

The Mech 6141

Chapter 6141 Single-Modal Lightning Tribulation

Ves was glad that the Carmine System and its variations did not conflict with classical neural interfaces.

It was very much possible for mech pilots to form double connections to their living mechs.

There was no rule that stated that a Carmine mech had to completely replace an old-fashioned but reliable neural interface for an exotic Carmine System.

In fact, Ves believed that a pilot could exert the greatest degree of control over a mech by using both interfacing methods on a concurrent basis.

Ves had modified and tweaked the Elegant Rage with this assumption in mind. He did not really consider the scenario where an entirely different pilot had to pilot the living mech in an emergency.

Unfortunately, the lightning tribulation cared nothing for Ves' plans and arrangements. He had no choice but to work with what was available.

He missed Venerable Joshua.

Out of all of the possible substitutes that Ves could think of, Joshua was perfect for the job.

He was not only highly adaptable and accustomed to piloting a wide variety of Larkinson mechs, but he also possessed a strong affinity for life, which shared close relations with the wood element!

Major Simon Jankowski was a step down in every way despite the fact that he was a trained and experienced RA mech officer.

Ves did not discredit Jankowski's own combat prowess. He just thought that the expert candidate was better off piloting the first-class multipurpose mechs. The mecher had not spent his entire career on becoming good at piloting second-class mechs.

Forget about Venerable Joshua. Ves would have been happy with any experienced Larkinson mech pilot.

He resented the fact that the Premier Branch still remained isolated from the rest of the clan.

He also felt it was high time for the new branch to build up a proper mech force staffed by dependable Larkinson pilots. Otherwise, he would have to continue relying on Major Jankowski or other outsiders whenever he urgently needed the services of a mech pilot.

"Ves." Jovy spoke over the communication channel. "Analysis of the storm forming over the Elegant Rage has confirmed that it is likely preparing to initiate a single-modal, single-round lightning tribulation. It is the simplest and least demanding form of tribulation that can be attracted, so its threat level is the lowest out of all of the possibilities."

A single-modal, single-round lightning tribulation only amounted to getting struck by a single lightning bolt 9 times in a row.

It was short, straightforward and lacked the complications and surprises of multi-modal lightning tribulations.

Unfortunately, it was not an outcome that Ves wanted to obtain.

"We're in trouble."

"How so, professor?" Major Jankowski asked even as he was in the process of understanding the technical capabilities of the mech he just interfaced with earlier.

"If Jovy's words are correct, we are about to get hit by 9 destructive lighting bolts in a row. That would have been fine for a mech that has notably strong defenses, but the Elegant Rage is designed to function as an offensive mech. Her main form of defense is evasion, which is not an option against a tribulation event that is known to strike targets with unerring accuracy."

Ves quickly tried to consider whether the Elegant Rage was resilient enough to resist the power of 9 tribulation lightning bolts.

He was fairly certain that the mech could easily shrug off any single lightning strike.

The problem with tribulations was that they never settled for single attacks. The next lightning bolt struck when the target did not have time to recover from the previous one. Combined with the fact that the next attack was always stronger than the last one, then there was a good chance that the Elegant Rage would eventually get overwhelmed!

As Major Jankowski processed this information, he did not look good either. The Elegant Rage was equipped with a range of weapon systems, from ebony wood tonfas to the brand new Sprout Rifle.

However, these weapons served no purpose against a powerful storm cloud that was so lazy that it only rained down 9 boring lighting bolts in a row. There was no way for any of these weapons to show their advantages by beating up more concrete enemies formed out of tribulation lightning!

Instead, the lighting tribulation only came to test the Elegant Rage's hard defenses, which were not that good!

The Elegant Rage's energy shield generator was too small, underpowered and horribly outdated to boot.

The metallic armor system was also lastgen and underpowered according to the Larkinson Clan's current standards.

The only bright spot was the parts made out of improved ebony wood. Despite lacking phasewater reinforcement, it still functioned as a particularly effective hyper material.

Under the right circumstances, the parts made out of ebony wood should be able to regenerate any damage they received.

The surrounding forest generated and attracted a considerable quantity of wood energy, but it was nothing comparable to what the Emperor Tree was able to gather when it was still alive.

Venerable Lanie and her companion spirit were also unable to help in this matter due to their absence.

The more Ves thought about it, the more he disliked this situation. The Elegant Rage simply wasn't equipped to survive a straightforward series of lighting bolts.

It's about to start, sir!" Major Jankowski warned.

The storm clouds already started to produce flashes of light. The dark and stormy clouds openly directed their animosity towards the Elegant Rage, making it seem as if they were eager to pummel the Woodsap mech into the dust!

Ves grimaced and continued to consider a lot of different thoughts. He thought back on the descriptions he read about lightning tribulations.

His eyes narrowed just before the first strike was about to fall.

"It's coming!"

CRACKLE!

Major Jankowski already commanded the Elegant Rage to brace herself by pulling out her tonfas and crossing them above her head!

The expert candidate expected for the mech to receive a nasty shock that was bound to scorch or damage a number of parts.

What the Elegant Rage experienced instead was a mild electric jolt, one that was only powerful enough to massage the mech frame!

This wasn't supposed to happen. Even the weakest lightning tribulation should already be a strenuous ordeal to a mech as weak as the Elegant Rage.

When Major Jankowski tried to examine what had happened by performing a quick internal diagnostic, he quickly discovered that a second presence had appeared besides the Elegant Rage.

The much larger and taller form of Ves in his nanosuit stood protectively over the mech of his own design!

It turned out that just before the tribulation attack was about to strike the Elegant Rage, Ves had instantly teleported out of the cockpit and rapidly unfolded his true body for the purpose of intercepting the lightning bolt!

"P-Professor?"

Ves' giant form grinned before he rapidly shrunk in size. Once he managed to fold up his bulky true body, he teleported right back inside the cockpit of the Elegant Rage.

"That should do it." Ves affirmed. "It's a bit of a gamble, but I can't think of anything better. That tribulation lightning sure stings a bit. I am glad that I already endured worse in the past."

Major Jankowski looked nonplussed. "Why did you do that, sir?"

"I didn't do it to shield the mech from damage." Ves explained himself. "I did it to provoke the tribulation storm. You see, these sorts of tests are largely conducted to test the fitness of the object. By moving to intercept the lightning bolt and weaken it to the point where the remaining force just tickles the mech frame, I have directly provoked the tribulation event by interfering with its purpose. If my guess is correct, the storm should be readjusting its parameters right now..."

"Ves!" Jovy said in mild alarm! "Your actions have directly agitated the tribulation storm! It is growing more powerful and turbulent. Our new analysis indicates that it has turned into a multi-modal lightning tribulation! If this was the purpose behind your spontaneous intervention, then I have to say that it worked."

"That's great news! You should already know why I did this, correct?"

"I do." Jovy was a good enough mech designer to understand that the Elegant Rage should theoretically stand a better chance in a more complex tribulation event. "The threat posed by the lighting tribulation has increased. We have yet to found any signs that it has grown powerful enough to conduct another round of tribulations, but be careful not to push your luck any further. One provocation from you is already enough."

"Relax, Jovy. So long as the storm behaves like I think it will, there is no need for me to intervene further."

"Don't worry, Major. I did you a favor. If the storm responds as I think it will, the clouds will soon start to spit out tribulation manifestations that you can duel against to your heart's content. That sounds a lot better than passively letting the Elegant Rage get tortured by lighting strikes from above, right?"

As the storm above the Elegant Rage started to accumulate more scary energies, Ves leaned forward and carefully patted the expert candidate's shoulder.

"Don't worry, Major. I did you a favor. If the storm responds as I think it will, the clouds will soon start to spit out tribulation manifestations that you can duel against to your heart's content. That sounds a lot better than passively letting the Elegant Rage get tortured by lighting strikes from above, right?"

Though Simon Jankowski truly did not know whether he should be thankful of this development, he had to steel himself for the true challenges ahead.

CRACK!

A lightning bolt struck the forested ground before the Elegant Rage and instantly produced a clearing.

A tribulation manifestation appeared that resembled a flying raptor. The reptile with wings soon began to lift off the air and possess a commanding view of the environment.

The lightning manifestation only had eyes for the Elegant Rage.

Ves narrowed his eyes as he and Blinky quickly tried to determine the properties of this simulated alien opponent.

"Be careful, major. Blinky is able to sense that while the manifestation is able to channel tribulation lightning, its main element is based on blood."

"Blood?"

Major Jankowski soon knew what that meant as the winged raptor suddenly began to produce a stream of red blood that hovered around the creature.

The tribulation demonstrated strong command over blood. Such an opponent could be quite scary to fight against!

However, Ves only grinned at the sight. "Get close. Get really close. Don't bother fighting with your tonfas. Just let the winged raptor strike your mech before trying to retaliate with the thorns."

Although Major Jankowski wanted to maintain his distance from such a disturbing opponent, he decided to put his trust in Ves' advice and approach the enemy target.

The winged raptor immediately began to send out a spray of dangerous and corrosive blood.

"Don't evade! Let it hit your mech frame!"

The blood instantly started to behave like acid when it began to douse half of the mech frame.

Though the Elegant Rage immediately started to suffer a lot of exterior damage, the mech immediately closed in on the blood raptor and began to crash against the lightning manifestation!

The winged raptor incurred considerable damage as it was not equipped for defense.

However, it was able to repair its damage by expending its reserve of blood. The raptor soon began to spray the Elegant Rage with another torrent of corrosive blood!

While the metallic parts of the living mech was not faring too well, its ebony wood components were doing a much better job of staying in one piece!

Even if the wood started to succumb from the corrosive blood, it was already starting to regenerate and undo the damage in real-time.

How impressive!

"Keep brawling against the blood raptor. Try and roll around so that a lot of thorns end up puncturing this tribulation manifestation. Don't stop rolling!"

It sounded like a silly command, but it was truly producing results! The more the Elegant Rage got struck, the more lethal the thorns became!

The Elegant Rage would have been able to clean up the blood raptor easily by now if Venerable Lanie was sitting in the cockpit.

However, the current thorns were not that bad. They still possessed power of their own that was not reliant on the nascent domain of an expert pilot.

As the blood raptor began to suffer more and more from getting stung by all of the thorns, the lightning manifestation finally popped and began to release destructive and creative energies in the immediate environment.

The Elegant Rage just survived her second tribulation strike!

Chapter 6142 Reassuring Mech

The initial strikes of a basic multi-modal lightning tribulation did not really amount to anything impressive.

The tribulation storm may have converted the straightforward lightning bolts from above into more complicated tribulation manifestations, but their power level was not that impressive at first.

That slowly changed as the Elegant Rage under the control of Major Simon Jankowski defeated one lightning manifestation after another.

Though the Elegant Rage was able to maintain the upper hand each time, there was no way for the mech armed with thorns, tonfas and a special rifle to avoid damage.

This was particularly the case when the defeated manifestations exploded and showered the nearby mech with the power of destruction and creation!

Fortunately, the Elegant Rage possessed inherent regeneration capabilities that were not entirely dependent on Venerable Lanie. The forest environment provided just enough additional wood energy for the Woodsap mech to regenerate many damaged parts by herself.

The components made out of improved ebony wood recovered fairly easily, but even the metallic parts began to show signs of gradual restoration!

Ves paid close attention to the telemetry of the Elegant Rage. When he observed plenty of indications that the living mech was actually able to repair simple battle damage to her metallic components, he became pleasantly surprised at this phenomenon.

The performance was better than he expected!

Was this the benefit of converting the Elegant Rage into a Woodsap mech?

Compared to her previous condition when she had just mutated into a thorn-covered form, the integration of Emperor Tree Wood seemed harmonious, but also incomplete. It was as if the Elegant Rage acquired an entirely new set of internal architecture, yet barely utilized it for anything aside from using wood as emergency replacement materials.

Now that Ves had made a pass at the recovered mech, he had picked up where the mutations left off and bound everything more tightly together by grouping them into a Carmine System linked with Emperor Tree Sap.

The practical and symbolic meaning of the changes were significant. The Elegant Rage was no longer a freak of accident anymore. It had turned into a more proper wood-based hyper mech.

The regeneration factor of the Elegant Rage could probably become a lot better if Ves converted her entirely into a mech made out of improved ebony wood.

However, Ves lacked the desire and the expertise to do so. He also felt that the Elegant Rage was better off if she maintained her half-metallic, half-wooden state. The living mech was able to make use of the advantages of both biotechnology and conventional technology. She might not excel in either areas, but she became a lot more versatile than before.

"These lightning creatures aren't as bad as the ones I fought before." Major Jankowski freely commented. "I don't have to fight too many of them either. This lightning tribulation only ends after 9 attempts to take down this mech, right?"

"That is correct, but don't underestimate it." Ves warned. "The tribulation is weak, but the next challenger is always around 30 percent stronger. This means that the final opponents will definitely test your piloting capabilities to the limit."

The expert candidate's expression turned a little more serious. "Understood. I am trying my best to minimize the damage to the mech, buy more time for the damaged systems to recover and familiarize myself with all of the quirks of this strange machine. I have very little experience with piloting cybernetic mechs, and I have never piloted one that is partially based on wood. It is not a great concern for the time being. The complexity of the Elegant Rage is much lower than that of a first-class multipurpose mech."

"How is your experience with the Elegant Rage so far?"

"This is a reassuring mech to pilot." He said after the storm sent out a dolphin-like creature made out of tribulation lightning. "It doesn't look too strong on the surface, but it is able to regenerate any damage it takes. This is a luxury that I have never seen in a second-class mech like this. Self-repair systems are more common in more premium first-class mechs, but their capabilities are often limited. I have the impression that the Elegant Rage is even able to repair her core systems as long as she is granted enough time."

Ves nodded with a smile. "No matter their specific circumstances, each Woodsap mech functions as a more advanced and pronounced version of a wood hyper mech. The wood element has always been strong at restoration. Although you are the wrong pilot to maximize the Elegant Rage's regenerative properties, you can just let the living mech take care of this chore. Your job is to maximize her combat capabilities and win every bout with as much grace as possible."

"Grace, huh? Now that you mention it, the Elegant Rage makes it surprisingly easy for me to pilot her with a certain degree of feminine flair."

This became obvious as the mech continued to tangle with the flying dolphin creature.

The current alien creature was quite fast, but could only launch attacks up close, which gave the Elegant Rage room to evade and maneuver around the flying beast.

The living mech did not straightforwardly dodge the dolphin's charges with the most efficient movements possible. The Elegant Rage spontaneously made a few unnecessary but relatively minor movements that caused her movements to flow more smoothly after another.

It was not quite a dance, but it looked rather close to it. The dolphin would have felt increasingly angry and frustrated by the Elegant Rage's repeated flourishes. It was as if the mech was intentionally mocking the tribulation manifestation's lack of grace!

"Careful!"

The aquatic creature finally couldn't take it any longer! A horn extended from its forehead that crackled with lightning.

The dolphin's tail violently exploded, allowing the creature to charge forward at a much greater speed than before!

Major Jankowski did not even have time to consider whether he should attempt to block or evade the incoming charge.

He chose to evade!

As an expert candidate, his reflexes were already better than his already augmented physique could allow.

The Elegant Rage evaded to the left in accordance with his instinctual response. The living machine only deviated from the command by inducing a rapid spin.

Bang!

In the end, the Woodsap mech barely but 'elegantly' managed to evade the sharp and threatening horn!

The Elegant Rage only got pushed back when the body of the charging dolphin managed to clip the living mech in the side.

Even when the Woodsap mech briefly lost control over her flight, the mech still took measures to maintain a dignified posture!

Ves felt rather bemused by the effects of the Lobis Fragment. The description of the archegem produced by Lucky did not mention any concrete performance boosts, but it was clear that its effects were not negligible or useless!

He initially thought that the Lobis Fragment would only make the Elegant Rage appear more coquettish in her movements, but there were serious battle applications to her dancing motions.

At this time, the alien aquatic creature had lost a lot of strength. Detonating its own tail was a desperation move. The creature had no way out aside from trying to impale its adversary.

So long as it managed to bury its horn deep inside the Elegant Rage, the mech would have suffered crippling damage!

It was a pity that the dolphin's gambit failed. The creature had become half-crippled. Its mobility was not as great as before, and its horn only served as useless decoration.

The pilot understood the importance of giving the Elegant Rage as much time to recover as possible. Starting the next fight too soon was counterproductive.

Major Jankowski was not in a hurry to finish off his weakened opponent. The Elegant Rage maintained a healthy distance while firing small but fast-moving ebony wood seeds at the partially crippled aquatic opponent.

The pilot understood the importance of giving the Elegant Rage as much time to recover as possible. Starting the next fight too soon was counterproductive.

Of course, lightning tribulations were not that easy to exploit. Plenty of challengers in the past tried to take advantage of excessive delays to buy more time to recover.

As the bout dragged on, the half-crippled dolphin seemed to gain an instant boost of power. The tribulation manifestation already started to fall apart, but before it disappeared entirely, it became determined to go out with a bang!

This happened completely without warning, causing Major Jankowski to react a little later than he wished.

As the disintegrating dolphin charged at the Elegant Rage without any visible sign of buildup, the Woodsap mech instantly made a backflip in the air!

By lurching herself backwards, the Elegant Rage barely managed to evade the deadly horn!

However, the mech still endured an electrifying collision that not only dented her chest plating, but also injected a powerful surge of tribulation lightning throughout her mech frame.

Immediately afterwards, the alien aquatic creature was no longer able to maintain its integrity anymore and exploded, causing it to release a lot of creation and destruction energies!

The Elegant Rage endured this 'reward' with considerable difficulty. Much of her exterior sustained damage as the mech struggled to resist the momentary wave of pain.

However, the restoration effect of the accompanying creation energy was much better than usual. The Woodsap mech's responsiveness to the power of pure creation was so high that much of the damage disappeared in a matter of seconds!

Ves observed this interaction with great curiosity. Woodsap mechs may not be the toughest machines that he could make, but their ability to regenerate damage was unparalleled!

"Five down, four more to go. The next one is only going to get more difficult."

"I know, but the Elegant Rage should have grown stronger than before. I can already feel that the mech is running smoother than before. All of that exposure to tribulation lightning so far has definitely had an effect."

He was right. Five successive tribulation lightning baptisms caused a lot of small imperfections to smooth over.

Of course, the tribulation lightning was not too strong due to consisting of just 9 strikes in total, so the boost in strength was not that noticeable.

However, it was impossible for a mech designer like Ves to miss the subtle changes to his own work. His work on converting the Elegant Rage into a Woodsap mech had been rather crude and hasty.

His lack of familiarity with organic mechs, the untested nature of the Woodsap Carmine System and the notable time constraint had forced him to finish his work in a relatively rough state.

Ves was not exactly proud of that, but his only intention had been to complete a functional Woodsap mech as opposed to creating another work of art.

Yet now, the lighting tribulation seemed to compensate for all of the sloppiness in Ves' latest work. It was as if a vastly superior craftsman was making a pass at the Elegant Rage with every lightning baptism.

The only regret was that the lightning baptisms were too weak to be of any interest to Ves. he had siphoned the energies of much more powerful lightning strikes during the legendary tribulation of the Dominion of Man.

While Ves could have decided to go ahead and embezzle a modest portion of the Elegant Rage's reward, he held off on this decision.

There was not much he could do with so little tribulation energy. As long as he allowed the living mech to claim as much creation energy as possible, there may be a chance for the Elegant Rage to evolve into a masterwork mech!

There was no guarantee that the Elegant Rage would become a masterwork mech as soon as the Red Association took possession of her. Not all Master Mech Designers possessed this capability to do so, and even if they did, they might not possess the motivation to do their best.

Since Gloriana was not involved in the refit process, the Elegant Rage did not come with a god body solution. It was therefore very significant if the Woodsap mech was able to become a masterwork mech at the end of this ordeal.

One of the benefits of having the Elegant Rage turn into a masterwork mech was that Ves gained absolute assurance that her Woodsap Carmine System would definitely work as intended!

The chance that such a high-quality mech would botch her attempt at forming an experimental Woodsap Pact was extremely low!

Chapter 6143 Quick Bargaining

The Elegant Rage had to put up a slightly greater struggle to defeat the next opponent, but that was all. Major Jankowski needed no additional instruction in order to outfight the tribulation manifestation that resembled a rock golem.

The enemy was amazingly resistant against damage, but it was unable to fly. The only threat posed by the creature was that it was able to launch rock projectiles that flew fast and exploded as soon as they approached their targets.

The Elegant Rage was able to evade the rock projectiles so long as they remained in one piece, but her armor received a lot of scratches after getting struck by a lot of rock shards.

The fight turned into a contest of endurance. The Elegant Rage eventually managed to win comfortably as the lightning manifestation was unable to withstand all of the ebony wooden seeds launched by the Sprout Rifle.

As the Elegant Rage already managed to complete two-thirds of the multi-modal lightning tribulation, both Ves and Major Jankowski became more alert.

"It's going to get really difficult from now on." Ves remarked. "Lightning tribulations never want to let off their targets easily, and I fear that my action to provoke the storm will finally come back to haunt me. If my guess is correct, the tribulation will get more serious by targeting the weaknesses of the Elegant Rage."

He could feel the energies accumulating in the storm clouds. The continued survival of the Elegant Rage did not sit well with the lightning tribulation.

Thankfully, no matter how powerful it became, at least it didn't get hijacked by the Subjugation King.

The powerful god king probably had standards. It was an absolute waste of time for him to expend so much power just to witness the struggle of a much weaker mech.

It may also be that the Subjugation King was only able to hijack storms of sufficient size and power. It could be that only larger and more noticeable storms registered on his senses.

Whatever the case, Ves didn't have to worry about a certain slave driver trying to ruin his life again!

"The next one is coming." Major Jankowski noted.

The lightning manifestation that appeared as the seventh challenge came in the form of a living gas cloud!

The hostile 'entity' was fast and surprisingly agile, so the Elegant Rage had little choice but to confront this enemy head-on without any chance of avoidance.

That was where the problems began. From the moment the Elegant Rage attempted to strike the gas cloud with her ebony wood tonfas, the weapons simply passed through without hitting anything solid!

In the meantime, the gas cloud began to generate a large amount of lightning bolts, many of which struck the Elegant Rage from all sides!

Although the mech's armor system was able to endure this destructive massage for the time being, the more delicate and vulnerable parts were faring significantly worse!

The sensors and the flight system of the Elegant Rage possessed a much lower damage tolerance and could not withstand this lighting bombardment for long!

Major Jankowski immediately recognized the threat and tried to pull the Elegant Rage out of the gas cloud.

Unfortunately, no matter how elegantly the cybernetic mech moved through the air, the Elegant Rage was unable to shake off a cloud that was even faster and more maneuverable!

"How can I kill an enemy that can't be struck?!" He questioned. "It doesn't look as if this enemy will exit this special state!"

The Red Association was not entirely unfamiliar with enemies that exhibited similar capabilities.

In most cases, it took a lot of energy to maintain an intangible state.

In addition, first-class multipurpose mechs were often equipped with diverse armaments, of which one should always be able to damage these tricky opponents.

The Elegant Rage did not have access to a dozen different weapon systems! Much of the damage that the mech was able to inflict was physical in nature, but this just so happened to be the most ineffective solution against an opponent that lacked a solid body!

Ves frowned in thought. He studied the enemy that continually struck the Elegant Rage from every direction in the hopes of discovering a weakness.

"Wait! I know how you can defeat this enemy!" He exclaimed.

"Please elaborate."

"If my guess is right, an enemy like this can only be harmed by relying on energy damage."

"My mech doesn't have access to energy weapons at the moment. Wasn't this model equipped with plasma tonfas?"

"I replaced them with solid ebony wood rods." Ves helplessly said. "As I have said before, I always assumed your Association would take the time to design proper weapons and arm the Elegant Rage with them. Anyway, that's not important at the moment. Your mech still has an extraordinary means of attack. Examine the state of the thorns. They are constantly accumulating energy as your mech gets attacked. You should be able to launch an effective counterattack if the thorns are packed with counterattack energy."

The Elegant Rage's thorns were not for decoration! They had become the unique gimmick of the partially wooden mech. The wooden and metal thorns adorning her mech frame became deadlier as the living mech continued to suffer greater harm.

The expert candidate inspected the thorns, but grew disappointed when he evaluated their current threat level.

"They're not powerful enough. I can vaguely feel the energies inside of them, but I don't have any confidence that they will be able to deflate this gas cloud."

The efficiency was too low!

It couldn't be helped. The Elegant Rage's thorns were originally a manifestation of Venerable Lanie's distorted willpower. Only when the living mech came under the effect of forced resonance or true resonance would the thorns be able to show their true power.

As it was, the thorns were charging up so slowly that it would take forever before they could land a serious enough blow against this intangible opponent!

Just as Major Jankowski was starting to think about giving up and evacuating from a no-win situation for the second time, Ves spoke up again.

"We can still defeat this enemy. The electrical bolts produced by this gas cloud are quite weak, so the Elegant Rage can still endure them for the time being. The problem is that the mech cannot outlast the gas cloud long enough to charge up the thorns. In order to buy more time to prepare an effective counterattack, you need to relocate the mech. Go down to the forest. The thicker the trees, the better."

Major Jankowski grinned. He immediately understood what Ves had in mind!

Instead of continuing to struggle in the air, the Elegant Rage abruptly dove and descended straight in the middle of the densest part of the forest!

The gas cloud followed suit and made sure that it remained centered around the moving mech.

The difference this time was that many of the lightning bolts struck the trees instead of the mech itself!

Many of the bolts ended up striking the surrounding trees, causing them to explode or catch on fire!

Though the gas cloud was inflicting terrible harm on the environment, the Elegant Rage gained a momentary reprieve.

However, it was not enough.

"This is a good idea, but the Elegant Rage is not recovering fast enough. There is only so much this forest can shield the mech from damage."

The trees were too weak and fragile! They were nowhere near as powerful as the Emperor Tree, so they were only good for grounding lightning bolts.

Seeing as this plan was not producing the desired results, Ves decided to voice his second proposal.

"We need to be more proactive. Try and invoke the blessing of Gaia before firing the Sprout Rifle straight towards the ground."

"Pardon?"

"Let me guide you through the process."

It took way too much time for Ves to explain his plan, but Major Jankowski did not need to know that much in order to do his job. He didn't even need to bargain with Gaia for assistance. Ves was already in the process of begging the design spirit for help!

"Gaia! Listen to me! Help us out by lending your power to the Sprout Rifle!"

It was difficult to catch the True God's attention. Gaia grew way too quickly and lost her respect for her progenitor. She quickly became involved in much greater affairs, causing her to look down on the Larkinson Clan.

"Gaia! Gaia! We need your help! The Elegant Rage won't be able to make it if you don't lend us your power. Think of all of the good this mech can do once she has survived this test. I intend to make a lot more Woodsap mechs in the future. I am not afraid of dedicating many of them to you, because there are no other design spirits that are more suitable to shower the Woodsap mechs with their blessings."

Ves could feel that he had managed to attract Gaia's interest, though the ongoing tribulation event made it difficult to maintain a connection.

"It's okay." Ves reassured Major Jankowski. "The Sprout Rifle is designed to channel Gaia's blessing. I think that is enough of an excuse to get away with this. We just have to be careful not to do it often enough to make the tribulation storm think we are cheating."

Now that he managed to attract the distant design spirit's attention, Ves quickly began to bargain with her. He knew that the only way for the Elegant Rage to borrow her power was to win her over with solid benefits.

After making certain concessions related to Woodsap mechs to Gaia, the design spirit finally went into action.

"The storm is growing more violent!"

Outside intervention was a big taboo during lighting tribulations. This was why the current one became a lot more complex after Ves deliberately provoked it at the beginning.

"It's okay." Ves reassured Major Jankowski. "The Sprout Rifle is designed to channel Gaia's blessing. I think that is enough of an excuse to get away with this. We just have to be careful not to do it often enough to make the tribulation storm think we are cheating."

Gaia only reached out to the Sprout Rifle long enough to infuse it with a modest dose of her power. She retracted her presence before the tribulation storm could do anything more.

Now that the Sprout Rifle had become infused with the blessing of Gaia, Major Jankowski reluctantly pointed the weapon downwards and fired an activated ebony seed right onto the ground!

The impact was softer than usual. The Sprout Rifle had deliberately reduced much of its power in order to prevent the seed from shattering apart.

Once the seed settled into the soil, its green glow became brighter as it began to sprout and extend all sorts of thorny vines in every direction.

Each vine was filled with a bountiful amount of life energy and wood energy, allowing them to grow rapidly!

Not only that, but the thorns also became charged by Gaia's energies. As soon as they came in contact with the gas cloud, they began to attack it on a metaphysical level!

"It's working!" Major Jankowski noted. "The thorns on those vines are much more effective than the thorns on the exterior of my mech."

"That's because they are charged by the power of a True God."

What was important was that Gaia did not attack the gas cloud directly, but instead empowered the sprouted thorn vine.

The thorns became so effective that they not only harmed the gas cloud, but also started to absorb its energy to fuel the growth of the vines even further!

Although the gas cloud immediately retaliated by striking the vines with lightning bolts, the energetic vines rapidly recovered and became more vigorous in their attacks!

"Is this the true power of the Sprout Rifle?" Major Jankowski asked as he never expected this kind of weapon to produce such a strange sight.

"Not even close." Ves shook his head. "The Sprout Rifle only truly comes into power when wielded by Venerable Lanie. It is a real shame that the first display of this ability does not have the benefit of her true resonance. The gas cloud never would have troubled us so much if she was in the cockpit."

Chapter 6144 The Swords of Ice and Fire

To be honest, Ves felt as if the Elegant Rage had resorted to cheating by borrowing the power of Gaia.

Major Jankowski barely had to do anything as the thorn vines spawned from the Gaia-empowered seed practically slaughtered the gas cloud by themselves!

While Ves acknowledged that the Elegant Rage was able to sit back and relax because he had done a good job at designing the Sprout Rifle, it did not change the fact that the mech was relying on the power of an external source.

It presented an interesting question to Ves. Could Gaia or any design spirit be considered as a part of the strength of a living mech?

Was their ability to call in long-distance support a violation of the rules, or just a part of the game?

Ves wasn't able to make up his mind.

His sense of honor told him that borrowing the power of a True God was not right, even if the tribulation storm let him get away with it this time.

His sense of pragmatism was a lot more accepting towards this approach. So what if the Sprout Rifle was able to borrow Gaia's power? This was the entire purpose of a blessed weapon!

Perhaps it was much like the priest characters in those popular virtual reality games based on fantasy settings. Unlike most character classes, the ones related to priests explicitly prayed to their gods to cast healing spells and resurrect dead bodies. The devoted characters were able to perform a lot of actions that were far beyond the realm of mortals, yet they were still allowed to do so within the rules of the game.

Perhaps the concept of blessed weapons was not all that different. Gaia had to pay a price in order to bestow the Sprout Rifle with her power.

This was also why Ves had formed a tentative deal with Gaia. He promised that she would be the design spirit of every Woodsap mech he would make in the future.

This was a beneficial arrangement so long as both sides maintained friendly relations. Ves would become assured that his Woodsap mechs gained a supportive supervisor and source of additional wood energy.

In turn, Gaia would gain a lot of high-quality spiritual feedback from pilots that would presumably enjoy greater success by forming Woodsap Pacts. Each of these pilots and their Woodsap mechs would probably have amazing compatibility with the Mother of Earth, so Ves had no reason to resist this change.

The only concern that Ves had with this arrangement was whether he was shifting too much power into Gaia's hands.

The True God not only possessed a lot of relations with plantlife, but also shared an unmistakable connection to Old Earth.

This meant that it was conceivable that Gaia would also be able to claim dominion over elemental Carmine mechs based on the earth element!

It was not acceptable for a design spirit to become the default design spirit for both wood and earth-aspected Carmine mechs.

To be honest, Ves originally intended to create another design spirit with a powerful wood or earth domain.

If he had been able to harvest the remnant spirituality of the Emperor Tree, then Ves would have the perfect ingredient to create a tree-based design spirit that inherited many traits of the calamity plant!

Alas, this was not possible unless Ves became willing to dismantle the Ebony Everchanger, which was not an option.

He would have to figure out a different solution. He could still spend money to acquire powerful mutated beasts based on either wood or earth elements.

"The thorny vine exhausted the gas cloud a minute ago. The next one is about to come." Jankowski said, pulling Ves from his thoughts. "This is the eight challenge."

That meant that as long as the Elegant Rage managed to pass 2 more tests, she would successfully earn the right to exist as the first Woodsap mech in existence!

Although it looked as if the Elegant Rage had almost made it to her destination, both Ves and Major Jankowski did not dare to become complacent.

After continuous strengthening, the lightning manifestation that emerged this time was bound to be even harder to defeat than the strange gas cloud!

"A considerably larger form dropped from the storm clouds. The lightning formed a vaguely familiar alien presented before the Elegant Rage."

"This one looks relatively familiar." Ves noted. "Messier 87 probably hosts a powerful species of sword wielders. This one holds two different blades. The alien can also do more. Can you sense the flow of E energy? One of the blades is attracting fire energy while the other is attracting ice energy!"

When combined with tribulation lighting, the twin blades of this sword-wielding alien started to look really scary!

This was the style of swordsmanship of Messier 87! In an energy-rich environment, every extraordinary swordsman apparently learned to amplify all of their sword techniques by borrowing the power of heaven.

Although this approach towards swordsmanship lacked the strong willpower and indomitability of human swordmasters, the alien style was nonetheless immensely powerful as long as there was a strong supply of energy.

It just so happened that the sword wielding alien could count on the storm clouds to gain a constant infusion of tribulation lightning. The four-armed alien with digitigrade legs was already taking advantage of this by increasing the lethality of its swords!

Major Jankowski frowned. "I am not sure whether the tonfas of the Elegant Rage can withstand the blows of those swords. That fire sword looks especially threatening against the wood of my mech."

Ves could feel the potent power of the sword-wielding alien as well. The tonfas may be able to give the Elegant Rage a chance to survive up close, but if the discrepancies in skills as well as hard performance became too great, then that would not bode well for the living mech!

"We need to leverage all of the advantages of the Elegant Rage that we can muster. Pick up the vine from below. I think we may need to borrow the power of Gaia yet again."

Major Jankowsky did not question the command. The mech flew towards the site where the vines had lingered after they killed the gas cloud. Much of the thorns still looked eager to inflict pain while sucking the life out of their victims.

Major Jankowski suppressed his apprehension towards the dangerous-looking growths and commanded the Elegant Rage to pick up one of the vines.

As soon as the mech did so, the vines suddenly collapsed and condensed until they turned into a single long green whip!

A whip that was covered in much denser and more deadly thorns!

"I am not proficient in the use of whips." Major Jankowski spoke.

"It shouldn't matter too much. Just throw it at the enemy. The vine is alive, so it should be able to entangle the enemy by itself."

If Ves had more time, he would have explored whether there was a way to change the shape of the vine into a physical shield, an additional armor layer or even a spear.

Alas, the tribulation would not give the Elegant Rage the time to figure out her new capabilities.

After the alien swordsman started to wield the power of fire and ice, it immediately started to charge straight at the Elegant Rage!

Major Jankowski only bothered to launch a few ebony seed shots at the incoming enemy, only for the alien swordsman to block the simple attacks with its flaming blade.

In the face of this aggressive approach, the Elegant Rage did not immediately throw out its vine whip.

Instead, the mech wrapped it up around her mech frame like a bandolier and intended to meet the charging alien adversary with a pair of tonfas!

"Wait, are you sure it's a good idea to—"

Bang!

Bang!

The Elegant Rage bounced backwards as the power unleashed by the two swords upon getting blocked by the tonfas proved to be too much!

It took a lot of effort to arrest the momentum transferred by the alien swordsman. When Major Jankowski observed the state of the ebony wooden tonfas, he could already observe the damage.

Not only were the two weapons chipped, they also showed obvious burn and ice damage each!

The tonfas were already beginning to recover, but when a wind of ice and frost blew into the Elegant Rage's direction, the regeneration speed immediately dropped!

"It can do that?!"

"Move! Don't let your mech and her components get frozen in place! This is an area denial attack! So long as you keep moving to places that are not affected by the ice, the Elegant Rage won't get inhibited."

The power of ice and frost was slow to act on the Elegant Rage. Since there were no restrictions to her movement, she simply boosted the warmer areas and forced the sword-wielding alien to waste a lot of energy for nothing.

This did not deter the powerful foe. Seeing that the Elegant Rage was trying to avoid confrontation in order to give her tonfas time to restore themselves, the alien swordsman began to slash its ice blade in the air!

"Watch out! Those are sword energy attacks!"

Each slash unleashed a powerful ice spike that soared towards the Elegant Rage at a fairly fast pace!

The mech was able to dodge the first spike without expending too much effort, but then the next ones arrived.

The Elegant Rage began to display her newfound grace once more as she began to dance and weave around all of the ice spikes.

It seemed as if the swordsman was unable to make any progress, but then it began to swing its fire blade as well.

Arrows made out of fire energy shot towards the Elegant Rage!

Major Jankowski put greater effort into dodging them. He really did not want his partially wooden mech to catch fire!

It became a lot harder for the Elegant Rage to remain unscathed. The mobility of the second-class mech was not the best, and the expert candidate still wasn't able to pilot her as fluently as possible.

Eventually, the Elegant Rage could not prevent herself from getting struck by an ice spike.

The sharp spike pierced a leg plate and inflicted moderate damage to the internals!

What was even worse was that the ice spike began to freeze the foreleg section, causing every related part to slow down or malfunction.

"Shake it off!" Ves quickly urged.

The Elegant Rage already whacked the partially embedded ice spike away with one of her tonfas.

The removal of the ice spike ended the freeze effect, but still left a strong impression on Ves and Major Jankowski.

"The alien swordsman is coming closer!"

The enemy was not content with launching ice spikes and fire arrows at the Elegant Rage. The four-armed alien was actively trying to move closer so that it could strike at the mech directly.

There was little the Elegant Rage could do at the moment. Major Jankowski had to put a lot of focus on evading, deflecting or blocking all of the incoming projectiles.

As soon as the enemy swordsman came close enough, it began to summon a large amount of fire energy before making a wide slash with its fire sword, unleashing a wall of fire that the Elegant Rage was unable to evade!

Major Jankowski could do little but have his mech brace against the attack.

The heat levels in the cockpit rose as the wall of flame scorched the exterior of the Elegant Rage!

The metallic parts glowed red-hot while many of the wooden components had already started to burn!

"Gaia!"

The thorn whip released a burst of energy, causing the flames that had begun to spread across the Elegant Rage to lose their power and disappear!

"Fire is the nemesis of a Woodsap mech or any wooden mech for that matter. If we want to beat this swordsman, we can't let it channel the power of heaven without interruption." Ves spoke.

"So the Elegant Rage needs to get close?"

"Yes. You need to put your fighting skills to good use. If you can't outfight this alien, then the Elegant Rage will probably get burned."

Chapter 6145 The Elemental Alien Swordsman

As the storm clouds continued to rage above the skies of New Constantinople VIII, many people began to pay attention to the Larkinson Clan yet again.

Most leaders of red humanity were currently preoccupied with the final war preparations in order to meet the imminent alien offensive, but there were still enough people who had the time to take a look at the Larkinson Clan.

Although the general population still remained ignorant about lightning tribulations, many high-placed figures had gradually learned about their significance.

"What is Professor Larkinson doing this time?"

"What fantastic mech did he make that would merit such a response?"

"I cannot see what is special about this cybernetic mech outside of those illogical thorns."

The scale of the lightning tribulation may be limited this time, but any creation that provoked such a response was worthy of notice!

The Red Association had moved quickly to block curious onlookers from witnessing the Elegant Rage in action, but the fact that the entire event took place on open terrain made it impossible to block every means of remote observation.

People were beginning to take notice of the first Woodsap mech, even if hardly anyone comprehended the true secrets of this mysterious machine.

Inside Diandi Base, the mech designers who witnessed the finalization of the Elegant Rage all grew impressed at the performance of the overhauled mech up to this point.

"The ebony wood improved with the help of our researchers is truly performing as well as expected." Professor Vector Loban stated as he continued to pay attention to the telemetry transmitted by the Woodsap mech. "The regeneration factor of this material is higher when employed by the Elegant Rage as opposed to other biomechs. It is clear that there is a strong synergy between living mechs and hyper wood."

Professor Jovy Armalon paid closer attention to the pilot. "Major Simon Jankowski is making good progress in mastering the nuances of the Elegant Rage. This is one of the reasons why he was assigned to lead the mech contingent of the Bluejay Fleet. He is experienced enough to have polished all of his piloting skills, but he is also young enough to remain flexible and open-minded. The living mech must be putting active effort into accommodating his piloting quirks as well."

No pilot was able to hop into the cockpit of a random mech and master it to an extremely high level during a single deployment.

Even an excellent first-class expert candidate such as Simon Jankowski who possessed excellent fundamental skills could not outperform the likes of Lanie Larkinson before she broke through.

It would be nice if Jankowski had spent a few more months with the Elegant Rage, but his current degree of utilization was not bad given how little time he spent in the cockpit.

Alas, there was another reason why the mech designers would have preferred to witness the performance of another mech pilot.

"It is a shame that Venerable Lanie is not present to draw out the true power of the Elegant Rage." Gloriana spoke with a pained expression. "I haven't been able to work on the Elegant Rage myself, but Ves has learned about mech personalization from me to apply a good selection of my best practices in this project. The Woodsap mech is best suited for mech pilots that prefer skirmishing over brawling and is able to demonstrate a high degree of ambidexterity in order to wield the two tonfas in both a defensive and offensive capacity. Major Jankowski's combat approach is different, and it shows."

Venerable Lanie Larkinson gained an excellent grasp on basic swordsmanship due to special reasons. She subsequently spent years as a mech pilot and expert candidate on tempering all of her skills, but notably her melee combat capabilities.

Similar to Venerable Imon Ingvar, Lanie had taken a penchant for dual wielding swords or other armaments. She not only gained a good sense of rhythm in combat, but also became proficient in wielding two equally sized weapons as if both were being held by her dominant hand.

Ves subsequently optimized the Elegant Rage for this combat approach, making sure that both arms were able to exert the same amount of strength, with only minor differences in their settings to take Lanie's subconscious biases into account.

Major Jankowski on the other hand did not focus too much on melee combat. He was fine when wielding fairly short and light one-handed weapons, and he knew his way around long and heavy polearms.

However, the medium-length solid ebony wooden tonfas fell outside these categories. Although Jankowski at least attended a few classes in the past where he was able to learn the basics of wielding this exotic type, the man was clearly not in tune with Lanie's preferred weapon type in the past few years!

Not only that, but Jankowski never put any emphasis on ambidexterity. He wielded the Elegant Rage's tonfas with a distinct split between a dominant hand and an off hand.

It was not a bad approach.

By relying on the dominant hand to hold the tonfa like a club, the Elegant Rage was able to strike the current lightning manifestation with additional reach and leverage.

By relying on the off hand to hold the tonfa by the convenient grip, the Woodsap mech gained a convenient and slender barrier that could effectively block a lot of sword strikes.

However, the poor mastery demonstrated by Major Jankowski was not enough. He was unable to replicate Venerable Lanie's more dynamic and unpredictable approach of alternating between grips with either tonfas.

It became a lot harder to predict her attacks when either hand was able to switch from a defensive to an offensive grip and vice versa.

Although Simon Jankowski knew that he could be doing a lot more with the pair of tonfas, he did not dare to attempt anything new for fear of losing control and presenting an opening to his current opponent.

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

The four-armed swordsman simulated by the lightning tribulation was relentless. The alien warrior swung his weapons with greater speed and more versatile angles than the Elegant Rage, causing the latter to get suppressed ever since both opponents closed in on each other.

Jankowski barely found opportunities to launch his own attacks. The two swords that were constantly bearing down on the Elegant Rage not only struck with considerable force, but also produced elemental effects that generated additional pressure.

Whenever the alien swordsman's fire sword struck a tonfa, it produced a blast of flames that scorched and burned the ebony wood.

Whenever the opponent's ice sword struck a tonfa, it produced a blast of frost that impaired the ebony wood's regenerative properties.

The alien adversary became a lot harder to fend off when he occasionally swapped his swords around!

The fire sword struck a tonfa that had already become marred by frost.

The ice sword struck a tonfa that had become hotter and marked by burns.

The abrupt switch from hot to cold or the other way around was not doing the abused tonfas any favors!

The tonfas weren't designed to withstand this kind of abuse. The improved ebony wood material that served as the main material of the pair of weapons may possess the ability to recover from damage, but it needed time it did not have at the moment!

Ves grew more and more concerned as the duel progressed. The biggest positive to this bout was that Major Jankowski still managed to maintain his guard. The enemy swordsman had not been able to land more than a couple of glancing blows onto the Elegant Rage's mech frame.

He was also learning quickly. The pressure of combat forced him to become rapidly more familiar with the tonfas. He was constantly optimizing and speeding up all of his moves.

This was the strength of a heavily augmented first-class mech pilot. Soldiers such as Simon Jankowski might not possess too much depth in any single area, but they accrued such a broad array of skills that they had become good at quickly gaining proficiency in any weapon system.

However, this still did not give the Elegant Rage an edge in the ongoing duel.

The enemy was learning as well. The lightning tribulation did too good of a job at simulating the skills as well as the combat acumen of this alien swordsman.

The adversary that was large, skilled and strong enough to be able to fight head-on against a mech like the Elegant Rage always maintained the upper hand throughout the exchanges.

Even if the alien swordsman briefly backed off, he only came back even harder just a short moment later!

Ves continued to study the opponent's swordsmanship with a critical eye. He had spent enough time with Ketis and the Swordmaidens to gain certain insights on the alien's approach to sword combat.

The traditional swordsmanship of the Heavensword Association was largely centered around the self. The swordmaster relied on extraordinary willpower to forcefully reshape the reality around him! Their strong minds and stronger wills also made them extremely resistant to changes imposed by others.

Ves did not get the sense that the alien swordsman was trying to impose his own will onto reality.

Instead, the four-armed warrior seemed to mold himself to certain aspects of the environment. He actively harmonized with the power of fire and ice in the environment, allowing him to amplify all of his attacks by channeling ambient E energies.

This was similar to how the Emperor Tree leveraged the abundant amount of wood energy that it had managed to capture from the environment!

The difference between the two was that the alien swordsman did not rely on brute force alone in order to leverage the power of heaven.

It was not too obvious at first, but as the duel progressed, the alien swordsman was gaining more and more momentum.

All of his sword techniques seemed to resonate with either fire or ice energy!

It was like a snowball. The more the alien swordsman wielded the power of these elements, the more he was able to call upon them in his next attacks!

The tonfas held by the Elegant Rage were beginning to look more and more ravaged as a result. Despite Major Jankowski's adaptations, the pair of ebony wood weapons could not endure the onslaught for long!

Even a total layman was able to see that the lightning manifestation was gaining more and more advantages as the fight continued.

Two different energy vortices appeared around the swords. Despite their proximity, the fire and ice vortices did not actually come close enough to produce any violent reactions.

Instead, the alien swordsman masterfully kept them apart and wielded the power of the two elements without producing any accidents!

There were even signs that the alien swordsman was able to deliberately take advantage of the inherent conflict between the two elements to add additional force to certain blows!

As much as Major Jankowski tried to figure out his adversary's weaknesses, he had no ability to exploit them so long as his Elegant Rage remained suppressed.

"I cannot go on like this, professor." He spoke through gritted teeth. "I need a way to break this game. Do you have any solutions?"

That was what Ves had been wondering for several minutes now. The second-to-last challenge of this ostensibly short lightning tribulation was already proving to be a very serious threat to his work.

The easiest way to break the game was to borrow a copious amount of power from Gaia, but Ves was extremely wary of exceeding the tolerance of the lightning tribulation. Its earlier reaction already showed that it was on the edge.

No. Major Jankowski and the Elegant Rage needed to look to themselves in order to improve their performance.

There was one obvious way to increase their combat effectiveness. It was also one that Ves had been trying to ignore since the start of this ordeal.

What if Ves broke his promise to Venerable Lanie?

What if he allowed Major Jankowski to form a Woodsap Pact with the Elegant Rage?

Chapter 6146 Gap in Energy Utilization

The Woodsap Pact.

The Elegant Rage in her current iteration would never be able to unlock her true potential so long as she was still being used as a standard mech.

There was nothing wrong with her neural interface. The Elegant Rage was still able to perform almost comparable to how she was in the past.

However, it was undeniable that she was still fighting as if one of her hands was tied behind her back.

Ves found it painful to witness his creation struggle for survival while being subjected to a handicap.

The Woodsap Pact could make everything better.

Even if she was not paired with her intended mech pilot, Ves was convinced that the Elegant Rage would definitely be able to unleash her greater potential if she formed a Woodsap Pact with Major Jankowski.

The option tempted him a lot. If Ves had to choose between seeing the Elegant Rage crumble into dust like the Elemental Lord or seeing her live by pairing up with the wrong pilot, he would gladly choose the latter option any day!

"Wait. It can't work."

The Red Association had installed a lot of powerful augmentations into Simon Jankowski, but that did not mean he was able to endure Emperor Tree Sap running through his veins.

Any attempt at replacing his blood with a toxic alien substance was bound to threaten his life!

Perhaps his powerful implants might allow him to sustain himself by relying on backup systems, but the continued intrusion of Emperor Tree Sap would poison him both physically and spiritually.

Ves immediately shook his head. There was truly no point for Major Jankowski to form a Woodsap Pact with the Elegant Rage.

The performance of the mech would decrease as a result of Jankowski's suffering and debilitation.

Once he deteriorated to the point where he was unable to muster up effective resistance, the Elegant Rage was doomed to defeat.

Even if Jankowski magically managed to take advantage of the Woodsap Pact to put up a good fight and make it to the end of the lightning tribulation, there would be no point.

The bonded pilot would either die or become disabled.

The Elegant Rage, which had permanently bonded with a pilot that was no longer available, would turn into a giant but very expensive ornament!

Just like any other Carmine mech, the moment a Woodsap mech formed a pact with a mech pilot, it had vowed to never accept the control of another mech pilot again. This was a promise made with a much more powerful form of blood, so its binding force became especially strong!

In other words, it was pointless for the Elegant Rage to survive this way, because neither her old or new pilot could make use of her features.

The unfortunate mech's only remaining value was to serve as a research object that could aid in the development of subsequent Woodsap mechs.

This was not a trivial benefit, but it fell far short of Ves' hopes and expectations.

Ves inwardly shook his head. He no longer considered this option. The Elegant Rage was made for Venerable Lanie Larkinson. It would be an affront of her purpose and existence if he forced her to form a pact with a completely different pilot!

He could spend his time much better if he considered more realistic options to turn this situation around.

This was difficult because the circumstances did not permit him to employ a lot of options.

In terms of raw physical performance, the Elegant Rage was not that different from the alien swordsman.

In terms of combat skills, Major Jankowski was at a heavy disadvantage. There was no way for him to outfight or outmaneuver a genuine master in his discipline. The most he could do was to maintain the tightest possible defense and prevent his mech from getting struck too many times.

In terms of E energy utilization, the lightning manifestation also enjoyed an advantage. The mysterious form of elemental swordsmanship practiced by the four-armed alien effectively made it so that the Elegant Rage had to fight back against the environment as well!

Crack!

One of the battered tonfas held by the Elegant Rage almost snapped in half after it got repeatedly pummeled by strikes augmented by flame and frost. The condition of the weapon had already dropped to the point where Major Jankowski felt reluctant to use it to resist any further hard blows.

Ves furrowed his brows.

What else could he reverse this decision?

Could he channel the transcendence glow in order to promote Major Jankowski's breakthrough?

No. It wouldn't work. Major Jankowski was in the wrong place at the wrong time. The expert candidate had not fought enough serious battles to temper himself to the point where he became eligible to trigger apotheosis.

Even if Jankowski was much further ahead than Ves thought, it did not change the fact that he was piloting the wrong mech!

Mechs mattered when it came to breakthroughs. Most of them took place when the pilot was either using a machine that he had been familiarizing with for months or years, or a very new and powerful product that better matched his fighting style.

Neither of these conditions applied to Major Jankowski at this junction.

As admirable as he may be for rapidly becoming familiar with the Elegant Rage's unique quirks, he still looked as if he would rather pilot one of the RA's trusty first-class multipurpose mechs.

It was hard for a professional first-class mech pilot to find any joy by being forced to make do with a mech of a lower class.

The soldiers of the Bluejay Fleet may have been shadowing Ves long enough to understand that his second-class living mechs possessed special qualities, the enormous gap in hard performance still made Major Jankowski uncomfortable!

Ves silently ruled out the possibility of inducing a breakthrough. He needed to find an entirely new and different way to turn this battle around.

There was not much time left for him to make a difference, so he concentrated hard and rapidly went over the variables.

It was like he was trying to run a marathon while being weighed down by a backpack that weighed over 100 kilograms. No matter how much his augmented physique allowed him to bear this burden, he would never truly feel fulfilled throughout this entire experience!

Ves silently ruled out the possibility of inducing a breakthrough. He needed to find an entirely new and different way to turn this battle around.

There was not much time left for him to make a difference, so he concentrated hard and rapidly went over the variables.

He soon concluded that the fundamental issue that caused the Elegant Rage to fall behind was the disparity between energy.

If the Elegant Rage and the alien swordsman fought by relying on their own power, then the latter wouldn't have been able to gain a strong advantage.

Unfortunately, the alien swordsman was incredibly good at using his swordsmanship to borrow the power of heaven. The power of fire and ice added a lot of lethality and other troublesome factors to his attacks!

As for the mech that was trying and failing to keep up with the lightning manifestation, the current iteration of the Elegant Rage amounted to a stopgap model that only served as a preview to her future form as a fully fledged expert mech.

The Elegant Rage was also a hyper mech, but her ability to leverage the power of heaven through her ebony wood was far behind compared to a native of Messier 87!

The aliens of the supermassive galaxy had been born and raised in a high-energy environment over countless generations.

They were much more sophisticated and efficient at this game. Their ability to harness the power of heaven might not be as good in a fairly distant place like the Red ocean, but their techniques gave them an edge against most forms of hyper technology!

Ves narrowed down his possible options until he was left with two different options.

He could either find a way to inhibit the alien swordsman's ability to draw upon the power of heaven, or he could improve the Elegant Rage's ability to do the same.

The former option was too difficult. The alien swordsman was not actually real, but the lightning tribulation had made sure to emulate much of his intelligence and initiative. There was no way the adversary would allow Ves to tamper with his ability to draw upon the power of ice and fire.

Ves could only shift his gaze to the cybernetic mech. In the end, he had to solve this problem like a mech designer.

"How?"

It was not as if the lightning tribulation would calmly allow Ves to hit the pause button and bring the Elegant Rage back to his workshop in order to apply hasty upgrades.

The only way to improve the machine was to do it on the spot, which was anything but easy!

Ves rapidly went over the possibilities that came up in his mind.

What if he added transphasic capabilities to the Elegant Rage?

Although he had made the Woodsap mech more compatible with phasewater after he upgraded the old Emperor Wood with an artificially improved version of ebony wood, he had yet to add any transphasic parts to the living mech.

Ves had been acting like a cheapskate by expecting the Red Association to spend its own reserves of phasewater.

This decision created an opportunity for Ves to apply spontaneous upgrades to the Elegant Rage!

Where would he get the phasewater?

"My blood should be able to do the job in a hurry."

The idea sounded tempting, but Ves soon figured out that it wasn't all that practical. There were very limited ways he could upgrade the Elegant Rage with transphasic components in the middle of an active battle.

The tonfas were almost gone. The backup knife needed to be worked by an industrial machine in order to infuse it with phasewater. Ves might be able to infuse phasewater into the ammunition of the Sprout Rifle, but the alien swordsman would never give the Elegant Rage a chance to employ her firearm!

Ves soon rejected this choice. Phasewater could not make a difference in this bout.

What else?

A cultivation method probably wouldn't work either. The Elegant Rage already ditched the Greater Larkinson Metal Guardian Mantra because the artistic conception bestowed by Venerable Lanie did a far better job just by existing.

"Wait a second."

Ves might be able to cheat the lightning tribulation by entering the System Space in order to buy additional time.

However, it was extremely unlikely that any cultivation method he developed over there would lead to an instant performance boost.

Ves had a better chance of doing so if he somehow managed to develop a powerful desperation technique! There were actually many ways for cultivators to overdraw their potential or pay a heavy price to gain a momentary advantage in battle.

So long as he developed a suitable method for the Elegant Rage, the Woodsap mech may be able to turn this battle around!

This may be a way to empower not just the Elegant Rage, but also his other living mechs!

"Why didn't I think of this before?!"

Cultivation was too new to red humanity. Ves was barely scratching the surface of what it was capable of. Even though he had managed to learn a lot of basic spells with the help of an enlightenment fruit, he never really thought about how others could make similar use of E energy.

This was one of the factors that distinguished the Elegant Rage from the alien swordsman.

The latter not only practiced an unknown cultivation method that allowed him to become more in tune with the power of heaven and earth, but also mastered a lot of sword techniques that enabled him to actively mobilize fire and ice energy for specific purposes!

It was painful to compare the sophisticated methods of the lightning manifestations to the entirely passive regeneration factor of the Elegant Rage!

Now that Ves spotted this difference, he could no longer unsee it anymore. His professionalism as a mech designer compelled him to fix this glaring shortcoming as soon as possible!

The only way forward for the Elegant Rage was to actively master the use of all of the wood energy under her command!

She could do way more with this versatile resource than to promote the restoration of her damaged components!

Chapter 6147 Playing To Her Strengths

When Ves entered the System Space without anyone noticing it, he instantly felt relief.

As long as the Mech Designer System functioned correctly, time in the outside universe should have come to a standstill from his perspective.

The actual mechanics were doubtlessly a lot more complicated, but Ves did not bother to waste his time and brain power on trying to uncover the truth.

He paused for a while and gazed at the idyllic white clouds floating in a peaceful blue sky.

Seeing as there weren't any wrathful lightning bolts trying to pierce the peaceful facade of the mountaintop, Ves became assured that his gambit worked.

It had been a risk to enter the Mech Designer System in full view of a hostile lightning tribulation.

Either the heavenly authority of Messier 87 already detected it and knew about its existence beforehand, or it just managed to discover that the cheeky mech designer who attracted tribulations on a regular basis carried an immensely powerful artifact from another galaxy!

Whatever the case, Ves was already prepared to respond to either situation. There was not much the heavenly authority of Messier 87 could do against him. It was bound to the same rules as it was meant to uphold.

Seeing that the lightning tribulation did not retaliate against Ves, there was no need for him to do anything special.

This granted him the time to focus on the more immediate issue.

How to make the Elegant Rage better.

He already came up with the idea of allowing his living mechs to make more effective use of E energy.

Technically speaking, any mech was able to utilize the power of E energy in a lot of handy ways. Hyper technology existed as a means to enable mechs and other machines to attract certain kinds of E energy and make use of them in predefined ways.

The Elegant Rage also possessed a bit of rudimentary hyper technology, though it was not as strong or systematic as Ves wished.

The Lucid Rage model that the current mech was based upon was a product of the Phasewater Generation.

The Elegant Rage only 'accidentally' became a hyper mech after it merged with a lot of Emperor Wood.

Ves may have upgraded this inferior material with a much better variation of wood, but it did not change the fact that the Elegant Rage was vastly underutilizing the potential of wood energy by only using it to fuel its damage restoration capabilities.

"There's also the thorns."

This was the greatest strength of the Elegant Rage. The living mech became contaminated by Venerable Lanie's talent, and was partially able to mobilize her distinct ability.

Unfortunately, the Elegant Rage was much less competent in this regard. The living mech was not the one to break through.

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "If I have to develop an active ability for the Elegant Rage, it has to be based on wood energy as well as her thorns."

He had to work with what he got. The Elegant Rage did not possess a lot of strengths. The mech served as an excellent platform for melee combat, and its Sprout Rifle presented interesting options, but this was rather barebones.

That still left Ves with a lot of possible choices, so he quickly tried to narrow them down in order to set a goal that he could work towards.

"The Elegant Rage is more suited to fight long, drawn-out fights, but it cannot do so against her current opponent. The alien swordsman can fight all day while continually borrowing energy from the lightning tribulation as well as ambient E energy radiation. This means that the Elegant Rage needs to eschew the most fitting abilities and pull off a move that is fast, explosive and preferably instant. It should be powerful and practical enough to cripple the alien swordsman or at least throw him out of his rhythm."

The wood element was not typically associated with powerful and explosive attacks, but as one of the five classical elements, it was so varied and versatile that it could still be employed in this fashion.

Ves began to dig up the basic spells that he had learned years ago. He never really made use of them as he would rather prefer to rely on technology if he wanted to start a fire.

"Let's see. It's hard to be able to do this without any plants around."

Perhaps he could buy one from the System, but he was unwilling to spend his AP. He had yet to make any significant strides in completing the Missions he accepted.

"I really need to work on that." He admonished himself. "This situation would have been a lot easier to deal with if I have lots of AP to spare."

He focused back on what he could do for the Elegant Rage by going over the exhaustive list of basic spells.

Promote the blooming and flowering of plants? Pass.

Revive diseased plants and trees? Pass.

Increase the mass and nutrition of edible crops? Pass.

"A lot of basic wood spells are nothing more than farming techniques!"

It made sense. Cultivators needed to eat as well, and promoting the growth of plants was probably a big deal at the time. Various elixirs and other powerful medicines could only be made with extraordinary plants as raw materials.

Fortunately, there were still a few basic attack spells.

Ves raised his hand and gathered a bit of wood energy in order to form a very small and weak wood thorn.

"Launch!"

The thorn propelled forward and struck a nearby rock with barely any sound.

Suffice to say, the attack was very underwhelming. Ves seriously doubted that the Elegant Rage could produce a better result by launching her thorns at the alien swordsman. The latter probably possessed a powerful means to fend off such an assault.

"What about this then?"

He waved his hand and spent more time gathering more wood energy. A very thin vine formed in the air before it launched forward to entangle and wrap around a smaller rock.

Once the vine latched on to its target, it tried to reinforce itself and tighten its grip.

"This is an excellent means of entangling an enemy... if it was powerful enough."

Much of the reason why the conjured vine did not impress Ves was because he had to make it from wood energy. The conversion of E energy to a matter was very slow and inefficient, especially for a cultivator that did not excel in this element.

The entanglement would probably become a lot more impressive if there was already an existing vine available.

Ves recalled that the Elegant Rage managed to retrieve a condensed thorn vine produced during the last tribulation challenge.

Major Jankowski wanted to save it up as a means to trip up the alien swordsman, but so far he did not have the opportunity to draw upon this handy vine.

The Elegant Rage was at risk of getting chopped to pieces from the moment it stopped blocking all of the incoming sword strikes!

"There should still be a way to activate this vine. The mech just has to do this hands fee."

The vine was a fairly powerful resource, especially when it still retained a proportion of Gaia's wood energy.

Ves needed to leverage this resource as well as the wood energy in the environment to produce a fast and explosive result.

"Should I induce it to explode?"

No. It wouldn't work. He very much doubted that the vine could be made to explode all at once.

It was best to work with the existing strengths and inclinations of what the Elegant Rage possessed.

In the case of the vine, it had grown extraordinarily tough, and its thorns were also capable of inflicting decent damage. It had become a good tool for trapping and injuring anything caught by this growth.

"Then let's make its ability to entangle opponents stronger. How can the alien swordsman remain a threat when the vine has wrapped up his limbs?"

The vine did not even have to inflict any damage onto the lightning manifestation. It was already enough for the vine to immobilize and stop the alien swordsman's attacks. The Elegant Rage herself could do the rest!

There were several major concerns, though.

For one, the vine needed to be launched at the enemy without getting intercepted by a fire or ice sword.

The vine also needed to endure a lot of fire and frost exposure. This required a constant infusion of wood energy to rapidly repair itself while also fending off the elemental attacks over an extended period of time.

"A regular effort is not enough." Ves concluded.

Both fire and ice had proven to be highly effective against wood!

Fire posed the most direct threat to the vine because the latter was inherently vulnerable to catching flame.

Ice could freeze the cells of the vine, thereby causing its activity to slow down and find it much more difficult to maintain its regeneration processes.

Ves could only draw upon the example of the Emperor Tree to resist these dangerous effects.

"As long as the vine has access to a lot of wood energy, it can outlast any hostile effect!"

Only an overwhelmingly powerful attack had a chance of overcoming the rapid regeneration of the vine, but it was unlikely for the four-armed swordsman to possess this capability.

So long as the vine successfully inhibited the lightning manifestation's ability to perform his elemental sword techniques, much of the threat posed by this enemy should be gone.

"The vine doesn't have to last forever. It only needs to maintain a strong hold long enough for the Elegant Rage to land the killing blow."

In short, it all came down to energy. The Elegant Rage not only needed to draw upon a lot of wood energy, but infuse it all into the thorny vine so that it could do its job.

It was not easy to attract a large quantity of wood energy. The Elegant Rage was far weaker than the Emperor Tree in this aspect. Its inherent wood energy reserves were also rather paltry and inadequate for the job.

Ves quickly came up with two potential ways for the Elegant Rage to summon a lot more wood energy in a hurry.

"It can drain itself to fuel her vine."

This was the first idea that came to his mind. It should be fairly effective as the Elegant Rage should be able to release a lot of wood energy by depleting the strength of her wooden components.

So long as the Elegant Rage absorbed a lot of wood energy or replaced her withered wooden parts with healthy ones after the battle, the self-inflicted damage shouldn't be permanent.

The problem with this approach was that it would leave the mech drained and weakened after overcoming this challenge!

This was bad as a lightning manifestation that was 30 percent more powerful than the alien swordsman would appear shortly afterwards!

The Elegant Rage absolutely could not afford to start the final fight for her survival in a drained and weakened state.

Ves therefore directed his attention elsewhere. It was not acceptable to drain the wood energy from the Elegant Rage's vital components, but what about other reservoirs of wood energy?

"What if... the Elegant Rage can drain the energies of the trees in the surrounding forest?"

This was a much more acceptable idea!

Although the devastation to the forest and the local ecosystem would definitely be considerable due to the need to requisition a huge amount of wood energy, it was all for a good cause!

Nothing came for free. Ves would rather sacrifice the lives of a million trees than have the Elegant Rage sacrifice her own life.

"It won't be easy, but I think there's a way to do it." He grinned.

Ideas already began to swirl in his mind. He needed to puzzle out a way for the Elegant Rage to quickly and efficiently drain an entire forest of all of its wood energy.

"The faster, the better!"

Chapter 6148 An Underutilized Resource

Ves made the correct decision by entering the System Space during a critical junction of the lightning tribulation.

The pressure and urgency of the moment no longer weighed him down to the point of collapsing.

Although it was just a temporary reprieve, Ves still cherished the opportunity to let out a deep breath and clear his mind.

It was not always good for him to take a break in the middle of an intensive situation. Ves always performed at his best during crises. When his back was pushed against the wall, his imagination often went into overdrive, allowing him to develop many brilliant ideas that could turn the situation around.

However, the eight challenge of the tribulation event required much greater effort in order to overcome. There was no way an ordinary improvised solution could drag Major Jankowski and the Elegant Rage out of the pit.

The alien swordsman was simply too strong!

Given the extreme lack of options that Ves could employ to quickly boost the Elegant Rage's effective combat power, he felt it was wise to take his time to develop a proper solution.

As Ves silently climbed up the mountain steps, he did not bother to direct his attention to the side paths that led to the different facilities, but continued to mull over the strategy that he had decided upon.

One of the biggest reasons why the alien swordsman was able to gain the upper hand was because he was a very effective qi cultivator.

Although he was nowhere near as strong as the much more powerful lightning manifestations that showed up during the transformation of the Dominion of Man, the four-armed alien clearly dedicated a lot of practice in his techniques.

It was not easy to wield two opposing elements. Examples such as the Renewer of Terra and his legendary Ouroboros were the exception rather than the rule. It took an insane mind or exceptional circumstances for a cultivator to be able to make concurrent accomplishments in two completely opposing and conflicting E energy attributes.

Therefore, the alien swordsman became completely worthy to put the Elegant Rage to the test despite his relatively low absolute strength.

"The scariest part of it all is that I don't think that the alien swordsman has exhausted his bag of tricks."

So far, the powerful alien only pressed the Elegant Rage with rapid but fairly medium-intensity attacks. If elemental swordsmanship was anything like the traditional swordsmanship practiced by the Heavensworders, then the tribulation manifestation definitely held a few power moves in reserve!

These powerful sword techniques were probably costly and time-consuming to execute, but their power should never be in doubt.

The scariest aspect of a fire and ice wielder was not the fact that he could employ both elements separately, but that he could combine them to inflict far greater combination damage!

The skilled enemy already displayed hints of this in some of his attack routines. The alien was not only able to prevent the two opposing elements from accidentally conflicting with each other, but could also purposefully bring them together to gain an even stronger advantage during a duel!

At this time, the alien swordsman gained such a considerable edge over the Elegant Rage that it was unnecessary for the former to resort to any risky moves.

It was completely logical for him to maintain a steady advantage and slowly grind down the Elegant Rage's defenses.

If Ves did not find a way to pull a rabbit out of his hat, then the alien swordsman's strategy would undoubtedly succeed!

He frowned. Ves understood that only overwhelming force could grant the Elegant Rage a chance to survive this bout.

"I need power. Lots of power."

It was not so easy to make up for the enormous gaps in energy absorption and energy utilization.

Ves already determined that the only way for the Elegant Rage to make a comeback was by imitating the Emperor Tree by leveraging a huge amount of wood energy.

The problem was that ordinary measures were not enough to meet the insanely high demand.

"There is actually a lot of wood energy contained in the organic components of the Elegant Rage, but draining them to attain a temporary power boost is absolutely counterproductive."

This was not the final test of the lightning tribulation. If the Elegant Rage was confronting the ninth and last punishment from the heavens, then Ves might see merit in a self-sacrificial attack.

"If the Elegant Rage cannot afford to pay the price, then let others pay the price in her stead."

This was actually his favorite way of tackling these issues. Ves always liked it when he could make a lot of gains without needing to pay the corresponding price.

In fact, he preferred it when he was able to fool his enemies into making painful sacrifices!

Sadly, the current situation made it difficult if not impossible for the Elegant Rage to land a powerful blow on the alien swordsman by exploiting the latter's strength.

The most apparent source of additional wood energy was the forest and wildlife of the surrounding region.

New Constantinople VIII may have been designated as the commercial capital of a thriving first-class port system, but the Devos Ancient Clan did not have the resources to convert the entire planet into an ecumenopolis.

Even the first-raters valued the soothing and relaxing presence of nature. It was also a lot easier to maintain stable climates when the planet hosted viable ecosystems.

There was plenty of nature to be found in the more remote and underdeveloped regions of the planet. Much of the development of New Constantinople VIII was concentrated in and around the capital city of Sandan.

As Ves reached the top of the mountain and stepped into the grounds of the Sacred Temple, his eyes lit up as he made a profound realization!

"Life is a resource, and New Constantinople VIII just happened to possess it in abundance!"

Sure, the flora of the terraformed planet overwhelmingly consisted of young and relatively immature Earth-based plants and trees, but that did not change the fact that they functioned as natural reservoirs of wood energy!

Of course, Ves could not expect the wood energy contained by these young and artificially cultivated plants to be high in quality.

The density of wood energy in a young forest should also be incomparable to that of a forest on an untamed planet such as Reticula Corein V.

Ves did not look down on it, though.

So what if the wood energy of the local ecosystem was rather shabby in terms of quality and quantity?

The Elegant Rage merely had to work harder and extend her reach further in order to absorb a huge quantity of wood energy!

As long as the Elegant Rage amassed enough wood energy, she should easily be able to beat back the alien swordsman!

"Life is a resource." Ves repeated. "I have spent so much time on trying to foster life in my products that I never thought about how it could be used as a power source."

Ves initially felt repelled by the very notion of exchanging life for power. The fundamental goal of his design philosophy was to foster the growth of both mechs and mech pilots so that they could breach their limits and ascend to greatness.

To put it in different terms, his work as a mech designer was largely centered around increasing the life states of his products and his clients.

This was the definition of growth. The more powerful they became, the more energy they accumulated!

This was why the idea of depriving a forest of all of its wood energy sounded so abhorrent to Ves.

He did not consider himself to be a nature lover, but he felt it was fundamentally wrong to drain the wood energy of many trees just to give the Elegant Rage a temporary power boost.

"An action like this will lead to a net reduction in life." Ves murmured.

He did not care about the lives of his enemies. Ves was not stupid enough to value their right to life when they were happy to kill him and the people he cared about if they had the chance.

What made Ves hesitate was the idea of gaining power by harming third parties.

Sure, the subjects in question only amounted to a lot of trees and plants that nobody really cared about, but it was the principle that mattered.

Ves deeply felt that he was on the verge of crossing a significant moral line if he violated the principle of minimizing collateral damage.

Ever since the Age of Mechs began, many mech designers had been brought up with the idea that their products were supposed to function as a safer and less destructive alternative to warships.

How could Ves still claim that his mechs abided by this standard when they suddenly gained the ability to wipe out entire forests and destroy entire ecosystems?

This was the sort of destructive practice that gave his mother and many other ancient cultivators a bad name!

"Maybe this is the true reason why I am so hesitant about crossing the line." He frowned.

Ves could already feel that the act of pursuing power through rampant plundering was forbidden in more ways than one. It was a universal taboo that fundamentally violated the will of the heavens.

Just like how the creators of the Sacred Scrolls utterly ruined the Milky Way Galaxy by attempting to drain it entirely of its immense energies, any deed that benefited oneself at the expense of the environment would inevitably be met with punishment!

The most common form of punishment was to silently accrue negative karma.

Ves knew a thing or two about karma, so he understood how terrible it was for malevolent cultivators to plunder energy from others without restraint or justification.

Even though these cultivators always managed to harvest enormous short-term gains, they imperiled their long-term futures by attracting the ire of the heavens!

Not only would they suffer inexplicable bouts of bad luck, these demonic cultivators also had a much higher chance of dying whenever they attracted a lightning tribulation!

However... as much as Ves wanted to turn away from these unsavory methods, he could not afford to do so. The survival of his first Woodsap mech was far more important than his morals and principles.

Although his design philosophy objected to his decision, Ves found that he did not really find it all that unbearable to break this particular taboo.

Not only was he doing it for the benefit of his latest mech, he also did not take taboos all that seriously anymore.

"This is a time of war. Desperate times call for desperate measures."

Ves did not deny the possibility that his recently acquired darkness domain may have skewed his thinking on this matter, but so what?

He was not being irrational when he decided to violate one of the fundamental principles of mech. He managed to come up with several logical arguments why it was necessary for him to take his work to the next level.

"Am I beginning to resemble my mother?"

Ves felt quite disturbed by the thought. His mother did not hesitate to treat others as tools to be used. She had no qualms about draining the vitality of others to fuel her growth and her powers.

Though Cynthia frequently assumed a motherly guise in front of Ves, he had seen her true face.

Cynthia Larkinson was a True God who embodied the cruel side of nature! Predation was her philosophy as well as the source of her power. She was incapable of limiting herself to mutually beneficial growth cycles like her son.

As deplorable as she may be, Ves never doubted that she was weak.

Whether it was her old self or her reborn self, the Lady of the Night undoubtedly stood out as a competent and deadly fighter among True God-level qi cultivators.

If not for the fact that she remained stuck in the low-energy environment of the Milky Way Galaxy, she would have been able to expand her empire much further beyond the confines of the Nyxian Gap!

Chapter 6149 Mental Shift

From the moment Ves made a mental shift, his entire perspective on reality changed forever.

Previously, he always looked at life from the perspective of a nurturer.

He was like a gardener who invested a lot of time and effort into growing healthy and bountiful plants.

Each living mech that he managed to design and produce over the years made his garden ever more prosperous.

His mental shift caused him to look at life as a resource that was ripe for the taking!

He still regarded life as a miracle and a treasure to be nurtured, but he also gained another perspective that possessed a completely different attitude towards this subject.

It was as if he gained a split personality of sorts that looked at life from the perspective of a selfish plunderer!

Although he was initially unfamiliar with looking at life from this angle, he quickly acclimatized to it once he thought about the benefits, of which there were many!

"There is not much of a difference between siphoning energy derived from exotic radiation and draining energy from other life forms."

All of the energies ultimately originated from the same common source. The biggest difference was that energy held by other lives had become owned, making it more difficult to harness it directly.

Still, there were ways for demonic cultivators to erase the imprints of owned energy or simply skip this step and make use of this stolen resource directly!

Ves certainly knew about it, but that did not mean he could replicate these methods himself.

He still lacked a means to drain a large amount of wood energy from a large forest.

It was as if he was looking at a huge farmfield that was filled with ripened crops, but lacked the harvesting machines to quickly collect them all. Perhaps he might be able to improve by cobbling together a simple scythe, but this was an incredibly inefficient solution!

Ves needed to give the Elegant Rage the power to drain the life of surrounding trees all at once. Regular wood manipulation techniques could no longer meet his demands.

"If my suspicions are correct... then the act of plundering a large amount of wood energy from a forested environment no longer conforms to the rules of nature anymore. As long as the scale grows large enough, such actions have the potential to inflict serious damage to a planet's ecosystem."

This was not an approach that aligned with the concept of wood. Although nature could be cruel, it also emphasized balance. There was a difference between natural disasters and man-made disasters. The former was a part of nature's struggle, while the latter was a disruption of the common living space of so many other individuals.

Such actions were much more aligned with the darkness element as opposed to the wood element.

Ves raised his arm and conjured a ball of darkness energy. It was a rudimentary display of power, but it helped to bring him more in tune with this ominous element.

He strode into the temple building and deliberately moved to a corner where the light level was the lowest.

Immersing himself in shadow helped to put himself in the right mindset. It was a lot more difficult to think about how to drain the life out of an entire forest by standing under bright lighting.

As Ves avoided the light, he indeed found it easier to shift his mentality and think about plundering the bounty of nature for his own purposes.

When he thought back on what the Elegant Rage was capable of, he realized that it had already begun to straddle the line between light and darkness.

As the first mutated mech of the Larkinson Clan, the Elegant Rage had spontaneously grown thorns due to getting contaminated by Venerable Lanie's overwhelmingly negative emotions.

This caused the Elegant Rage to turn from a noble dueling mech into a scarred and traumatized machine that sought to sting anyone who harmed her and her pilot.

Wood as an element was neither light nor dark. It could be employed in many different ways.

The emergence of thorns was a reflection that the Elegant Rage had already taken a turn towards the negative aspects of the wood element.

"The foundation is already there. I don't have to start from scratch." Ves concluded.

This was good news and made his job considerably easier.

However, thorns shared no direct relation with the act draining the environment of wood energy.

The current iteration of the Elegant Rage had no means of interacting with the environment.

Ves needed to change that. This meant that he had to add an extra feature to the Woodsap mech spiritual foundation that could fundamentally change its nature.

"This is not going to be a light upgrade."

The good news was that there was no need to install any new hardware onto the mech frame.

Ves figured that the Elegant Rage could already accomplish its objective by relying on additions based on spiritual engineering or E-technology.

That also made this job a lot more difficult. It would have been nice if he was able to bring the Elegant Rage back into his workshop so that he could install a huge new hyper module onto the mech frame.

"Well, it's not as if it is necessary to add more hyper materials to the mech. The Elegant Rage already has a lot of improved ebony wood that is not being used to their full potential."

The Elegant Rage already possessed the ability to utilize E energy a lot more effectively. The living mech was just not capable of doing so because Ves neglected this aspect in the past.

His starting point should be the ebony wood that currently made up much of her mech frame. Ves had to figure out a way to activate this powerful wood and assist the Elegant Rage in siphoning a lot of wood energy.

He also thought about the thorny vine that had grown from one of the seeds fired by the Sprout Rifle.

This was another prop he could use to drain the life out of the surrounding forest.

He frowned as his thoughts soon hit a wall. Figuring out a starting point was not enough. He needed to develop a more specific way to utilize the wood to achieve the desired result.

"I know my starting point and my ending point. What I can't figure out is how to connect the former to the latter."

There was a gap in his knowledge base.

He was not familiar with how to manipulate the wood element in a more destructive and predatory fashion.

He also lacked a lot of specific methods related to 'demonic cultivation' that could help the Elegant Rage gain a rapid boost of power.

The solution seemed obvious at this point.

"I need to acquire an enlightenment fruit that can make up for the gap in knowledge."

He always intended to learn more methods related to his recently acquired darkness domain, but events moved too quickly before he had time to address this priority.

Ves hadn't even completed any of the Missions that he had accepted shortly after the System completed its latest upgrade!

He was still stuck with a paltry sum of 132 Ascension Points. Ves was grateful that he still retained at least that much. He thanked his habit of trying to maintain a minimum AP reserve in case of emergencies.

"132 AP is not much, but it should at least be enough to acquire an affordable enlightenment fruit with a narrow focus."

Ves left the shadows and exited the Sacred Temple. He descended down the mountain and approached what may arguably be his most favorite facility in the System Space.

Ves licked his lips as he thought about how much he could gain if he plucked them all before biting into their juicy flesh.

"It's so painful to be poor!"

The exorbitant AP price of this stellar enlightenment fruit did not deter Ves from staring hotly at this sumptuous package of priceless knowledge.

The Tree of Possibilities beckoned to him once again. Hundreds of random fruits in many different shapes, sizes and colors vied for his attention.

Ves licked his lips as he thought about how much he could gain if he plucked them all before biting into their juicy flesh.

"It's so painful to be poor!"

He thought about his limited spending power and winced once again.

He wished that the System opened up a way for him to spend AP on credit. He had become too pampered as of late.

The Larkinson Clan was spending way more than it earned in recent months. Despite the lack of liquidity, money never seemed to be an issue, as Ves and the Larkinsons could easily borrow a lot of money. All of this ease was based on the assumption that the clan would grow faster than its debt burden.

Unfortunately, the System did not see any merit in establishing a financial institution based on Ascension Points. The only way for Ves to obtain more was to earn them fair and square.

"If I am truly short of AP, I'll go back to the Mission Hall and see how many Missions I can complete in a lengthy marathon work session." He decided.

Ves really hoped that he would not have to resort to that. Trying to extend his stay in the System Space by spending AP while trying to complete as many design-related Missions as possible was mentally exhausting ordeal. He would probably need a long vacation by the time he was done.

He was still prepared to do it for the sake of the Elegant Rage, but Ves hoped he could get his hands on a more cost-effective enlightenment fruit that met his essential requirements.

"Let's see what the tree has in store this time."

Ves couldn't help but glance at a handful of familiar and very attractive enlightenment fruits.

[Divine Blacksmith Records]

Price: 975 Ascension Points

Imparts a large collection of related smithing recipes and techniques developed by a Divine Blacksmith. The majority of techniques consist of special hammering methods that can impart metallic and organic materials with special properties. The smithing recipes contain many combinations that enable a craftsman to forge powerful materials with the infusion of special energies and materials into a work.

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The exorbitant AP price of this stellar enlightenment fruit did not deter Ves from staring hotly at this sumptuous package of priceless knowledge.

The more he learned about high-level artifacts and how his living mechs related to them, the more he recognized the value of a complete traditional blacksmithing heritage!

"One day." Ves promised. "One day I will grab you and let Vulcan ingest you whole."

His gaze soon swept across another expensive but seductive enlightenment fruit.

[Karnasis Seed Planting Manual]

Price: 555 Ascension Points

Imparts a set of secret techniques that enables a practitioner to covertly plant demonic seeds into many different people. These demonic seeds will gradually merge with their recipients until they fully merge together.

The practitioner can employ various different techniques to manipulate the behavior of the seed bearers, although strong-willed individuals may be able to detect and resist contradictory compulsions. The practitioner can also harvest as much energy from them as desired. If seed bearers grow stronger, they can make greater sacrifices to their controller.

If a seed bearer perishes, the implanted seed can be harvested and absorbed by the practitioner. The matured demonic seed can also absorb the nutrients of the corpse on the spot to rapidly form a demonic tree that can spread a large amount of initial seeds that can be spread to a large group of nearby individuals.

"What a useful method."

Compared to the first time Ves encountered this fruit, his attitude towards it was completely different.

He no longer found it as reprehensible or disgusting as before. He still recognized the stigma surrounding its methods and its implications, but the Karnasis Seed Planting Manual seemed like the perfect complement of a powerful wood-based organism such as the Emperor Tree!

"By extension, it can also function as an excellent complement of the Elegant Rage!"

If Ves wasn't so short of AP at the moment, he would have felt tempted to buy it. Not only did the Karnasis Seed Planting Manual present him with options on how to solve his immediate problems, he could also employ its methods for many other purposes down the line!

Chapter 6150 Positive or Negative Methods

After acquiring numerous enlightenment fruits over the years, Ves had learned that the Tree of Possibilities never undercharged its products.

If a fruit was priced at 555 AP, then it was most definitely worth the high price.

The Karnasis Seed Planting Manual Enlightenment Fruit seemed tailor-made to solve many of his recent problems.

It could serve as an extremely comprehensive introduction to the wood element. Ves could also learn a lot about demonic cultivation and how to quickly gain power by depriving it from others.

Although these so-called demonic seeds could certainly be used to disrupt a lot of human lives and throw a society into chaos, Ves didn't consider it to be an evil method anymore.

Part of it depended on who it was used on. If Ves mastered the knowledge of this enlightenment fruit but made sure to plant the demonic seeds into alien lives, then who could possibly object to his actions?

The more alien lives he drained with these deadly seeds, the better!

Not only would he be able to kill a lot of native aliens that posed a threat to red humanity, but he could also grow stronger in the process!

"This is no different from a buy one get one free deal!"

The difficulty with this demonic cultivation technique was to maintain enough discipline to avoid targeting any humans.

From the moment he attacked the people that belonged to the same group or civilization as himself, Ves would undoubtedly cross an unforgivable line!

"It's not a big deal. There are way more aliens than humans in the Red Ocean. Only an idiot or a weakling would think about targeting innocent people."

He no longer wasted his time on enlightenment fruits that were way out of his budget. There were still a lot of fruits hanging on the branches of the Tree of Possibilities that were much more affordable.

Ves possessed a lot more strength and courage than that. If he managed to master the Karnasis Seed Planting Manual one day, he would definitely unleash his new methods towards the many aliens whose lives were ripe for the picking!

He took one last longing look at the enlightenment fruit before decisively turning his head.

"Maybe next time."

He no longer wasted his time on enlightenment fruits that were way out of his budget. There were still a lot of fruits hanging on the branches of the Tree of Possibilities that were much more affordable.

Of course, their benefits paled in comparison to the likes of the Karnasis Seed Planting Manual, but there were still a few interesting bargains in his opinion.

[Evil-Breaking Peach Wood Sword Manual]

Price 100 Ascension Points

Imparts a method to carve suitable wood into an Evil-Breaking Peach Wood Sword. This is a sword that does not possess a strong cutting edge, but is highly effective when used to fight against negative existences. The Evil-Breaking Peach Sword is also effective when used to fight energy-based lifeforms and other energy constructs.

Evil-Breaking Peach Swords that are excellently carved and made with high-quality materials can be enhanced by lightning. When empowered by any source of lightning energy, the Evil-Breaking Peach Sword not only becomes much more deadly against immaterial enemies, but also receives physical tempering that strengthens its physical properties.

"Damn."

Ves felt tempted to purchase the Evil-Breaking Peach Sword Manual Enlightenment Fruit almost immediately after reading its description.

Was it a coincidence that this enlightenment fruit just so happened to be available?

It seemed quite serendipitous that the Tree of Possibilities granted him the option to learn how to make these so-called Evil-Breaking Peach Swords.

Although these swords were probably not designed to fight against tribulation manifestations, Ves nonetheless believed that such a weapon should be highly effective against the alien swordsman!

The enemy that was giving the Elegant Rage such a hard time was not an actual living alien powerhouse. He was actually a simulation generated by the ongoing lightning tribulation.

The Evil-Breaking Peach Sword should still enjoy a bonus when attacking the alien swordsman, especially given that lightning directly empowered it so long as its power level remained within tolerance.

Ves seriously felt tempted to purchase this enlightenment fruit, but he eventually decided against this choice.

The Evil-Breaking Peach Sword may be effective in defeating the alien swordsman, but what about the next opponent?

When the ninth tribulation manifestation that was 30 percent stronger than the alien swordsman showed up, the gap in power would become so wide that a special sword alone could no longer make up the difference.

"I can't overlook the fact that the fundamental reason why the Elegant Rage is falling behind is because she is not utilizing as much E energy."

Ves believed that as long as the Elegant Rage gained a lot more energy and knew how to effectively make use of it, she should easily be able to overcome the alien swordsman and whatever tribulation manifestation that came next!

Ves did not forget about the Evil-Breaking Peach Sword Manual, but he set it aside for the time being in the hopes of finding a more fitting alternative.

He would only go back and evaluate this enlightenment fruit if the Tree of Possibilities disappointed him with its selection.

Soon enough, Ves came across another interesting fruit.

[Introduction to the Withering Curse]

Price: 77 Ascension Points

Imparts basic theory on the concept of withering and teaches several related techniques and curses. Withering is a process that relates to the decay of organisms and most notably plants. It can be used as an offensive application of the wood element that is especially effective on organic targets.

The Introduction to the Withering Curse does not contain a large quantity of curse techniques, but they are versatile and can be changed to adapt to specific demands and conditions. Withering curses are highly effective against weaker organisms, but can easily be resisted by strong and healthy targets.

"That sounds closer."

Introduction to the Withering Curse was close to the kind of basic knowledge package that Ves sought.

It should probably teach Ves the basics on how to impose the terrible force of withering onto other organisms.

Curses were generally regarded as attacks that could be launched from a distance, so Ves did not have to worry too much about range when trying to wither an entire forest that stretches for kilometers in every direction.

As for the fact that curses were ineffective against powerful targets, Ves did not really care. The trees planted all across New Constantinople VIII were all weak and vulnerable!

Even if a few trees somehow managed to turn into a mutated plant, the Devos Ancient Clan would detect it right away.

One of the reasons why New Constantinople VIII never suffered any attacks related to the random emergence of mutated beasts was because its security services eliminated any animal that showed any sign of abnormality!

Perhaps it might be acceptable for hunting preserves such as Ocanon VI to keep so many mutated beasts alive, but this was not acceptable for a fast-growing planet occupied by lots of Terrans.

Without any tree on the planet that was comparable to the Emperor Tree in terms of power, the Elegant Rage should not be able to encounter any resistance when trying to wither all of the surrounding trees.

"Withering alone is too wasteful, though."

What Ves sought was not to cause the Elegant Rage's targets to decay and cause their energies to disappear.

Instead, he wanted his Woodsap mech to gain the ability to harvest those energies and power up her own attacks.

Ves rubbed his hairless chin in thought. "It would be nice to obtain a more comprehensive enlightenment fruit that can make up for this absence, but... do I really need to spend more AP?"

Cultivation techniques were alive. There was never a single absolute right answer on how to do stuff.

Ves already became accustomed to absorbing the knowledge contained within different enlightenment fruits, but then went on to tinker with the different theories and techniques to produce different outcomes.

He was confident that if he absorbed this particular enlightenment fruit, he could 'complete' the process by figuring out a mechanism for the Elegant Rage to absorb the energies lost by the plants that were withering on a wide scale!

The premise to all of this was that the so-called withering curses did not destroy all of the juicy wood energy that the plants originally contained.

Ves frowned a bit. He was not quite certain whether this fruit would give him the building blocks he needed to turn the Elegant Rage into a true nature predator.

He decided to postpone his decision and look for other suitable fruits.

Several minutes went by as Ves inspected a lot of fruits that weren't relevant to the current situation at all. The only ones that interested him a little more were the ones that promised to teach him various darkness-related cultivation methods and techniques.

As much as Ves felt personally interested by them, it was hard to impart any of the techniques to the Elegant Rage, so he skipped the over.

In the end, Ves couldn't help but return to the Evil-Breaking Peach Wood Sword Manual and the Introduction to the Withering Curse.

They presented two completely different ways to break the current situation.

The Evil-Breaking Peach Wood Sword Manual was obviously an upright and honorable way to empower the Elegant Rage.

The Introduction to the Withering Curse likely contained a lot of underhanded, dishonorable and maybe outright evil techniques!

Yet that did not stop him from taking the latter seriously.

Of the two choices, Ves felt a lot more drawn to the Introduction to the Withering Curse despite the fact that it did not present a complete ready-made solution.

As Ves weighed his decision, he ultimately decided to reach out and pluck the Introduction to the Withering Curse Fruit.

"I need this more than the other."

It was related to both the wood and the darkness elements. It was a thoroughly negative method that was also related to ominous concepts such as death and decay.

As Ves held a wrinkled and half-rotted purple fruit in his hands, he did not show any sign of disgust as he bit into it and ate all up in a couple of quick bites.

Before the dry and awful taste of the fruit registered on his taste buds, he winced as he received an abrupt infusion of knowledge in his brain!

The changes came and went quickly. Ves instantly mastered the basics of a small collection of withering techniques.

"How wonderful. I didn't know how vulnerable life can be to a cultivator who knows how to manipulate life."

Ves' horizons had widened now that he became burdened with greater knowledge. His understanding of the negative side of life had expanded enormously, making him feel that spending those 77 Ascension Points was the best decision he had made!

Among the most useful lessons he learned from the fruit was to learn how to cast curses.

These were particularly dark and underhanded means of manipulating or attacking enemies.

Ves recalled that during one of the later waves of the epic tribulation of the Dominion of Man, the Bloodfire dreadnought confronted a massive mirror beast that managed to bypass everyone's spiritual defenses and cause them to turn against each other.

Back then, Ves completely remained ignorant how the mirror beast was able to fool so many entities, up to and including Caramond and Furia!

Now he knew. The god beast excelled at casting curses that affected the entire crew and other life forms of the Dominion of Man.

By intermittently showing up and presenting its cursed mirror at the dreadnought, the lightning manifestation of the powerful beast refreshed its curse.

"When it comes down to it, a curse is a more indirect and subtle means to attack a target."

Just as Ves suspected, they were completely useless against an opponent like the current tribulation manifestation, but it was possible to cast the same curse to a large swathe of weak and vulnerable targets!

It was so easy to cause a lot of harm as long as he was willing to pay a price!

In fact, if Ves wanted to, he could use the knowledge he learned from this fruit to make a lot of people in a city sick!

"It is no wonder that demonic cultivation has become so persecuted by the mechers and fleeters! The capacity to do harm is too great!"