

The Mech 6131

Chapter 6131 Live to Serve

Ves received daily updates about the Larkinson Biotech Institute's research into the remains of the Emperor Tree.

The enthusiastic research teams managed to produce a lot of empirical data and derive all kinds of interesting conclusions from their analyses.

The Larkinsons understood more and more about the Emperor Tree and how calamity plants worked in general.

The Larkinson Biotech Institute flourished as many scientists made amazing discoveries that enriched the clan's biotech capabilities.

Vice Director Maria Abselon even took advantage of the attractiveness of the remains of the Emperor Tree by using it as a selling point in her recruitment pitches.

By promising newcomers the opportunity to conduct their own private research on the many samples of Emperor Wood, she successfully managed to hire over a dozen first-class biotech scientists hailing from the Terran Alliance, the Rubarthan Pact and other first-rate colonial states.

While the Larkinson Biotech Institute was having the time of its life, Ves was also making greater progress in the development of Woodsap mechs.

Although he was still waiting for the Ebony Everchanger and other samples of Emperor Wood to arrive in New Constantinople VIII, he was able to make use of the LBI's research results to accelerate the refit of the Elegant Rage.

With the help of the information collected by the LBI, the mutated mech no longer seemed as unfathomable as before. Ves was gradually able to figure out its internal logic and mechanisms.

The more he studied the Elegant Rage's seamless integration of metallic and wooden components, the more he came to admire her design.

The additional knowledge that he managed to gain in the last few days reinforced his impression that there was an intelligent direction behind the Elegant Rage's transformation.

The living machine did not spontaneously fill up her cavities with wooden equivalents and called it a day. The wooden components worked on completely different principles and had to be designed around their deviating properties.

Ves had a few guesses of who or what the intelligent direction might be. His biggest suspect was the Red Kingdom.

"There is only one party that is 100 percent certain to be involved in Lanie Larkinson's distorted breakthrough process."

Though Ves did not dare to utter its name out loud, the Red Kingdom still loomed large in his mind!

The Red Kingdom was a massive spiritual construct of unsurpassed scale and power. It held so many different functions that Ves could only scratch the surface of what it was capable of. The current Kingdom in the Red Ocean may be fairly young, but it directly inherited many of the capabilities of the much older Kingdom of Mechs.

At its peak, around a hundred Star Designers collectively oversaw the Kingdom of Mechs!

This effectively meant that the Kingdom was never static! It was able to grow and develop itself continuously over time. The longer its existence, the more it developed, especially when an increasing number of Star Designers arose and leant their own expertise to the grand design.

In the past, Ves had always dismissed the Red Kingdom as a passive actor. It was powerful without a doubt, and it wielded an enormous influence over the lives of mech pilots and mech designers.

However, Ves always took comfort in the assumption that the Red Kingdom behaved like an automated background program.

So long as the Red Kingdom executed its limited set of instructions without any judgment or bias, there was no reason for Ves harbor any fear or suspicions towards this great existence.

This time was different.

If the Red Kingdom did more than the minimum and actively showed more initiative by extensively redesigning the Elegant Rage on a fundamental level, then that meant it was not as passive and unthinking as he always assumed!

A chill ran through his spine. The Red Kingdom was deeply connected to every mech pilot and mech designer. Ves was no exception as his design flame still maintained a connection to the Red Kingdom that was so well-hidden that even he couldn't find any clues!

What if the Red Kingdom went rogue one day?

What if it got hijacked by a bad actor who wanted to enslave or ruin the entire mech community?

What if the Red Kingdom became too smart and started to pursue its own ideas?

Though Ves had no proof that the Red Kingdom was at risk in any way, he no longer felt as reassured by its existence as before.

He frowned. "I can't escape its grasp."

Every mech pilot and mech designer of the first and second major cultivation ranks owed much of their progress to its invisible hand. The Red Kingdom secretly guided their cultivation and helped them advance during critical times.

That caused each and every one of them to become dependent on its proper functioning. The moment it started to malfunction or deviate from its intended programming, the Red Kingdom could single-handedly ruin Ves and many other people's lives!

It would have been great if mech pilots and mech designers had a way to cultivate by themselves.

This was clearly impossible during the Age of Mechs, but Ves was not so sure whether this was still the case during the Age of Dawn.

The biggest problem with trying to make red humanity less dependent on the Red Kingdom was that manual cultivation was prone to error.

This was especially the case for more complicated methods, including the ones that determined the progression of mech pilots and mech designers.

In addition to these concerns, Ves also feared that the mech designer profession would become incomplete if the Red Kingdom was taken out of the picture.

After all, when a professional realized his design philosophy, he made an important contribution to the Red Kingdom. This was such an intrinsic part of the development of a mech designer that Ves could not imagine what would happen if this step was removed!

He shook his head. "There is no point in entertaining these doom scenarios."

Ves may have grown into a rising star within the upper ranks of red humanity, but his low qualifications and lack of hard power meant he had no agency over this matter.

He could do nothing to affect the changes of the Red Kingdom. It remained firmly under the control of actual Star Designers.

Since that was the case, he pushed his fears out of his mind and turned his focus back on reforming the Elegant Rage.

He might not be able to fully comprehend the intelligence responsible for mutating the living mech, but he could at least pick up where it left off and further perfect the Elegant Rage.

As he continued to conduct his research on the Elegant Rage, he occasionally entered into a conversation with the living mech.

"You are a beautiful mech, even with all of the thorns in the way." Ves complimented the machine as he carefully tried to stimulate the growth of one of the pieces of wood embedded to the mech frame. "I really regret that I won't be able to tinker with you anymore after you have left my possession. Once I send you off to the Red Association, the mechers will take over every subsequent development. The only thing I can do to make an enduring of your existence is to convert you into a Carmine mech. Hopefully, the overly clever RA mech designers won't try to ruin that in their eagerness to upgrade you to first-class expert mech standards."

The mech surrounded by wooden and metallic thorns briefly flashed her optical sensors. "I TRUST IN YOUR WORK, PROGENITOR, BUT I AM ALSO LOOKING FORWARD TO GROWING STRONGER BY INCORPORATING STATE-OF-THE-ART TECHNOLOGIES. THE MECH DESIGNERS OF THE RED ASSOCIATION MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO DESIGN LIVING MECHS LIKE YOURSELF, BUT THEY WILL DEFINITELY KNOW HOW TO MAKE ME STRONGER, TOUGHER AND FASTER. THAT IS ALL I NEED FROM THEM IN ORDER TO HELP LANIE KILL HER ENEMIES."

Ves was glad that the living mech had a sober perspective on this matter. There was stuff that only Ves could design, and there was stuff that only the mechers could implement. Each of them had their own strengths.

"No matter how the mechers will upgrade and expand your capabilities in the future, don't forget that you will always be a living mech. The greatest advantage that Lanie has is that she doesn't have to bear all of her burdens alone. You have helped to save her life and make a comeback. She trusts you a lot because of that. This is a wonderful relationship, and one that you must always cherish. Don't end up like Zeal who got killed by his own pilot in the end."

The mention of that controversial incident briefly caused the Elegant Rage's thorns to shine in an aggressive manner!

"YOU DO NOT NEED TO REMIND ME OF THAT, PROGENITOR. MY BATTLE PARTNER SHARES NO RESEMBLANCE WITH THE TRAITOR AND BACKSTABBER. ONE DAY, SHE AND I WILL DELIVER THE PUNISHMENT THAT TAON MELIN DESERVES. NO MATTER IF IT TAKES A DECADE, A CENTURY OR A MILLENNIUM, WE SHALL NEVER REST UNTIL WE HAVE KILLED THAT PATHETIC LITTLE CRETIN."

Fortunately, the living mech quickly controlled her temper and clamped down on any dangerous activity.

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Ves inwardly winced. He had hoped that the Elegant Rage would be a little more sane about this vendetta, but it turned out that she was just as fanatical about it as her battle partner!

The two were completely of one mind on this issue. This negated the advantage of having two minds in control over a single mech.

Ves had always been a strong believer in the idea that the mech pilot and the living mech had to be of slightly different minds. The lack of diversity of thought may cause Venerable Lanie to develop extreme thoughts without anyone able to rein in her more insane ideas.

It would have been great if the Elegant Rage was able to function as a more sober and rational companion, but it appeared that Lanie would gain an enabler instead.

Oh well.

"What do you think about becoming a Carmine mech?" Ves asked a different question. "You should know what that entails. I am pretty sure you would be ecstatic if you can form a permanent pact with Venerable Lanie, but are you willing to spend the rest of your life by her side?"

"I AM. THIS IS A DREAM COME TRUE FOR ME AND POSSIBLY MANY OTHER LIVING MECHS. I AM MOLDED BY LANIE. I KNOW NO OTHER PILOT, AND I HAVE NO DESIRE TO ACCEPT OTHER USERS. IF THE WORST HAPPENS TO LANIE, I WILL FOLLOW HER IN DEATH. THERE IS NO MEANING TO MY EXISTENCE WITHOUT MY FIRST AND ONLY BATTLE PARTNER. SHE IS THE BEGINNING AND THE END OF MY LIFE."

Those were not the thoughts of a human. Ves felt rather conflicted about the third order living mech's unreserved trust and commitment towards Venerable Lanie.

Living mechs differed from humans in that they were all designed and built to fulfill specific purposes.

These goals dominated their own lives and forever changed the way they valued their own lives.

Living mechs were symbiotic by nature. They existed for their mech pilots rather than themselves. The thought of living and fighting by themselves never crossed their minds.

To be fair, Ves was responsible for shaping them like this. They were designed to function as war machines under the control of humans.

It would have been a huge risk if Ves ever released a mech that did not try to serve its human pilot to the best of its ability!

In this regard, forming an elemental Blood Pact with Venerable Lanie was no big deal for the Elegant Rage.

From the living mech's perspective, she was merely fulfilling her purpose to a more extreme degree than before.

"I think that Lanie will definitely be thankful that she is able to depend on you for many years to come." Ves smiled as he continued his work on the thorny mech. "Make sure to take advantage of your different perspective on matters. Try to be her friend rather than her sycophant. She will have a much greater chance of surviving what may come if you act as a second opinion to her. Always try to keep her in check."

"I SHALL TAKE YOUR ADVICE UNDER CONSIDERATION."

Chapter 6132 Emperor Tree Sap

With the active cooperation of the Elegant Rage, Ves made faster progress in figuring out a theoretical framework for Woodsap mechs.

Ves continually felt grateful towards the Elegant Rage for providing him with an excellent example on how to fuse wood-based technology with conventional metallic technology.

To put it in extremely simple terms, Venerable Lanie's mech already possessed an incomplete prototype of the Carmine System!

Ves merely had to make use of the existing foundation of wood integration and add a few more elements in order to turn it into a Woodsap mech.

There were two important problems that he needed to solve in order to complete his modifications.

First, he needed to find a way to replace the regular variety of wood with ebony wood.

Back during the sample retrieval mission, the fallen Elegant Rage absorbed the remains of fallen wooden mechs in order to make her mech frame whole again.

Although the material was already pretty good, it was among the weakest and least promising variations of Emperor Wood produced by the calamity plant.

The Red Association may be able to upgrade this inferior wood material with a vastly more superior formula that it had developed in-house, but Ves believed that it was best to make use of ebony wood.

This was why Ves remained stuck on this issue. He had to wait until a fast transport vessel finally delivered the shipment of ebony wood to his doorstep.

The second problem that hindered his progress was that he needed to figure out a powerful liquid medium that could safely be circulated in Lanie's human body.

This was a troublesome issue as there was no way that the raw tree sap from the Emperor Tree could safely be circulated in the vascular system of a typical human!

It sounded as absurd as replacing all of the blood in a person's body with maple syrup! There was no way this could work!

In order to gain a better understanding of the consequences of using tree sap as a substitute of blood, Ves collected a bit of tree sap from the Elegant Rage and stuffed it inside an injection needle.

Ves momentarily stared at the pointy container. He could sense the high concentration of wood energy. The sap of the Emperor Tree was thick and enriched with all kinds of organic and non-organic substances, so it was also dense with nutrients and chemical energy.

This was the lifeblood of a calamity plant!

"It's almost just as dangerous as phasewater."

All of this meant that it was a bad idea to inject it into any random organism.

Of course, Ves did not leave this to speculation alone. He already brought in a number of specimens in order to observe the consequences in person.

"You first."

Ves stood before a table that held a small tree. It was a perfectly normal, unmutated standard tree derived from an authentic old Earth species.

He used the sharp needle to press inside the slender trunk of the plant before injecting a minute amount of exotic tree sap.

The tree immediately started to droop. It was losing its stiffness and integrity with each passing second! The foreign tree sap literally poisoned it to death!

"Damn."

He moved on to the next table which held a plain white lab mouse. Animal testing was the logical next step.

Ves ignored the cute critter's eyes and injected it with a few drops of Emperor Tree Sap.

An energy shield cage immediately came to life in case it was necessary to contain the aftereffects of a violent explosion.

Nothing of the sort took place.

Instead, the mouse immediately started to squeak in pain before dropping dead. Its body began to discolor and bleed, but other than that the carcass did not do anything else.

"So dangerous."

Ves moved on to an exobeast whose species and properties he did not bother to study. Ves only wanted to get his hands on an organism with a tough body and high tolerance towards different ailments.

When he injected a small amount of tree sap into the body of the reptilian beast, the creature looked fine for half a minute, but slowly began to die. Its passing was similar to the lab mouse, though its greater size allowed it to hold out longer.

Suffice to say, Ves was not happy with the results. He had only injected minor quantities of tree saps into every test subject, and already they started to croak!

It would probably help if he reduced the dosage by at least one or two orders of magnitude, but Ves did not like this adjustment.

The point of the Carmine System was to ritually connect two different beings by blood. It was of utmost importance that the two participants circulated the same blood.

Excessively diluting the Emperor Tree Sap until there was hardly anything related to the Emperor Tree left in the final mixture would probably invalidate the blood connection.

It was best to adulterate the tree sap as little as possible in order to form the strongest possible Woodsap Pact.

"Hmmm..."

Ves stared at the syringe. He hadn't even used up most of the tree sap. The test subjects all got killed before he could increase the dosage on them. That left him with a considerable excess.

"Well, I shouldn't waste this stuff."

Before he could question himself any further, he proceeded to stick the needle into his own arm and injected all of the remaining tree sap into his bloodstream!

Of course, most needles, including the reinforced one attached to the syringe, wouldn't have been able to pierce into his surprisingly tough skin.

His true body was much larger and possessed far thicker skin!

Ves had to utilize his inherent phase lord capabilities to deliberately weaken his skin and allow his body to get injected by the needle.

Once he had done so, he waited and tried his best to sense his body's reaction to the unwelcome intrusion of tree sap.

"..."

Nothing. Ves felt absolutely nothing.

To be fair, his true body was so enormous that the dosage was far too trivial to poison his body in any way!

Ves merely hoped that he could gain a more intuitive feel of how tree sap behaved inside his body, but he would probably have to inject tens if not hundreds of liters of tree sap.

"Never mind, then."

In the end, Ves drew an important conclusion from this round of experimentation.

The tree sap was extremely lethal to most human physiologies. Perhaps the Red Association was currently in the process of applying heavy augmentations to Venerable Lanie's body, but that would not necessarily make her compatible with the extremely lethal Emperor Tree Sap!

"What about the other way around?" Ves wondered. "Can Emperor Wood tolerate exposure to human blood?"

He conducted another quick experiment to find out. Much to his relief, Emperor Wood was so strong that it did not weaken when it was exposed to normal human blood.

The only problem occurred when he decided to expose samples of Emperor Wood to his own phasewater-enriched blood.

Each and every sample crackled and split apart as the spatial fluctuations tore them all apart.

"Okay, that answers that question."

This was another problem. Phasewater technology had become a big deal in modern times. The Hyper Generation may have supplanted the Phasewater Generation in the Red Ocean, but that did not mean that phasewater had lost its relevance!

If Ves wanted to prep the Elegant Rage for future use within the ranks of the Red Association, he had to make sure that its organic components became compatible with phasewater.

"If ebony wood doesn't solve this problem, then I will have to modify it so that it can get along with phasewater."

Ves was reaching the limits of what he could do on his own. The Larkinson Biotech Institute might be able to help, but it would take months or years before its biotech researchers produced solid results.

That was too slow.

He decided to call over Alexa Streon in order to gain a second opinion.

Once his protege arrived and received an extensive heads-up, the clever Journeyman Mech Designer fell into thought.

"I do not think it is a large problem to develop a variation of Emperor Wood that is compatible with phasewater." The woman shared her own thoughts. "There are many native plant species that have evolved on planets that are endowed by phasewater deposits. As long as you can transplant or reverse engineer the genetic code that enables these plants to contain and resist the effects of phasewater, your scientists should be able to develop phasewater-tolerant Emperor Wood."

Ves smiled. "You're right. I don't think it will be easy to modify the wood derived from a calamity plant, but it shouldn't be too difficult either. The right building blocks are already in place. We just need to piece them together."

"As for the tree sap problem, I am unable to devise any obvious solutions. I am afraid that you have to make a difficult choice. The first option that comes to mind is to admit that you are not yet equipped to develop a Woodsap mech and give up on this ambition. Why must you insist on turning the Elegant Rage into a Woodsap mech? Can't you turn her into a regular Carmine mech? In fact, why must she forge a Blood Pact with Venerable Lanie in the first place?"

Alexa asked a number of sharp questions. There was no clear reason why Ves had to turn the Elegant Rage into a Carmine mech. Many pilots including the likes of Saint Tusa were doing just fine without relying on such a special feature!

"I don't have much choice, Alexa. The Mace of Retaliation directly instructed me to turn the Elegant Rage into Venerable Lanie's Carmine mech. He wants to raise the stakes and force Venerable Lanie to win or gracefully retreat from every battle she participates in. There should never be an instance where she suffered such a heavy defeat that she has lost her entire mech."

The young woman's expression changed. "That is... harsh. Is it truly a benefit for Venerable Lanie to be mentored by such a strong personality? The stories and rumors about the Mace of Retaliation

have never been too positive. He is only a pale shadow compared to his much more successful father."

"Let's not gossip behind a peak ace pilot's back." Ves awkwardly coughed. "In any case, the only hard requirement is to turn the Elegant Rage into a Carmine mech. If I want to, I can complete the conversion in two days, and that is if I try to be really careful. This is not what I want, though. The Elegant Rage is the strongest wood-aligned mech that I have encountered up to now. It is an ideal candidate to become my first wood-aspected Carmine mech. It is just that I have yet to flesh out the concept of my revolutionary new elemental Carmine System."

His latest student knew how Ves could become stubborn about these kinds of issues, so she did not persuade him to change his mind.

They could spend their time much more productively if they figured out a proper solution to this problem.

"I see no other way to make a Carmine System that substitutes human blood for Emperor Tree Sap than to force Venerable Lanie to undergo extreme body modifications." Alexa spoke with a heavy tone. "I think the Red Association must figure out a way to turn her into a partial plant in order to make her compatible with this dangerous sap."

This was not an impossible demand. Ranya Wodin had already integrated herself with a plant a long time ago.

This was a more extreme instance, though. Ves had no idea whether Venerable Lanie would even agree to such a radical body transformation.

"We will have to contact the Red Association if there is no better option." Ves tiredly sighed. "We cannot go any further unless we gain the explicit approval of Venerable Lanie and the active cooperation of the mechers."

Developing a Woodsap mech was far more troublesome than he thought!

Chapter 6133 Immature Tech

The problems that Ves encountered during the development of Woodsap mechs taught him an important lesson.

A price had to be paid for mech pilots to form a bond with an elemental Carmine mech.

Baseline or regular augmented human bodies could not tolerate the substitute medium used by one of the five as-of-yet-developed elemental Carmine Systems.

This was a major problem and setback. It effectively meant that anyone who wanted to pilot an elemental Carmine mech needed to make a drastic sacrifice in order to make use of its power.

Was it fair to ask his customers to undergo extreme life-changing physiological transformations just to bind themselves to really weird versions of Carmine mechs?

"The biggest question is whether it is worth it." Ves furrowed his brows.

He was unable to answer this question because he had yet to produce an actual elemental Carmine mech.

He intended to turn the Elegant Rage into the first mech of this new sub-category of mechs.

However, his plan required him to persuade Venerable Lanie to act as a test subject for a new and completely untested design application.

Even though Ves believed his planned implementation of a Woodsap Carmine System was theoretically sound, the lack of empirical verification meant that there was always a risk of accidents.

He needed to talk about his problems. He felt too burdened by what he had to impose on his customers just to make his elemental Carmine System concept work.

His wife thought he was moving way too quickly.

"You haven't completed the development of a mature Carmine System yet." She poked as she held Marvaine in her arms. "Trying to develop a more advanced version of this tech will lead to many preventable problems. Have you ever thought about slowing down and taking this step by step? You will be in a better position to develop a proper Woodsap mech in a decade."

Ves shook his head. "I can't wait that long! Look, I don't disagree with your logic, but reality is forcing me to move faster than I am comfortable with. There is only one chance to convert the Elegant Rage into a Woodsap mech. If I refuse this opportunity and turn the mutated mech into a standard Carmine mech, then that represents a lot of lost potential. Venerable Lanie will not be able to derive as many advantages from her Blood Pact."

"And that matters how, Ves? Last I heard, our clan has exiled Venerable Lanie Larkinson. Her interests are no longer important to us. We are supposed to maintain our distance from her, or else the exile will have no meaning anymore."

"That is how exile should work in theory, but it doesn't work that way in practice." Ves patiently explained to his wife. "No matter what, everyone will look at her record and her last name and assume she is still a representative of our clan. Her conduct, performance and accomplishments will inevitably reflect on our clan. It is in our best interest to make her as powerful as possible, especially if she chooses to pilot a living mech that is originally ours. The more she manages to stand out among the mechers, the more those snooty fellows will appreciate our work."

Gloriana briefly thought about it, but then proceeded to plant a kiss on Marvaine. "Your bias is showing. Your family affection towards Lanie is clouding your judgment. From what you have described, Woodsap mechs go much further than Carmine mechs in imposing demands on mech pilots. There are too many chances that this will go wrong. If you insist on pursuing this, then you must be thorough in order to avoid this gambit backfiring on you. Do not be afraid of consulting the Red Association for technical support."

Though his wife was not as helpful as he hoped, she reminded him of a few important considerations.

Ves turned to another mech designer for additional feedback.

His student Alexa understood his dilemma, but she did not think the requirements were excessive.

"To be honest, sir, the mandatory requirement that the mech pilot must be paired with a single mech for the rest of his or her life is the most onerous one. Once a mech pilot agrees to form a Blood Pact with a Carmine mech, that individual has already made the bravest and most life-changing decision of his career. If you subsequently ask that mech pilot to undergo radical body modifications in order

to become eligible to pilot a Woodsap or Bloodfire mech, then that is not a particularly heavy demand."

"You make it sound as if we are entrapping our potential customers and clients with a sunk cost fallacy." Ves flatly responded.

The former Terran shrugged and smiled. "That is because it is true. If we try to entice a pilot to commit to using a single Carmine mech for the rest of her life, she may as well make the most of this decision and make a greater commitment. When a pilot decides to form a Blood Pact, she has already chosen to reject a normal progression trajectory. Any soldier who is willing to go above and beyond is more likely than not ambitious. As long as your elemental Carmine mechs are stronger than other products, and as long as you have gathered solid proof that a more exotic Blood Pact can increase the probability of breakthroughs, you will find that demand for this solution will skyrocket."

Her argument made a lot of sense. It all came down to whether a Woodsap mech or other elemental variant could deliver solid benefits to its mech pilot.

As long as such a mech was able to provide both enhanced performance and greater growth prospects, Ves would not have to worry about running out of customers!

"Thank you for sharing your perspective with me, Alexa. How well do you think Woodsap mechs will catch on in the Terran mech market?"

"That is a complicated question, sir. The Terran mech market is notoriously hard to enter. It is oligopolistic, which means that it is large but also dominated by many large competitors. The customer base is predominantly made up of large and medium-sized organizations, each of whom prefer to establish long-term relationships with trusted mech companies. It is difficult for a new entrant to persuade Terran customers to try out experimental mech models that have yet to prove themselves on a wider scale. Strict regulations also limit the release of highly innovative products that have not undergone extensive field testing. This is meant to stabilize the mech market and ensure that every product is safe and reliable to use."

Ves frowned. He knew that Alexa was not wrong in this. The Terran mech market was insanely profitable, but only for the large players that had already carved out their own market positions.

Not just any mech company could succeed in the Terran Alliance. The company in question needed to possess capital, relationships, regulatory advantages in abundance in order to gain a solid foothold in the market!

The rather extensive suppression of new entrants prevented the Terrans from getting their hands on the latest and most cutting edge technologies unless they went private and made use of other channels.

That was not to say that there was no room for innovation in the commercial mech market. The Terrans simply looked up to the largest and most reputable mech companies to keep up with industry trends and make sure they remained competitive.

Most Terran customers simply had no reason to take a look at the eclectic and unreliable products sold by smaller players.

"What about the Rubarthan mech market? I heard that it is a lot easier to get started over there." Ves proposed.

"The Rubarthan mech market has its own challenges." Alexa chuckled. "The good news is that the mech market is not as dominated by an oligopoly. The customer base is also more adventurous and willing to try out more experimental mechs designed by smaller players. The issue is that competition is extremely fierce. Not only will competitors try to compete on price, they may also choose to license your designs to hijack your product advantages or develop their own technological substitutes in order to steal your customer base. As long as the mech companies do not go too far and break any hard rules, they are allowed to fiercely compete against each other. Only the fittest of competitors deserve to survive in this cutthroat market environment."

Ves huffed. It was typical for the Rubarthans to maintain a more liberalized mech market. This resulted in a considerable uptick in chaos, market disruptions and other unpleasant business.

Despite all of these downsides, the Rubarthans felt it was critically important to promote competition and to prevent any market leader from becoming too complacent.

"So I should have a better shot at introducing Woodsap mechs in the Rubarthan mech market, is that what you are saying?"

"Not necessarily." Alexa replied. "The Terran mech market is not as inaccessible as you think, especially for a mech designer as famous as you. There are two different strategies that you can choose from. The first strategy is that you can prove the concept of your Woodsap mechs by introducing them to the third-class and second-class mech markets. This is the strategy that I am currently pursuing for my own living mechs. It will take years to prove that your innovations are promising and reliable enough to be applied to first-class mechs, but it will allow you to retain greater control over your own works, assuming that a first-class mech designer did not manage to develop a substitute before you are ready to enter the first-class mech market."

The Evolution Witch pretty much forced Ves to adopt this approach for his standard Carmine mechs. That meant that even a god pilot saw a lot of merit in this strategy.

"What about the other strategy?"

"Partnerships. If you want to produce results in a shorter time frame, then you can approach an established player in a first-class mech market such as Isthmus Manufacturing. You will be responsible for providing the mech designs, while the mech manufacturer is responsible for production, shipping, sales and aftermarket services. This is a common arrangement in every industry, but is the best way for new players to enter the first-class mech market."

Ves saw the merits of this strategy, but the price was also considerable. The LMC would have to give up a lot of profits as well as an extensive amount of control.

Was this the most suitable approach to take for his elemental Carmine mechs?

"I don't mind the premise of giving my partners a fair share of the profits, but I do not particularly like the sound of relinquishing so much control." He said.

"The partner is not a pure profiteer, sir. The Terran and Rubarthan mech manufacturers are highly experienced and have a large staff of mech designers and other experts at their disposal. They can not only help you tailor your mech designs to their mech markets, but also provide extensive R&D

support. For example, you can obtain immediate and extensive support from a willing Terran or Rubarthan mech manufacturer if you are willing to sign a contract related to Woodsap mechs. You only need to convince them of the value and the future potential of your speculative innovation."

That was easier said than done, but it was a valid direction that Ves could take with his Woodsap mechs.

It was too soon for this, though. Ves only sought to convert the Elegant Rage into a Woodsap mech. He was still far from developing a mass production model that incorporated a more tested version of the Woodsap Carmine System.

"I will take your advice under consideration." He told Alexa. "You have given me a lot of ideas and reminded me of the options that I have available. For now, I want to keep things as private as possible. For now, I just want you to search for research institutions that can help me increase the phasewater tolerance of Emperor Wood and more specifically ebony wood. The priority shipment from Reticula Corein V is due to arrive on another day. We can experiment with real samples by that time."

Chapter 6134 Vegan Cat

A big turning point came in the development of the first Woodsap mech.

The shipment from Reticula Corein V finally arrived on New Constantinople VIII!

Ves grinned for hours as the transport carrying the most valuable spoils from the battle against the Emperor Tree slowly touched down on the landing zone of Diandi Base.

"Meow?"

Lucky looked as if he did not know why he had to be present. Ves just randomly plucked the dark-colored gem cat from Andraste's lap and carried him all the way outside.

The cat curiously observed as the fat transport vessel powered down before lowering the main cargo hatch.

A small army of bots moved in to take out numerous cargo containers. Each of them held valuable spoils that Ves desired to obtain for a while now. He finally had access to different varieties of Emperor Wood!

As Diandi Base began to receive, inspect and process the incoming cargo, Ves soon managed to get his hands on a small splinter of ebony wood.

The splinter originally came from the Ebony Zeal, but had broken off from the champion wooden mech after getting struck by the Promethea after Isobel's breakthrough.

Ves already had a good idea of how remarkable it was, but holding a real sample in his own hands made him appreciate this material even more.

"This is the finest variation of Emperor Wood that currently exists. Isn't it fascinating, Lucky? It is an organic fusion between a high-grade exotic alloy and a high-grade hyper material. It is tough but also fairly flexible. It is surprisingly light in weight but is also much more spiritually active than any hyper material I have seen. It might not score at the top in every criteria, but its overall performance is so good that it is truly a worthwhile material to use in the development of first-class mechs."

If not for the fact that it took a lot of time and energy to produce more ebony wood, Ves would have been tempted to design ebony mechs right away!

As Ves continued to admire the real piece of ebony wood in his hands, Lucky did not seem nearly as impressed.

"Hey Lucky."

"Meow?"

"Why don't you take a bite?"

"Meow-meow?!"

"Doesn't it look and smell yummy to you? It may be organic, but it is heavily enriched by the best metals that the Emperor Tree was able to extract from the environment. This particular piece just so happens to have integrated the first-class alloys from the Zeal. That should make this piece of ebony wood a lot more enticing."

"Meeoow!"

Lucky was already starting to squirm away from Ves' grasp.

"Oh no you don't. Cats can be vegans as well, you know. Now open up and take a bite!"

"Meeeow! Meeeow! Meeeow!"

Ves disregarded the melodramatic cat's distress and forcibly stuffed the ebony wood through Lucky's gullet.

Soon enough, the ebony wood had disappeared into Lucky's unwilling stomach.

"Meoooow..."

The cat clearly did not enjoy the experience. He continued to hack and cough as if he had just swallowed the most unpalatable thing in existence.

It didn't make sense to Ves. Lucky ate all kinds of strange, weird and toxic metals. If his digestion system was able to handle such difficult materials, then he should be able to digest a wide range of organic and non-metallic materials as well!

However, Lucky's reaction towards being forced to swallow a piece of alien wood was genuine. The gem cat truly detested what just entered into his stomach and immediately began to show signs of getting sick.

It was as if he had just gotten food poisoned!

Ves rolled his eyes at the display. "You don't know what sort of good stuff you have just ingested. It's really difficult for us to produce more ebony wood. It not only requires a diverse collection of high-quality materials, but also has to be fueled with an astronomical amount of wood energy. The Emperor Tree only ever managed to produce just three ebony mechs at its height."

"Meoow..."

Lucky did not care about that background information at all. He was just upset that Ves forced him to eat another piece of awful tasting organic material!

Once Ves loosened his grip, Lucky fought against his sickened stomach and successfully managed to get away from the devil who forced him to ingest a piece of strange wood.

"Meow meow meow!..."

The cat quickly disappeared by phasing through the ground.

Ves shrugged but let Lucky go. He had already seen what he wanted to see.

He picked up another piece of ebony wood and stroked its surface as if he was holding a delicate jewel.

"I am going to conduct a lot of experiments on you." He grinned.

Ves did not delay in this. He had been waiting far too long for this shipment. He already planned out a whole series of experiments.

Of course, there was no need to examine the ebony wood from scratch. The Larkinson Biotech Institute had conducted its own studies on the high-quality wood material and managed to collect a lot of useful data.

What Ves sought to do with ebony wood went beyond figuring out its properties.

He wanted to explore its applications and see how much he could tap into its potential. He also wanted to make deliberate alterations to ebony wood in order to increase its performance and make it more resistant to phasewater.

Before he began his experiments, he briefly paid a visit to the Ebony Everchanger.

Ves placed a lot of value in the legacy of the Emperor Tree. The Premier Branch dedicated an entire secure vault for the temporary storage of this powerful alien construct.

Alexa and Gloriana accompanied Ves as he made his way to the only living remnant of the Emperor Tree.

The Ebony Everchanger was truly more impressive to Ves now that he was able to observe it up close.

From the strong wood alignment of its spirituality to the remarkable way the large construct was able to operate by relying on unconventional materials, Ves eagerly wanted to pick it apart and see how it ticked from the inside!

He tried his best to restrain his urges. The Ebony Everchanger was far more valuable to him while it remained whole.

"What do you think?"

"It is... a perversion of living mechs." Gloriana judged. "I do not object to tributes of our mechs because I know that their creators are generally well-meaning, if much less skilled than ourselves. This is not a tribute. This is an incompetent form of theft and imitation. It is not enough for the Emperor Tree to try to reproduce the power of the Everchanger in an incompetent manner. It also tried to corrupt the entire mech concept by overriding our masterwork mech's original functions with its own wood-based solutions!"

His wife truly did not like the Ebony Everchanger at all. She objected to the existence of every organic mech because they were never produced with the level of machine-like precision that she demanded out of her perfect vessels.

In contrast to the perfectionist, his protege had a more positive opinion on the ebony mech.

"This alien specimen would make for a fantastic legacy mech." Alexa noted with clear interest in her voice. "Due to the excellent regenerative properties of ebony wood, the Ebony Everchanger can theoretically engage in asexual reproduction. It should be able to produce nearly identical clones of itself. Regardless of the cost of doing so, this is incredibly valuable as it opens up the possibility to develop self-replicating mechs. Once a line of ebony mechs has managed to propagate in large numbers, I can bind them into a single mech dynasty, thereby allowing Carmine mech pilots who have formed a pact with it to utilize every ebony mech of the same lineage interchangeably."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "You sound genuinely interested in developing an ebony wood variant of your living legacy mech concept."

"I am, but I am not in a hurry to utilize it for the time being. I am still preoccupied with designing third-class living legacy mechs. Ebony wood is too expensive for this mech market. It is better to wait until I am ready to design first-class living legacy mechs before I think about designing an organic living legacy mech based on the best and most developed variant of Emperor Wood at that time."

"Hm. Good choice. It is better to wait a few years until our clan has refined this wonderful material further." Ves spoke. "I am thinking about instructing the Larkinson Biotech Institute to set up an entirely new research division that is solely centered around Emperor Wood. If our clan has a future for this wood variety, then it is more than worthwhile to invest into persistent R&D on this wood. The scientists can work on developing improved versions of ebony wood to cater to first-raters. They can also work on developing more affordable variants of Emperor Wood to design organic mechs that are more appealing to second-raters and third-raters. You should have plenty of options at that time."

His student certainly looked intrigued. "There is natural synergy between Emperor Wood and my living legacy mechs. The issue is that market acceptance for biomechs is low. Wooden mechs are even more unusual than most biomechs, so we will have to fight an uphill battle in order to turn any wood-based biomech model into a commercially successful product."

She was right. Biomechs were strange and troublesome to maintain. The current mech infrastructure was not geared towards fielding and servicing mechs predominantly made out of any organic material.

Ves did not give up on them, though. "The fundamental reason why biomechs never caught on was because its proponents never managed to present a convincing case why customers should use them over metallic mechs. I think we change that if we combine our own specialties with this material. At the very least, my Woodsap mech concept will probably convince a lot of customers that mechs made out of Emperor Wood are worthwhile investments."

These were future considerations. For now, Ves needed to think about producing more short-term results.

Alexa and Gloriana did not linger around for long. Both of them had full schedules and needed to get back to work right away.

Ves decided to approach the Ebony Everchanger and see if he could interact with the wooden construct.

Due to the ebony mech's good behavior, Ves had allowed it to remain in the vault without trying to lock it down in any other way. There was no stasis field or azure energy shields to bind it in place.

This made it risky for Ves to approach on his own initiative, but not too much. He was not only equipped with multiple pieces of personal protection equipment, but he was also a phase lord. He was confident he could handle any surprise attack.

Ves simply decided to approach under the guise of a normal human in order to test the ebony mech's reaction.

So far, so good. Ves did not sense any spike of hostility in the ebony mech. It had truly surrendered itself to its captors.

"Hello." Ves waved his arm at the Ebony Everchanger. "I am your new owner. I hope you will fare well under our care. Your old creator is gone now. If you want to live on after your progenitor's passing, then I hope you will follow me and listen to my instructions. I have many plans for you. One of them can make you really powerful. Perhaps you might even be able to surpass the strength of the Emperor Tree one day."

The Ebony Everchanger listened to his words, but did not respond in any obvious fashion.

Ves previously thought that the ebony mech was too stupid or underdeveloped to understand his meaning.

Then he realized that he was talking to a derivative of an exoplant.

While many mutated plants and calamity plants eventually developed and mastered the concept of communication, the Ebony Everchanger was not as old and powerful as the Emperor Tree. It was only a month-old baby in absolute terms!

Ves let out a sigh. "It appears that educating you is a long-term project."

Chapter 6135 Inhuman Demand

Ves finally managed to make a lot of progress after he gained access to the Ebony Everchanger along with other remains of the Emperor Tree.

Although he was not able to communicate directly with the Ebony Everchanger, he spent enough time with the alien wooden construct to form a tacit relationship with it. He simply turned himself into a known presence who always tried to be attentive to its condition.

Familiarity bred friendship, or at least tolerance.

While Ves mainly conducted studies on the Ebony Everchanger itself, he agreed to transfer samples of ebony wood to the Red Association in order to develop an upgraded version that was useful for high-end mechs.

"Don't worry, Ves. I will personally pay attention to this matter and ensure that our research team will produce results as quickly as possible." Jovy Armalon said. "Any gains we make will end up

improving the Elegant Rage, which will soon turn into our asset. We have no reason to disregard its importance."

It only took a few days for Jovy to get back at Ves. "It is done."

"That quickly?"

"Your demand is not too onerous to our biotech researchers, Ves. We have conducted extensive studies on organic materials. The wood produced by the Emperor Tree has a number of interesting advantages, several of which are unique. The scientists were particularly fascinated by how extensively Emperor Wood is able to evade many forms of detection due to the integration of Solus Gas. It is regrettable that Emperor Wood must be supplied with Solus Gas in order to reproduce the wood with the same capabilities."

Ves nodded in understanding. One of the most critical materials that Task Force Solus shipped to Diandi Base was a tank filled with highly concentrated Solus Gas. It became a lot harder to produce more Emperor Wood with all of the advantages of the original materials without adding this special material!

Jovy activated a projection that showed a slightly discolored version of ebony wood.

"Since the output is dependent on the input, our scientists have combined dozens of organic and non-organic materials that are already utilized for other demanding purposes. They have found the right combination that preserves the advantages of ebony wood while also offering superior performance. I can promise you that the new wood variant is significantly stronger and more difficult to destroy."

"I take it that it is also more expensive to produce, is that correct?"

"That is an unavoidable consequence. Mind you that this is hardly the only version of ebony wood that our scientists can develop. They settled on this outcome because it is what they can develop with a minimal time investment. The researchers essentially adapted existing wood solutions to ebony wood and selected the first one that produced a successful result. There is still much more room for refinement and optimization, let alone more qualitative improvements."

"I understand. I appreciate the fact that they have been able to present acceptable results in such a short time frame. This will help me form a more solid and stable foundation for the Elegant Rage as a future expert mech."

Soon enough, the mechers would take possession of the mutated mech, which meant it was up to them to develop more powerful and sophisticated ebony wood variations.

Ves just wanted to make sure that the Elegant Rage got off to a good start as a Woodsap mech.

The mechers also encountered hindrances when they grappled with the slow production rate of ebony wood, but they had a lot of solutions.

The Association already possessed the means to form pockets of space with highly concentrated E energies. The research team simply applied to use one of those chambers and took advantage of the huge concentration of wood energy to more quickly produce pieces of improved ebony wood.

The cost of producing superior variation of ebony wood on an expedited basis was not cheap!

Fortunately, the mechers did not think about letting Ves pay the bill. They already considered this research would be helpful to the Association and one of its latest expert pilots.

Ves only had to wait a few more days before the Red Association finally shipped enough improved ebony wood to begin the replacement process.

He went down to his private workshop and greeted the Elegant Rage once again.

Several containers filled with lots of pieces of improved and phasewater-resistant ebony wood had just been transferred over the private workshop.

As a powerful third order living mech that had recently enjoyed a significant growth spurt due to Venerable Lanie's breakthrough, the Elegant Rage was able to detect the much more powerful wood variant.

"IS THIS THE IMPROVED EBONY WOOD THAT YOU HAVE PROMISED TO UPGRADE ME WITH?" The thorn-covered mech asked.

"Yup." Ves smirked. "You can feel how much better it is compared to your own wood, right? There is no need to feel too sentimental about your inferior material composition. As long as you can swap out your old wood with this new variation, your foundation will become a lot stronger. This will allow Venerable Lanie to enjoy a good start in her career as an expert pilot."

After confirming that the Elegant Rage did not object to assimilating the new wood, Ves quickly started to begin the process of wood material substitution.

This was probably a much more difficult process if Ves worked with a regular mech made out of wood, but the Elegant Rage was different.

It was a mutated third order living mech that had received a lot of empowerment from Lanie's recent breakthrough.

It was rather magical to see this change taking place over a relatively sedate pace.

The Elegant Rage couldn't help it. She wasn't able to channel a lot of wood energy, so she could only absorb the ebony wood at a very slow rate.

Even if it wasn't being piloted, the Elegant Rage was still able to leverage a limited amount of power by herself. Her strong thorn imprint and integration of wooden components granted her the ability to channel a limited amount of wood energy.

Utilizing wood energy was necessary to power the living mech's instinctive wood replacement process.

It was rather magical to see this change taking place over a relatively sedate pace.

The Elegant Rage couldn't help it. She wasn't able to channel a lot of wood energy, so she could only absorb the ebony wood at a very slow rate.

Ves watched on as the process took place. It would have required exponentially more energy to produce ebony wood from scratch, but since the Red Association already produced plenty of it in a hurry, the Elegant Rage did not need to work too hard in order to upgrade herself.

Seeing the Elegant Rage grow stronger by absorbing superior materials reminded Ves of the Devil Tiger.

Veronica never managed to get a good look at the most current state of the Devil Tiger.

Perhaps that should change.

Ves came up with a lot of innovations related to living mechs. It was high time for him to apply them all to his very first masterwork mech.

He idly entertained the idea as he observed the gradual transformation of the Elegant Rage.

Once the living mech fully assimilated the available ebony wood, Ves only had to implement targeted modifications to the partially wooden mech frame in order to convert her into a Woodsap mech.

Ves already figured out the technical design of a Carmine System based on Emperor Tree Sap after borrowing help from the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

As far as he was concerned, the mech was never the issue.

The real problem was with the mech pilot. Ves still felt reluctant to demand so many sacrifices from the mech pilot, but he believed it was necessary to do so in order to bring out the full potential of his elemental Carmine System.

Seeing that it wouldn't take more than a few more days before he could ship the upgraded and converted Elegant Rage to the Red Association, Ves decided it was finally time to contact Venerable Lanie.

Ves first called his friend Jovy.

"What do you require this time, Ves?"

"I need you to get me in contact with Venerable Lanie Larkinson." Ves stated. "I am sure you know why I need to talk to her directly over a secure communication channel."

Jovy was doubtlessly aware of Ves' recent work and nodded within a second. "That can be arranged. Given the sensitivity of this conversation, we will have to ask you to teleport back to the Tarrasque in order to make use of our most secure communication facility."

"That's not a problem."

It only took three hours before Ves was able to contact Venerable Lanie. Once he was teleported onto the flagship of the Bluejay Fleet, Jovy led him to the secure communication chamber before leaving him alone.

Ves was under no illusion that the conversation would be truly private. The most he could expect was that the Survivalists and the Transhumanists would do their best to prevent mechers from other factions from gaining access.

As he sat down on a chair, the environment around him changed to display a slightly different projected chamber.

"Hello again, Lanie. You look... a lot better than before."

"I have already received the first round of augmentations." Venerable Lanie said as she wore a training suit that outlined her strengthened and thickened physique. "I have several more months to go, all while I am expected to study history, regulations, mech piloting theory and more. It is... exhausting, but also fulfilling. I miss my living mech, though."

"Don't worry about that. I am almost done with upgrading the Elegant Rage." Ves said with a smile. "However, before I make the final modifications, I need to know how far you are willing to go to pursue greater power. Your answer will largely determine how extensively I will upgrade your living mech."

He proceeded to explain the basics of his experimental Woodsap Carmine System and what it demanded from a mech pilot.

The female exile initially looked troubled, but soon schooled her expression.

"That is... not what I expected to hear. I cannot say that I am comfortable with the need to turn myself into a half-plant."

"That is not actually correct." Ves quickly corrected. "I am sure the clever mechers can develop a body modification program that can make your body compatible with Emperor Tree Sap without literally turning a part of your flesh and organs into plant matter. It is just that the domineering properties of this powerful tree sap will still result in drastic modifications that will further distance you from your humanity. The psychological impact this will have on you is much greater than many other forms of augmentation."

"It's okay, sir."

Ves blinked. "Really?"

Venerable Lanie gave him a rueful smile. "Ever since I broke through, I have already left my old life behind. I don't really care about holding on to my human sentiments. I have a great need for power, and if you think your Woodsap mech invention can make me stronger than ever, then I will gladly turn myself into a plant hybrid. The only thing that makes me hesitate is that you haven't actually proven that your Woodsap Carmine System is stronger."

"That is true, but I have strong reason to believe it is worth it." Ves tried to reassure her. "I have already worked on a secret project that is based on similar principles. The results far exceeded my initial expectations. While I cannot say that a Woodsap mech will become ten times stronger than a regular mech, my work should at least produce a degree of amplification that will satisfy you. If that does not happen, I will promise you that I will continue to iterate on the Elegant Rage until it truly lives up to my expectations."

Though Venerable Lanie had good reasons to be skeptical about the Woodsap Carmine System, she always looked up to Ves. She trusted her former patriarch, especially when it came to topics related to mechs.

She was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, even if he asked him to undergo extreme body modifications in order to use Emperor Tree Sap as a substitute for blood!

"I'll do it." She said in a firm voice. "If this change will bring me closer to the Elegant Rage than ever, then I will gladly embrace this change. It will be difficult for me to pass the Mace of Retaliation's tests and outperform my many rivals in the RA if I can't count on this advantage."

"Good. I will be in touch with the mechers who will be responsible for developing a suitable augmentation suite for you. Hopefully, they can still change your current augmentation plan to take the new demands into account."

Ves managed to overcome almost every obstacle that stood in the way of turning the Elegant Rage into a Woodsap mech.

Venerable Lanie Larkinson's consent to undergo unprecedented body modifications in order to effectively replace her blood with Emperor Tree Sap was far-reaching.

Such a massive change could never be accomplished by any regular genetics lab.

Ves had to turn to the Transhumanist Faction in order to research this radical solution and convert Lanie's body as soon as possible.

"There is no need for you to feel concerned about this matter. The demands that you have issued are heavy, but it can still be done. This is what our Transhumanist Faction is working towards."

Professor Vector Loban reassured Ves shortly after he teleported to the surface from the Bluejay Fleet.

"Will the Survivalists agree to let your faction take charge in transforming Venerable Lanie's body?"

"The Mace of Retaliation who has taken your exiled expert pilot under his wing is not a small-minded individual. He trusts us to do our jobs, and we will. I am sure that if the Evolution Witch is not currently preoccupied with military affairs, she would have definitely put all of her support behind your current project. With that in mind, our faction is prepared to invest serious resources and manpower into this job."

Given his interactions with the Evolution Witch, he knew that Loban was not exaggerating.

The elemental Carmine System exemplified much of what Divine Lucie Miyazaki strove for. She was practically the embodiment of embracing extreme physiological transformations in exchange for greater power and longevity!

Just as the Evolution Witch had been forced to make permanent, life-changing changes to her congenitally deficient body, Venerable Lanie had to bring herself to fundamentally shed her familiar human physical traits and essentially become an alien just so that she could excel on the battlefield!

Ves was quite familiar with this dilemma. He too had become very far removed from his original baseline human incarnation over the years. While he did not exactly agree to undergo much of his extreme body transformation procedures, he would be lying if he said that he hated all of his changes.

It was nice to be strong.

It was nice to be able to survive while being thrown into the vacuum of space without a hermetically sealed suit.

It was nice to know that most assassins had no way of killing him anymore unless they employed lots of first-class mechs or a weapon of mass destruction.

In a galaxy and age where survival once again became a serious concern, becoming stronger and more resilient on a physical level was definitely not a dispensable luxury!

"A part of me feels reluctant to unleash inventions such as Woodsap mechs to human society." Ves shared his doubts with the Transhumanist liaison. "I know it is too premature to determine whether this project is a success, but if it does... how will that affect red humanity in the long run? Will an increasing number of mech pilots become tempted by the promise of power and other benefits and

gladly abandon their humanity? I am not sure whether we will be able to recognize what our society has become after so many of our soldiers have willingly become transhuman."

"You are not thinking far enough, Ves." The 50-year old Transhumanist spoke as he crossed his arms. "I would argue that the body transformations required to pilot your Woodsap mechs and other as-of-yet developed elemental Carmine mechs go beyond patching up the weaknesses and shortcomings of the human physique. I believe that the extreme changes that Venerable Lanie must embrace in the following months will eventually turn her into a posthuman."

The emphasis on the word 'posthuman' immediately induced greater discomfort in Ves.

"Are you saying that you are going to change Lanie into a monster?"

Professor Loban shook his head in disapproval. "The differences between transhuman and posthuman are enormous. Have you ever truly thought about what sets them apart, Professor Larkinson?"

Ves shook his head. "One goes pretty far to improve humans, and the other one goes much further in order to perform better."

"That is correct, but you are not thinking deeply enough of what they represent. They are more than words. They are ideologies. The premise of transhumanism is to evolve humans to become better versions of themselves. With the premise of retaining one's spiritual humanity as much as possible, classical transhumanists seek to upgrade their existing human traits into better but still recognizably human improvements. To put it in different terms, transhumans believe that our race is already strong, and that we only need to refine our existing endowments in order to achieve transcendence from that basis."

Ves received Vector Loban's underlying message.

"Transhumanism is based on the assumption that it is already great to be human. There is room for improvement, but there is no need to go too far because doing so may cause us to lose the qualities that make us so successful as a collective." He stated.

"That is a good description. It is not a coincidence that the human race has managed to overcome the Seven Apex Races, which were long considered to be the most superior races of our native galaxy, and conquer half of the Milky Way. We may be physically weak and not all that intelligent, but it is our relentless drive to overcome our human weaknesses that has allowed us to draw out much of our potential compared to all of the alien races that are too lazy to move beyond their natural gifts. Transhumanism as an ideology is fundamentally based on the premise that being a human is already one of the greatest blessings in our lives."

Ves frowned in thought. "I take it that posthumanism thinks differently?"

"That is a logical deduction. Posthumans approach the state of humanity in a different light. They agree with the transhumanists that humans are not all that strong, but they disagree on the assumption that there is value in retaining one's humanity as much as possible. To them, the vestiges of humanity are shackles that must be released one by one in order to turn any individual into the best possible version of himself. To embrace posthumanism is to literally attempt to leave one's humanity behind and embrace any alternative that is superior, whether the improvements are derived from strong alien genes or completely artificial products that have no equivalence in nature."

Although transhumanism and posthumanism sounded similar, they were ultimately very different in thought and approach.

"I see. I think I get it, Vector. The central premise of posthumanism is that being human is awful. It is a virtue if a person is willingly able to give up aspects of his own humanity to become more powerful. Since this is what posthumans pursue, how does that fit into your faction?"

Professor Loban smiled. "The Transhumanist Faction is large and encompasses a variety of ideologies and opinions. Before the Great Severing, our faction was mainly led by the Chosen Human. We had other leaders, but Divine Hussain Albedo unquestionably set most of our policies. Now, which camp do you think he represents?"

"He's a classical transhumanist without a doubt." Ves immediately answered. "Even a child can figure this out. He is widely regarded as the most perfect human to exist. He is the epitome of the peak that the human race can attain if it managed to unlock its full potential. It is too bad that an aberration like the Chosen Human has only ever emerged once."

There were actually a lot of wild and crazy rumors on the galactic net that the Chosen Human was anything but a freak accident of nature.

Many conspiracy theorists claimed that the Chosen Human was the product of extreme boundary-breaking experiments.

People simply couldn't conceive of the idea that a potentate with S-grade genetic aptitude could never exist unless a cabal of biotech scientists gone rogue sacrificed a dozen powerful ace pilots and merged their brain tissue into a designer baby that was conceived in a test tube!

The Mech Trade Association always refuted these crazy conspiracy theories, but it could never stop people from gossiping.

Ves did not know what to believe either. He felt that there was definitely a big story behind the Chosen Human's conception, but there was no point in speculating over it. The famous god pilot was stuck in the Milky Way Galaxy and had no way of extending his reach into the Red Ocean.

"Under the Chosen Human's regime, the Transhumanist Faction maintained strong restraint towards any augmentation research. Our scientists and developers had to make sure their work did not exceed the relatively restrictive boundaries set by our highest leader. Divine Albedo was never shy about delivering punishment in person to any researcher that dared to engage in taboo research. You cannot believe how much his continued existence has deterred many scientists from engaging in groundbreaking research projects."

Ves smiled back. "I guess that era is over now that our side of the greater beyond gate is cut off from the Chosen Human."

"That is correct. In fact, before the Great Severing occurred, the Transhumanist Faction in the Red Ocean already developed the habit of conducting more extreme research, particularly in relation to phasewater and the native aliens. Many transhumanists who originally felt dissatisfied by the limitations imposed by the Chosen Human opted to move to another galaxy in order to distance themselves from the Divine and his large army of supporters. Once the Age of Dawn has begun, many Transhumanists who found themselves stuck in the Red Ocean actually celebrated their separation from the Milky Way. They no longer have to work under the old regime anymore!"

"I guess it helps a lot that the Evolution Witch is the opposite to the Chosen Human from an ideological perspective." Ves remarked. "The history of your new leader is much different from your old leader. Divine Miyazaki never had any reasons to appreciate the intrinsic strengths of the human race. She suffered so much from her human frailties that she was eager to transcend from her own humanity as quickly as possible. According to your definition, the Evolution Witch is probably the epitome of a posthuman."

"Yes, and now her ideology has gained primacy in the Transhumanist Faction. Several years have already passed since the start of the Age of Dawn, but we have already developed ten times as many revolutionary innovations as we did in the last handful of decades! The Evolution Witch is a much more tolerant and encouraging leader. Under her new regime, our scientists are not only permitted to undertake radical posthuman research projects, but they are actively encouraged to push the boundaries of what it means to be human. Strong results matter more than any attempt to preserve the original meaning of humanity."

That sounded like paradise to some, but a nightmare to others!

Though Ves was normally a strong proponent of rapid and less restricted innovation, he was not sure whether it was a good idea to remove so many limiters in human augmentation research.

The excesses of the human race during the latter half of the Age of Conquest came to mind!

"Aren't you guys afraid that we will end up repeating history?"

"Not really." Professor Loban casually shrugged. "We have learned from our mistakes. We are not as complacent as before. Besides, one of the reasons why humanity ended up driving itself to the brink of extinction was because we no longer felt pressured by strong alien enemies. That is not the case for red humanity. We have so many powerful external enemies that we can channel any excessive aggression outwards instead of inwards. As long as our alien foes are the ones that suffer from our overeagerness to abandon our humanity, then can we still treat this as a problem?"

"That is... remarkably convenient."

Professor Vector Loban was not wrong. It would be terrible if powerful human soldiers changed so much that they lost control and lashed out against their fellow humans.

However, if those same crazy posthumans began to rampage in alien space, then they would not be regarded as monsters.

Instead, they would definitely be treated as heroes!

Chapter 6137 Ves the Posthuman

"Do you understand now why the Transhumanist Faction will endeavor to transform Venerable Lanie Larkinson to meet your requirements?"

Ves nodded. "Now that you have explained it to me, I can see how Lanie's transformation completely aligns with the posthuman ideology promoted by the Evolution Witch. From the perspective of the current Transhumanist Faction, there is great promise in adding plant-like traits to Venerable Lanie's physique. Not only will she become stronger in many ways, but if she can achieve fantastic synergies with an already powerful Woodsap mech, then that will turn her into a positive example of the benefits that posthumanism can bring to our civilization."

Professor Loban grinned. "That is an astute analysis. As eager as we may be in trying to evolve our race to a higher state, we are not pursuing posthumanism for the sake of it. We are always mindful of our goal, which is to make ourselves stronger and more competitive in comparison to other alien races. Mechs are a binding factor of our civilization. If we can successfully tie posthumanism to mechs in a beneficial manner, then we can promote our cause and convince many more people to embrace the changes that we are attempting to introduce in our society. Mechs and posthumanism go well together, and your elemental Carmine System has the potential to serve as concrete proof of this assertion."

In other words, Ves could not escape the reality that his work on elemental Carmine mechs had a strong political and ideological dimension to them. There was no way he could merrily develop his Woodsap mechs without gaining the support of a strong political supporter.

If the Transhumanist Faction was still being led by the Chosen Human, then it was seriously doubtful whether its members would be willing to condone the extreme transformation that Venerable Lanie had to undergo in order to pilot a Woodsap mech!

Fortunately, the RA Transformation Faction had already entered into a new regime. Ves' work just so happened to align with the objectives of the Evolution Witch. As long as this remained the case, he would not encounter any major hindrances from the Red Association!

"My elemental Carmine System concept is probably not the only posthuman project that your faction has developed an interest in, correct?" Ves asked.

"Naturally. I do not have an overview of the immense amount of R&D initiatives that our faction is sponsoring or directly working on, but I can tell you that the changes to our race will be profound. From developing a systematic method of transforming humans into phase lords to fully digitizing humans to the point where they are no longer dependent on frail human flesh, our faction is doing its utmost to speed up red humanity's collective evolution in an effort to better adapt to this cruel new age."

"Aren't you guys afraid of going too fast to the point of running headlong into an accident? What does the Survivalist Faction think about your newfound frenzy?"

Vector Loban chuckled. "The Survivalist Faction are the ultimate pragmatists. They will do whatever is necessary to ensure humanity's survival. Right now, the Survivalists collectively agree that the threat of getting defeated by an overwhelming number of aliens is far greater than the threat of ending our race due to rampant genetic modification. As long as this remains the case, the Survivalists will always serve as our most dependable allies and enablers. If you do not believe me, you can ask Jovy Armalon for further clarification."

That indeed sounded like the Survivalists.

"Will posthumanism become the dominant trend in our society?" Ves curiously asked.

"I cannot answer that question, Ves. Not every human in the Red Ocean is as open-minded as us. There are still many groups of humans who resist posthumanism. The Terrans and the fleeters are much more restrained on this subject and prefer to adhere to classical transhumanism. I predict that red humanity will become increasingly more divided on this issue. The fault lines are not that obvious for the time being, but that will change in a handful of decades."

"Oh?"

"An entire new generation of children will grow up while reaping the benefits of posthumanism." Professor Loban explained. "Unlike the people of our generation or the older generations, these children have received the unprecedented opportunity of undergoing more far-reaching transformations that will make them stronger, smarter and much more competent than their peers. They are lucky to be born and raised in an age where the Chosen Human's restrictive policies have already been overwritten by the Evolution Witch's more permissive policies."

Ves widened his eyes. Vector Loban hinted at a profound shift in human society. If it was true that a lot of designer babies were being born that were a lot further removed from the human template than before, then these were all monsters in the making!

Of course, these posthuman babies had no way of affecting human society on a large scale at the moment, but that would definitely change.

Once these freaks that superficially resembled humans completed their education and entered the workforce as adults, that would be the moment where human society as a whole would begin to experience a massive shock!

"I can definitely foresee that this difference will turn into a political wedge issue down the line, but... we first need to survive whatever the native aliens throw at us." Ves said.

"That is what the Survivalists think as well. Being able to live long enough for us to argue over political and ideological differences is infinitely better than losing all of our territory and most of our population. By the way, do not think that you can stand on the sidelines and remain unaffected by this debate."

"What do you mean by that?" Ves frowned.

"Perhaps you do not fully realize it yet, but you have quickly emerged to become one of the standard bearers of posthumanism. You are the most successful example of your generation. Think about it. As far as we know, you were born a baseline human or close to it in a small and modest third-rate state in the galactic rim. Once you embarked on your career, you relied on your brilliance as well as many different adventures to evolve into a Senior Mech Designer, the first human phase lord and the youngest tier 3 galactic citizen in human history. Your superhuman capabilities have played a key role in all of your accomplishments. It is impossible for a baseline human or lightly augmented human to replicate just 1 percent of your record."

Loban's explanation put Ves' career and accomplishments in a different light. Ves never thought of his work from this angle.

As much as Ves wanted to deny that his many achievements could only be made by sacrificing his own humanity, he could not lie to himself. He knew exactly how extensively he relied on advantages that exceed human boundaries.

"I still value my humanity." Ves plainly said. "Perhaps it is the third-rater in me that feels this way, but I still think there is a lot of merit in clinging to our weak human sensibilities. Whatever entanglements I have with posthumanism doesn't stop me from believing in the strength of humble humans."

"You are free to think this way, Ves, but opinions in the rest of our society are changing rapidly. As reluctant as I am to speculate on the Evolution Witch's motives, I believe that one of the reasons why she favors you so much is because your example helps her cause. It also makes you a thorn in

the eye of those who are proponents of classical transhumanism, such as the First Flame and Admiral Amelie Jameson. Like it or not, you have already picked a side in this ideological debate."

Ves looked anything but pleased after hearing this. He was a mech designer first and foremost. He believed from the bottom of his heart that humans, even the weakest baseline variant among them, could become as strong as a god pilot as long as they piloted great mechs.

There were many examples in the history of the mech community that validated this assumption.

In the Larkinson Clan alone, Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson was the true hero as far as Ves was concerned.

Just like Ves, Tusa was born as an ordinary baseline human in a third-rate state that was located right on the furthest edge of the galactic rim.

Over the course of many battles, Tusa steadily managed to develop his strength and increase his status until he had finally become the first ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan!

Throughout his entire journey up to this point, Tusa only received light augmentations and never felt the need to remove himself further from his own humanity.

His willpower had always remained his strongest asset. With the help of an excellent living mech in the form of the Dark Zephyr, Tusa possessed an unlimited future!

Though Ves believed it would be ideal if all of his clients and customers could attain the same degree of success as Saint Tusa by piloting his living mechs, he knew that reality could never produce this result.

To those who lacked the many opportunities that Tusa had received, embracing posthumanism may be their only way to step onto the path to godhood.

"Your children are also part of this debate." Vector said.

"What?"

"Oh, come now. Did you think that none of us have noticed how each of your three children perform far above their peers of the same ages? They may look human, but their bodies are so much more superior that their astounding evolution cannot be explained by their designer genes alone. I can tell you that not only our faction, but many other groups are carefully monitoring the performance of Aurelia, Andraste and Marvaine. We are all highly interested in seeing whether they can continue to overperform in their respective fields while also retaining enough stability to function in our society."

The mention that so many different groups were paying attention to his children deeply disturbed Ves!

He understood that it was unreasonable to expect his children to fly under everyone's radar.

That did not mean he wanted everyone to treat his son and daughters as long-term observation targets, though!

There was no chance for any of his kids to grow up while remaining low key if this was the case. They were doomed to live high profile lives, just like their father!

Ves sighed in resignation. "I hope that everyone will stick to watching. I would hate it if they purposefully interfere with the lives of my children for experimental purposes. They are not test subjects."

"There is no need for you to feel concerned about that. Your children automatically fall under our protection. This is a service that we extend to every high tier galactic citizen. If you are not reassured by that, then I suggest you increase their security detail."

That was a good suggestion. Ves already added it to his to-do list.

The two mech designers talked a bit more about posthumanism. Ves gained a lot of insight on certain people's attitudes on human augmentation and transformation.

After learning that Ves did not have to worry about the opinions of the mechers, he began to feel a bit better about his work.

His elemental Carmine System concept may demand extreme changes to any mech pilot that desired its power, but it remained a niche choice.

Most people could not stomach the option of turning themselves into a half-human freak.

Another hindrance was cost. The anticipated transformation that Venerable Lanie must undergo in order to pilot a Woodsap mech was anything but cheap. Only first-raters and possibly wealthy second-raters should be able to afford the personalized treatments.

There was still room for the regular version of the Carmine System to exist. It might not be as flashy as the more exotic variations, but a mech pilot should still have a good chance to advance to god pilot with this solution!

Chapter 6138 Organic Weapon System

After a bit of waiting, the time had finally come for the Elegant Rage to attain her new and complete form as a Woodsap mech.

Although Ves knew that the Red Association intended to upgrade the partially wooden mech into a powerful first-class expert mech that incorporated many of its high-tech design applications, the work that he had done would always remain a permanent fixture to the living machine.

Once the Elegant Rage turned into a Woodsap mech, she would live and die like one. There was no reversing this change, especially once she formed an elemental Blood Pact with Venerable Lanie.

It would have been great if Lanie was present and available to form a Woodsap Pact right away. Ves would have been able to gather a lot of useful data and obtain solid proof that all of the work he put into this experimental concept yielded the desired results.

Unfortunately, Venerable Lanie was still stuck at one of the headquarters of the RA. It would take several months before she was scheduled to complete her physical transformation and studies. Only at that time would Ves gain concrete proof that his invention lived up to his expectations.

Oh well.

Ves still had enough reasons to look forward to this day. He truly did not know what would happen once he completed the final changes, but he already had a feeling that the Elegant Rage may undergo a profound change that he could not predict.

Even if nothing unexpected took place, Ves still had plenty of reasons to look forward to the end result.

Since this may be the only time he would get to work directly on the Elegant Rage, he made sure to update her to the standards of the sixth and latest generation of living mechs.

The Elegant Rage could already be considered a fifth generation living mech, so the only real change that turned her into a sixth generation living mech was the addition of an Ultimate Module.

Ves initially questioned whether it was necessary for the Elegant Rage to obtain an Ultimate Module.

Her foundation was already remarkably strong after her mutation.

Her strange and absurdly effective thorns already fulfilled many of the functions of an Ultimate Module.

However, since Ves was in a position to add an extra trump card to the Elegant Rage at a modest price, he figured he might as well work on an Ultimate Module, or else he would feel he let Venerable Lanie down.

Developing any Ultimate Module was a big pain because Ves needed to take the individual circumstances of each living mech into account and develop a personalized solution.

In the case of the Elegant Rage, Ves first thought about turning her thorns into an Ultimate Module, but then he figured out that this was a redundant action.

The living mech already maintained such a strong connection to her dynamic thorns that creating a subordinate spirit to manage them was unlikely to produce any benefits.

"Ultimate modules are better used to add new capabilities rather than enhancing existing core features." Ves concluded.

In order to figure out what he should add to the Elegant Rage, he first needed to gain an understanding of her current strengths and weaknesses.

The mechers could easily change her configuration when they got their hands on the second-class mutated machine. There was little point in focusing on stuff that could easily be changed such as the lack of ranged armaments or the absence of strong defenses.

Ves paid much more attention to the fundamentals of the Elegant Rage.

Venerable Lanie broke through as an expert pilot that focused on counterattacks.

Any enemy that got close and attempted to destroy the Elegant Rage would inevitably get stung by her thorns!

What made the thorns impossible to ignore up close was that they grew deadlier whenever the living mech got struck!

However, as useful as these thorns may be, they possessed a glaring weakness that every versatile opponent could exploit.

"Elegant Rage."

"YES, PROGENITOR?"

"Those thorns of yours... I know they can harm any enemies that come into contact with them, but... can you use them to retaliate against enemies that maintain their distance?"

"I... DO NOT BELIEVE SO." The living mech answered at that time.

"So any rifleman mech, alien phasefighter or alien warship can hover a few kilometers away and continually take potshots at your mech frame without needing to fear the threat posed by your thorns?"

"THAT IS SO. I CAN STILL BE EQUIPPED WITH RANGED WEAPONS, SO IT IS NOT AS IF I AM DEFENSELESS AGAINST ENEMIES THAT ARE OUT OF MY REACH."

"Whatever ranged armaments the RA mech designers intend to install on your mech frame will likely be unable to leverage the strength of your thorns." Ves argued. "That is a huge missed opportunity in my own opinion."

"DO YOU THINK YOU CAN DO BETTER THAN THE MECHERS?"

"There are many areas in which they can do better than me, but when it comes to this kind of stuff, don't count me out too soon. Let me think about a possible solution."

As an offensive mech, the Elegant Rage needed to be able to tackle a wide variety of enemies.

The Elegant Rage was originally based off the Lucid Rage model, which was dedicated to melee combat.

Venerable Lanie had developed a bias for melee combat, but she still performed well in ranged combat as well.

Ves believed that she would appreciate it if the Elegant Rage received a powerful ranged weapon that synergized well with her mutated talent as well as her mutated mech.

When Ves was thinking about all of the capabilities that the Emperor Tree had demonstrated during combat, he began to pay closer attention to its seed cannons.

The weapon system was very crude and simplistic. It relied on driving a wooden piston really hard on the back of a seed, thereby forcing the projectile to rapidly launch from the barrel and strike at a distant target.

Amazingly, the Emperor Tree managed to turn this into a viable and somewhat accurate weapon system by making use of rifled barrels in order to force the aerodynamic seeds to spin.

This massively increased their stability, range and accuracy, which meant that the seed cannon had a realistic chance of hitting its intended target.

However, from the perspective of a modern mech designer like Ves, seed cannons were laughably primitive and crude!

"I guess it is a decent solution if all you have to work with is wood, but..."

Ves could think of a hundred different ways to develop a superior weapon system that still retained the advantages of using Emperor Weed.

He couldn't help himself. He tried to utilize all of her expertise in both kinetic weapons as well as biomech design to come up with a vastly improved version of a seed cannon.

His intention was twofold. He wanted to add a powerful and unique seed cannon to the Elegant Rage's arsenal. In order to prevent the mechers from superseding this organic weapon with one of their own high-tech solutions, Ves made sure to keep it relevant by scaling its effectiveness to the strength of Venerable Lanie and the growth of her Woodsap mech.

"This improved seed cannon will not only become an Ultimate Module, but also a blessed weapon!"

The two were separate design applications, but there was nothing stopping Ves from combining them in a single device.

The development process of his interpretation of a seed cannon was not all that difficult.

The greatest concern on his mind was ammunition. The Emperor Tree could easily make use of very large calibers because it had a lot of space to store its seed ammunition. The calamity plant could also produce more of them with ease.

Ves did not think the Elegant Rage could solve its ammunition concerns so easily, especially when Venerable Lanie was still an expert pilot.

"There is no need to make use of oversized projectiles when smaller ones can do the job."

Ves overhauled the very primitive seed cannon design by turning it into a hybrid wooden version of a gauss rifle.

There were a few parts that had to be made out of pure metal, but Ves could actually get away with using improved ebony wood for many other components.

At least outwardly, the improved seed weapon still appeared to be made out of wood.

By relying on electromagnetic force to propel the metal-rich seeds, the muzzle velocity and damage inflicted by the new weapon became a lot better.

Ves could afford to shrink the caliber and switch to much smaller seeds made out of improved ebony wood.

In fact, Ves even added a mechanism to the weapon that could theoretically enable it to grow more seed projectiles in the field!

The weapon only needed to have access to enough raw materials as well as lots of wood energy in order to replenish its ammunition reserves.

"The Elegant Rage won't need to resupply at all if all goes well." Ves fantasized.

Combining a primitive seed cannon with gauss weapon technology was not the most important change he made.

Ves actually had a much more ambitious plan in mind, but it relied on numerous different factors in order to produce a completely new and possibly unprecedented result!

Converting the improved seed rifle into an Ultimate Module was not too difficult for Ves. He already had a solid direction in mind on what special capability it should gain. The tricky part was to tie it into the Elegant Rage's thorns, but he was able to do it after performing a bit of E-technology engineering.

The most crucial change he had to make was to turn it into a blessed weapon. The new weapon simply wouldn't be able to reach its full potential unless it was tied to one very specific design spirit.

"Gaia, would you like to bless this organic weapon with your power?" Ves beseeched the True God. "Let this seed rifle channel the wrath of nature. I am sure that Venerable Lanie will be glad to cooperate with you to defeat the enemies that you have in common."

Although Gaia did not respond at first, she eventually acquiesced and gave her blessing to the remarkable weapon. She did so after Ves described how its amazing performance would earn her greater recognition.

In any case, now that Ves had reached the day where he intended to complete this upgrade project, the Elegant Rage looked a lot deadlier and more rounded now that she had gained a seed rifle.

The eye-catching weapon was largely made out of the same improved ebony wood that characterized the rest of the organic parts of the mech frame.

When a small group of mech designers had gathered in the private mech workshop to witness the completion of the first Woodsap mech, Alexa Streon couldn't hold her curiosity towards this new addition.

"This weapon is filled with the power of life." She said. "It is also filled with the power of thorns. How come it feels much more threatening than a seed cannon despite its reduction in size?"

Ves smirked at his student. "Aside from turning it into a gauss weapon that can fire small seeds at much faster speeds, its projectiles can also do something special when they are infused with the right energies. Tell me, Alexa. Why do seeds exist?"

"Seeds exist... so that they can sprout into plants. Wait... are you suggesting that the seeds launched by this organic weapon can actually...?!"

"Hahaha! Your guess is right! Under the right circumstances, the Elegant Rage should be able to launch a seed at a distant opponent that will subsequently spout into a modest growth consisting of ebony wood! As long as its reserve of wood energy hasn't run out, it should be able to grow into an entangling vine that is difficult to get rid off! What is even better is that if my design works out, the ebony wood vine should also be able to draw upon the Elegant Rage's counterattack energy to grow unnaturally sharp and deadly thorns!"

This was the primary gimmick of what Ves had taken to calling the Sprout Rifle!

It was a weapon that was fully aligned with the wood element. It was also a weapon that perfectly synergized with Lanie's acquired talent.

Though Ves was unable to test the viability of the experimental Sprout Rifle, he believed that it would definitely surpass Venerable Lanie's expectations once she finally gained the opportunity to test it out for the first time!

Chapter 6139 Lobis Fragment

The development of the Sprout Rifle rounded out the Elegant Rage and gave the thorn-covered mech a chance to leverage her advantages at a distance.

To be honest, Ves did not expect the performance of the Sprout Rifle to be good at first. The weapon was largely based on improved ebony wood, so it was not weak by any means.

That did not change the fact that Ves had to develop the weapon in haste by making use of suboptimal materials and tech. The terrans could easily present the Elegant Rage with a first-class gauss rifle that vastly outperformed the Sprout Rifle in terms of size, mass, ammunition capacity, per-shot power, firing rate, interchangeability and overall efficiency.

That said, there was nothing stopping the mechers from upgrading the Sprout Rifle. Ves had already created a solid base that contained all of the essential elements. The materials, the technological implementations and even the appearance of the weapon could be changed.

What the mechers must never change was to change its status as a blessed weapon and an Ultimate Module. The Sprout Rifle's entire existence was centered around its ability to channel E energy and the blessing of the Mother of Earth to grow dangerous vines that could attack any enemy within range.

This tactic reminded him of the Promethea's penchant of starting deadly wildfires whenever the expert rifleman mech struck a distant opponent.

The Sprout Rifle was designed to offer a similar capability to the Elegant Rage, though its performance was much more restrained.

Ves predicted that the Sprout Rifle should be able to perform much better when attacking organic opponents.

The vines growing out the seeds may gain predatory capabilities.

They could suck the life out of any large creature that had the misfortune of getting entangled!

The more the vines absorbed the energy and biomass of their prey, the more they grew.

The greater the blessing and resonance empowerment, the more serious the threat posed by this positive feedback loop!

Each of the rapidly sprouted growth had the potential of killing their targets by taking advantage of their own bulk!

The greater the blessing and resonance empowerment, the more serious the threat posed by this positive feedback loop!

It was similar to how Saint Isobel's King Killer Flames were able to propagate and engulf entire enemy warships just by using their hulls as fuel!

Compared to the King Killer Flames, the thorny vines that could sprout from the seeds launched by the Elegant Rage probably would not perform too well when employed against inorganic opponents.

They only truly shone when employed against large organic enemies, and only when their physical bodies became vulnerable.

Ves predicted that as long as Venerable Lanie grew strong enough, the Elegant Rage might be able to outperform the Promethea when it came to killing phase lords and phase whales!

The Sprout Rifle should also be incredibly effective against all manner of exobeasts.

Huge opponents that were filled with vitality such as the Emperor Tree should never be able to shrug off the threat posed by Venerable Lanie and her battle partner ever again!

In any case, Ves became quite satisfied with the addition of the Sprout Rifle. The Elegant Rage would no longer be able to function as a pure melee mech when equipped with this weapon, but the living mech should be able to fit much better in the lineup of the Red Association.

Amidst all of the fancy first-class multipurpose mechs, the Elegant Rage should be able to keep up with her non-living peers by firing seeds at distant targets. She would not be rendered helpless if she was being harassed by enemies from afar.

"It really would have been great if Venerable Lanie was here to witness the completion of her new Woodsap mech." Ves sighed yet again.

"You can always wait until she has completed her augmentation surgeries and retraining." Gloriana suggested.

"That will take too long, honey. I don't want this project hanging over my head any longer than is necessary. Besides, the mechers still need to make a pass on the Elegant Rage to upgrade her into a proper first-class expert mech. That will probably take a bit of time as well. The sooner we get this done, the sooner Venerable Lanie can get into action."

Once Ves felt that the time had come, he left the gathering of mech designers and floated over to the cockpit of the Elegant Rage.

Much of the new components were already in place, but Ves had deliberately saved the final pieces of the Woodsap Carmine System for last.

Much of the interior of the cockpit had been converted from a metal base to an ebony wood base.

The decor gave Ves the feeling that he had entered a high-tech tree house as opposed to a metal control room.

"It feels nice."

The cockpit generated a completely different atmosphere from all of the other mechs that Ves had designed in the past.

Swapping out much of the cold hard metals for warm and vibrant ebony wood filled the entire cockpit with wood energy. This would probably help Venerable Lanie attain a closer connection and also help her soon-to-be-altered physiology merge with her living mech.

He even thought about adding a number of decorative thorns on the chamber walls, but he eventually sobered up when he thought how they could easily impale Lanie's body if they ever grew out of control.

In any case, the centerpiece of the cockpit was the piloting chair, which was completely made out of transformed ebony wood and other organic materials.

Ves designed the piloting chair to be a lot bigger and bulkier than normal because it also incorporated a part of the Woodsap Carmine System.

Most notably, the chair contained numerous channels that were responsible for circulating the Emperor Tree Sap that was already running throughout the Elegant Rage's organic components.

The degree of integration between the Woodsap Carmine System and the Elegant Rage was much higher than any other Carmine mech that he had worked on in the past.

The initial Carmine mechs were just regular metallic mechs that reluctantly incorporated an organic vascular system.

There was no functional purpose to this shallow network of arteries. None of the parts of a Carmine mech actually required blood to function. The Carmine System therefore decreased the technical performance of the mech.

This was not the case for the first Woodsap Carmine mech. The Elegant Rage had mutated to the point where many of its metallic components had been replaced by ebony wooden equivalents.

The latter might not have any use for human blood, but they all required nutrient-rich and energy-dense alien tree sap in order to function and sustain themselves!

This meant that the Woodsap Carmine System no longer functioned as a drag on the living mech!

The overall efficiency and capacity utilization of the Elegant Rage did not drop as a result of the integration of the new elemental Carmine System. At most, Ves had to overhaul the cockpit in order to accommodate all of the extra systems required to circulate Emperor Tree Sap in the body of the mech pilot in a controlled fashion.

Before Ves put the finishing touches on the Elegant Rage, he decided to sit on the chair that he had spent a lot of time on designing.

"Ugh. It's not that comfortable."

Ves had customized the chair for Venerable Lanie's proportions. He also designed it with the assumption that the exiled expert pilot would wear a protective piloting suit.

Once he satisfied his curiosity, he hopped out of the chair and went to work.

He connected the final remaining parts of the Woodsap Carmine System together. The closer it came to completion, the more he felt he was on the cusp of building a work of great significance.

Ves hadn't entirely made up his mind yet on how he wanted to realize his design philosophy.

Developing four more Carmine Systems based on the other classical elements sounded like a fairly straightforward way to advance to the rank of Master Mech Designer, but he was not sure whether he wanted to take the elite route.

As much as he had been focusing on high-end mechs as of late, Ves never forgot about his roots.

Designing mechs for the masses granted him much more fulfillment. He was able to transform the lives of many more mech pilots, giving them opportunities to transform their lives and grow into heroes in their own right!

The elemental Carmine mechs that Ves envisioned in his mind were not that suitable for the mass market. They were very costly and imposed high requirements on their pilots. Ves disliked the fact that they could only serve the needs of the wealthy and the elite. Third-raters had no chance of benefiting from these admittedly powerful machines.

Ves inwardly shook his head. "There is no point in thinking so far ahead. I am far from making enough progress in either direction."

He turned his focus back on his work and carefully connected the final parts of the Woodsap Carmine System together.

"There."

A sense of anticipation welled up inside Ves. He still harbored a bit of doubt on whether the Woodsap Carmine System was able to work as intended.

There was no way to test it for bugs and malfunctions until Venerable Lanie was finally ready to form a Woodsap Pact with the Elegant Rage.

"I hope it won't produce any accidents."

Before he left the cockpit, Ves had one additional decision to make.

He put his hand into one of his pockets and retrieved a sparkling gem that was characterized by a visible patterned structure.

It was one of Lucky's more recently produced archgems.

[LOBIS FRAGMENT]

A semi-processed gem that contains a fraction of a dancer who could not cease. Will compel a mech to dance to eternity with the grace of an ancient master of her art. All motion shall bear a touch of elegance and refinement that can captivate any audience that is able to experience emotions.

Ves initially did not think of embedding one of Lucky's gems into the Elegant Rage, but as he increased his commitment to her design, he started to think about this option.

He truly felt it was not necessary to integrate any gem to the Elegant Rage. Her current incarnation was already good as far as he was concerned. Once the RA took possession of the living mech, they would definitely upgrade her even further.

However, Ves already amassed a considerable collection of gems, and he wasn't using them up fast enough.

Ves ultimately decided to gift the Elegant Rage with a gem. It helped that the Lobis Fragment just happened to fit the Woodsap mech well. He couldn't think of any other mech that deserved this gem more.

"Here we go." Ves whispered as he placed the gem onto the ebony wooden surface of the cockpit.

The wood automatically absorbed the gem. An invisible surge of energy ran throughout the entire Woodsap mech as the subtle influence of a remnant powerhouse began to affect the mech frame in a mysterious fashion.

Though the effect of the so-called Lobis Fragment could not be observed until the mech finally went into action, the Elegant Rage appeared a little more harmonious than before!

Just as Ves was about to exit the cockpit, he suddenly froze when he felt the start of a converge over his head.

"Oh, come on! It's not even a masterwork!"

Ves was no longer a stranger to this sensation. His expression turned helpless and annoyed as he quickly exited the cockpit and met up with his fellow mech designers again.

Jovy and Vector already received the news. Both of them looked bemused that Ves had managed to do it again.

"Congratulations, Ves. You managed to create another work that satisfied the condition of triggering a lightning tribulation. The storm clouds are already gathering over Diandi Base. It doesn't appear that the tribulation will be strong this time, but the Elegant Rage in her current form is not too powerful either."

"I still didn't ask for this!" Ves complained! "Can't the heavenly authorities give me a break?"

Chapter 6140 Not The Intended Pilot

Ves had an inkling that the completion of his first Woodsap mech would be an event of considerable significance to him, but he truly did not expect to draw a lightning tribulation!

Sure, the Woodsap Carmine System was a completely new and unprecedented innovation, but it was hardly the first time Ves produced a new invention.

"Why the hell is this happening now of all times?! There are so many other mech designers who are constantly coming up with fantastic new works. The work that I have done on the Elegant Rage is not even all that dramatic compared to the best of what my competitors are able to make. Why is it always me that gets plagued with these annoying storms?!"

Jovy offered a possible answer. "We have studied the phenomenon of lightning tribulations. I do not have access to the full reports, but I have read a summary which presents a theory that lightning tribulations are automatically triggered based on conditions set by an unknown intelligent being in ancient times. In more concrete terms, the more one of our modern works resemble powerful artifacts, the greater the probability of attracting lightning tribulations."

Ves twitched his lips. "I suppose that my design approach has been moving closer and closer to developing mechs as high-level artifacts."

"There is one key variable that appears to play a defining role in attracting lightning tribulations. Whoever set the trigger conditions was mainly concerned with constraining the growth and proliferation of unqualified beings and objects that draw upon E energy. Compared to the hyper mechs developed by other mech designers, it is clear that your first Woodsap mech incorporates much more advanced hyper technology and E-technology."

That made sense. Ves recalled a theory that he had stumbled upon a while ago. The power of heaven may seem ubiquitous, but it was actually finite. The galaxies that generated lots of E energy and spread it throughout their dominions wanted to ensure that its subjects would not squander this valuable resource.

Lightning tribulations served as both a punishment and reward mechanism. Anyone or anything that grew powerful enough to draw upon greater amounts of E energy had to undergo a dangerous test to prove that they were making effective use of the power of heaven.

Anything that ended up too weak clearly did not deserve to occupy a larger share of the power of heaven. From the perspective of the heavenly authority, it was better to get rid of these weaklings in order to make room for powerful minions that made more efficient use of E energy.

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Ves frowned deeper. He did not design the latest iteration of the Elegant Rage with peak combat effectiveness in mind. It was supposed to be a fairly focused attempt at creating the first Woodsap mech.

Even though the living mech had yet to be converted to an expert mech, the Elegant Rage was only able to shine when she was piloted by Venerable Lanie Larkinson.

Now that the intended pilot was far away and out of reach, much of the potential of the Elegant Rage remained locked away!

This meant that the living mech would have to survive against the coming tribulation with at least one arm tied behind her back!

"Dammit." Ves smacked his palm against his face. "If I knew that something stupid like this would happen, I would have delayed the completion of this conversion project."

It was too late for regrets!

Ves had already done the deed. Now he had to face the consequences of his decision.

"This is a disaster." Gloriana said with concern. "This couldn't happen at a worse time. Venerable Lanie is stationed far away from this planet! Who is supposed to pilot the Elegant Rage?!"

Alexa Streon had a different stance on the matter. "Why does the Elegant Rage need a pilot to survive its upcoming test? Aren't third order living mechs capable of operating on an autonomous basis? As long as the threat posed by the tribulation is limited, I think that living mech can acquit herself well."

Ves immediately rejected this option. "This is a lightning tribulation we are talking about. The Elegant Rage may have become a lot more powerful than the average third order living mech due to absorbing Venerable Lanie's breakthrough energies, but that is not enough. She is still a mech. Just because she is alive and intelligent enough to fight by herself does not mean she is meant to function this way. It is also dishonest to let the Elegant Rage face her lightning tribulation as anything other than a mech."

"Then what is your decision, sir?"

"We put a mech pilot inside the Elegant Rage. It's that simple." Ves said before turning to Jovy. "I require the services of Major Simon Jankowski yet again. Please call him up and have him teleport inside the cockpit of the Elegant Rage as soon as possible. Oh, please teleport the mech out of this workshop as soon as possible. I don't want the storm to ravage Diandi Base. It is best if you can displace my Woodsap mech in the middle of the largest forest environment in this hemisphere."

He began to kick off the air and float towards the cockpit of the mech that had managed to attract a storm. There was no need for Ves to clarify that he wanted to experience the lightning tribulation first-hand. It was such a typical action to him that no one second-guessed his decision anymore.

Jovy did not waste any time after Ves issued his instructions. He nodded even as he used his cranial implant to transmit a few emergency orders. "It will be done in half a minute. Despite the short

notice of your requests, we should be able to get your mech ready in time for the start of the tribulation event. Major Jankowski happened to be on patrol at the moment."

The Premier Branch had yet to field its own first-class mech unit, so there were no suitable Larkinson mech pilots on hand.

Ves decided to stick with Major Jankowski of the Bluejay Fleet yet again as he was already familiar with this particular role. The RA mech officer had managed to advance to expert candidate during the disastrous tribulation of the Elemental Lord.

He found it quite fitting that the mech pilot who did his best but failed to change the Elemental Lord's fate would have a chance to redeem himself by piloting the Elegant Rage.

The valuable experiences that Major Jankowski accrued during the last attempt should serve him well this time. Not only was he familiar with the many dangers and taboos related to lightning tribulation, he also experienced the wonder of piloting a hyper mech that possessed a strong command over the classical elements.

Compared to the ill-fated Elemental Lord, the much more modest Elegant Rage only commanded a single element. There were much fewer variables to worry about. The lightning tribulation attracted by the Woodsap mech was obviously a lot weaker as well.

"Your mech will be teleported in 5 seconds!" Jovy shouted. "The rest of us will remain here and observe the tribulation event behind the workstations. Good luck, Ves."

A shimmer ran throughout the Elegant Rage as she was forcibly displaced to the middle of a nature preserve located dozens of kilometers away.

The site was not that far from the forest where the Elemental Lord made a last stand against the cruelty of the heavens.

The Elegant Rage immediately became more energetic as she had entered an environment that was highly conducive to her elemental alignment.

The artificial forest planted by the Devos Ancient Clan during the terraforming process was not particularly old or noteworthy in any way. The Devosans just sought to create a balanced ecosystem in order to produce a stable climate on the capital planet of their port system.

The Woodsap mech would have been able to gain access to significantly more wood energy if she appeared in one of the old and extremely biodiverse forests of untamed planets.

"Oh well."

Ves had to work with what he got. New Constantinople VIII was hardly the most ideal planet for the Elegant Rage to undergo this test, but it was better than making this attempt on a lifeless rock or in the middle of deep space!

This reminded him that if he ever created any other elemental Carmine mechs in the future, he better make sure that he would be prepared for lightning tribulations next time!

He intended to develop a Bloodfire mech in the medium term. He even planned to convert the Promethea into the first machine to form a Bloodfire Pact with her pilot!

Once he was ready to make this happen, Ves would definitely make sure to seek out the hottest planet that was closest to a powerful star!

He would also make sure that he only converted the Promethea into a Bloodfire mech when she had also been upgraded to the standards of a first-class ace mech.

Given that Saint Isobel Kotin was currently reduced to a brain and a spine, it would take years before she obtained a new body and became healthy enough to pilot a mech again. This gave Ves plenty of time to prepare for this potentially dramatic event.

All of these were concerns for the future. Right now, he needed to make sure that the underprepared Elegant Rage managed to survive this critical test.

A pilot teleported right onto the ebony wood piloting chair.

"You're here. That's good."

"Good day, Professor Larkinson." The RA mech officer professionally greeted. "I am not prepared for this mission, but this will not hinder me from doing what is necessary. Please summarize the information that I must know before the tribulation starts."

The storm clouds that previously emerged above Diandi Base had instantly followed the displaced Elegant Rage above a forest in an unpopulated region of the planet.

The storm was accumulating more and more power, though it was distinctly weaker than the lightning tribulations that Ves managed to attract in the past.

"The Elegant Rage is a second-class mech that is partially made out of a really powerful variant of wood." Ves said. "The problem is that I did not focus on upgrading her standard technological features. The mech designers of your Association were supposed to do that. This means that the mech is much weaker than the quasi-first-class machines that I have been working on as of late. Her defenses are weak as I have not incorporated any phasewater technology to the mech frame."

Major Jankowski immediately frowned. As a first-class mech pilot that was accustomed to the power of the renowned first-class multipurpose mechs of the Red Association, he did not look forward to wrangling with a second-class mech that was still based on an outdated Larkinson mech model!

"I am not accustomed to piloting second-class mechs, but I should be able to fight well enough. This strange wooden piloting chair is too small for my build. Can you expand it so that I can sit more comfortably?"

The ebony wooden chair began to morph immediately after he made the request. This was not a feature that Ves added to the mech.

"YOU ARE WELCOME." The living mech spoke.

"This is much better. Thank you." The RA mech major bowed his head in gratitude. "What else do I need to know, sir?"

"The current version of this mech was originally designed to function as a Woodsap mech for a very specific pilot. You will not be able to pilot the Elegant Rage to her full potential without forming a Woodsap Pact. Fortunately, there are no restrictions that hinder you from forming an old-fashioned man-machine connection with the neural interface, so you should be able to pilot this mech just like any other second-class machine."

Major Jankowski looked confused. "A wood-what mech?"

"Oh, I forgot. You probably don't have authorization to know about this classified tech. Don't think too much about it. Just focus on working together with the Elegant Rage to survive this tribulation."

"Very well."