that had encroached on their globe.

However, the benefit of having a second ace pilot far exceeded the losses suffered from a temporary setback in the Solus Gas harvesting operation.

"Understood." Joshua responded. "We will be heading back. Just take into account that neither of us are in good condition anymore. We won't be able to put up a good fight."

"By the way, see if you can take care of the Ebony Zeal as well. Capture it if you can, but destroy it if that is not possible. Try to preserve at least a few chunks of its ebony wood if you have to resort to the latter."

It turned out that this request had already become moot. When the First Sword and the Everchanger returned to the Emperor Tree, they both observed the burnt and ruined pieces of the Ebony Zeal resting on the ground.

The Promethea clearly blasted it to pieces before burning the vulnerable remains with its highly potent energy beams!

Venerable Joshua briefly grimaced. "Isobel rarely leaves anything intact once she goes on the attack. Now that she has become an ace pilot... this tendency has grown stronger."

Both expert pilots could feel Saint Isobel's desire and lack of restraint. She made no secret of the fact that she just wanted to burn everything without discrimination!

While she may still retain enough awareness to distinguish from friends and foe, neither expert pilot wanted to take the chance.

"She is beginning to sputter." Joshua observed. "Get ready. We may need to intervene sooner rather than later."

"I hope the Emperor Tree is dead by that time. It is counterattacking the Promethea with full force at the moment."

Now that the purple sun had descended to the point where it was attempting to burn apart the entire bottom side of the main trunk, the Emperor Tree truly went mad at this time!

None of the branches succeeded in doing anything aside from getting burned before breaking down into ashes.

The same went for the massive tree roots. As thick and heavy as they may be, when they attempted to slam into the Promethea, the roots rapidly dried out and became immersed in fiery heat as soon as they crossed into the Saint Kingdom.

Its largest, lowest and heaviest branches began to swing straight down in an attempt to slap the Promethea!

None of the branches succeeded in doing anything aside from getting burned before breaking down into ashes.

The same went for the massive tree roots. As thick and heavy as they may be, when they attempted to slam into the Promethea, the roots rapidly dried out and became immersed in fiery heat as soon as they crossed into the Saint Kingdom.

Even if the Promethea received a few kinetic blows, the expert mech in its forced resonance state was able to neutralize much of the force!

All of the Emperor Tree's desperate measures failed to slow down Saint Isobel's hunt for the heart of the massive plant.

Although the large amount of Solus Gas in the environment as well as embedded into the Emperor Tree prevented the newly promoted ace pilot from getting any easy clues, she personally guessed that she was heading in the right direction.

The tree was getting more and more desperate!

From trying to consume the power of the purple sun by dousing it with an excess of water and tree sap, to continually slamming one root after another into Isobel's Saint Kingdom, the Emperor Tree still hoped to win by attrition!

"Your fear betrays your vulnerability."

Just as she suspected, the Promethea eventually reached the center of the massive root system that was resting underground.

Once the purple sun reached this section that was unreachable for most mechs, the King Killer Flames began to get into contact with extremely resilient ebony wood that shared many of the same properties as the ebony mechs.

The purple sun exploded with power as Saint Isobel went all-out in an attempt to burn down the massive tree heart as quickly as possible!

The Promethea not only fired her Ignitron rifle as fast as she could pull the trigger, but the machine also unleashed Kiroshi so that the companion spirit could burn the other side of the massive tree heart!

Slowly, but steadily, the purple conflagration overcame the powerful resistance of the center of the Emperor Tree's power.

The massive calamity plant had run out of options. It still possessed a lot of power, but its heavy seed cannons, its branches, its roots and other defensive measures were completely unable to eliminate a small but powerful mobile combat asset.

The massive calamity plant had run out of options. It still possessed a lot of power, but its heavy seed cannons, its branches, its roots and other defensive measures were completely unable to eliminate a small but powerful mobile combat asset.

This was especially the case when Saint Isobel had finally become strong enough to negate the Emperor Tree's greatest advantage, which was its ability to regenerate by absorbing lots of energy!

By the time the purple sun finally began to dim before fading entirely, not a single piece of the tree core was left intact and unburnt.

Saint Isobel had run out of power from the moment she was able to confirm that she had definitively killed the heart of the tree.

The Promethea, which looked a lot more terrible than before, began to lose stability and fall.

"I've got you, Isobel!"

The Everchanger quickly swooped in to support the heavily damaged and partially broken machine.

Venerable Joshua panicked when she sensed Isobel's willpower and energy weakening at an extremely rapid rate.

The expert pilot even began to sense the specter of death looming inside the cockpit of the expert rifleman mech!

"Isobel? Isobel!"

Chapter 6123 The Expended Fuel

The Emperor Tree was dead.

At least, that was the presumption.

No Larkinson was willing to say for certain whether the tree was dead. Not when the bottom half of its massive trunk and its astronomically large root system still remained undamaged.

However, when Saint Isobel and the Promethea finally managed to burn the entirety of the tree heart that rested in the very center of the calamity plant, its remaining 'body' instantly lost activity.

Technically, the pieces of wood still remained 'alive', for a given definition of the word.

They just lost any visible sign of conscious direction. If the tree heart functioned as the Emperor Tree's brain, then the remainder of the massive tree had turned into the equivalent of the body of a brain dead patient.

The lack of direction from a central consciousness that was powerful enough to command such an enormous organism caused the enormous tree mass to become lost.

The branches, at least those that had not yet collapsed from the purple flames that were still devouring it, no longer tried to repel the human mechs.

The seed cannons had all fallen silent, no longer posing a threat to any mechs that they were able to target.

The roots had collapsed onto the ground like the tentacles of a dead octopus and showed no signs of any conscious life.

Perhaps it may still be able to function as a biologically viable plant life, but it would never be able to wield the power that the Emperor Tree had once demonstrated!

Although the Larkinsons still needed to conduct extensive checks in order to verify that the Emperor Tree truly lost the ability to make a comeback, either at this site or hundreds of kilometers away, the battle against the Emperor Tree had pretty much come to an end.

Yet even as the Larkinsons tentatively concluded that it was over for the Emperor Tree, Venerable Dise and Venerable Joshua expressed increasing concern about Isobel's state!

It was difficult to understand Isobel's present condition as the mech was thrashed from both inside and out. The forced resonance acting upon the machine had caused the mech frame to endure such excessive heat and other sources of pressure that many of its parts were no longer intact!

Entire components cracked into pieces while others had gotten burned.

If not for the fact that Saint Isobel's massively strengthened willpower granted her machine inherent resistance against the King Killer Flames, the expert mech shouldn't have been able to survive what had previously come to pass!

Still, a heavily damaged and crippled mech was a pretty decent outcome compared to the alternatives.

What truly mattered was whether the ace pilot inside the cockpit managed to survive the ordeal. Venerable Joshua had justifiable concerns about the current state of the new ace pilot.

As his Everchanger propped up the inert and damaged Promethea with difficulty, Joshua became increasingly more distressed when he began to sense the coming of death towards the weakening source of willpower inside the cockpit.

As an expert pilot that had recently tried to embrace death in all of its terrible finality, Joshua most definitely recognized its presence.

It did not take long for him to connect the dots!

"Isobel! If you don't respond right away, I will tear you from the cockpit and render any aid I can!"

Joshua did not even bother to pause before he decided to take action. Though he was unable to get a clear image of what went on inside the cockpit, what little he was able to determine already told him that time was of the essence.

In fact, as his Everchanger carefully utilized his sharp Heartsword to pry away the damaged chest plates and dig into the cockpit, Joshua sensed that Saint Isobel's once-powerful willpower had dipped far below the point when she was still an expert pilot!

This was so alarming that the Everchanger threw caution to the wind and began to create a rough and hasty incision that directly breached the front side of the cockpit!

"Isobel!"

A spotlight shone from the third eye of the Everchanger.

The light revealed a sight that almost stopped Joshua's heart.

Isobel's body... was utterly ruined.

Joshua became reminded by the sight of soldiers who got killed by getting burned.

It was obvious that a fire had erupted inside the cockpit. This fire completely engulfed the tiny space and burned out all of the consoles and even the chair that seated Isobel!

As for the pilot herself, not a single piece of her piloting suit was left intact. Even her helmet had Half-burned and half-melted onto her skull!

The flames that had devoured her body had practically carbonized all of her limbs. Isobel's forearms and forelegs had pretty much disappeared into ash, leaving only blackened stumps behind.

Large holes had formed in her torso. Not a single piece of skin was left intact. The cavity which held her organs largely resembled the interior of a house where a fire broke out. Many organs were simply gone. Only a few charred and blackened pieces were left that could be vaguely associated with specific organs.

As for Isobel's head... the material of her helmet obscured large parts of her head, but it had most definitely not managed to withstand the flames that devoured the rest of her body. Her teeth became visible because there were no lips left to hide them anymore. The eye sockets looked distressingly empty and entire pieces of blackened bone remained visible.

Anyone who witnessed this terrible sight would have no choice but to conclude that whoever this body belonged to had unquestionably died!

"ISOBEEELL!"

Yet just as Joshua began to sob, he suddenly heard a familiar feline cry.

"Ya..."

A much fainter and more diminished version of Isobel's companion spirit weakly emerged from Isobel's skull.

Compared to her previous state where she had become larger than a tiger and wielded the power of a halfgod, the current state of Kiroshi was extremely tragic!

However, Joshua did not feel saddened about Kiroshi's loss of strength at all. He keenly recognized that the companion spirit was still alive at this time!

"Kiroshi! You're alive! What... what about Isobel?!"

"Yaaaa..."

The companion spirit looked sad as she pressed her front paws on top of Isobel's terrible looking skull.

Though Isobel's body appeared completely dead, when the Everchanger conducted a deep scan of the supposed carcass, the sensor systems immediately noticed a very obvious discrepancy!

Isobel's brain, which was obscured by her skull, remained intact!

Its condition was incredibly good compared to the rest of her body!

This was clearly an unnatural condition as the brain should never have been able to resist the flames that consumed Isobel's body under normal circumstances.

Joshua instantly concluded that Isobel had put great care and effort into preserving the only organ that truly mattered!

What also granted him a bit of hope was that portions of her spine also remained in bad but relatively intact condition. This was important as both the brain and the spine of a human formed the central nervous system.

Joshua knew that so long as the central nervous system of a human remained relatively intact, it was still possible to salvage that person's life!

Now that he was paying closer attention, Joshua could actually feel a semblance of Isobel's willpower inside the brain.

The extraordinary willpower of an ace pilot, even a new one, was far more powerful and resilient than anything an ordinary mortal could produce.

Even when the body of a Saint was almost ruined, as long as Isobel's willpower remained intact, there was still a chance to salvage her life!

Unfortunately, that chance was dwindling by the second because the brain and spine were not able to sustain their health under these terrible circumstances!

Without the oxygen absorbed by the lungs and the heart that pumped blood into the brains and spine, there was no way to keep the valuable brain tissue oxygenated and in working condition.

"KETIS!" The distressed expert pilot immediately called over the command channel. "SEND OVER A MEDICAL SHUTTLE RIGHT AWAY! ISOBEL NEEDS URGENT CARE!"

A few shuttles responsible for retrieving ejected mech pilots from the battlefield had already started to race towards the fallen Emperor Tree, but it would take precious time for them to arrive besides the crippled Promethea.

By then, it would be too late! The Everchanger made a suggestion.

"DID YOU FORGET WHAT WE WERE GOOD AT? IF THE MEDICS CANNOT ARRIVE IN TIME, WE MUST STEP UP AND DO WHAT WE CAN."

"But... we never did anything like this before. I don't have the slightest clue on how to keep Isobel's brain alive!"

"LET YOUR WILLPOWER DO THE WORK. YOUR ONLY JOB IS TO MUSTER UP THE STRONGEST POSSIBLE DESIRE TO SAVE ISOBEL'S LIFE. THIS IS THE SECOND ACE PILOT OF THE LARKINSON CLAN. WE LITERALLY CANNOT AFFORD TO FAIL."

Venerable Joshua grew serious. His living mech was right! Even if he had doubts whether he could save Isobel's life when her body had fallen in such a terrible state, he owed it to her and the clan to save her life!

"Help me, battle partner!"

The expert pilot and expert mech became of one mind as they carefully leveraged their true resonance to infuse vitality into Isobel's corpse.

The burnt corpse remained unresponsive. Death had already claimed it with so much totality that there was no chance of reviving them anymore!

However, Joshua gradually regained a bit of hope when he noticed that a fraction of the life energy channeled into Isobel's body got absorbed by her remaining intact organic cells!

The brain was still failing, but the deterioration rate had slowed!

Joshua immediately strengthened his efforts. He strained his mind to his limits and desperately wished to undo whatever damage the brain had suffered and restore it back to a healthy condition!

The body of an ace pilot might not appear much stronger than that of a mortal, but it was actually far more scrappy and resilient due to all of the willpower baptism that it had received in the past.

As the center of Isobel's willpower and consciousness, her brain was actually far more resilient than the human norm. Otherwise, it would have never been able to maintain its activity under these terrible conditions.

"Yaaaaa! Yaaaaa!"

Kiroshi actually started to express more excitement!

This showed that Joshua's efforts were working!

The problem was that there were still signs that Kiroshi was losing strength.

As much as Joshua wanted to do more, the problem was that Isobel's willpower still resisted the treatment.

No matter what, the willpower of an ace pilot was inviolable. The current treatment was incredibly inefficient because Isobel's brain actively resisted the intrusion of Joshua's willpower and life energy!

There was nothing more that Joshua could do. The only way to overcome the resistance of Isobel's willpower was to wait for her to die out entirely.

By then it was too late!

While the closest medical shuttle still needed a bit of time to arrive at the site, Joshua began to give in to despair as Isobel and Kiroshi began to grow incredibly feeble!

They were like flickering candles that could go out after getting hit by a single breeze!

As darkness encroached the burnt and ruined cockpit of the Promethea, Joshua suddenly thought of another measure.

"Willy!"

"Mraaw!"

A green companion spirit jumped out of the Everchanger and approached Isobel's corpse!

"Ya..."

"Mraaw mraaw..."

Joshua's companion spirit did not have a solid plan when he entered the Promethea's cockpit, but the green spiritual cat spontaneously knew what to do now that he had settled over Isobel's body.

Willy began to glow in a faint green light. More life energy and vitality radiated from his energy manifestation than ever!

Soon enough, the companion spirit opened his mouth and spat out a small but highly concentrated ball of life energy towards Isobel's brain!

"Yaaaaa!"

The forceful infusion of Willy's life energy completely overcame the defenses of Isobel's willpower and injected a lot more vitality into her brain!

Though the incredibly crude and rough treatment did not magically heal the brain, it restored its condition just enough to make it last a little longer!

Willy had paid a lot to conduct this emergency treatment. The companion spirit shrunk by half and looked visibly deflated.

It was clear that Joshua's companion spirit had drained himself in order to provide emergency treatment!

"I can only do this once."

Joshua worried whether this was enough. He was already starting to think about sacrificing his own life energy when a very welcome presence finally reached the coordinates of the Everchanger and the Promethea!

The medical shuttle had arrived!

Chapter 6124 Biomass Rescue

The operation to kill the Emperor Tree ended in an explosive and dramatic fashion!

First, the battle ended in a resounding victory to the Larkinson Clan. The Emperor Tree had been felled. Its ebony tree heart had been burnt until there was nothing but charred remains left in place.

In order to confirm that the Emperor Tree had truly perished, a large amount of mechs quickly arrived to secure both the major Solus Gas deposit as well as the remains of the gigantic calamity plant.

Multiple shuttles and transports descended from orbit. Each of them carried multiple teams of biotech researchers and a large amount of specialized field equipment.

Progress in studying the enormous remains of the Emperor Tree was bound to be slow. There was just too much biomass. The manpower of Task Force Solus was also woefully inadequate to complete the excavations and examinations in a short amount of time.

The biotechs didn't mind. Studying the remains of a powerful calamity beast was a dream come true for them. Every exobotanist from the Larkinson Biotech Institute practically scrambled to enter their shuttles in order to conduct their first studies and experiments on the unique and exceptionally interesting wood samples.

However, as much as the Larkinson Clan managed to secure a lot of strategic as well as material objectives during this short and expedient operation, many of these gains became overshadowed by the news of what happened to the star of the show.

"Venerable Isobel Kotin managed to break through! She has become the second Saint of our clan!"

"What?! Really?!"

"It's true! The clan has just announced the news! When Saint Isobel broke through, she produced so much fire around her Promethea that it looked as if a purple sun had descended onto the untamed planet. The Emperor Tree which was responsible for driving Venerable Taon and Venerable Lanie crazy stood no chance against her purple flames. Much of the tree got burned down!"

"Where is Saint Isobel? Why hasn't our clan published any footage of her debut as an ace pilot?"

"I heard there may be problems. Saint Isobel had to be picked up by a medical shuttle. There is no word of what happened to her ever since. Given that the clan has blocked all subsequent news about

her state, I think it may take longer for her to recover. The Promethea also got trashed. I am not sure whether the expert mech is still alive, but it will take a long time to restore the damage."

All sorts of rumors and hearsay erupted throughout the fleet. The successful ascension of another ace pilot among the Larkinsons was definitely a cause for celebration!

Many clansmen already started to celebrate when they heard the news.

The more ace pilots, the better!

In an era that was defined by total war, the power of champions had an outsized influence on the morale and confidence of a population.

The Larkinsons already gained a huge boost in confidence after the ascension of Saint Tusa, but he was only a single case. What if he was the exception rather than the rule? What if his breakthrough could be credited to his own talent and determination as opposed to the institutions of the Larkinson Clan?

If the former was the case, then it may be extremely difficult for another ace pilot to emerge among the existing expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan.

If the latter was the case, then the clan was truly on the right track! The chance to produce a third and fourth ace pilot among the current batch of high-tier expert pilots would undoubtedly rise!

This was because the Larkinson Clan proved with actual results that its martial institutions had become mature and systematic enough to develop a working high-level talent development program.

In addition, ace pilots tended to promote more of their own kind. Saint Tusa had already provided limited but highly relevant advice to the existing Larkinson expert pilots.

Once Saint Isobel managed to stabilize her condition and come to terms with her increase in status, she would be able to provide guidance from a different perspective!

Of course, the primary benefit of Saint Isobel's successful breakthrough was that the Larkinson Clan gained another powerful combat asset!

In contrast to Saint Tusa, the female ace pilot possessed completely different talents and inclinations.

This was incredibly fortuitous to the clan the former possessed clear gaps and shortcomings that the latter was able to compensate for. Not only was Saint Isobel a ranged mech specialist, she also happened to excel in spreading damage on an extremely wide scale!

Once the Design Department elevated the Dark Zephyr and the Promethea into ace mechs, the two could easily become a fearsome combination if they fight alongside each other.

The Dark Zephyr was fast, agile and precise. The light mech had proven to be extremely deadly up close and turned into a very fierce duelist. With the help of his new Ultimate Module, the powerful light skirmisher no longer possessed a glaring shortcoming in offensive power!

Nobody knew what the Promethea would be capable of once she became an ace mech, but she was bound to be able to spread a lot more potent flames at a distance! What the rifleman mech lacked in surgical precision, the living mech more than made up for shoring up the Larkinson Army's lacking capabilities in attrition warfare!

While all of this sounded great, the premise was that Saint Isobel Kotin and the Promethea both managed to survive and recover from the battle!

The uncertainty surrounding Isobel's dire physical state was exactly why the Larkinson Clan did not dare to publish any further announcements related to the distressed ace pilot.

At this time, Swordmaster Ketis waited nervously outside of the hatch leading into a well-equipped high-tech operation room aboard the Dragon's Den. No noise managed to pass through the completely sealed entryway, so the woman had little idea whether the Isobel would be able to live past this eventful day.

"Relax." The physical projection of Ves spoke. "Ace pilots are more resilient than ordinary humans. As a swordmaster, your body is also a lot healthier than before. Isobel may have only become an ace pilot for a short time, but the forced resonance state has massively reinforced what remains of her physical state."

Ketis grimaced as she continued to pace back and forth. "I am aware of that, but there is a limit to how much the willpower of an ace pilot can do the impossible. I know enough about biology that the human brain will begin to suffer permanent damage once they have been cut off from blood and oxygen for multiple minutes. Then there is the damage produced by prolonged exposure to an excessive amount of heat. Even if her willpower and her companion spirit have done an admirable job at keeping the flames at bay, there are clear signs of thermal damage to the exterior brain tissue."

In other words, Saint Isobel's brain briefly got cooked!

This was an unavoidable consequence of the extreme stunt. This was already a fairly good result considering the awful state of the rest of her body!

"I think Isobel may be able to pull through." Ves optimistically said. "There will be consequences, but it is already pretty good if she can wake up and live for another day. The real question is whether she will become healthy enough to pilot a mech. There are ace pilots who have suffered much less damage yet still found themselves unable to continue their careers."

Nobody knew whether this nightmare scenario would come true for Isobel. This was why the two mech designers remained in suspense.

A few more minutes passed before the hatch slid open.

The vice-director of the Larkinson Biotech Institute stepped outside, not having bothered to change from her surgical suit.

The Terran biotech researcher exuded a strong sense of competence that belied her fairly young age. At little over 50 years old, she had managed to get banished from the Terran scientific community, only to find refuge at the much more tolerant and open-minded Larkinson Clan.

While Maria Abselon was not a specialist surgeon or medical professional, her top-notch Terran biotech education still allowed her to take the lead in treating Isobel's terrible condition!

The fact that she emerged from the operation room meant that she had completed her initial treatment of the brain and spine salvaged from the cockpit of the Promethea.

She turned around and faced the patriarch and the task force commander.

"Progress has been made." The vice director spoke in a neutral tone. "First, the rescue came in time. We cannot ascertain what Venerable Joshua's ad-hoc treatment has done for Saint Isobel after he attempted to render aid, but we estimate he has played a crucial role in keeping the surviving brain tissue alive. The first responders who arrived on a medical shuttle have adequately managed to retrieve Isobel's intact organs, though in their haste, they have caused a minor degree of damage to the spine. The medical equipment on the shuttle is woefully inadequate to preserve the retrieved biomass, though it has kept Isobel's brain alive long enough to deliver her to a treatment center in Chimera Base."

The medical shuttle had to speed up and return to base as quickly as possible.

"The doctors stationed at the treatment center did not possess adequate facilities to render the aid that Saint Isobel truly needed, but they have been able to restore many damaged cells before carefully placing her brain and spine into a much more helpful biomedical nutrient fluid tank. That has slowed down her deterioration long enough to ship her to this vessel. She is quite lucky that a ship that is equipped with the most advanced biotech and biomedical facilities has been transferred to Task Force Solus. It would have been much harder to prevent the further degradation of Saint Isobel's life and health with the facilities in Chimera Base alone."

It was times like these that Ves thanked himself for continually increasing the clan's investment into the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

Although the Dragon's Den was starting to show her age, much of the lab and medical equipment installed inside the bioresearch vessel had been updated a lot more recently than the actual hull.

The bio researchers did not require a state-of-the-art starship to complete their projects, but they absolutely could not do without powerful and modern biolab and bioproduction equipment!

"Will she make it?" Ves straightforwardly asked.

"She is... stable." Maria Abselon answered. "We cannot guarantee that her physical condition will deteriorate in the next 48 hours, but there are enough indications that her brain and spine can be preserved in the short term. This is not a permanent solution, as any human that has found herself reduced to these organs will not be able to bear the psychological burden of losing a whole body. Perhaps the ace pilot's strong willpower may allow her to endure much greater hardships than other patients, but it is best if we provide her with a new body as soon as possible."

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"Will you be able to regenerate a new body for her?" Ketis quickly asked.

The former Terran bio researcher did not directly answer this question. "We can discuss Saint Isobel's treatment options later. This subject is not simple. Before we go over it, I must mention an important complication that we have managed to ascertain in the process of providing initial treatment. As I have mentioned before, Saint Isobel has managed to do an admirable job at preserving the health and integrity of her brain. Venerable Joshua has also managed to render aid in

his own unscientific way. Nonetheless, they have not been able to prevent all damage. Our scans of the brain have alerted us to a highly consequential possibility. The Saint... may not be able to interface with a mech ever again."

"...Oh." Ketis flatly responded.

"That... is a setback." Ves commented. "It's okay. Please continue. I need to hear the treatment options that are available to our latest Saint."

Chapter 6125 Recovery Options

When most people heard that an ace pilot incurred so much brain damage that their ability to interface with a mech had been compromised, they would probably react with shock and dismay.

When Ves and Ketis heard the news that Isobel's brain may never be able to interface with a mech like the Promethea ever again, their reactions were remarkably muted.

An inability to use a neural interface to connect to a mech was no longer a crippling injury to them.

Didn't Benjamin Larkinson manage to regain the ability to pilot a mech despite the fact that he had to retire half a century earlier due to suffering permanent brain damage?

Since an old geezer who was previously a single step away from death managed to regain the ability to pilot a mech, then there was a chance for Saint Isobel to make a comeback as well!

The existence of the Carmine System was technically supposed to be a secret from most Larkinsons, but they weren't stupid. It was hard to suppress the spread of rumors.

Ves was relatively okay with this. There was little harm in letting his clansmen talk and gossip among themselves. The only requirement he imposed on them was to keep confidential information out of the hands of the public. The Transhumanists did not want to ruin the public rollout of the Carmine System.

In any case, the existence of the Carmine System was not a secret to a select group of people in the Larkinson Clan. Ketis naturally had a right to know, and the vice director that took charge of the Larkinson Biotech Institute on behalf of Ranya Wodin also knew the details.

This was why none of them reacted too strongly to this adverse development. The only real consequence to this news was that Saint Isobel lost the ability to choose to form a Blood Pact with her living mech.

If she was able to retain her life, recover her fighting condition and retain the desire to go back into the fray, then Ves and Gloriana would most definitely prepare a suitable Carmine mech that fully matched her strengthened and altered condition.

Before he could begin to discuss the planning with his wife, Ves first needed to understand Saint Isobel's recovery prospects.

Vice director Maria Abselon approached this topic cautiously because she and the other surgeons encountered numerous complications over the course of treating Isobel's physical state.

"Let us discuss subsequent treatment." She spoke. "Under normal circumstances, it is absolutely possible to restore the body of a patient that has been reduced to Isobel's current state. If we employ first-class technology mastered by the Terran Alliance, then it should take three to four years to restore a baseline human to at least 90 percent of his or her peak condition. The recovery period and

the restoration rate can heavily fluctuate when we take augmentations into account. Some can speed up the recovery, while others can slow them down."

"What is the psychological impact of regrowing an entirely new body?" Ketis asked with concern.

The biotech researcher spread her arms. "It depends. There is no simple answer to this question. Most humans who have received entire new bodies that are designed to be as close to their original physiologies as possible still suffer from a range of psychological disorders. The problem can grow more severe when they are gifted with newer bodies that are much less familiar to them. The lack of choice, the abrupt transition and the sense of alienation can all exacerbate the psychological problems."

"Do high-ranking pilots suffer from these issues as well?"

"They do, swordmaster. Do not think that expert pilots and ace pilots are immune to these human failings. Some of them are much more sensitive to this problem because they have developed a strong familiarity with their original bodies. They are oversensitive to any discrepancies and resent the loss of precision and control over their new limbs."

"I heard about that." Ves spoke. "This is one of the reasons why people are actually a lot more careful about augmenting high-ranking mech pilots. They are too accustomed to the bodies they already grew up with. This is why it is best to augment them before they step onto the path to godhood."

Maria nodded. "The good news is that these powerful soldiers are able to overcome these difficulties at a higher rate compared to ordinary individuals. Expert pilots and especially ace pilots have strong willpower and are unwilling to give up. What is important is that we give them enough hope. No matter how small the chance of recovery may be, as long as they can change their fate with their own power, they will work harder than any other human to better themselves. At most, it will take longer to restore their ability to fight."

That put a positive spin on this matter, though Ves inwardly winced at the thought of a prolonged recovery period.

It was common knowledge in the mech community that expert pilots and ace pilots developed quickly shortly after their breakthroughs. The sooner they could obtain a mech appropriate to their level of strength and begin to make use of it, the faster their resonance strength grew in the next couple of years!

If these powerful pilots did nothing but sit on their hands for three or four crucial years, they would waste this golden moment!

By the time they finally regained the ability to pilot mechs or received their long-awaited machines, their willpower already settled down and became a lot more solidified. It became several times harder for them to make progress, causing them to remain stuck at the lower end of their rank for a much longer period of time.

Ves did not want Saint Isobel to suffer in this way!

She needed to be restored sooner rather than later. It was a complete waste to have her stuck in recovery and rehabilitation for four whole years.

"How soon can she recover?" Ves impatiently asked.

"It depends on the treatment program." Maria Absalon carefully said. "Terran treatment typically takes up to 4 years, but it can be shortened if you are willing to increase your spending to make use of the best services, technologies and medical professionals. Even then, I do not expect you can restore Saint Isobel in less than 2 years. If you want to accelerate her recovery even further, there is only one group that surpasses the Terran Alliance in the treatment of high-ranking mech pilots."

"The mechers."

"Just so, sir. The Red Association is the unquestionable authority in the research of all variables related to expert pilots and ace pilots. Depending on your budget and demands, it may be possible to restore Saint Isobel back to 95 percent of her old peak condition within a single year. The speed and efficacy of the treatment is heavily reliant on the lead doctors and biotech experts assigned to the project. If you have any friendly contacts or favors, then this is the time to make use of them. The mechers value every ace pilot and will most definitely take this case seriously, but they will not easily mobilize the old and highly experienced authorities in this field."

"I understand."

Ves could afford the price. He still recalled that he was able to cash in a big favor. He could also seek out the Evolution Witch to negotiate a deal with the Transhumanist Faction.

However, was it truly necessary to turn to the mechers to bring Saint Isobel back to normal?

He had several reasons to feel reluctant about turning to the mechers. His conflicted expression did not hide his thoughts.

"What are you thinking about, Ves?" Ketis asked with a suspicious look.

"I... do not think we should rely so much on external parties to restore one of our most important military assets. Look, I will send her to the Red Association if we have to, but I at least want to know if we have options for treating her inhouse. Vice director, please explain to us whether the LBI is equipped to restore Saint Isobel."

"We can do it, but there are elevated risks, sir. Part of it has to do with a complication that we have ascertained. During the process of treating her condition, we have detected random bursts of elevated heat. We believe that her weak and unstable willpower is passively attempting to produce flames in the environment. The reason why nothing worse has happened is because she has lost too much strength. We fear that if she recovers, this problem will become magnified. The current phenomena only amounts to random increases in temperature. If Saint Isobel returns to her peak condition, it may be possible for her to produce flames similar to the ones generated by her mech. If that ever happens, she will pose a persistent threat to herself, the people around her and the environment."

Both Ves and Ketis grew a lot more serious when they heard that. Saint Isobel had clearly taken a very dangerous turn in her evolution. She wouldn't have started a fire in her own cockpit and allowed her body to get burned if she retained any sense!

Though Isobel ultimately succeeded in breaking through, it was clear that she incurred a range of sequelae due to her extreme choices.

"What are your suggestions?" Ves plainly asked.

"We develop a new body for the Saint that is expressly designed to contain her condition. We must add an extra function to her body that can inhibit her tendency to produce flames around her. The body must also become much more resistant to fire than her original physiology. This will at least prevent her from harming herself. We do not have a clear idea on how this can be done for this particular case, so we cannot guarantee that we will be successful in developing a fireproof body. We may need to ask for technical support from multiple different scientists."

"I see."

The vice director did not sound too confident. The Larkinson Biotech Institute may have improved rapidly over the years, but it was a complete fantasy to think his own doctors could match the capabilities of the Terrans and the mechers!

That did not mean that Ves gave up on doing it in-house.

He already began to entertain a few interesting ideas.

"Is there any way I can help with this project?"

"Most definitely, sir." Maria Abselon smiled. "If we choose to develop a cybernetic body that comprises both organic and metallic organs, your expertise may become relevant to us. It is particularly interesting if we make heavy use of hyper technology in the development of Isobel's transhuman body. She may become stronger and more difficult to kill. She may be able to suppress her unstable command over her fire, or amplify it so that she can fight much more effectively outside of the cockpit of her mech. You can even implement alternate interfacing technology, although I cannot make any judgments about their effectiveness. You will need to consult an expert in this field."

They talked a bit more about the possibilities. The LBI might not be the best, but it had become pretty impressive over the years.

The Larkinsons could choose from a lot of different possibilities.

They could play it safe and focus on accident prevention.

They could play it fast and whip up something really basic to complete Saint Isobel's restoration as quickly as possible.

They could also go all-out and develop the most powerful and feature-rich transhuman cybernetic body for the Larkinson Clan's second ace pilot.

The problem was that the clan may be able to choose between one of these options, but not all three at the same time.

Ves needed to settle on a priority and have the Larkinson Biotech Institute focus on it above all other considerations.

"Can we communicate with Saint Isobel?" Ketis spoke up again. "We shouldn't be the ones to make this choice. It is best if we can have her input."

"I am afraid that will not be possible, ma'am. It is already very lucky for us that Saint Isobel is able to cling to her life. She is in a very weak state at the moment. Her brain needs a long period of careful treatment and lengthy recovery. Even then, Isobel may not be able to 'wake up' and gain awareness of her own conditions. In short, Saint Isobel Kotin does not have the competency and the

capacity to make medical decisions on her own. She is unmarried and does not have any relatives in the clan. Patriarch, you have the authority to decide on her behalf."

"I see."

That placed a heavy burden on his shoulders.

Chapter 6126 Long Recovery

When Ketis and the physical projection of Ves received an opportunity to visit Isobel after she had been moved to a hastily prepared recovery chamber in a different section of the Dragon's Den, they visited straight away.

Vice Director Abselon did not exaggerate when she claimed that Isobel had lost a lot of strength.

Now that Isobel had literally been reduced to just a brain and a spine, her willpower had weakened to an extremely deplorable extent. It was as if she had suffered so much trauma that she had grown weaker than a low-tier expert pilot at this time!

Fortunately, this show of weakness was mainly due to the loss of her body and her other injuries. As long as she managed to regain her body and health, Isobel should be able to regain much of the strength of an ace pilot.

No matter what, Saint Isobel had already completed her second apotheosis. Her willpower went through a qualitative transformation that made it fundamentally different and stronger than that of an expert pilot.

Isobel also formed an actual domain. This was the core of her strength and was one of the reasons why she managed to preserve her brain and hang onto her life while enduring the threat of getting burned.

When mech pilots stepped onto the path of godhood, they gradually turned from pure matter-based life forms into partial or complete energy-based life forms.

Ves was not entirely sure about the details, but energy still became an increasingly more vital component of their existences.

Ace pilots had already reached the midway point of this transformative process. This meant that even if Isobel suffered even more severe brain damage, there was still a decent chance of making a full recovery because her willpower and her domain already carried much of her memories and other stuff that was typically stored inside her body cells!

Unfortunately, ace pilots had yet to reach the stage where they could abandon their frail human forms entirely. They were still mortal in many ways, so needed the support of a physical form in order to function properly.

Ves already started to consider a few ideas on how to do so. Some of them were more radical than others.

"Can you speed up her healing?" Ketis asked. "Joshua managed to do so by injecting life energy into her. You should be able to do so as well."

"Maybe." Ves did not rule out the possibility. "It is best to be careful, though. Ace pilots are normally highly exclusionary towards energies that belong to others. Joshua succeeded because he was still relatively healthy while Isobel was on the verge of death. As our patient here recovers, her

willpower is bound to grow a lot stronger and more difficult to overcome. Intervening rashly will cause Isobel's willpower to panic and overreact."

Ketis frowned, but accepted the explanation. She was not unfamiliar with this dynamic considering that Sharpie also exhibited this property.

She gestured towards the very faint, small and weak companion spirit that was resting inside the brain.

"How about Kiroshi? If it is too dangerous to treat Isobel directly, then why not try to heal her companion spirit? As Kiroshi regains her strength, Isobel should recover as well as the two of them are linked."

"That is actually a good idea. It may actually work. We still need to come up with a proper plan, though. There are currently six known individuals that I can think of that can help Kiroshi and by extension Isobel recover faster. There is me, Venerable Joshua, Gaia, the Superior Mother, Miss Alexa Streon and General Axelar Streon. Each of us harnesses different aspects of life energy, so one or more of us should be able to help."

This was quite a wide variety of options!

This was good news for Isobel because if just one of the wielders of life energy was able to help, the Larkinsons would not have to wait too long before they could finally welcome their second ace pilot on the battlefield!

"Now that you have found a potential solution to recover her in a spiritual way, we need to figure out how we should recover her physical form." Ketis said as she stared at the brain floating in the tank of nutrient liquid. "We can't keep her like this, obviously."

"I agree. The question is what we should aim for when our clan develops a new body for her. Do you know Isobel well?"

"Not particularly. We have very different interests. We do not mix with each other during normal times. I think my husband Joshua knows her much better."

"That is good to hear. I will ask him about her inclinations and so on. Right now, I think it is not too presumptuous for me to make a guess. Given that Saint Isobel was the only person who decided to act in an extreme fashion in order to force her breakthrough, she is actually a lot more courageous and willing to take risks in order to succeed. In addition, she is highly motivated by power. Becoming strong is of utmost importance to her. If that is the case, then we should calibrate the development of her new body through that lens."

Ketis turned to Ves. "What do you have in mind? You sound as if you already have a plan."

"I do. The vice director mentioned multiple different options in developing a replacement body. One of the most important variables that we need to take into account is recovery speed. It is in the best interest of the clan if Isobel gets back into the fight as quickly as possible. The aliens are ready to launch their major offensive any day now, and we will definitely take part in the first deep strike expeditions when they become available. It makes a huge difference for us if Saint Isobel has recovered and received her new ace mech by that time."

That did not entirely sit well with Ketis.

"It is too fast. We cannot rush Isobel's recovery solely because we want to pursue short-term gains. If she suffers too many complications due to shoddy treatment, then her future may be cut off. That is a terrible outcome that will absolutely ruin her. If you ask me, it is better to wait longer in order to ensure that Isobel makes a proper recovery."

"I agree, Ketis. Those are my thoughts as well. My considerations may be different if she is the only ace pilot that we can count on, but now that we have Saint Tusa, we can afford to wait 4 or 5 years in order to get it right."

It was still a bit of a pity for Saint Isobel to be taken off the board for half a decade. Events moved quickly during this period. Having one less ace pilot at the Larkinson Clan's disposal would undoubtedly limit many of its options.

It couldn't be helped. Ves absolutely did not want to ruin Isobel's chances of becoming a god pilot one day.

He knew that one of the many reasons why so few ace pilots managed to advance to the rank of god pilot was because they encountered all kinds of accidents over their long careers. From defeats to heavy injuries, there were many ways for ace pilots to drop out of the race before they even came close to reaching the finishing line.

"I am in favor of taking it slow." Ves explained as he continued to study Isobel's current condition. "She will have to miss out on taking advantage of the initial period of accelerated growth. It is unlikely for her to be able to catch up to Saint Tusa, but this is an acceptable price to pay if it means that her future is still unlimited."

His former student was in complete agreement. "Okay, since we have decided to take it slow, what sort of body are you thinking about developing for her? I already have a strong hunch that you are not content with producing a nearly identical clone of her old body."

"You would be right. We may as well take advantage of Isobel's current state to develop a physical body that is much more high-performing than anything our clan has ever seen. I have a couple of goals that I want to meet for this project. First, seeing that it is likely that Isobel cannot fully control her power over flames, it is best if her replacement body is as fireproof as possible."

"That should be the number one priority."

"Second, we can try to turn Isobel into a formidable augmented supersoldier. Even if there is never an occasion for her to fight a battle while she is separated from her mech, it is still handy if she can take care of herself."

"I do not agree." Ketis shook her head this time. "Leave infantry combat to the professionals. We should develop an augmented body that is highly suited for mech pilots. It should be highly resistant towards kinetic damage and physical shock. It also should provide the strongest possible protection to the brain and spine. There are many more augmentations designed for mech pilots that we can include as well. Each of them can make the recovered Isobel much stronger than the old Isobel."

Ves frowned. "I am aware of these options, but it is not easy to stuff them all in a single human body. Not only will Isobel be flooded with choices that she may not actually need, but it will become a lot harder for her to acclimate to her souped-up body."

"She is an ace pilot, Ves. She will be able to shape her body according to her will, literally. Even if there are flaws and inefficiencies, willpower baptism can remedy many problems."

That may be true, but there were still other factors that concerned Ves.

"Let's talk about the Carmine System." Ves shifted the topic. "I have been thinking about developing elemental variants of the Carmine System for a while now. Saint Isobel is a perfect candidate to form a Bloodfire Pact with her future ace mech. Normally, I would feel hesitant about making a mech pilot form a pact that can only be formed by using fire energy as a substitute for blood. Any pilot who dares to form such a dangerous pact will probably get burned from the inside. As for Isobel..."

"Even if she is not immune to fire, she can tolerate the heat much better than others, especially when she recovers and gains a fireproof body." Ketis remarked.

Ves smiled as he came up with an interesting notion.

Why not let Saint Isobel supply the fire energy?

Normally, it was impossible to rely on a weak human to supply the considerable amount of fire energy required to form a Bloodfire Pact, but Isobel was different!

Her current state may be weak, but as long as she regains enough strength, she should be able to command more than enough power to form a Bloodfire Pact. Once the pact was made, it should be trivial for her to establish a stable circulation of fire energy between herself and her ace mech.

"We need to restore and upgrade the Promethea in order to supply Isobel with the ace mech she needs." Ves stated. "I haven't taken a close look at the condition of the mech yet. Is the living mech still alive?"

"According to the reports of Joshua and the mech technician, the Promethea is heavily damaged, but she is still alive. She has become much stronger due to benefiting from her battle partner's breakthrough energies. Her mech frame is in bad condition, but it should not be challenging to repair or replace all of her physical parts."

That was good news. The greatest challenge to preparing the Promethea was to convert her into a proper Bloodfire mech. Ves had never developed such an odd mech before. The Dominion of Man may have taught him a few lessons about the Bloodfire Pact, but he was not able to use the powerful Carmine dreadnought as a template.

Ves needed to conduct a lot of research and development in order to cobble together a working Bloodfire Carmine System for mechs!

"Ugh. How the hell am I supposed to fit this massive project into my schedule?"

Chapter 6127 Acquisition Order.

Now that Ves decided to take it slow, there was not much he could do to advance Saint Isobel Kotin's recovery process.

Developing a powerful new cybernetic body for her that not only incorporated the latest technologies in human augmentation, but also complemented her fire domain as perfectly as possible was extremely complicated.

At the very least, the Larkinson Biotech Institute did not have enough first-class biotech experts with the relevant expertise in its employ.

Vice Director Maria Abselon thoroughly explained all of the lengths the LBI had to go through in order to complete this ambitious project.

"We cannot develop the right capabilities by hiring individual biotech researchers from the Terran Alliance and other first-rate states." She explained. "Those who are available for hire are usually junior scientists. They are absolutely not qualified to build a new body for an ace pilot, especially one that has exhibited numerous complications and abnormalities. We need to obtain the services of a large, experienced and knowledgeable R&D team. There is only one way for us to acquire such a team in the timespan that you have designated."

"Acquisition." Ves stated.

"Correct, sir. The LBI in its current state does not have the capabilities to work on this project, but there are many first-class biotech research institutions that possess superior qualifications. We only need to look for a small to medium-sized institution that is willing to accept our offer. Once we acquire the entire organization and recruit the majority of researchers, we should be able to develop an advanced cybernetic body for Saint Isobel. In addition, we can also develop and implant a range of first-class augmentations for the rest of our clansmen. This is an enduring benefit to the clan. We no longer need to turn to third parties in order to improve the capabilities of our own personnel."

Ves' physical projection directed a knowing look at the vice director. He understood her game. Her arguments were valid, but she most definitely had more selfish motives in mind.

The LBI had always been regarded as one of the foremost research institutions under the Larkinson Clan.

The sudden rise of the T Institute affected its interests. The biotech researchers had to put more effort into competing for funding, personnel and resources.

When Gloriana took over as the director of the Design Department, she pushed the clan into founding a bunch of other R&D institutes. Now that 4 more organizations had arisen that focused on developing a lot of cool new stuff, the LBI's primacy came under threat!

In order to ensure that the biotech researchers continued to enjoy a priority in funding and so on, they urgently needed to increase their value in the eyes of the clan. What better way to do so than to be able to develop and install genuine first-class augmentations?

Ves could not even refute the necessity of such an acquisition. The Larkinson Clan or at least its Premier Branch was moving up in society. The inability to augment its own first-raters was an embarrassment and a sign that the clan's foundation was not strong enough.

The clan could only gain a stronger footing in first-class society by developing a certain degree of self-sufficiency in this aspect.

"How much?"

"At least 100 billion MTA credits."

"That much?!"

"We are not looking to acquire hundreds of biotech researchers alone." Maria Abselon patiently explained. "We are also trying to buy out entire libraries and databases that contain the sum of knowledge, research results and successful product designs of that research institution. As long as the know-how is competitive enough, you will find that paying billions of MTA credits is a reasonable sacrifice."

Ves accepted the argument, but he was still hesitant about spending all of that money.

The Larkinson Clan had entered into another period of rapid growth. The Premier Branch was a money-swallowing beast that needed a lot of investment in order to attract qualified personnel, supply them with proper first-class facilities and prepare them for warfare at a much higher level than the Larkinsons were accustomed to. This was not the time to be frugal and act like a cheapskate.

Even so, there was a limit to how much the Larkinson Clan could spend on expensive goodies.

The dividends earned from owning 20 percent of Isthmus Manufacturing had already been committed to a lot of different spending priorities. In particular, it took a huge amount of funding to operate both Starfarer Berth and the E-66 Experimental Yard.

The latter was tasked with converting the Tortured Scream, the orven battleship that the expeditionary fleet recently captured after winning the Battle of Torment.

Sure, the large alien hull only needed to undergo a quick and dirty refit in order to make her somewhat usable by the Larkinsons, but the cost of doing so was still enormous in absolute terms!

"It will be difficult to finance this acquisition. However, as long as you can find a good enough R&D institution and present a solid plan to earn back the money that we have spent, I am inclined to support it." Ves reluctantly spoke. "I will give a heads-up to my personal assistant. He will supervise this matter on my behalf."

There was no need for Ves to spend his precious time on overseeing this acquisition process in person.

Now that Gavin Neumann returned from the Streon Ancient Clan, he should be more than capable of undertaking this responsibility. His new contacts within the Terran Alliance should help him get in touch with a lot of different Terran research institutions.

The vice director nodded in understanding. "I will cooperate with him to the best of my ability. Depending on how much funding our clan is able to mobilize for this acquisition, we may be able to conclude a deal within three months. If the clan is unwilling to spend an adequate sum of money, then it will take longer."

"What sort of research institution can we expect to gain by spending 100 billion MTA credits."

"Do not expect to obtain a particularly large or successful one at that price level. You have to know that if there are research institutions that have developed a good application that is above market standard, it would have been acquired by a larger group long ago at significantly greater prices. 100 billion MTA credits is only the minimum that we must spend to fulfill our objectives. Truly competitive bioresearch in human augmentation is never cheap."

Ves knew a little bit better why second-raters were unable to gain a foothold in first-class society.

Just the enormous gap in capital alone was enough to dash the dreams of many ambitious second-raters!

The Larkinson Clan happened to be in a weird position. It was still a second-class family organization for the most part, but its income levels were abnormally high.

More importantly, the clan was severely underleveraged compared to similar organizations in the new frontier. This meant that the Larkinsons still had a lot of leeway in terms of borrowing cash.

Ves was very reluctant to pile so much debt in a short amount of time, but... did he have a choice?

Trying to refrain from spending lots of cash during a critical and sensitive period of time would slow down the Larkinson Clan's development.

Once the clan ceased to grow at a fast pace, it would become much harder to compete against the bigshots and protect the Larkinsons against enemies powerful enough to defeat first-raters!

Ves discussed a few more details with Maria Abselon about funding and other conditions.

"By the way, has the LBI discovered anything important when examining the remains of the Emperor Tree? Is the captured Ebony Everchanger in a stable condition?"

"Not enough time has passed for us to draw too many conclusions." Vice Director Abselon answered. "The Emperor Tree is enormous even in death. You will have to be patient. As for the captured wooden construct that is designated as the Ebony Everchanger, it remains stable and inert as far as we can tell. It has ceased all deliberate activity and entered into a dormant state from the moment the Emperor Tree has perished. It is just..."

The woman adopted a reluctant expression.

"What is it, vice director?"

"We... are not entirely certain that the Ebony Everchanger is as inert as it appears. As you know, Venerable Joshua is particularly sensitive towards signs of life. While he was assigned to guard the Ebony Everchanger, he warned us that he feels that the wooden construct is still alive and conscious. In fact, he fears that this captured prize may not be as harmless as it seems."

Ves immediately grew serious. "Does Joshua suspect that the Ebony Everchanger secretly hides the remaining consciousness of the Emperor Tree?"

"We cannot rule out this possibility. For now, we have decided to put it under heavy guard. At least one active expert mech and an entire mech company must remain on standby at all times. It is highly doubtful that the Emperor Tree can wield the strength that he has shown at his height when he was still complete, but that does not mean we can afford to lower our guard. We cannot let this matter persist. It was only because Saint Isobel's dramatic breakthrough and physical deterioration attracted all of our attention that we neglected to address the Ebony Everchanger."

"I need to take a look at it myself." Ves decided. "It is best if I can examine it in person. Observing it by remote is not good enough."

"Do you require us to ship it over to your location at Diandi Base?"

"Yes. I need you to send over the intact Ebony Everchanger as well as any intact remains of the other two ebony mechs. In addition to that, I would like to get my hands on whatever remains are left of the tree heart. It doesn't matter if much of it has burned into ash. My personal assistant will

make sure to send the fastest possible starship to ship these goods over. The sooner I get my hands on them, the better."

"We shall prepare the goods for shipment right away. However, do take into account that our research on the Emperor Tree will be hindered if we send away all of the ebony wooden remains."

"I will allow the LBI to retain enough samples of ebony wood to conduct further research. I trust you to determine the most appropriate proportion of materials to hold back." Ves decided. "Before you send all of these goods over, I would still like to examine it by remote through a special method. Tell me when it is Venerable Joshua's turn to guard the immobilized Ebony Everchanger. I can examine the captured wooden construct more closely through one of my works."

Ves looked forward to examining the Ebony Everchanger. The ebony wooden mechs had made a strong impression on him. They were the perfect template to use for the development of his first Woodsap mech!

He also wanted to find out whether the Emperor Tree was still alive. Was the Ebony Everchanger its clone as well as a backup measure in case its main body perished?

If this was the case, then the Larkinsons definitely picked up a bargain by capturing the Ebony Everchanger intact!

Ves could do so much with the spirituality of the Emperor Tree. The calamity tree's performance during the last two engagements made a strong impression.

Right now, Ves couldn't help but think that the most brilliant way to upgrade the original Everchanger was to merge the living mech with the Ebony Everchanger!

It would be even better if Ves was able to salvage and make use of the Emperor Tree's spiritual remnant as well. This would augment the performance of the new ebony wood-based additions.

More importantly, the ingredient could also be used to grant the Everchanger a powerful affinity for the wood element!

All of this took time, though. Ves was far from ready to design an upgrade for the Everchanger.

He still needed to upgrade the Elegant Rage first.

The results of upgrading Venerable Lanie's mech would provide valuable empirical data which could be used to refine his upgrade plans for Venerable Joshua's machine!

Chapter 6128 Joshua the Loser

Ves did not neglect the importance of inspecting the Ebony Everchanger. He decided to take a look as soon as Venerable Joshua started his guard shift.

As soon as Ves managed to establish a connection, his physical projection appeared in an underground vault.

The Larkinsons placed the Ebony Everchanger in the center. Compared to when it was just captured, the powerful wooden construct was no longer wrapped by a thick layer of hardened slime.

In order to keep the ebony mech contained, the vault not only deployed an array of azure energy shields, but also kept the captured wooden construct immobilized by putting it under a powerful status field.

A stasis field generator that was large and powerful enough to immobilize the Ebony Everchanger was not cheap!

The generator also consumed an enormous amount of energy in order to maintain the field.

It was all worth it, though. The Ebony Everchanger in its current condition had no chance of breaking the stasis effect!

The wooden construct remained completely secure as far as most people were concerned. If not for the fear that the Emperor Tree somehow shifted itself over to this ebony mech and sought to make a comeback, it wasn't even necessary for Venerable Joshua to be on guard duty.

In any case, Ves tried to examine the Ebony Everchanger as best as possible. It was difficult for him to detect anything subtle, but he was still able to ascertain that the full spirituality of the Emperor Tree was not secretly hiding inside this wooden construct.

Ves strongly suspected that the Emperor Tree, or at least its main incarnation, had truly died upon the moment Saint Isobel burned its tree heart.

He found it regretful that Saint Isobel did not hold back in killing the Emperor Tree. If she hadn't conjured up such a powerful purple sun that reacted violently to any spiritual intrusions, Ves could have possibly made an attempt to salvage the Emperor Tree's spirituality through the Everchanger!

Oh well.

Ves was not too dissatisfied with the current results. He would gladly trade away the Emperor Tree's spirit in exchange for the ascension of a new Larkinson ace pilot!

Now that Ves grew assured that the Ebony Everchanger was not a trap that the calamity plant deliberately shoved in the hands of the Larkinson Clan, he shifted his attention towards the expert mech that was currently on guard.

The real Everchanger looked close to pristine even though a short time had passed after the operation. The living mech and its battle partner remained physically unharmed, but Ves was not so sure they were fine on a mental level.

"Hello Joshua, Everchanger."

"Hello, sir."

"GREETINGS."

"So... you sound a little glum. Are you bothered by your performance during the last mission? You don't need to blame yourself, Joshua. It is normal to fail in a breakthrough attempt. It is not so easy to become an ace pilot. Your accumulation is much smaller. You just need more time to figure out your stuff."

The expert pilot let out a sigh. "My wife already told me that, but I cannot shake off how I almost managed to overcome my bottleneck. I felt it loosening. I only needed to go one step further in order to become a real ace pilot. If the Everchanger did not pull me back at the last second..."

"YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN DEAD." The living mech ruthlessly admonished his own battle partner. "DON'T BE AN IDIOT, JOSHUA. THE EMPEROR TREE HYPNOTIZED YOU SO THOROUGHLY THAT YOU WERE ABOUT TO SHOOT YOURSELF. THERE IS NO GOING

BACK FROM DEATH, JOSHUA. THE LEAST YOU COULD HAVE DONE IS AIM YOUR LASER PISTOL ON A LIMB RATHER THAN YOUR BRAIN."

"It wouldn't have been enough! I had to bring myself as close to death as I could! Sir, I know it looks bad, but I really think I had a chance of coming back from blowing a hole in my head. As long as I broke through and mastered the power of life and death, I was confident that I could have recovered my body somehow!"

"THAT IS PURE SPECULATION ON YOUR PART! THE MOST LIKELY OUTCOME OF BLOWING OUT YOUR BRAIN IS THAT YOUR HEADLESS CORPSE WOULD COLLAPSE AND LOSE ALL ACTIVITY, BOTH PHYSICALLY AND SPIRITUALLY. I WILL NEVER APOLOGIZE FOR STOPPING YOU FROM COMMITTING SUICIDE."

It sounded as if Joshua's most recent stunt had caused a rift in his relationship with the Everchanger. This was bad as the two would not be able to cooperate as well as before if they continued to mistrust and resent each other.

Ves decided to voice his own opinion.

"Joshua, your theory is not entirely implausible. Saint Isobel made a similar attempt and managed to succeed, though she was a lot more careful about it by expressly protecting her brain. Her courage and cleverness is commendable. She deserves to become an ace pilot as far as I am concerned. I don't think the same can be said for you. Another reason why Isobel did better was because she managed to gain the support of her own battle partner. The Promethea went against her orders and supported Isobel all the way. In contrast, you completely neglect the feelings of your battle partner and failed to win his approval."

"..."

The high-tier expert pilot could not defend against this remark. It was painful to be reminded that he had failed where another pilot succeeded.

Saint Isobel's breakthrough should have been a reason to celebrate, but all it did was to remind Joshua of his inferiority.

The reason why he felt this way was because his seniority was higher than Isobel. He broke through earlier and received his expert mech a lot sooner.

He also felt that his Everchanger was objectively better than the Promethea. The former was not only a masterwork mech, but also the machine that best embodied Ves' design philosophy.

Despite all of these advantages, Joshua ultimately fell short, while a pilot he had always regarded as his junior managed to transcend to a higher rank!

He would be lying if he denied he felt jealous towards Isobel.

However, he was also genuinely happy for her. The rise of any Saint among the Larkinsons should be a positive development. The addition of one more powerful protector meant that the clan became a little more secure. Joshua would not have to shoulder all the weight and responsibility for protecting his friends and family.

"You are still young, Joshua. The path to godhood is not a sprint. It is a marathon, one where it is normal to bump into obstacles every now and then. You at least managed to learn valuable lessons

from this attempt. In my opinion, your idea of trying to harness the power of both life and death is ambitious, but I don't think it fits you well enough."

"I AGREE. LISTEN TO YOUR PATRIARCH, JOSHUA. YOU ARE TOO SOFT HEARTED TO BECOME AN EMBODIMENT OF DEATH. I LIKED YOUR EARLIER INTENTION TO IMITATE THE POWERS OF OTHER POWERFUL BEINGS A LOT BETTER. WHY WERE YOU IN SO MUCH OF A HURRY TO THROW IT AWAY?"

"I don't know..." Joshua said. "Maybe the Emperor Tree steered me wrong, but... is it truly that bad? I mean, Isobel probably listened to the advice from the calamity tree as well, and now she has become an ace pilot at a young age."

"Isobel has also been reduced to a brain and a piece of spine. Her extreme conditions also produced a range of other sequelae that has probably warped her cognition, just like Venerable Taon and Venerable Lanie."

"I do not see how that matters, sir. She has become unquestionably more powerful."

Ves shook his head. "You can't treat her as a role model, Joshua. I respect her choices and admire her willingness to take an extreme risk, but do not treat this as the only acceptable way for expert pilots to break through to ace pilots. The regular process is nowhere near as dangerous. Sure, it will take longer for you to break through, but you still have plenty of time."

It was important for Joshua to settle down. The expert pilot would have a better chance of breaking through after he resolved his doubts, figured out a more acceptable approach to overcome his bottleneck and waited for the Everchanger to receive his long-awaited upgrade.

"IT DOESN'T MATTER. I ALREADY PULLED YOU BACK. THERE IS NO USE CRYING OVER SPILT MILK."

"Maybe the two of you are right, but my heart feels otherwise." Joshua tiredly said. "I can't stop feeling upset about how close I came to breaking through. I know I could have killed myself for real, but in my opinion it was worth the risk. I won't be able to shake this belief of mine."

"IT DOESN'T MATTER. I ALREADY PULLED YOU BACK. THERE IS NO USE CRYING OVER SPILT MILK."

"The Everchanger is right. You need to come to terms with what has happened and move on. It is never too soon to prepare for your next attempt."

Though his previous attempt was still raw to Joshua, the expert pilot knew that it was not productive for him to obsess over his recent failure.

"Alright, sir. I will do my best to move on. I think my battle partner is right about my previous idea. I shouldn't have forgotten about it when I got caught up in the transcendence glow."

Ves smiled. "Your progress is too quick, just like every other expert pilot that made use of 'supplements'. It is normal for you to require more time to figure out how you want to fight when you have obtained the power of an ace pilot. I highly suggest you wait until I have upgraded your Everchanger. I have already come up with a few ambitious plans that will change how you fight with your battle partner."

That certainly caught Joshua and the Everchanger's attention.

"Can you give me a preview?"

Ves gestured towards the Ebony Everchanger in the distance. "It has to do with that powerful wooden construct over there. What do you think about incorporating its aspects in your own machine?"

A trill of revulsion emanated from the Everchanger.

"NO THANKS. I DO NOT WANT TO TURN INTO WOOD, THANK YOU VERY MUCH."

"It is not as bad as it sounds! You are my favorite expert mech! I would never mistreat you. I am not asking you to convert to a wooden mech frame. I just think it would be useful if I augment you with wooden parts. You will turn into a milder version of the Elegant Rage."

"IT IS TOO UNNATURAL. THE EBONY MECHS WERE ONLY STRONG AND DIFFICULT TO DEFEAT BECAUSE THE EMPEROR TREE CONTINUALLY SUPPLIED THEM WITH WOOD ENERGY. I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO ENJOY THE SAME BENEFIT."

23:24

Ves nodded. "I know, but you don't need the Emperor Tree. You have Venerable Joshua. As long as he breaks through and forms a Saint Kingdom, you will have access to a huge amount of life energy, which is related to wood energy. Your ability to regenerate from getting hit will skyrocket. Aside from that, you can also choose Gaia or the Superior Mother as your design spirit if you want to gain access to another source of compatible energies. You might not be the most powerful mech by then, but you will definitely be the most unkillable!"

Unless an enemy was able to smash apart the Everchanger in a single overwhelming attack, the powerful mech would always be able to bounce back and return to peak condition in a matter of seconds.

Such a hardy mech could be useful in many different situations, from completing risky scout assignments to locking powerful enemies into a stalemate.

Joshua was not too sure about this, though. The Ebony Everchanger may share a close resemblance to his battle partner, but it was completely different from the real thing.

"I don't know, sir. You are the expert on this, but... shouldn't there be stronger materials out there?"

"You are probably right, but don't discount the value of this ebony wood. It may be possible for the Everchanger to replicate the abilities of the Emperor Tree. This should at least turn your machine into a genuine beastmaster that can command an entire exobeast army. Doesn't that sound exciting, Joshua?"

Chapter 6129 The Legacy of the Emperor Tree

Although Joshua was obviously not in a good mood at the moment, Ves was confident that the expert pilot would bounce back in time.

Failure was normal under the circumstances. Expert pilots had to meet high standards in order to break through. Whatever changes had been made to the Red Kingdom may have lowered the thresholds, but it could change the fundamental qualities required for any pilot to reach the second major cultivation rank.

The principles of willpower cultivation were universal. Both swordmasters and expert pilots needed to temper their willpower and gain supreme confidence over themselves before they were even remotely qualified to take a step further.

Given that Joshua had not yet fully committed to a future development trajectory and often wavered in his intentions, he was obviously not ready yet. He needed more time to figure out his future and work towards it to the exclusion of every other possibility.

Hopefully, Joshua would get his act together by the time Ves upgraded the Everchanger.

After talking to the expert pilot a bit more, Ves finally turned back to the prize that beckoned to him since the moment his physical projection appeared inside the vault.

"Joshua."

"Yes, sir?"

"I need you to move your Everchanger closer to the ebony mech. I need to borrow your masterwork mech to conduct a more detailed examination of this treasure."

Joshua did as instructed. It seemed strange for the Everchanger to move closer to an ebony wooden mech that looked similar but also off in many ways.

This resulted in an exaggerated uncanny valley effect. Ves could not stand the appearance of the Ebony Everchanger.

That did not stop him from appreciating the ebony wooden mech's performance.

The Emperor Tree clearly attempted to copy the Everchanger, but possessed little actual comprehension of what all of the mech parts were supposed to do. The calamity plant also failed to replicate the proportions of the genuine mech well enough.

This resulted in an exaggerated uncanny valley effect. Ves could not stand the appearance of the Ebony Everchanger.

That did not stop him from appreciating the ebony wooden mech's performance.

Even if the Ebony Everchanger relied on a powerful external energy source to perform at its best, it was still impressive that a construct made out of wood managed to fight expert mechs to a standstill!

Ves wanted to learn more about it and find a way to reproduce its advantages. If he could replicate just a fraction of the advantages of the Ebony Everchanger, he was confident that he could turn his upcoming Woodsap mechs into truly special machines!

He had already thought of a wonderful application for these special elemental Carmine mechs.

Their inherent regeneration properties were highly dependent on the availability of wood energy or related E energy types.

In a typical space battle, there was no other source of wood energy aside from the exotic radiation generated by Messier 87 in the distance. A Woodsap mech probably wouldn't be able to regenerate particularly quickly unless it had access to another source of wood energy such as Gaia.

The situation would be different when the Woodsap mechs fought on life-bearing planets.

The richer the ecosystem, the greater the concentration of wood energy.

The greater the concentration of wood energy, the higher the performance of Woodsap mechs!

Such machines had the potential to perform way above standard in the right environments!

In fact, Ves could also envision similar scenarios for other elemental Carmine mechs.

A Bloodfire mech would perform particularly well in hot environments such as planets that orbited close to a star.

An water-based Carmine mech would be able to outperform other aquatic mechs in any water-rich environment.

An earth-based Carmine mech would become rock solid when deployed on any terrestrial planet or moon.

A metal-based Carmine mech should be able to perform better than usual when put on a space station or starship that were nearly entirely made out of alloys.

In short, if Ves wanted to make the best use of his elemental Carmine mechs, he needed to pay a lot more attention to all of these interesting elemental variables.

"Mrow~"

When Ves temporarily shifted his companion spirit to the Everchanger, Blinky was able to gain a much more detailed impression of the ebony mech under stasis.

Blinky was able to sample the ebony mech's deep connection to the wood element. The Star Cat was also able to sense that the trapped wooden construct was not a completely mindless entity. It possessed a spiritual presence that was not strong, but not too weak either.

Unfortunately, Blinky was unable to form any solid conclusions. The stasis field distorted every observation and made it difficult to ascertain any details.

There was only one way to solve this problem.

"Shut down the stasis field." Ves command.

"Are you serious, sir?" Joshua immediately questioned. "This will unfreeze the Ebony Everchanger. Who knows what it will do. It may end up self-destructing itself once it realizes that its creator is gone."

"I am sure about it. I need more data. Be ready to reactivate the stasis field as soon as it does anything funny."

The operator responsible for controlling the stasis field generator executed the order. Once the field shut off, it was as if an invisible weight disappeared from the center of the vault.

The Ebony Everchanger essentially unfroze and regained the ability to move and act for itself.

That did not mean that the wooden construct did not earn back its freedom. The vault was still closed, and the ebony mech was also surrounded by multiple layers of azure energy shields.

For a moment, silence passed as the Ebony Everchanger did not appear to move. The only visible sign of activity was that it released a little more heat than before. That indicated that it was definitely doing something.

"Strange." Joshua remarked as he focused his senses on the odd ebony mech. "Is it... thinking?"

"Yes, though not in a way that you and I can understand. Plant organisms think differently from animal organisms such as ourselves. It is rather interesting that there is a remarkably high degree of mental activity from this wooden construct. I did not expect it to be capable of producing so much higher-level thought."

"Higher-level thought... wait. You mean it is intelligent?!"

"This is not a mere product of a calamity plant." Ves calmly explained. "It is a construct made out of a shard of its own tree heart. Do you understand what that actually means? It is a splinter of a powerful and intelligent organism. Even if the main tree has died, that does not change the fact that this ebony mech has inherited at least a fraction of the properties of a calamity plant."

"Does the Ebony Everchanger possess an independent mind, or did it get hijacked by the spirit of the Emperor Tree?"

"Why are you asking me, Joshua? Can't you make this determination yourself? Use your senses. What are they telling you? Are your instincts ringing any alarm bells?"

"I don't feel threatened by the Ebony Everchanger, but I feel disturbed by its existence." The expert pilot answered as he continued to examine the wooden construct closely. "I... kind of feel that there is something about the Ebony Everchanger that reminds me of the Emperor Tree itself. It is weak, though. I can't really make up my mind whether our old enemy is waiting to revive himself through this ebony mech. What... am I looking at, sir?"

Blinky smirked as he continued to hover around the stationary wooden mech. The Ebony Everchanger remained well-behaved for the time being. It did not mindlessly lash out or make any movements on its own. It was as if the loss of direction from the Emperor Tree had turned it into a clueless machine.

"I think I figured out the Emperor Tree's plan. Before you ask, I am more certain than before that the Emperor Tree has truly died. Our clan successfully took revenge for what the calamity plant had done to Venerable Taon and Venerable Lanie. As long as the field teams have made their own verifications, we can transmit the good news to the two exiles."

"They will be more than happy to receive this news." Joshua said. "It won't undo the injustices that have been done to them, but I think it will help them move on from the past. Since the actual Emperor Tree has died, what is so special about the Ebony Everchanger?"

"As far as I can tell, it has inherited a part of the spirituality of the Emperor Tree." Ves slowly replied. "I am not completely certain about this, but it sort of feels this way. The Ebony Everchanger lacks the age, knowledge, power and other accumulation of the powerful calamity plant. It is an independent off-shoot of our old enemy. Although it is currently very weak, the Emperor Tree has deliberately strengthened its foundation and other aspects. So long as the ebony mech is put in the right growth environment, it should be able to grow stronger a lot faster than usual. It already retains a part of the properties of a calamity plant. It should be able to reach this state much easier than other plant-based organisms."

Venerable Joshua initially did not understand what Ves was talking about, but he soon widened his eyes in realization.

"Wait! Are you telling me that the Ebony Everchanger... is the child of the Emperor Tree?!"

"Hahaha! That's right! It is a good plan! The Emperor Tree has truly proven to be a lot more cunning than the average calamity beast. Do you know what I think? I believe the tree created the Ebony Everchanger as its legacy. It is a deliberately designed backup option that was meant to be captured by us. It has already witnessed our mechs attempting to capture an intact wooden mech before. This ebony mech and possibly the other ones are not solely designed to fight, but also ensure that the tree is able to leave behind its offspring if the worst case scenario took place."

This practice reminded Ves of ancient tales about how human tribes that managed to conquer other tribes adopted the latter's women and children.

So long as the male warriors had been killed, the remaining members of the tribe no longer posed a significant threat anymore. Instead, the women and children all turned into productive assets that could deepen the foundation of the winning tribe!

"Is that why the Ebony Everchanger is so... quiet at the moment, sir?"

"Maybe. It is possible that in order to increase the chance that we are willing to adopt this 'child', the Emperor Tree deliberately programmed it to be obedient and docile towards its new human masters. If that is its intention, then it has worked. I am very interested in getting my hands on such a powerful and promising construct. This Ebony Everchanger has excellent growth prospects. I almost don't want to merge it with your own Everchanger."

"ARE YOU STILL INTENT ON FUSING ME WITH THIS WOODEN MONSTROSITY AFTER YOU HAVE MADE YOUR LATEST DISCOVERY?"

The real Everchanger clearly did not want anything to do with this alien construct!

Ves thought for a moment. "I need more time to think about this matter. I suppose that the Ebony Everchanger in its current state is much more valuable as an independent asset than if I merge it into your mech frame. However, it also gives me a lot of intriguing ideas about fusing it to your mech frame while retaining its ego. Don't you realize how much more powerful you can become if you can actively leverage the power of a cooperative calamity plant?!"

"I THOUGHT THAT ANY EXOBEAST AND EXOPLANT IS INHERENTLY HOSTILE TO CIVILIZATION. AREN'T YOU AFRAID THAT THE EBONY EVERCHANGER WILL TURN AGAINST US AND TRY TO AVENGE THE DEATH OF ITS 'PARENT' ONE DAY?"

"The risks are high, but so are the rewards. I am sure you can handle it, somehow. This is still a preliminary plan, though. If I cannot make it work, then I will try to find a way to merge your mech frame with other ebony wooden shards."

Chapter 6130 Emperor Wood

The operation to kill the Emperor Tree yielded a lot of gains to the Larkinson Clan.

The Emperor Tree's downfall left behind a lot of wooden remains. Much of it was high-quality wood that acted as a natural hyper material that still retained a semblance of the Emperor Tree's extraordinary properties!

It would have been great if Director Ranya Wodin had already completed her EdNet training.

Her specialization was related to exobotany, so she would have definitely loved to play around with all of the high-quality specimens harvested from one of the most powerful exoplants the Larkinsons had ever encountered!

Unfortunately, her continued absence for at least two more years meant that other eager biotech researchers managed to get their turns first. Multiple research teams drafted interesting new research proposals that promised to enrich the Larkinson Biotech Institute's solutions related to plant organisms.

The cost of conducting all of this research was not too high. Despite the fact that Saint Isobel Kotin burned a lot of wood during the previous operation, there were still millions of tons worth of wood and huge amounts of tree sap available for the taking.

Nobody worried about running out of Emperor Tree materials anytime soon!

Only a couple of parts of the Emperor Tree proved to be scarce, such as ebony wood.

Saint Isobel had done too good of a job at burning down the most precious tree heart. Her King Killer Flames also devoured the Ebony First Sword until there was nothing left and obliterated the Ebony Zeal from a distance.

The search teams hadn't found all that much unburnt remains of the Ebony Zeal.

However, the biotech researchers who eagerly conducted their first experiments on the remains of the Emperor Tree managed to make an explosive discovery.

The Larkinson Biotech Institute placed so much importance on this revelation that Vice Director Maria Abselon chose to contact Ves at the first possible opportunity.

"What's up?" Ves asked the physical projection as he turned away from his research into Woodsap mechs.

It was exactly because he was preoccupied with the development of wood element Carmine mechs that he still placed a high priority on any news related to the Emperor Tree.

"We have made a very critical discovery, sir." The former Terran woman replied. "We have discovered a reliable mechanism to reproduce the biomass of the former Emperor Tree. The immediate consequence is that the wood salvaged from the deceased calamity plant is no longer finite anymore. As long as we satisfy the right conditions and supply the correct input materials, we can slowly increase our stock of wood that is almost identical to the biomass of the Emperor Tree. As far as we have been able to ascertain, this mechanism applies to every variety of wood, including the most valuable ebony wood."

"What?!" Ves became a lot more attentive after hearing this explosive news. "You can clone the Emperor Tree's wood despite the fact that it is not alive anymore?!"

"Life and death has different meanings for exoplants." The physical projection of Maria Abselon smiled. "The powerful consciousness of the calamity exoplant is deceased, but its enormous physical body is still performing all of the routine biological functions to sustain its physical condition. It has turned into the equivalent of a brain dead human patient that is perpetually stuck on life support. When you break the patient's bone, his body's natural mechanisms will still work to mend and heal it as this is a subconscious physiological process. The same applies to the

regeneration ability of the Emperor Tree's wood. It is still present even if Saint Isobel Kotin managed to terminate the ego."

From the way Maria Abselon described it, the regeneration process was like a hardcoded subroutine that could still be run even if the main operating system had been wiped. There was no requirement that the subroutine had to be controlled by the original controller. As long as the original Emperor Tree was gone, there was no inherent protection left to prevent others from manipulating the subroutines!

The vice director played several pieces of footage where the scientists successfully managed to produce different quantities of wood from numerous existing samples taken from the Emperor Tree.

Brand-new sections of wood slowly grew from the original samples when fed with different materials as well as large amounts of wood energy.

The fact that the scientists already managed to produce more high-quality wood variations with similar properties as their originals meant that the remains of the Emperor Tree were not finite anymore!

The Larkinson Clan did not have to worry about running out of this wood as if they were exhausting an ore deposit.

This was the fundamental advantage of using organic materials. It was relatively easier to reproduce them so long as the producer was able to source the right input materials.

Ves immediately focused on the latter. Nothing came for free. Not even the Emperor Tree was able to violate the laws of conservation of mass and energy.

In order to gain something, the Emperor Tree had to lose something of equivalent value.

Ves recalled that the calamity plant expended huge amounts of wood energy and tree sap in order to supercharge its own regeneration processes.

From what he could observe from the laboratory footage, the scientists simply exposed the pieces of Emperor Tree wood to a lot of ores, exobeast remains and other materials taken from the local environment.

Continuous exposure to E energy radiation slowly stimulated the wood pieces into absorbing the raw materials to grow in size, thereby increasing the amount of wood available to the Larkinsons.

"Amazing."

The preliminary results had massive implications for the Larkinson Clan's use cases for this collection of organic materials. Ves saw hope of perpetually using wood derived from the Emperor Tree in the mass production of many different varieties of Woodsap mechs!

In fact, Ves even started to dream about whether it was possible for him to design and mass produce a fully functional wooden mech that could be piloted by humans!

Although Ves had not yet come up with a reason why his customers must purchase wooden mechs as opposed to classical metallic mechs, he was sure he could come up with a good enough value proposition to impress the mech community.

As Ves continued to study the footage and the accompanying data, he soon discovered a glaring problem.

"The production process is not... efficient." He said. "It's too slow. Seeing as there is a plentiful amount of wood and raw materials available, I guess the bottlenecks that are holding back the production rate is the lack of central direction and the limited input of wood energy."

Maria Abselon nodded. "Those are our conclusions as well. As it is, the production of 'Emperor Wood' is not challenging from a technical perspective, but it is slow and energy inefficient. When we compare the laboratory results to the much more rapid and efficient regeneration process of the Emperor Tree back when it was alive, there is an enormous sea of difference."

"Why is there such an enormous discrepancy?" Ves asked with a frown.

This was an important question. The extremely slow wood production rate of the early laboratory experiments had no field applications at all. It would probably take weeks to produce a decent chunk of Emperor Wood, and months to produce enough of this material to produce an entire wooden mech!

While the biomech industry was accustomed to growing its products over a span of multiple months, Ves was not satisfied with this terribly slow production rate.

The Emperor Tree was able to produce large amounts of wooden mechs in a matter of days. It was able to regenerate tons and tons of high-quality wood in a matter of minutes during battle!

If the Larkinsons managed to master the method of regenerating wood at the same speed as the Emperor Tree, then any mechs made with Emperor Wood would be extremely easy to restore in the field!

Ves did not want to give up on this promising capability. Without this insanely high regeneration factor, there was no reason to favor Emperor Wood over other materials in the development of wood-based biomechs!

Fortunately, the Larkinson Biotech Institute managed to investigate this problem a little further.

"We have formed a number of hypotheses that we are in the process of testing. Our main hypothesis is that the reason why the performance was so high when the Emperor Tree was alive was due to quality and quantity."

"Explain."

"The Emperor Tree has demonstrated the ability to channel large quantities of wood energy back when it was alive. In both engagements against our Larkinson mechs, it has actively leveraged large amounts of wood energy to accelerate the regeneration of its wooden constructs as well as its main body. Our clan currently does not possess a device or mechanism that allows us to increase the concentration of wood energy in a small environment. We are in the process of remedying that by importing high-grade wood hyper materials, but it is unlikely we will be able to match the performance of the Emperor Tree in the short term."

Ves nodded in understanding. "What you have said makes sense. What else?"

"We hypothesize that there are specific factors that can dramatically increase the efficiency of wood energy usage. As you already know, E energy is psychoreactive. This means that it is a mistake to treat it as a mundane form of energy such as electricity. Strong mental activity can significantly alter the behavior of E energy. When the ebony heart of the Emperor Tree was still operational, the

calamity plant possessed such a strong cognition that it was able to unlock some of the potential of wood energy and amplify its regeneration properties by several orders of magnitude."

"How big of a difference does this make?"

"We cannot give you any precise numbers, but let me give you a simple analogy." The leading biotech expert said. "Take the Promethea's energy rifle. This is a large weapon that requires a large quantity of energy to fire a single energy beam. Under normal circumstances, only a mech or a machine of an equivalent size can satisfy the Ignitron rifle's consumption. If there is a strong conscious mind that focuses hard on inflicting damage with this weapon, it is possible to inflict just as much damage by using a battery that is designed to power infantry-scale energy firearms!"

"That much?!"

"A calamity plant is very strong. How else do you think that it managed to grow to such an enormous size?"

The analogy described by Maria Abselon may sound a bit exaggerated, but it most definitely conveyed the message that the vice director wanted to convey.

There was a huge difference between a subroutine that was being run on autopilot and a subroutine that was actively being supported by a powerful and compatible mind!

Ves had a better understanding of the current problem. The death of the Emperor Tree deprived the Larkinson Clan of an easy way to handle Emperor Wood.

He suddenly thought of the captured Ebony Everchanger.

"Vice director, since the regeneration process can be accelerated and more efficient when it is actively directed by a strong and compatible consciousness, does this mean the Ebony Everchanger can replicate the performance of the Emperor Tree?"

"It depends, but we believe it is possible. It will take time to turn the Ebony Everchanger into an industrial-scale production machine. It is too immature and incomplete in its current state."

Ves briefly thought about turning the Ebony Everchanger into a full-time Emperor Wood production machine, but he was very reluctant to do so. He wanted to turn the ebony mech into a powerful combat asset!

"Is it possible to use other powerful exoplants to produce Emperor Wood on an industrial scale?"

"It is plausible, but we have yet to test it. We need to conduct many more experiments before we can give you a solid answer. We have only examined and experimented on the samples for a short period of time. More discoveries are forthcoming."