

The Mech 6161

Chapter 6161 Seeds of the Tree

As the Elegant Rage became bathed by a glow that was completely opposite to her rage-filled mental state, the faint presence of Lufa's glow deep inside her wooden body began to trigger familiar memories and associations.

The mech gradually remembered that she was originally a mech that not only derived strength from rage and passion, but also kept herself alive by emphasizing control and rationality!

By maintaining enough discipline would she be able to channel her fury as effectively as possible!

As a mech that once started off as a copy of the Lucid Rage model, losing control like this was one of the biggest taboos of her kind!

It was only now that the Elegant Rage managed to regain her connection with Lufa that she remembered her original self!

"I... AM NOT... THE EMPEROR TREE!"

An explosion of power erupted from the ebony tree as its trunk spontaneously burst apart and shed a lot of lightning-scarred wood!

The sight of a juggernaut-sized tree exploding and raining lots of broken wood across the terrain was shocking!

"Has the mech fallen?!"

"What happened to the pilot?"

"Wait! There is still a mech!"

After the Elegant Rage purged all of the excess wood, a familiar sight emerged from the base of the trunk.

The familiar thorn-covered form of the Woodsap mech reappeared in all of her glory.

Although her half-metal, half-ebony wood mech frame still bore the taint of defying the heavens, the lightning tribulation did not set out to destroy her anymore.

Might was right. The Elegant Rage had successfully passed nine different tests in a row. Since that was the case, the tribulation had an obligation to reward the surviving machine for proving herself to be strong enough to withstand so much punishment.

The tribulation lighting arcing across her mixed form not only strengthened and perfected her hybrid mech frame, but also cleansed some of the taint and more adverse mutations.

Now that the Elegant Rage had regained her lucidity with the help of Lufa, the Woodsap mech no longer blindly pursued power, but instead yearned to strengthen her stability.

She never wanted to lose control like that ever again!

"RAGE IS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD... ONLY BY GRASPING IT FIRMLY WILL I PREVENT MYSELF FROM GETTING HARMED BY THIS WEAPON. I MUST NEVER LET LANIE DOWN AGAIN."

The more Elegant Rage blamed herself, the more she became determined to strengthen her control!

Now that she had set her priorities straight, whatever was left of the lightning baptism went on to fulfill her strongest desire at this time. Her spiritual foundation not only became a little bit stronger, but also became a lot more resistant against external influences.

It was a pity that the tribulation baptism of a single-round multi-modal lightning tribulation was not that strong.

A lot of the improvements had been tied into the massive ebony tree form that previously served as the Woodsap mech's extended body.

By purging herself of all of that tainted and oppressive wood, the Elegant Rage may have liberated her mind from the pernicious influence of the Emperor Tree, but she also gave up on much of the benefits of the final wave of lightning baptism!

It didn't matter. Neither the Elegant Rage nor Ves cared about all of the tribulation energies that had gone to waste.

Ves felt glad that his first Woodsap mech returned to her original form and regained her sanity. So long as she was able to do this once, she could do it again. The Elegant Rage should definitely be much better prepared to pull herself back from her most primal state.

It was a pity that Major Jankowski did not receive that much benefit from the lightning baptism. His role had been minimized in the last and most profitable wave. The giant ebony tree also intercepted and absorbed a lot of tribulation energies, so the expert candidate only managed to receive minimal benefits through the Man-Machine Connection.

Now that the Elegant Rage was no longer at risk of turning herself into the reincarnation of the Emperor Tree, Lufa took the initiative to break his connection with Blinky.

The companion spirit quickly morphed back to his original fluffy cat shape. He looked a bit winded due to enduring the pressure of channeling a design spirit, but the Star Cat otherwise remained in good shape.

"Mrow..."

The storm clouds above the surface of New Constantinople VIII slowly faded away. The energy levels dropped as the entire region returned to calm once again.

The sight of the aftermath looked dramatic.

The surrounding terrain was utterly devoid of any life. The remains of many plants and trees littered the landscape. Everything that used to be vibrant green had turned into muddy brown.

The site that used to be a lush and carefully planted forest not only looked dead, but felt this way as well.

A pervasive aura of death had spread throughout the entire location. Other forests affected by the Elegant Rage's hunger for wood energy became filled with death as well.

Only the lingering marks of tribulation lightning across the terrain and pieces of wood caused the air to feel a little more charged.

Ves did not care about the damage to the terrain. Now that the crisis had passed, he regained the mentality of a mech designer and quickly returned to his projected data screens.

He rapidly studied the graphs and data readings in an effort to understand the myriad of changes to the Woodsap mech.

"Mrow mrow."

Blinky meanwhile began to study the Elegant Rage's sublimated spiritual foundation with rapt attention.

The lightning tribulation had sublimated the Woodsap mech in many different ways. Her growth was considerable. She became a considerably stronger and more stable mech out of this harrowing experience.

One of the best ways to quantify the growth of the Elegant Rage was to take a look at her Ascension Runes.

"Mrow?!"

"20 Ascension Runes?!"

That was more than any other living mech aside from the Dark Zephyr Mark III!

The only complication was that the Ascension Runes had been split into four different Ascension Paths.

Three of them were already familiar to Ves, but he felt conflicted about the latest one that the Elegant Rage 'spontaneously' acquired.

"The Path of the Berserker, the Path of the Tranquil Sage, the Path of Thorns and... the Path of the Emperor Tree."

There was no other way to describe the Elegant Rage's newly acquired Ascension Path. The handful of runes that corresponded to this path possessed a strong association with the wood element, but also contained a sense of primal majesty that reminded Ves of the former calamity plant.

"Is the Emperor Tree truly dead?"

The gigantic tree that once occupied a major Solus Gas deposit on Reticula Corein V had perished.

This was an absolute fact.

Task Force Solus had thoroughly studied the calamity plant's old haunt in order to confirm that the powerful tree did not secretly manage to live on through another growth.

Yet death did not appear to be absolute when it came to the Emperor Tree.

So much Emperor Wood had survived the passing of the calamity plant. The Larkinsons had already begun to use this wondrous material for other purposes, and that was where the Emperor Tree may be hoping to make a comeback.

If Ves and Lufa had not intervened to save the Elegant Rage from her maddened state and finalized her evolution into an ebony tree, would she still be known by her original identity, or the Emperor Tree?

Ves had a feeling that the latter possibility was likelier!

"This damned tree just won't stay down!"

The Emperor Tree was too greedy for life!

It was not enough for it to pass on an obvious legacy like the Ebony Everchanger.

For the Emperor Tree to bury seeds of himself in every piece of ebony wood and possible other varieties of Emperor Wood meant that it was impossible to guarantee that this former enemy would truly stay down!

The only way to rule out any chance of a comeback was to destroy every single specimen of Emperor Wood, but that was far too wasteful.

"At least the Emperor Tree shouldn't be able to do much damage if he does manage to come back somehow."

Task Force Solus may have great reasons to fear the return of the Emperor Tree on Reticula Corein V, but the Larkinson Clan had multiple ways to deal with a hostile calamity plant.

The Terrans had even less to fear as one of their powerful first-class multipurpose mechs should be able to kill or heavily damage the Emperor Tree!

Since there was no particular reason to fear the return of this old foe unless it had taken over the Elegant Rage somehow, Ves no longer bothered to concern himself over this matter and returned to studying the changes to his creation.

"The Woodsap System has become more perfect."

The Elegant Rage never employed it once, but she still cared enough about it for the lightning tribulation to optimize it. This was good news as that would likely reduce the probability of accidents occurring once she was finally able to reunite with Venerable Lanie.

Ves even took note of all of the small changes and tweaks. They would definitely come handy when it was time for him to design other Woodsap mechs.

"Ves! Ves!" The communication channel crackled back online. "What is your condition? Are you in good health? What is the state of the mech?!"

"I'm fine, Gloriana. Nothing serious happened inside the cockpit. Both me and Major Jankowski are unharmed. A storm of this magnitude has no chance of threatening me. The Elegant Rage appears to be in a better condition than before. You can take a look at her yourself once we return."

"That is good to hear. We no longer have access to the data feed from the Elegant Rage. The transmissions ceased from the moment she transformed into a large tree."

"Oh. Let me fix that."

"No. You better not do so. The scrutiny on the Elegant Rage has exploded among the highest circles of the mech community. Do you know how much attention you have attracted after the Elegant Rage began to behave unlike any mech they have seen before? Not even the Survivalists and the Transhumanists can hold back all of the interest expressed by the Terrans, Rubarthans and so on! The Elegant Rage needs to be brought back and put out of sight as soon as possible."

"Understood. I will see if my mech is in a good enough condition to return to Diandi Base. Can't the Bluejay Fleet teleport us back directly?"

"The mechers do not want to risk it. The Elegant Rage is still radiating strange energies that may lead to complications. They will need time to recalibrate their teleportation systems and to see whether the anomalous activity of your mech has subsided."

"Very well."

Both Major Jankowski and the Elegant Rage had entered into an introspective mood. They both went through life-changing experiences that profoundly changed their mentalities.

As much as he wanted to leave them alone, they really needed to move. Ves lightly nudged the expert candidate's shoulder.

"Hey, this is not the time to decompress. Please try and see if we can make our way back to Diandi Base."

"Ah. My apologies, professor. The flight system of the Elegant Rage has returned to good condition. Our energy reserves are low, but it should be enough to bring us back as long as my mech controls her speed. This will be a lengthy trip. We have traversed far away from your home."

As the Elegant Rage ascended from the ground and steadily flew back to the home base of the Premier Branch, Ves stared at the ruined landscape down below.

As the Elegant Rage ascended from the ground and steadily flew back to the home base of the Premier Branch, Ves stared at the ruined landscape down below.

Although the Woodsap mech had only killed a lot of plants and animals, the Elegant Rage still carried the guilt of harming the ecosystem of the planet solely for the purpose of plundering wood energy.

Ves regretted that the Elegant Rage had taken a deeper turn towards darkness, but at least her return to lucidity reduced the impact of this adverse change.

Chapter 6162 Attention on Carmine Mechs

The mechers snatched away the Elegant Rage before she completed her journey back to Diandi Base.

In one moment, the exhausted but sublimated Woodsap mech calmly flew towards a single destination.

In the next moment, Ves suddenly blinked as the closed cockpit environment around him changed into a completely outdoor setting!

It turned out that the Red Association teleported the Elegant Rage as well as Major Simon Jankowski directly from her current location to a different site!

That sounded fine and all, but the problem was that they excluded Ves from the teleportation process, meaning that he got left behind!

Naturally, just because the mech was gone did not mean that Ves lost all of the forward momentum from the Elegant Rage's flight.

Just like any other person that got launched from a flying shuttle, Ves turned into a ballistic projectile that managed to fly a certain distance before crashing onto the ground like a cannonball!

Boom!

Ves dug himself out of the hole he created onto the soil. As a phase lord, he incurred no damage from the violent impact.

He just felt upset that the mechers dared to play a prank on a dignified tier 3 galactic citizen!

"Screw you guys!" He roared as he raised his middle finger into the air! "Can you at least bring me back to Diandi Base?"

Nothing happened.

Ves no longer bothered to wait and brushed off whatever dirt had clung onto his suit before rising in the air and journey home by relying on his own power.

Fortunately, a shuttle dispatched by the Premier Branch and escorted by a bunch of mechs managed to meet him halfway. This allowed him to take a break until the vehicle finally brought him back.

Ves immediately went down to his workshop. He grew disappointed when he did not see the Elegant Rage. This meant that the mechers had already claimed the Woodsap mech for themselves.

He turned around and entered the elevated control room where he was met with Gloriana, Alexa, Jovy and Vector.

"Ves."

"You have returned."

"Master Dervidian wishes to contact you as soon as possible."

It quickly became clear that a lot of people wanted to talk to him about what just happened. Ves knew that he would probably remain occupied all day, so it was best to get all of the meetings over with sooner rather than later.

"I will talk to Master Dervidian first." Ves declared. "I'll talk to Master Laila Rebecca Devos next. I will let my personal assistant decide the order from there, skipping any appointments with irrelevant people."

"That works." Gloriana said.

"I hate to disappoint you, but I don't think I can whip up anything too quickly." Ves tried to temper her enthusiasm. "The base version of Carmine mechs have not even been released yet. Unless the mechers have changed their mind, the first Carmine mechs will consist of third-class machines that will be put on sale later this year. We should give the third-raters enough time to act as our test subjects and verify that my Carmine System is safe to use. After that we should test it on second-raters. Then the first-raters get their turn, but only with the vanilla version of Carmine mechs. I don't know how much time will pass before we finally get to release Woodsap mechs on a wider scale."

The answer satisfied the two mechers. The Red Association had already held discussions on the amazing and terrible capabilities displayed by the Elegant Rage. The huge potential as well as the perceived instability of this powerful machine were the main reasons why the mechers rushed to take custody of the Woodsap mech!

"Before I go and account for myself, do you have any questions, or is there anything you want to bring to my attention?"

"How soon will you begin with the development of a mass production Woodsap mech model?" Alexa asked. "The Streon Ancient Clan and numerous other ancient clans have expressed great interest in the concept that we have tested today. Woodsap mechs may be our best way to gain a foothold in the Terran mech market."

"I hate to disappoint you, but I don't think I can whip up anything too quickly." Ves tried to temper her enthusiasm. "The base version of Carmine mechs have not even been released yet. Unless the mechers have changed their mind, the first Carmine mechs will consist of third-class machines that will be put on sale later this year. We should give the third-raters enough time to act as our test subjects and verify that my Carmine System is safe to use. After that we should test it on second-raters. Then the first-raters get their turn, but only with the vanilla version of Carmine mechs. I don't know how much time will pass before we finally get to release Woodsap mechs on a wider scale."

As amazing as the Elegant Rage performed earlier today, there were many problems and shortcomings that Ves had overlooked!

If every other Woodsap mech possessed the same vulnerabilities as the first machine of its kind, then they clearly needed to undergo a lot more R&D before Ves could responsibly make them accessible to others!

After Ves answered a few more questions, he left the control room and waited until he got teleported to a secure RA stronghold.

"So now you are willing to teleport me again." He grumbled.

Due to the heightened sensitivity of the topic, Ves needed to contact Master Dervidian in one of the most secure communication chambers on the planet.

Once Ves sat down, his surroundings changed as he gained a projected view of one of Master Dervidian's offices.

"Professor Larkinson. You have once again failed to remain low-key." The old but healthy-looking gray-haired man began. "The events surrounding your latest work have distracted many people from their final war preparations. The short but dramatic tribulation event has also caused our faction to experience a small crisis. Did you know that all of the excessive attention directed towards your strange mech has almost shattered the confidentiality surrounding your Carmine mechs? As it is, many more individuals have managed to learn about the existence of the Carmine System, even if it is just the name of your invention."

Ves quietly listened, but did not really feel guilty about the Transhumanist Faction's problems.

"With respect, Master, I think we have greater concerns to deal with than maintaining secrecy on a product that will become widely known in the short term."

Dervidian looked at Ves as if he was an idiot.

"We have deliberately shielded you from the political turmoil that would ensue once your Carmine System threatens to upend the hierarchy of the mech community. Do not think that you can release your Carmine mechs without suffering any negative consequences. Your products are so subversive that they pose a threat to the status quo. There will always be selfish rentseekers who will do their utmost to defend their existing privileges, even if they have to stand in the way of progress itself."

Ves shrugged. "I get it, but you guys are the ones who want to manage the Carmine System so much. Since that is the case, it is only natural for you to bear the burden of managing the public perception of my work."

"Opinions about your Carmine mechs have become more polarized after we have witnessed the Elegant Rage's performance." The Master Mech Designer informed Ves. "We understand that it is a more advanced and experimental version of a normal Carmine mech, but that still gives us great concerns about the damage they can do. During the final fight, your experimental mech managed to defeat an opponent by obtaining the power of a juggernaut, if only temporarily. You should know how significant such a transformation can be if it can be applied to more mechs."

Ves nodded. He had already thought about the implications of such an amazing feature.

"I see great hope in them. When used correctly, Woodsap mechs can allow us to defeat more enemies with less. Being able to deploy juggernauts the size of ordinary mechs is too much of an advantage for us to leave aside. It will probably take years before I can work out their kinks and minimize all of the risk factors that I have taken notice of, but in the long run I think our civilization will become better if we field more of these wooden machines, not less."

"There are those among the Association that believe that your Woodsap mechs can indeed play a small but significant role in turning around the Red War. There are also mechers who have developed great doubts about the safety and stability of these unusual living mechs. It is good that you are willing to continue the development of these special Carmine mechs for a longer period of time. The base version of the Carmine System might not possess as many advantages, but the risks are not as great."

"So what does your faction actually want?" Ves impatiently asked. "Do you want to change the timeline, or do I need to make any changes to the Elegant Rage?"

The RA Master spread his arms. "We need you to begin with prioritizing development of your first third-class Carmine mechs. We understand the reason why you have prematurely begun to work on your so-called Woodsap mechs, but we are concerned that you will quickly cause accidents, of which some may produce fatal results, if you continue to work on more advanced and experimental versions of the Carmine System. We do not think it is prudent for you to maintain this pattern. It is best if you return to basics and focus on developing the most stable, low-tech and cost-efficient Carmine mechs for the third-class market."

In other words, the Transhumanist Faction wanted Ves to stop attracting so much attention by pulling off a crazy stunt!

As long as Ves spent his time on working on the most boring and least powerful versions of Carmine mechs, then there was no way he could inflict as much harm as today!

"I can do that, Master. Do you want me to complete these projects sooner than scheduled? Designing third-class mechs is not a difficult challenge to me. Carmine System or not, its presence only introduces modest complications to the mech frame. A third-class mech is still a third-class mech."

Master Dervidian looked undecided. "There are good reasons to adhere to the original timeline, but there is a chance that we will shift our chance. It depends on how the alien offensive unfolds. If our

defensive bands collapse one after another, then we may need to rely on any solution to stop the alien invaders from pressing into our hinterland."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. I would like to release my Carmine mechs early, but not at the cost of letting the native aliens rampage across our stars without hindrance."

The two mech designers talked a bit more about the planning and arrangements surrounding Carmine mechs.

Although people like Master Dervidian were highly sensitive towards the societal impact of the release of the first Carmine mech models, the strange capabilities shown by the Elegant Rage also attracted a lot of concern.

"Tell me honestly, Ves. How much is the Elegant Rage at risk of losing control again?"

"None. Zero. The only reason why the Elegant Rage grew out of control was because she was not paired with a sufficiently strong pilot. She was made for Venerable Lanie Larkinson. Once an expert pilot takes charge, my latest work will have no chance of going out of control. This is assuming that Lanie interfaces with the Elegant Rage with a regular neural interface."

"What will happen if the two form a 'Woodsap Pact'?"

"I can only guess at the result." Ves honestly replied. "I predict that the Elegant Rage will become even more stable as Lanie's strong willpower can act on the machine through an even stronger connection. I think that you should agree with this logic."

Master Dervidian possessed a good understanding of extraordinary willpower, so he was willing to take this statement at face value.

That did not assuage all of his concerns, though.

"How do you estimate the risks when you consider other Woodsap mechs that are paired with either professional mech pilots or norms?"

"Well, assuming that they have undergone the same kind of extreme body modifications that Lanie must undergo, I think that the personality and discipline of the pilots in question will affect the stability of Woodsap mechs. There... is a heightened risk that they can turn into giant trees if their pilots are too weak, undisciplined, weak-willed or beset by personality disorders."

That was not a pleasant answer to hear. Master Dervidian frowned as he mulled over the answer.

"If that is the case, then we must restrict the sale and usage of Woodsap mechs to mentally stable individuals."

"I guess so, Master. I do not think that any variation of an elemental Carmine mech is suitable for weaklings. They have much greater potential, but that also makes them a lot more dangerous. I don't think this is bad. This will give elites a goal to strive for while also keeping ordinary Carmine mechs relevant for the masses."

Chapter 6163 A Costly War Strategy

The Elegant Rage's most recent performance significantly increased people's attention towards Ves' next big research project.

As a young Senior who already established a solid track record for radical innovations, people were readily willing to believe that a wood-based mech like the Elegant Rage possessed a huge amount of potential!

People weren't stupid. Those who reigned at the top of human society were often first-raters who managed to stand out from the rest of their highly augmented and well-educated rivals.

Given the available data points, it was safe to assume that Ves' secret project could significantly disrupt the entire mech market and mech industry.

While the benefits of living mechs had always been hard to quantify and compare with products developed by other mech designers, the benefits of fielding a partially wooden mech that could transform into a juggernaut-like tree were clearly recognizable to the most ignorant laymen!

Who wouldn't want to have a mech that could take root and increase their immediate combat power by at least an order of magnitude?

Even if the commercial variants of mechs like the Elegant Rage were 'only' able to become 3 to 5 times stronger after transforming into trees, that was already a game changer as far as customers were concerned!

Since the opening of the Red Ocean to human colonization, most battles in the new frontier overwhelmingly took place in high orbit or in deep space.

This trend heavily slanted the focus of the mech community towards spaceborn combat.

Mechs that could effectively fight in space received a lot more development resources.

Machines that operated exclusively in planetary environments became neglected as most colonies were too small and underdeveloped to merit large garrisons and defensive works.

All of that changed since the start of the Age of Dawn. As the native aliens began to raid planets located in the border regions on a larger scale, a lot of unprepared powers suddenly discovered that neglecting planetary defense had real consequences!

To be fair, the reason why many colonies in the border regions lacked enough ground-based defenses was because humanity had been too optimistic about conquering the Red Ocean.

The Great Severing happened so abruptly that so many groups stuck in the Red Ocean immediately plunged into a civilization-wide crisis!

From lacking financial support to an inability to receive vital shipments from the old galaxy, a lot of states and organizations had their hands full with trying to fix their messy and incomplete internal situations.

They did not have the time or resources to rectify their borders and increase their defenses!

This caused the border regions to suffer a lot when the Red War truly kicked off. Even now, red humanity still suffered from their inability to fortify the zones adjacent to alien space.

This made it all the more important to grasp every possible defensive advantage.

Ves found it rather strange that Master Dervidian put so much emphasis on the possible use of Woodsap mechs in defensive warfare.

"If all of my Woodsap mechs gain the ability to transform into large trees, people might not welcome them onto the battlefield, especially within our own territories." Ves cautiously warned. "By the time a large group of Woodsap mechs have barely managed to repel an invading alien force, the terrain and ecosystem of a prosperous planet may end up ruined to the point where it is no longer worthwhile to develop its colony settlements any further."

The projection of Master Termaneo Dervidian smiled but shook his head. "It is not about retaining the value of our planets. It is not even about halting the encroachment of the native aliens. It is about making the enemy bleed for every step they take. In order to discourage our enemies from conquering our star systems, we must increase the cost and reduce any gains that they can make to the greatest possible extent. Think about it, Ves. Would you like to conquer a moderately defended planet that will remain mostly intact after the fighting, or would you prefer to assault a more heavily defended planet that will lose much of its value and become a complete burden to the victors?"

"..."

"War forces us to be cruel." Master Dervidian spoke as he stood up and placed his hands behind his back. "According to our analysis, our technological edge is growing by the month. Our best researchers and mech designers are constantly developing newer and better applications of hyper technology that help us overcome the enormous disparity in numbers. Your Woodsap mechs can be counted among them. What we need to do is buy more time, and if that comes at the cost of ceding ground and ruining many of our planets, then so be it. The more we make the aliens suffer, the more we can deter them from advancing further."

Ves minutely widened his eyes. This was high-level strategic information that would never fall into the ears of ordinary people!

This was because the open admissions made by Master Dervidian could have a significant impact on the morale of human defenders!

Although Ves was already aware that the higher ups had chosen to adopt a strategy where they would trade territory for time, there was always an assumption that people could one day regain everything they lost.

However, if Woodsap mechs were allowed to take root on a large scale in order to inflict greater losses to the invading aliens, then large parts of a planet's ecology as well as mineral endowments would become utterly ruined!

If red humanity regained the advantage and began to take back the zones that had previously fallen to the native aliens, it would become a lot more difficult and much less profitable to recolonize the ravaged star systems!

"Isn't this going a bit too far?" Ves questioned. "I get why this can give us an advantage in the short to medium term. However, the lack of development potential of all of these ruined star systems may screw us in the long term."

"We have already made these considerations. Our strategists are far more far-sighted than you. The Red Ocean may be tiny relative to the Milky Way, but it still encompasses many star systems. Certainly, the planets left untouched by colonization or warfare are not as rich in resources, but they can still serve as adequate substitutes. Besides, you have to realize that red humanity only occupies a corner of this dwarf galaxy. There are many more star systems beyond our borders that offer

abundant resources. As long as we can buy enough time to field superior mechs and warships, we can not only take back our lost territories, but make large inroads into prosperous alien territories."

That... made a lot of sense. The sacrifice of employing Woodsap mechs to their fullest may be painful, but it could still be highly profitable!

Ves quickly frowned when he thought about another uncomfortable factor.

"Woodsap mechs can not only be employed in a defensive capacity, but also for offensive purposes. In fact, I think they are more suitable to assist in launching attacks because they can drain planets that are currently occupied by our enemies. It is just that employing Woodsap mechs like this on a wider scale may end up evaporating the benefits of conquering alien territory."

"Then we must control and restrict their usage." Dervidian plainly stated. "The power of Woodsap mechs must be regulated in a similar fashion to warships. The greater their capacity for mass destruction, the greater the need to restrict their usage. This task falls within the mandate of the Red Association, so we will properly address this issue. Your task is to continue your development on these interesting mechs and ensure they will become available within a reasonable timeframe."

Ves nodded in understanding. The division of responsibility was clear. His job was to develop the products. The mechers would ensure they would be put to good use. There was no need for the two parties to interfere with each other's duties.

They talked a bit more on the subject. Ves eventually addressed an interesting point.

"The Terrans have expressed great interest in my Woodsap mechs." He told the Master Mech Designer. "I suppose everyone is interested in a mech like the Elegant Rage, but I think the Terrans may be particularly suitable to invest in this future product."

"Oh? What do you have in mind?"

"If it is permitted, I would like to cooperate more closely with the Terrans to speed up the development of Woodsap mechs." Ves proposed. "One of the most important factors needed to make a stronger and much more strategically significant first-class Woodsap mech is to develop exceptionally strong and resilient wood materials that possess connections to very strong tree organisms. The R&D institutions of my clan are improving, but they are far from ready to conduct research in such a demanding endeavor. I think we can shave one or two years off the release date of the first mass production version of a Woodsap mech if I can partner up with the Terrans. Both of us will take what we need from each other. This is a mutually beneficial arrangement."

Master Dervidian looked intrigued as Ves laid out a thoughtful development plan.

There was only one problem.

"Why do you wish to turn to the Terrans? Why not turn to us instead? We are already involved in the development of your Carmine mechs. We have granted you access to numerous facilities and given you multiple conveniences."

"It's not enough." Ves retorted. "I know you guys are rich, and I know you guys have a lot of research teams. However, the Red Association is preoccupied with so many affairs that it is impossible for you to slant a huge amount of resources towards any single priority. There are too many mechers who are all clamoring for manpower and resources. I don't want to make enemies out of them. Since the Terrans have expressed the strongest degree of interest, why not take advantage

of them and encourage them to invest heavily into the development of Woodsap mechs? The results will ultimately become available to everyone, including mechers like yourself. Isn't it nice to sit back and relax while waiting to obtain free stuff?"

Although Ves described this scheme in crude terms, Master Dervidian quickly accepted the logic behind it. Letting the Terrans do much of the heavy lifting was indeed a rationally sound decision.

However, there were other considerations that Ves had not mentioned. Variables such as trust, intimacy and dependency also mattered.

Master Dervidian frowned. His authority was not enough to make a major decision on this matter.

If the Evolution Witch was available, then she could issue a verdict without any problem.

The imminent alien offensive would soon occupy all of their attention to the extent that many leaders had no time to address other issues anymore.

The Transhumanist mech designer stared at Ves for a moment before choosing to overstep his boundaries. He knew the temper of the Evolution Witch and understood that she would approve any measures that could accelerate forward progress.

"You have my permission to seek greater cooperation in the research and development of Woodsap mechs." Master Dervidian stated. "Until you are ready to unveil your first Carmine mechs to the public, you must keep this collaboration as secret as possible. It is best to join forces with a select group of individuals hailing from a single ancient clan."

"You have my permission to seek greater cooperation in the research and development of Woodsap mechs." Master Dervidian stated. "Until you are ready to unveil your first Carmine mechs to the public, you must keep this collaboration as secret as possible. It is best to join forces with a select group of individuals hailing from a single ancient clan."

"I plan to explore whether it is possible to collaborate with the Devos Ancient Clan first."

"Good choice. You are already operating in its territory, so it is much easier to maintain confidentiality. The Devos Ancient Clan is also a relatively small and weak group within the Terran Alliance, so the Devosans will likely remain honest in their cooperation."

That was all Ves needed to hear. His projects became increasingly larger and more technically sophisticated in scope. The time where he could design all of his prestige projects by himself had passed. It became more important than ever for Ves to build up relations with other powerful parties and take advantage of them to further his own research!

Chapter 6164 The Value of an Early Start

After his virtual meeting with Master Dervidian, Ves did not take a break.

He immediately personally paid a visit to the Eden Institute of Business & Technology to meet with Master Laila Rebecca Devos in person.

Both sides had a good idea of what they wanted from each other. They also had a strong intention to cooperate with each other. This made it so that the talks proceeded remarkably quickly.

Since Ves received authorization from the Transhumanist Faction, he did not hesitate to disclose the key details of both the Carmine System and the Woodsap Carmine System to Master Laila Devos.

The dean of the Department of Humanoid Mech Design reacted with genuine shock several times, but she kept her expression schooled most of the time.

As a Master Mech Designer who had lived over three centuries, she had witnessed many revolutionary advances in the mech industry.

Certainly, giving norms a chance to pilot mechs without relying on the dreaded neural interface was a much more impactful invention!

Her powerful mind was able to extrapolate how society would respond to such a revolutionary advance. There were so many people who had been denied the chance to fulfill their dream and become a mech pilot. Once they had a chance to enter the cockpit of a Carmine mech and earn glory on the battlefield, many more soldiers would enter the battlefield!

Although it was not clear how effectively these non-potentates could pilot mechs, as long as the difference was not too great, the use of mechs would definitely expand on an enormous scale!

The implications were so massive that Master Laia's brain and cognitive implants were already beginning to overheat. There were far too many variables for her to keep track of! It was impossible for her to predict the massive changes that would ensue once the Carmine System became public!

Master Laila placed a much higher priority on cooperating with Ves and the Larkinson Clan on this matter. It had been the right decision to bet on the Larkinson Clan after witnessing the abnormal performance of the half-wooden mech earlier today.

"Since the Red Association has already taken charge of the development of the base version of your Carmine mechs, then we shall not impose. We are more than happy to take part in the research and development of your so-called Woodsap mechs. Our biotech sector is enormous. As Terrans, we highly value our planets and living environments, so we have made many advances in the field of exobotany. Our ancient clan can mobilize several top research teams to facilitate the research of superior hyper wood varieties.

"Right now, the Elegant Rage that I tested out earlier is largely made out of wood derived from the Emperor Tree, a single calamity plant that my clan previously managed to defeat on an untamed planet. This wood has strong advantages, but its overall properties are limited by the Emperor Tree's relatively inadequate habitat. I think that there are many other calamity trees out there that possess much more powerful material properties. Their wood should serve as much stronger raw ingredients for my future first-class Woodsap mechs. Taking wood from different calamity trees may also be a way to differentiate my products further, as they may each gain access to unique abilities that are derived from their powerful ancestors."

Ves smiled at the old lady. "I would be pleased to enjoy the support of your excellent researchers. My own scientists can do this work as well, but their numbers, connections and qualifications pale in comparison to yours. I do not have the patience to wait until my own clan can provide me with the results I need. With the help of your contributions, I think I can complete the development of Woodsap mechs within three years as opposed to five years."

This was just a loose estimate, but Ves truly believed he could turn Woodsap mechs into mature products by that time!

The need for them was great. The Red War was about to intensify. The two sides should continue to fight a lot in space, but a lot more battles are about to take place on planets.

That was exactly where Woodsap mechs held the greatest advantage!

The sooner Ves completed development on Woodsap mechs, the faster they could make a difference in the war. This was his driving purpose as a mech designer.

Master Laila Devos understood his motivations well. She supported his ambitions even if she questioned whether he was being optimistic about getting everything done in just three years.

For mech designers at her level, it was not unusual for them to spend decades on completing a single major research project.

However, Ves possessed such an excellent track record that she was willing to take him at his word.

"We shall fully bear the cost of our own research activities." The Terran Master Mech Designer spoke.

That was a generous offer! Ves did not want to burden his clan with any excessive costs. He knew that gaining the support of top Terran biotech researchers was anything but cheap. If the Devos Ancient Clan took care of this concern, then that lifted a burden off Ves' shoulders.

Of course, he fully understood that nothing came for free. The greater the support, the greater the expectation of repayment!

"What would your ancient clan like in return for your generous support?" Ves inquired. "Please keep in mind that it is not possible to grant you exclusive access to Woodsap mechs. The Red Association will not agree, and if my products are powerful enough, you cannot prevent others from adopting them as well."

"We are not that unrealistic in our expectations, Professor Larkinson. We do not ask for the impossible. We merely wish to receive additional accommodations. For example, when Woodsap mechs are finally ready for mass adoption, we would like to be ahead of the competition."

"You want to claim a first-mover advantage?" Ves guessed.

"Yes. If our mech designers can observe, assist and possibly collaborate with you in your projects, we can master the art of designing Woodsap mechs sooner than others. You can even start a master class here at the Eden Institute that can only be attended by the mech designers of our ancient clan. It would also be a great honor if you can design several exclusive Woodsap mechs for the Terran Alliance. As the inventor and chief developer of this new variation of neural interface-optional mechs, you should be able to bring out qualities in Woodsap mechs that cannot be matched by other mech designers."

Master Dervidian was right. The Terrans wanted to take advantage of their cooperation with Ves to get an early start in Woodsap mechs.

The demands voiced by Master Laila Devos did not sound excessive at all. None of them required Ves to commit too much time and effort into fulfilling them. He just had to play favorites with the Terrans when it came to anything related to Woodsap mechs.

This sounded like an equitable exchange to Ves. Since he had no objections to the demands, he was already willing to agree to the deal in principle.

Of course, it would be too reckless for him and Master Devos to sign a contract on the spot. Both parties still had to hash out precise and concrete terms in order to reduce ambiguity to a minimum.

"I will tell my personal assistant to contact your representatives and hammer out a secret agreement between the Larkinson Clan and the Devos Ancient Clan." Ves eventually declared. "You should keep in mind that the Red Association will probably want to take a look at it before signing it off. Nothing will happen unless the mechers give their approval."

A bitter smile appeared on the old Master Mech Designer's face. "That is to be expected from a trade association with enforcement power."

To call the MTA and RA trade associations was like calling the Dominion of Man a passenger liner!

Both Ves and Master Laila knew that the only reason why the mechers could get away with overseeing this secret deal was because they possessed the might to enforce their hegemony!

There was little point in talking about this topic. Nothing could change while the current status quo persisted. The Age of Dawn had just begun. There were still many more years left for yesteryear's hegemons to make way for tomorrow's rulers.

Once they offloaded the tedious and trivial responsibility of forming a contract to their legal departments, Ves and the Terran Master began to relax and talk about lighter subjects.

"The mechers want to phase the introduction of Carmine mechs." Ves said. "The third-raters get to have their turn first. Once we can confirm that they are doing well enough, the second-raters will get their turn next. Only after that will first-raters such as your fellow Terrans get to pilot their own Carmine mechs."

"What is the time interval between these phases?"

"I don't know. Six months maybe. It shouldn't be too short or long. I will try and save time by converting my existing third-class and second-class mech models into Carmine mech variants. It is only when I have to design a first-class Carmine mech that I will probably need to put in a lot of hard work myself."

"Given your lack of experience and your immature comprehension of first-class technologies, it would be prudent of you to collaborate with an experienced first-class mech designer if you wish to publish a mech on the Terran mech market. We hold high standards. As long as your product meets our exacting expectations, you should not feel concerned about sales at all. If the basic performance of your products falls below our minimum requirements, then we will attempt to correct them ourselves. I do not believe you wish to see this happen."

Ves furrowed his brows. It would be an insult if Terran mech designers had to purchase licenses of his Carmine mech designs in order to develop superior versions of his work!

"I suppose your ancient clan is willing to help me ensure my upcoming first-class Carmine mechs will satisfy the Terran Alliance's clientele?"

"If I am available at the time, I shall take action myself." She stated. "It is not a waste of time to design at least Carmine mech together with you. We may belong to completely different generations, but it is exactly because our perspectives diverge so much that miracles can be made. You possess a creative mind and excellent affinities in the latest technologies. I possess a wealth of knowledge and experience in traditional Terran mech design. Our collaboration should yield considerable rewards for the both of us. My greatest concern is that I may not be available in a year's time. One of our other mech designers shall take my place if that is the case."

The proposal sounded a little weird to Ves. He was not entirely unaccustomed to collaborating with Master Mech Designers, but they tended to be less than two centuries old.

Working together with a mech designer who grew up a full century earlier was a different experience!

Master Laila was hardly the oldest mech designer in the Red Ocean, but she could truly be considered as an old fossil!

Ves was afraid that the vast gulf in experience, mind states, ideologies and so on would cause too much friction during their collaboration.

He was much more comfortable collaborating with the members of the same generation such as Jovie Armalon.

However, the Terrans would never accept the work of a 'mere' Senior Mech Designer. Only when a Master Mech Designer, and an experienced one at that, became involved in the development of a new mech would the market have confidence in the new product.

It shouldn't take that many steps for Ves to release a mech in the Rubarthan mech market. The customer base over there were much more tolerant towards new and experimental products designed by upstarts.

Oh well. At least the cooperation with a mech designer as reputable and accomplished as Master Laila Rebecca Devos should ensure that their product was guaranteed to become a bestseller!

Chapter 6165 Parallel or Sequential Development

Ves departed from the Eden Institute of Business & Technology as a happy man.

The strong willingness of the Devos Ancient Clan to collaborate with Ves on Woodsap mechs resulted in a quick agreement in principle.

It would take longer to form and sign a proper contract, but their cooperation was already set in stone as far as both sides were concerned.

With this new deal, Ves had taken another step towards developing a closer relationship with the Terran Alliance.

As Ves boarded an armored shuttle that would take him back to Diandi Base, he began to look back on his decisions in order to reflect on them. Had he made any mistakes in his haste to make quick progress?

"I don't think I have made any wrong decisions."

In fact, he felt as if he had stumbled upon a more promising development trajectory.

Ves never forgot that he speculated that one of his potential opportunities to advance to Master Mech Designer was to develop elemental Carmine mechs based on all five classical elements.

One of the reasons why he felt reluctant to pursue this particular path was because it demanded way too much time and effort from him. It was already exhausting enough for him to develop Woodsap mechs alone. To repeat this ordeal four times without a convenient shortcut like the Elegant Rage on hand was too excessive!

Yet what if he took advantage of extensive technical support from third parties?

As long as Ves did not go too far and made sure he always remained in charge of the key systems of the elemental Carmine Systems, he could off-load a huge amount of secondary research topics to the top research teams of powerful players!

The cooperation agreement with the Devos Ancient Clan could serve as a template for similar deals with other partners.

For example, Ves could cooperate with the Mech Supremacist Faction to develop a metal Carmine mech, the Transhumanist Faction to develop a water element Carmine mech, the Rubarthans to develop an earth Carmine mech and maybe even the Red Fleet to develop a Bloodfire mech!

As long as he limited each major player to a single element, he could maximize the research support he could leverage from third parties!

"I don't have to cooperate with the big players either. There are many smaller first-rate colonial states that would be happy to sponsor my research in exchange for special treatment."

One of the advantages of making multiple deals with different partners was that he could work on all of the major research projects at the same time!

It would take a very heavy commitment from him in order to devote enough time on the development of all five variations of elemental Carmine mechs on a concurrent basis.

He would have to reduce his teaching obligations, spend less time with his children, design less mechs for the Larkinson Clan, publish less commercial works on the market and cut back on spontaneous research projects.

However, as long as he was willing to make this sacrifice, he could devote all of his time on developing five very different varieties of elemental Carmine mechs!

"If everything goes smoothly, it should not take longer than 5 years to complete any single project. That means... I will gain an opportunity to realize my design philosophy 5 years after kicking off this marathon."

Ves grew stunned at how absurd this sounded. A part of him felt it was crazy for him to think that he could make up for the extensive gap in mech designs and other forms of accumulation by developing 5 revolutionary elemental Carmine mechs, but he truly felt as if he could complete this amazing feat!

So long as he continued to build up his momentum and did not get stuck along the way, Ves had great confidence that he could actually realize his design philosophy by the time he completed all 5 research projects in quick succession!

"This is crazy!"

Ves was over 40 years old at the moment, so if he followed this insane plan, then he had a good chance of breaking the Polymath's record for becoming the youngest Master Mech Designer in human history!

He kind of understood why the Polymath managed to make such rapid progress when she finally became a Senior.

Part of the challenge that Seniors struggled with was that they had to wait a long time to obtain the right inspiration to develop the right idea that could form the basis of their advancement opportunity.

There were Seniors who managed to gain a clear idea on what they could do in order to realize their design philosophies, but lacked the knowledge, resources and other requirements to fulfill their ambition.

There were also other Seniors who studied a lot of knowledge, but became so awed by the work of their predecessors that they could not come up with a worthwhile idea for them to pursue.

Then there were mech designers who possessed the resources to pursue an ambitious idea, but lacked the knowledge and skills to realize their dream.

In short, there were many reasons for Senior Mech Designers to remain stuck in their current ranks for decades if not centuries.

Ves used to place himself in the first category, sort of. He was not lacking in ideas, but he always thought he was not qualified to work towards becoming a Master Mech Designer due to inadequate resources and knowledge.

This was why his latest insight came as a shock to him. By outsourcing a lot of secondary and less important research assignments to different partners, Ves could reap a lot of benefits and accelerate his own progress.

He seriously felt tempted to enact this bold plan right away!

"I can't!" Ves shook his head. "It's too demanding! I can't work on five of these heavy projects at the same time. I would have to give too much in order to break the Polymath's record."

Although Ves understood the need to speed up his progress and become a Star Designer before the Subjugation King arrived in the Red Ocean, he did not want to deviate from his heart and become a different sort of mech designer!

Ves always pursued breadth over depth. He possessed a wide variety of interests and liked to explore many different research directions at different times. He always considered his ability to jump from one research subject to another as his strength.

If he tried to force himself into completing his elemental Carmine mechs at the exclusion of everything else, then he would be betraying his own inclinations as a mech designer!

He understood the benefits of becoming a more focused and specialized mech designer like Ketis and Gloriana, but Ves refused to limit his options!

There was an endless variety of mechs and design applications that he could explore over his long career!

He did not want to let his fear towards the Subjugation King and the vanity of beating the Polymath's record divert him from his current trajectory.

Ves let out a sigh. "It's best if I stick to my original plan and work on them one by one. There is no need for haste. Working on the research projects on a sequential basis will also allow me to apply the lessons of the old projects to the newer ones."

It was more efficient and steady to work on Woodsap mechs first, Bloodfire mechs second and maybe water Carmine mechs third.

By the time he tackled earth and metal Carmine mechs, technology advanced so much that a lot of better options became available.

Ves also gained so much proficiency in elemental Carmine Systems in general that it should only take a fraction of the time to complete the remaining ones.

Perhaps he might end up prolonging his status as a Senior Mech Designer for another decade if he followed this trajectory, but he would truly earn his breakthrough at that point.

If Ves had a choice, he did not wish to force an early breakthrough and suffer the consequences of doing so. Perhaps the Polymath paid a heavy price in order to hold her current record.

As the shuttle finally returned to Diandi Base, Ves finally reunited with his wife and shared some of the latest developments.

"You made the right decision to cooperate with the Terrans." Gloriana remarked. "I believe that one of the reasons why the Terrans have uncharacteristically moved quickly to secure an agreement with you is because they are driven by Gaia to embrace your Woodsap mechs."

Ves raised his eyebrows. "Gaia? Really?"

"I do not know if you have been paying attention to it lately, but Gaia worship has been gaining ground within Terran society. There are many older and established faiths that are doing their best to push against the rise of 'paganism' as they call it, but the fact that Gaia actually bothers to respond to her devoted worshipers on rare occasions is much more convincing than praying to a boy that is nailed to a cross!"

"That figure on the cross is a man." Ves corrected her. "How old was he, thirty? That is a full adult, especially in more primitive times when life expectancies were much lower."

Gloriana rolled her eyes. "That doesn't change the fact that the gods of these old churches have produced less miracles over multiple millenia than Gaia has done in only a handful of years!"

"You're right. I haven't paid attention to this. I wouldn't dismiss the old faiths too soon, though. They existed for thousands of years for good reasons. At the very least, their flocks are not only huge, but there are also a lot of strong worshipers among them. The power of collective belief is capable of producing miracles on its own. Anything is possible in the Age of Dawn."

Ves used to be a strict secularist that treated all religions as scam organizations, but he was not as eager to promote this stance anymore. He was a mech designer as well as a scientist. He had witnessed a lot of crazy stuff during the Age of Dawn that had forced him to recalibrate his perspective on reality.

In any case, if Gloriana was correct that Gaia had quietly been pushing the Terrans to support the rise of Woodsap mechs, then Ves welcomed this development.

He did not feel upset that Gaia, who already possessed a vested interest in Woodsap mechs, had secretly encouraged the Terrans to fall in love with mechs like the Elegant Rage.

As long as Ves did a good job in delivering a strong and practical Woodsap mech design, everyone's beliefs in his work would get vindicated!

"The help of the Terrans comes at a convenient time." Ves remarked. "Once we have completed the upgrades to the Amaranto, the Riot, the First Sword and the Promethea, I think it is time for us to upgrade the Everchanger into a Woodsap mech."

"Will Joshua agree to form a Woodsap Pact with the Everchanger?" Gloriana skeptically asked.

"I don't know, but who says that mech pilots have to form a Carmine Pact with a Carmine mech? Didn't Major Jankowski manage to do an adequate job with the Elegant Rage despite the fact that he never made use of the Woodsap Carmine System? We can add this feature to the next iteration of the Everchanger, but retain the existing neural interface. This way, we can give Joshua the choice on how he wants to shape his own future as a mech pilot."

His wife looked intrigued. "I understand your logic. This will not make Joshua's life comfortable, however. The longer he pilots the Everchanger without making use of the Woodsap Carmine System, the more he will become plagued by this temptation. Joshua is a pilot that is prone to worrying. You will mentally torture him if you put the Woodsap Carmine System within reach but do not place any obligations to form a pact."

"I can't baby Joshua around forever. If he cannot withstand this torture, then he is not fit to become an ace pilot like Tusa and Isobel."

Chapter 6166 Work on the Dark Zephyr

While Ves dealt with the aftermath of the Elegant Rage's exposure on New Constantinople VIII, the expeditionary fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance continued to wait and prepare for the tough times ahead.

All of the soldiers of the expeditionary fleet had set aside their pride and satisfaction for taking down the Torment Fleet as the atmosphere in the border regions became increasingly more tense.

Every Larkinson, Glory Seeker and so on frantically exchanged their money and war merits for tangible benefits that could give them a better chance to survive the storm to come.

Nobody dared to underestimate the native aliens that were about to bear down on the border regions. The more time passed by, the more intelligence trickled down from above.

Both the quantity and quality of alien fleets had increased by a huge margin compared to before.

The Red Cabal was no longer content with sending out rabble in an attempt to exhaust red humanity's resources.

Perhaps the high-and-mighty phase whales finally noticed that this strategy was starting to become counterproductive.

Simply sending in a steady stream of shabby alien raiding fleets could no longer shake the defenses of red humanity.

Many human forces were madly upgrading their combat assets, and the Red Two had also built up a lot of fortifications in the most vulnerable regions.

Faced with such a stiff set of metaphorical walls, it made a lot more sense for the native aliens to concentrate their forces and send them all out at once.

The momentum of this imminent alien assault was bound to shake the entire dwarf galaxy!

In the face of all of these threats, no one could guarantee they could live their way past all of the battles that would break out in the next few years.

However, many people also saw this as a great opportunity to temper themselves and attain greatness.

Heroes were born in wars!

Many veteran mech pilots wished that they had been born a decade or a couple of decades sooner. They had fought and toiled during the Age of Mechs where human space used to be a lot calmer and more stagnant.

The wars that took place during those years amounted to little more than human infighting.

Under the suppression of the MTA and the CFA, the fighting between different states often led to a lot of misery, but rarely resulted in the kind of mass slaughters that used to take place during the most terrible days of the Age of Conquest.

It was a lot harder for mech pilots to stand out, break past their limits and ascend the path of godhood under those controlled circumstances.

Now that red humanity had not only lost the backing of original humanity, but also entered into a war against aliens who never agreed to play by the rules of their adversaries, many mech pilots felt more pressured than ever.

While it was true that a lot of mech pilots who had grown up during times of peace failed to adapt to the changing times, the ones that fought in the border regions and went on to become linefighters benefited the most from the Red War!

These rising elites and heroes not only tempered their fighting spirits while confronting warships that could disintegrate their fragile mechs with a single salvo of their powerful batteries, but also earned precious war merits!

The importance of these war merits could not be overstated. The Red Association, the Red Fleet, the Terran Alliance and the Rubarthan Pact generously set up exclusive exchanges for the New Elites to reward them for fulfilling the collective duty of red humanity.

The Red Two and the first-rate colonial superstates behaved quite sincerely and opened up access to plenty of goods and services that used to be exclusive to their own people!

The War Exchange had quickly become the favorite destination for every blooded linefighter.

Not only did it offer attractive rewards at every price point, but the providers also discounted a lot of goods!

Everything they did was for the purpose of incentivizing as many soldiers to fight on the frontlines as possible. The powers that be also wanted to speed up the development of the New Elites and allow them to rise up faster.

One of the beneficiaries of the new policies was Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson.

Although the first ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan did not manage to achieve a dramatic breakthrough on the battlefield like most of his peers, Tusa had already proven his strength before and after his breakthrough.

He managed to earn a lot of war merits recently for his key role in defeating the Torment Fleet!

His quick takedown of the powerful Eminence of Torment especially earned him a high bonus, as it was in red humanity's best interest to kill as many phase leaders as possible!

At this time, the value of a war merit was roughly equal to that of an MTA merit.

This alone made war merits more desirable as MTA merits were usually a lot more valuable than the same sum in MTA credits!

Many third-raters and second-raters never dared to imagine that they would be able to earn rewards equivalent to the salaries and bonuses that first-raters took for granted!

Even so, compared to the total proportion of combatants in the new frontier, only a modest proportion of mech pilots and other soldiers earned the status of linefighters so far.

It couldn't be helped. Many people rationally figured out that there was no way for them to enjoy their rich rewards when there was a large chance that they would die after getting targeted by a scary warship!

Modern humans had developed such an acquired fear towards the threat posed by warships that many mech pilots chose to stay in the rear.

They were not necessarily cowards. There were plenty of veterans among them that had fought against a multitude of mech forces.

It was just that the anti-warship propaganda of the MTA and the CFA worked too well.

It was difficult for so many adults to unlearn their extreme apprehensions at the thought of fighting not just one warship, but an entire fleet of armed vessels!

The casualty figures were horrendous. So many hopeful mech pilots died or got crippled after just one or two encounters against the aliens.

Whatever war merits they managed to earn all became lost as they were neither transferable or inheritable.

Only the strong and the living deserved to cash in their rewards!

This was why the War Exchange became so lucrative to the few soldiers who were courageous enough to fight the aliens, but also lucky enough to survive the successive battles.

Those who were in a position to take advantage of the War Exchange had survived the harshest crucible and came out stronger in every way!

These were the true New Elites that the Fist of Defiance wanted to nurture from a human population that had long grown complacent in their past superiority.

As a participant of many battles against the native aliens, Saint Tusa already managed to build up a generous stash of war merits.

The additional rewards for contributing to the defeat of the Torment Fleet had practically doubled the amount of war merits in his possession. Tusa felt like a rich man after accumulating so much wealth!

Despite all of this, Tusa never felt the urge to spend them on anything expensive.

As far as he was concerned, the Larkinson Clan already took care of all of his essential needs.

From providing and upgrading the Dark Zephyr to bestowing him with a companion spirit, Tusa did not feel like he was lacking anything.

As a former third-rater, Tusa still retained the frugality of his humble background, and never thought about squandering his war merits on goodies that were ultimately dispensable.

To high-ranking mech pilots like himself, their only basis for power was their extraordinary willpower and their mechs!

This was why Tusa finally thought about spending his war merits for the first time.

His Dark Zephyr had received a monumental upgrade not too long ago, but now the living mech faced one of his most important transformations in his existence.

Under the gaze of awed members of the Crosser Clan, Saint Tusa calmly stepped deeper into the bowels of the factory ship known as the Cyclical Cross.

Although the second-class ship was horribly outdated compared to the frequently updated Spirit of Bentheim, the Cyclical Cross possessed her own ruggedness and industrial charm that Tusa could respect.

After passing through an armored hatch, he finally stepped inside one of Master Benedict Cortez' private workshops.

The Dark Zephyr had already been placed in the center of the chamber. Master Benedict had not yet finalized the design of the ace mech iteration of the powerful living mech, but that did not stop him from applying numerous iterative improvements in advance!

This showed the difference between Master Benedict and the mech designers of the Larkinson Clan.

Whereas Ves and Gloriana preferred to work on their big projects and move on after delivering their mechs, Master Benedict never left his most important works alone.

For example, the Mars received frequent incremental upgrades over time that steadily improved its performance over time. Its parts received updated tech while weaker materials also got swapped with superior ones.

It was not easy to keep the high-ranking mechs of the Cross Clan up to date. Master Benedict frequently had to set aside his research projects and original mech design projects in order to revisit his old works.

However, the advantage of an incremental upgrade approach was that the Mars never needed to undergo a massive refit like the mechs fielded by the Larkinson Clan!

Master Benedict also tried to make the best out of his situation by constantly conducting small experiments with the Mars and other powerful machines. This allowed him to improve and optimize his Endex System at a rapid rate!

In any case, now that the Larkinson Clan entrusted the upgrade of the Dark Zephyr to the second leader of the Cross Clan, Master Benedict did not delay too long before he started to tinker with the powerful machine.

As Tusa stopped in front of his dormant mech, he looked up as Master Benedict personally worked on components located beneath a disassembled abdomen plate.

The ace pilot did not have the faintest clue what the Master Mech Designer was working upon.

"Master Benedict." The young ace pilot greeted. "How goes your work?"

The older man grumbled as he continued to struggle with the complicated alien tech around him.

"Slow. Difficult. Interesting. This archetech that Gloriana Wodin has adapted to your mech is endlessly fascinating, but it is also hindering my work. My proficiency in this alien tech is far behind. It does not help that your machine has become a masterwork either. I cannot be careless when applying any change. I have to collaborate with Gloriana every time I wish to modify your mech."

"Does that mean it will take longer before I can pilot a true ace mech?" Tusa frowned.

"There is no need for you to feel too concerned. This is a problem of logistics, not competence. I will be able to fully upgrade your Dark Zephyr in a reasonable timeframe. Perhaps you may be forced to fight the first two or three opening battles of the upcoming alien offensive with a mere high-tier expert mech, but you will soon be able to fight at your best."

That mollified Tusa a little. "What can I do to help?"

"I need you to spend as many war merits as you can tolerate on a set of ace mech-grade resonating exotics. It is best if you spend all of it at once." Master Benedict explained. "Do not take this decision lightly. The current set of resonating exotics are not bad, but they can no longer keep up with your growth. It is better to replace them with stronger materials that can amplify the power of your upcoming ace mech much more drastically."

"I understand, Master. I am willing to invest my war merits, but why so much?"

"I need you to spend as many war merits as you can tolerate on a set of ace mech-grade resonating exotics. It is best if you spend all of it at once." Master Benedict explained. "Do not take this decision lightly. The current set of resonating exotics are not bad, but they can no longer keep up with your growth. It is better to replace them with stronger materials that can amplify the power of your upcoming ace mech much more drastically."

"I understand, Master. I am willing to invest my war merits, but why so much?"

"I would be happy to explain why you do not want to rein in your spending this time."

Chapter 6167 The Availability of Resonating Materials

Master Benedict Cortez did not keep tinkering with the partially disassembled Dark Zephyr while he talked.

That would be disrespectful towards an ace pilot.

While a Master Mech Designer did not have to bow and scrape in front of a Saint, it was best not to cause needless offense to a powerhouse that could literally bend reality.

A few minutes after Saint Tusa arrived, he and Master Benedict moved to a rest corner and sat down on the couches.

A bot delivered a drink to Master Benedict, which he sipped with visible pleasure.

"Do you know what resonating exotics are or where they come from?"

"No." Tusa shook his head. "I have used them for years, but I never saw any reason to dive deeper into these questions. I am a pilot, not a mech designer."

"Well, have you heard of the theory that all exotics in the universe are originally the decayed remains of powerful life forms that have died many ages ago?"

"I have heard of it, Master."

"Good. That saves us time. What you may not know is that there are supplemental theories that attempt to explain where resonating exotics come from. Where the more normal varieties of exotics can come from any body part of deceased beings, resonating exotics may be derived from their core organs. Whether it is the brain, the heart or some other alien organ that has no equivalency in human physiology, the theories claim that as they degenerate into exotics, they still retain the strongest and most persistent qualities of their once-mighty sources."

Saint Tusa looked thoughtful as he leaned back on the couch. He wondered why Master Benedict bothered to explain these theories to him. What difference did it make?

"That sounds interesting, but whether exotics are the remains of dead aliens and beasts or not, it is not as if we need to pay attention to their feelings. We live in completely different eras."

"You are correct, Saint Tusa, but not entirely. It is true that the origins of all of those exotics that we use today have died many years ago, but what if I say that resonating exotics can still develop feelings towards high-ranking pilots such as yourselves?"

"Hmm?"

"We do not have enough information to be certain about this, but one popular theory why resonating exotics behave as they do is because they carry a lingering intelligence or semblance of it that are based on those long-dead organisms. Much has been worn away over time, but what is left are the most fundamental qualities and strengths of those past life forms."

"If that is the case, then does that mean I resonate with certain exotics a lot better than others because I share something in common with the former?"

Master Benedict nodded. "That is what the most convincing theories state. Many mech designers, including Ves and Gloriana, believe it to be true. I am also leaning towards it, but I am not entirely convinced. We have never witnessed the lengthy process of death, decay and transformation of a resonating exotic from beginning to end. Scientists have only been able to make inferences based on a large amount of clues and calculations."

"So all if this may be false?"

"Do not think too hard about this issue, Tusa. This is a problem that scientists and mech designers such as myself are fighting over. The reason why I wanted to bring this possible theory to your attention is the importance of choosing the right ace mech-grade exotics for your Dark Zephyr."

That caused Tusa's mood to sharpen. "Please explain."

"There are two main reasons why I urge you to spend all of your war merits on procuring the best possible resonating exotics that are compatible with your willpower. The first is efficiency. What do you think is better. Do you want to buy a single set of quality resonating exotics that are strong

enough to remain relevant during your entire run as a Saint? Or do you want to procure a set of affordable resonating exotics at the start of your career as an ace pilot, then subsequently replacing them with more powerful resonating exotics when you have grown stronger and require more powerful combat solutions?"

"Is there any benefit to the latter approach?" Tusa asked with a doubtful expression.

"The upfront cost and commitment is lower." Benedict replied. "You can make use of the cheaper resonating exotics with an attitude of conducting a trial. Once you have fought many battles and grown into a senior ace pilot, you can choose to replace the old set with more powerful resonating exotics that can perform similar functions at a much higher power level. You can also discard your old methods and acquire a new set of resonating exotics that can bestow your Dark Zephyr with new and much more promising resonating abilities."

There were pros and cons to both approaches. Tusa could not make up his mind which one he should embrace.

"The second reason why you should make a heavy commitment is the issue of scarcity. Think about it, Tusa. If resonating exotics come from the most important organs of dead organisms, then it is not unreasonable to assume that more powerful resonating exotics come from stronger beings. There are many resonating materials that are suitable for use in expert mech, but there are much less that are suitable for ace mechs, especially the more powerful ones. Do you know why this may be the case?"

The Larkinson ace pilot did not have to think too much to come up with a possible answer.

"Just like mech pilots, the hierarchy of powerful beings in the past must be shaped like a pyramid. There used to be many aliens that managed to become as strong as expert pilots, but there are very few that can match the strength of ace pilots, and even fewer of them can give a peak ace pilot a challenge."

Master Benedict nodded. "This is a universal pattern. The circumstances of the distant past are not all that different from the circumstances of the present. There are very mech pilots today that can grow and survive long enough to reach the rank of ace pilot. In the distant past, the aliens who occupied the Red Ocean must have been distributed in a similar fashion."

"Yes. Red humanity is constantly prospecting for more resonating exotics, but they are not as common as normal exotics. The more powerful materials that are highly suitable for ace mechs are even scarcer. They are so rare in fact that ace-mech grade resonating materials are increasingly more artificial in nature. Material scientists such as the renowned Resonance Smith are highly celebrated because their work allows our civilization to expand the availability as well as the variety of high-end and top-end resonating alloys. However... the time, effort and funding needed to develop these premium resonating materials are prohibitive."

"Does that mean that the most powerful resonating exotics are limited and difficult to find?"

"Yes. Red humanity is constantly prospecting for more resonating exotics, but they are not as common as normal exotics. The more powerful materials that are highly suitable for ace mechs are even scarcer. They are so rare in fact that ace-mech grade resonating materials are increasingly more artificial in nature. Material scientists such as the renowned Resonance Smith are highly celebrated because their work allows our civilization to expand the availability as well as the variety

of high-end and top-end resonating alloys. However... the time, effort and funding needed to develop these premium resonating materials are prohibitive."

Saint Tusa understood a little bit more what Master Benedict wanted to convey.

Good resonating materials that were effective for ace mechs were exponentially more difficult to acquire than the ones suitable for expert mechs. Even an ace pilot like Tusa needed to be aware of the factors that limited their availability in order to plan out their futures.

Without suitable resonating materials that could support them in their struggles to break past their limits, their growth would ultimately stagnate!

"All of the better ace mech-grade exotics are not ones that can be mined from ore deposits, but are instead created in high-end labs?"

"Correct. To be honest, the War Exchange currently lists many different ace mech-grade resonating materials that are fairly powerful and useful, but it does not contain any of the top products. The mechers, the Terrans and the Rubarthans all prefer to keep them exclusive to their own ace pilots."

Saint Tusa grew disappointed when he heard that. This meant that the Larkinson Clan likely wouldn't be able to obtain the truly powerful resonating materials.

"The quality and other properties of resonating materials is not the sole factor that determines your strength and growth limit." Master Benedict taught the ace pilot. "This is why I advise you to invest heavily in a set of the most expensive resonating materials that you can attain. As long as you choose well, you will be able to use their associated resonating abilities many times over many years. The more you employ them, the more you are able to master them. You can also start to improve upon them. A resonating ability can produce drastically different outcomes depending on the growth of your resonance strength and the development of your Saint Kingdom."

Saint Tusa already received a few lessons about that during his last pilgrimage to the Red Association.

"Are you saying that I should rely on decades worth of growth and exploration to improve the performance of good resonating materials so that it can match the performance of top resonating materials?"

"Yes. That is the strategy that I am recommending to you. Do not forget about willpower baptism. Resonating materials are less susceptible to it, but it is still possible to grind them over a long period of time so that they become slightly more compatible and receptive to your willpower."

The benefits sounded rather uncertain. Tusa knew that it was a lot easier to work with weaker resonating exotics in the beginning, and switch to more powerful ones when he became a senior ace pilot.

"Won't it be possible for our clan to gain access to those top resonating materials one day? Maybe Ves will become a tier 1 galactic citizen and be able to ask favors from the Resonance Smith. We could also become so friendly with the Terrans or the Rubarthans that they are willing to open up their secret stash to our clan."

"Are you willing to bet your future on that?" Benedict asked with a smile. "Are you absolutely certain that your Larkinson Clan will never stop growing, and that Ves will fully realize his potential and become a renowned Master Mech Designer or even a Star Designer?"

Saint Tusa possessed a strong sense of confidence in Ves.

However, no one could say for certain what the future might hold.

Time was also a big variable.

Very few mech designers managed to realize their design philosophies within the first century of their lives. As for becoming a Star Designer, hardly any mech designer could match the pace of the Polymath!

Tusa eventually sighed. "Let us settle for your strategy, then. It fits the style of the Larkinson much more. As long as the foundation of my Dark Zephyr is good enough, I am confident I can expand his potential over time."

This was the spirit of a true ace pilot! High-ranking pilots never abided by the limits of reality!

Master Benedict smiled in satisfaction. "Good. Then let us proceed with making a preliminary selection. Based on the compatibility test conducted by the Red Association, I have singled out multiple key resonating materials that can replace the function of Perfidious Steel and Bissonat. You can either select new materials that can bestow your ace mech with similar resonating abilities, or you can decide to change your combat approach and gain access to brand-new options."

Tusa thought for a moment. He was quite fond of both resonating exotics.

Perfidious Steel allowed the Dark Zephyr to distort the perception of observers, causing them to miss their shots much more frequently than they should.

Tusa relied on this resonating material to keep his then-fragile expert light skirmisher undamaged in many battles.

Bissonat was a fairly boring but effective resonating exotic that amplified the resilience and cutting power of the Dark Zephyr's weapons.

It was this unassuming resonating exotic that enabled his battle partner to cut through lots of thick and sturdy hull plating of giant alien warships without ruining their edges!

Chapter 6168 B-30 Shattersteel

Before Saint Tusa wanted to take a look at the list of resonating materials, he first needed to decide what he wanted out of this selection.

Should he stick with what he was already familiar with and find superior substitutes for Perfidious Steel and Bissonat?

He decided to solicit Master Benedict's opinion.

When the Master Mech Designer of the Cross Clan heard Tusa's request, the older man immediately voiced his own opinion.

"The effects of both Perfidious Steel and Bissonat are dispensable at your current rank." Master Benedict said. "I was not involved in the development of the original Dark Zephyr, but I can infer that the original motivation of choosing these two resonating exotics was to compensate for the weaknesses of your first expert mech. One is meant to increase your ability to cope with attacks. The other is meant to compensate for the weak offensive capabilities of your mech. They are chosen because the designers of the Dark Zephyr are afraid that you would falter at a critical moment. Ves

and Gloriana did not want you to lose your mech as well as your life because of any shortcomings in their work."

Tusa's eyes flashed as he took in this explanation. He knew the two mech designers quite well and could clearly agree that they had this intention in mind.

A part of him felt warm. He appreciated the care and attention from the Larkinson Clan. He knew he was lucky for joining a prosperous clan that was able to provide better and better mechs over time.

Another part of him felt insulted. Even if he was a lot weaker back then, he was still an expert pilot at the time! There was no need to coddle him when he faced much greater risks before he ever managed to trigger his apotheosis.

Tusa crossed his arms. "I understand. I admit that my ability to defend myself was a lot worse in the past. That is over now. I think I have outgrown the need for these functions. My Saint Kingdom is able to compensate for all of my greatest vulnerabilities. It can reduce the lethality of incoming attacks, thereby making Perfidious Steel redundant. It can also help me strengthen and sharpen the blades of my knives, which means that Bissonat is only icing on the cake. I am more interested in exploring new options. Now that my responsibilities have grown, I need to expand my range of options so that I can solve more crises."

"That is a good mindset to take, but are you certain you want to replace the old resonance abilities entirely? I have found a pair of substitutes in the War Exchange that can make you change your mind."

"Oh? Do tell."

Master Benedict activated a projection that displayed a strange purple faceted crystal. It looked incredibly weird. It was not only highly reflective, but also seemed to change its shape depending on the angle of view.

It was a highly disturbing effect that could make anyone doubt whether their eyes still worked correctly!

"This is a rare naturally occurring resonating exotic from the old galaxy that the Red Association has in stock. It is called Turbulenta, and it has gained its name because it can disturb the observation of an ace mech under the influence of true resonance. What makes Turbulenta especially useful is that its effects can differ depending on how you apply your true resonance. If not for the fact that very few ace pilots are compatible with it, the mechers would have long exhausted their limited supply."

The projection changed to show a first-class ace mech that happened to incorporate Turbulenta.

The ace pilot cleverly combined his Saint Kingdom with Turbulenta to produce a range of optical illusions, ranging from creating a dozen visual clones to completely hiding the actual coordinates of the ace mech inside the large domain field!

The ace mech that utilized Turbulenta was even able to turn its entire exterior into a fractured mirror, making it impossible to track its weapons!

These were familiar tricks to Tusa, but when they were applied at the level of an ace mech, the results were drastically better.

For example, the ace mech was able to employ effective misdirection to outmaneuver and eventually defeat another ace mech!

Saint Tusa developed a much greater appreciation of Turbulenta due to this example. The powerful ace mech-grade resonating exotic could truly turn him into a trickster that could torment and confound all kinds of powerful opponents!

However, the ace pilot did not really like the fact that it did nothing to increase the direct combat power of his machine. It only gave him more coping mechanisms in case he was met with much greater resistance than he could ordinarily handle.

This was what the other resonating material was for. Master Benedict soon introduced his hand-picked replacement for Bissonat.

"There are many resonating materials that can increase the damage inflicted by a bladed weapon. Instead of searching for a more powerful material with an identical effect, I have sought out a modern resonating alloy called B-30 Shattersteel. It is designed to give ace mechs a means to overcome strong defenses by repeatedly striking them in the same areas."

The projection changed to display another ace mech, this one belonging to the Terrans.

The Terran first-class ace mech confronted a very powerful orven battleship that was considerably larger and more powerful than the Tortured Scream!

Due to her superior size and tech, the giant orven battleship was protected by powerful segmented multi-layered transphasic energy shields.

Even the more powerful ace mechs would have a headache in trying to breach those defensive layers!

However, the Terran ace mech approached boldly and without any fear. It did not even employ its suite of ranged weapons in order to soften up the energy shields.

Instead, as soon as it came close, it began to unfold eight pairs of arms, each of which held eight different long but slender knives.

The ace mech began to attack.

Tusa straightened his back as he witnessed the Terran mech's arms repeatedly strike at the segmented energy shield in front at an absurdly high rate!

The arms did not strike with a lot of power, but their swinging speeds were so fast that the ace mech was able to attack dozens of times in just a handful of seconds!

It soon became clear why the ace mech emphasized attack speed over strike power.

Each contact with a knife caused the transphasic energy shield to show minor cracks. This phenomenon was almost unnoticeable at the start, but as the rapid knife attacks continued to hit the energy shield, the 'cracks' became more and more noticeable!

Due to the ridiculous fact that the ace mech possessed eight arms, it only took a couple of seconds to breach the segmented transphasic energy shield!

The ace mech did not stop here. It immediately advanced and breached the second layer, before moving to the third!

The crew of the orven battleship clearly panicked. They tried to repel or slow down the progress of the human ace mech by resorting to a lot of means, but their countermeasures took so much time to deploy that their enemy already managed to make it through!

Surprisingly enough, the hull plating of the orven battleship was quite thick and resilient. The vessel had been built recently after the native aliens mastered a lot of stolen human technologies.

Despite facing stiffer resistance than usual, the Terran ace mech was able to drill through all of the thick metals by continuously creating more and more extraordinary cracks with every rapid knife strike!

"Interesting." Saint Tusa commented. "So this is the effect of weapons made with B-30 Shattersteel?"

"Yes. It is an artificial resonating alloy that is designed to break the unbreakable and undermine any form of hard defense by overwriting reality. B-30 Shatterpoint is not meant to breach defenses with single overwhelming attacks. It is meant to give ace mechs the ability to steadily weaken the integrity of anything it strikes. If ten attacks cannot break a barrier, then a hundred attacks should do it. If a hundred attacks is not sufficient, then maybe a thousand attacks will do the job. As long as your willpower is abundant enough to support the consumption of this resonating alloy, you can theoretically break through any barrier."

That was a bold claim! As Tusa studied the Terran ace mech that had been expressly designed to take advantage of this interesting new material, he soon began to frown.

"B-30 Shatterpoint is clearly a resonating alloy that is meant to be used in rapid attacks. As far as I know, the Dark Zephyr only possesses a single pair of arms. My battle partner will never be able to breach defenses as quickly as this Terran ace mech."

"It doesn't have to stay that way." Master Benedict said. "We can install additional limbs to your ace mech. They do not even need to be that big and cumbersome. You can fold them into the back of the Dark Zephyr when they are not needed, and unveil them when you are about to attack powerful enemies."

The Master Mech Designer activated another projection and quickly used his cranial implant to produce a visual mockup of such an alteration.

The Dark Zephyr with additional arms did not look as monstrous as Tusa feared. The additional limbs were very thin and slender. That caused them to become a lot more fragile and less capable of exerting power, but that was not important.

Tusa couldn't help but develop greater interest in B-30 Shattersteel. He liked the fact that this resonating alloy did not force the Dark Zephyr to rely on hard power in order to break enemy defenses.

The current pair of knives wielded by the Dark Zephyr may be able to become a lot sharper and tougher under the effect of true resonance, but the light skirmisher still had to exert a lot of power in order to breach anything that was annoyingly tough.

In other words, Bissonat still demanded the Dark Zephyr rely on one of his weaknesses, while B-30 Shattersteel was a lot more dependent on one of the living mech's strengths.

Master Benedict truly managed to find an excellent choice for Tusa. It fit the Dark Zephyr's inclinations very well.

"I am not impressed by Turbulenta, but I am impressed with B-30 Shattersteel. I will keep the latter into consideration." The ace pilot said.

"Good choice. Do keep in mind that ace mech-grade resonating materials have a tendency to produce greater conflicts with each other. Their effects are too strong, so any form of incompatibility will become magnified at higher energy levels."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that for many cases, you may only have the luxury of integrating a single key resonating material into your Dark Zephyr. This may force you to choose between B-30 Shattersteel and another material that has earned your appreciation." The Master Mech Designer answered.

Tusa managed to pick up a hidden clue. "Is the compatibility issue the reason why you presented Turbulenta despite the fact that its benefits are rather underwhelming?"

Benedict smirked. "That is a clever deduction. That is indeed a part of my considerations. Turbulenta is not as overwhelming as many other resonating materials, but it is because of this reason that it produces fewer conflicts. You can rest assured that we can safely implement both Turbulenta and B-30 Shattersteel in the same ace mech. Doing so will leave no room for other powerful resonating exotics."

"If that is the case, then I would like to study my other options. I do not want to make a premature decision without knowing what I may be missing out on. I doubt that the rest of your selection is weak."

"You are correct. There are truly amazing resonating materials available in the more expensive section of the War Exchange. For example, have you ever heard of an ace mech that can banish an enemy into another dimension?"

Chapter 6169 Erlemin

"A way to banish my enemies by sending them into a different dimension? Isn't that what FTL drives are supposed to do? How can you weaponize something like that?" Saint Tusa skeptically asked.

"With strong enough willpower and a resonating alloy that possesses strong spatial characteristics." Master Benedict grinned. "Let me introduce you to one of the Resonance Smith's more recent products. Erlemin is one of the few known ace mech-grade resonating alloys that has integrated phasewater. This enables the alloy to effectively displace any material object to another dimension upon physical contact."

The projection in front of the Master Mech Designer changed to play a few pieces of footage of Erlemin in action.

In one instance, a first-class ace mech holding a hammer struck a thick and extremely solid block of metal. The mech-sized object disappeared in an instant, making it seem as if it was literally erased from reality!

Saint Tusa never imagined that an ace mech was capable of producing such a feat.

"Is this banishment permanent?"

"No." Master Benedict said. "Objects that belong in the material dimension will try their best to get back. This happens to starships as well when their FTL drives suddenly malfunction. There are many reasons why this happens, but the explanation is too technical for you to understand. Just know that the more massive the object, the shorter their stay in another dimension. The ace mech responsible for banishing the object can extend the period by investing much more true resonance when executing this resonating ability, but it can become extremely draining. If the target actively resists the banishment, then the duration will shorten even further."

The footage showed examples where this occurred.

When the hammer-wielding ace mech banished an opposing ace mech, the latter only stayed absent for a few seconds.

The reason why it lasted so short was because the powerful enemy ace pilot leveraged his Saint Kingdom to forcibly drag his machine back to the material realm!

Tusa grew a little disappointed when he saw this. A trick like this was unlikely to work too well against other high-ranking mech pilots.

"How well does Erlemin perform against larger targets such as alien warships? Is it powerful enough to banish capital ships... and phase lords?"

Much of the opposition that red humanity fought these days reached stupendous sizes. The native aliens had a huge amount of warships in reserve. Plenty of them boasted a length that was longer than a kilometer. This was the arbitrary standard that humans used to categorize capital ships.

Then there were the phase whales and phase lords. These powerful beings with phasewater running through their veins could reach ridiculous proportions. The most powerful among them had grown so big that they surpassed the size of many moons!

When Tusa thought about whether his Dark Zephyr would be capable of banishing these biological titans in another dimension, he did not harbor much confidence!

While an ace pilot was expected to break through all obstacles and turn the impossible into a reality, the cold hard truth was that there were still limits!

The projection played a few other clips.

In one instance, the ace mech fought its way through the transphasic energy shields of an enemy warship and managed to strike the hull with a weapon integrated with Erlemin.

What surprised Tusa was that the ship indeed managed to get banished to another dimension!

The next clip showed the same mech confronting a battleship that was over 4 kilometers long. This was a true beast that was both modern and equipped with lots of powerful systems.

"This is only a sub-capital ship." The ace pilot said. "My Dark Zephyr can easily destroy a smaller alien warship like this without resorting to any fancy measures. Erlemin is only truly useful if it can help me banish larger targets. Is it possible to do the same to a real battleship?"

"The mechers have tried. You can see the results yourself."

The next clip showed the same mech confronting a battleship that was over 4 kilometers long. This was a true beast that was both modern and equipped with lots of powerful systems.

Such a vessel posed a true challenge to humans.

One of the details that cause Saint Tusa to frown was the fact that Erlmenin did nothing special against transphasic energy shields.

The ace mech was unable to banish the large alien battleship as quickly as it wished because it had to break past the segmented multi-layered transphasic energy shields first!

Fortunately, the ace mech received support from over a hundred first-class multipurpose mechs.

Their combined firepower allowed the ace mech get past the annoying defensive layers and strike the side of the battleship's hull with an Erlemin hammer that was glowing with true resonance!

This time, it was as if a miniature black hole appeared for a brief instant of time.

The entire side of the battleship went missing!

It was as if an invisible predator chomped a perfect sphere of ship matter from the massive hull!

"The efficacy of every resonating material scales with true resonance, domain expression and other factors." Master Benedict reminded Tusa. "The same resonating material can produce a weak effect when used by a weaker pilot, but can also produce a much more exaggerated effect if the pilot is stronger. The pilot of the ace mech in the projection does not possess the resonance strength to banish the entire ship, so he can only make due with partial banishment."

Half a minute later, the missing chunk of battleship hull returned to the material realm, but by then it was already too late for the vessel!

The constant motion of objects in space meant that the missing hull section appeared much further behind on the battlefield from the rest of the alien ship. There was no possible way to merge them back together in the middle of an ongoing battle!

Tusa's eyes lit up. "Wait. I do not need to use Erlemin to banish an entire warship. It is much more useful if I use it as a weapon and bite off large chunks from the hull!"

"That was the intention of the ace pilot in the projection." Benedict said with a smile. "However, Erlemin will not let you employ this tactic too easily. It takes a large amount of energy to separate so much matter from a larger object. The denser and tougher the material, the harder it is for Erlemin to cut through. The larger the volume, the more energy is needed to fuel this operation."

"Hmm, that can be costly."

"This is why Erlemin is better reserved for senior ace pilots. Their resonance strengths have grown extensively enough to employ this tactic on large targets several times during a battle without falling into exhaustion."

"I see. If I get this straight, Erlemin has three clear downsides. First, it doesn't do anything to energy defenses, which makes overcoming them a huge chore. Second, trying to banish anything that is too strong or too big can quickly drain the energy of an ace pilot. Third, trying to use it as a cutting weapon is also costly. I will not be able to maintain my fighting condition for long if the Dark Zephyr is built around the use of Erlemin."

Tusa became impressed by the effect of Erlemin, but he would have to be careful about using its associated resonating ability in combat.

He did not like it when he had to restrict his actions due to fears about exhausting himself too quickly!

However, Master Benedict did not highlight Erlemin without thought. He had good reasons to present this option to the ace pilot.

"Erlemin is a demanding resonating alloy to use. That is not in doubt. However, every ace pilot is unique. You possess several advantages that allow you to utilize this material much more effectively than other ace pilots. For example, your domain allows you to bypass energy defenses entirely. Your signature Leap of True Freedom ability enables you to circumvent segmented multi-layered transphasic energy shields instantly and with much greater ease. Your ace mech can banish a target without too much hindrance in those cases."

Tusa nodded. He already recognized this synergy between himself and this material.

However, that did not mean that he was convinced it was the best choice.

"The Leap of True Freedom is my most useful ability so far, but it takes a lot of effort to pull it off. If I have to resonate with Erlemin to either banish or cripple an enemy starship, that will force me to expend a lot of energy a second time. I do not think I can keep up with activating these demanding abilities multiple times. Besides, the Dark Zephyr also possesses an Ultimate Module that can help me cope with larger enemies. I have already tried out the Dark Wind Passage Ultimate Ability during the Battle of Torment and it worked great."

Master Benedict nodded in concession. "It is true that the effect of Erlemin partially overlaps with the outcome of using the Dark Wind Module. I do not agree that the former is redundant. Resonating alloys work on different principles than Ultimate Modules. The Dark Wind Module is purely offensive in nature. Erlemin is more versatile as it allows you to displace extremely powerful enemies that you cannot defeat."

"Why would I do that?"

"As long as you are willing to pay the price, you can temporarily displace any enemy champion that is powerful enough to demolish our entire expeditionary fleet. The temporary absence of such a strong opponent can buy us enough time to eliminate the rabble before concentrating our firepower on the sole enemy that is left. You can also banish a terrible opponent to buy enough time for our entire expeditionary fleet to turn around and flee the battlefield. It is unlikely the rest of us can be saved if you are only able to rely on your Dark Wind Passage to inflict penetrating but ultimately non-fatal wounds on powerful enemies."

Tusa understood now that Erlemin allowed the Dark Zephyr to contain enemies that were too powerful to defeat, but too dangerous to remain present on the battlefield.

He and his battle partner could play the role of saboteur. By specifically targeting these alien powerhouses or other major threats, he could contain them long enough until the other alien warships crumbled with greater use due to losing the support of their champion!

While Tusa started to develop a greater appreciation for this resonating alloy, he still hesitated on whether he should pick this material over other viable choices.

"If... if I choose to integrate Erlemin into the Dark Zephyr, is it still possible to make use of Turbulenta or B-30 Shattersteel?"

"I am afraid not, Saint. The inclusion of phasewater has caused Erlemin to become especially energetic and volatile. It does not go along well with Turbulenta. In addition, since Erlemin has to be integrated into a weapon or a limb, it cannot be used at the same time as a weapon integrated with B-30 Shattersteel."

"Wait." Tusa managed to catch an important detail. "Weapons such as knives and hammers aren't built into mechs. They are handheld pieces of equipment that can be picked up or put down. Doesn't that mean you can build a weapon based on both Erlemin and B-30 Shattersteel? As long as I have access to both weapons, I can simply pick the most suitable one to use in a deployment based on the enemy that I am facing. This means that I won't have to choose!"

Master Benedict chuckled. "That is an excellent deduction, Tusa. However, have you considered the issue of cost? Erlemin is among the most expensive resonating alloys on the War Exchange because it is new and laced with phasewater. At your current budget, you cannot acquire useful quantities of both Erlemin and B-30 Shattersteel."

"Oh. I should be able to earn more war merits during the upcoming offensive. Shouldn't it be possible for me to wait until I have enough to exchange for the other resonating material?"

"That is a common strategy among ace pilots, but... is this how you wish to shape your post-expert pilot combat system, Tusa? The decisions you make this time can literally define your role, your image and your value to your clan. It is not necessarily the best decision to branch out and acquire too many weapons. If your training and your combat style do not match your ace mech configuration, then you will experience problems in your subsequent growth."

Tusa looked troubled when he heard that. "You will have to clarify that, Master."

Chapter 6170 Tusa's Future Role

The transformation of the Dark Zephyr from a quasi-first-class expert mech to a first-class ace mech represented a huge and profound opportunity.

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson had become more powerful than ever before. How he fought as an ace pilot was already radically different because he was no longer afraid of getting overturned if his enemies targeted his weaknesses.

The existence of a Saint Kingdom was the most profound gain of becoming an ace pilot!

As long as Tusa paired up with a good enough mech, he could resonate with the machine so well to the point where his domain field could be amplified by several orders of magnitude, turning it into one of his strongest weapons and armor at the same time!

Master Benedict could not stress the importance of these changes often enough.

"Expert pilots and ace pilots are two completely different species. The former is weaker and possesses more vulnerabilities that can instantly spell their defeat. The latter is stronger but also more rounded. So long as your Saint Kingdom remains strong and intact, it can already make up for the relatively weak defenses of your Dark Zephyr. This means that your mech is not limited to his old configuration anymore. Your machine has already transcended the definition of a light skirmisher. This is especially the case when your battle partner will also gain the benefits of

becoming a first-class mech. What you need to decide is the direction of the evolution of your future ace mech."

Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson fell into thought. Any significant decisions related to his Dark Zephyr had massive implications. Each choice produced a lot of ripple effects.

Ace pilots were usually regarded as decisive people, but Tusa did not dare to make any impulsive choices on this matter!

Master Benedict observed the ace pilot carefully. He liked what he saw.

Patriarch Reginald Cross often gave him headaches because of his lack of inhibitions.

Saint Tusa was much younger and less experienced than the ace pilot of the Cross Clan, but he was much more willing to remain patient and adopt a rational perspective to his problems.

That made Tusa far easier to deal with than other ace pilots!

Of course, Benedict believed that Patriarch Reginald also had his good points. His passion and his desire to earn glory allowed him to make faster progress on the battlefield than many of his peers.

Even though Reginald was no longer a part of the expeditionary fleet, he was making so much progress over the past few years that it was not impossible for him to catch up to Saint Kalasandra Boojay within a few decades!

The only reason why Saint Kalandra was the strongest ace pilot of the Golden Skull Alliance was because she was twice as old as Reginald. Her steady personality allowed her to make slow but steady progress. She was unlikely to falter, but Master Benedict believed that her development speed was too slow to keep up with the rapidly changing era.

This was why the former Skull Architect still had great hopes that Patriarch Reginald would be the first to attempt a breakthrough to god pilot!

The leader of the Cross Clan was not afraid of taking risks!

Whenever Master Benedict gained the opportunity to apply new upgrades to the Mars, Patriarch Reginald never bothered to think too much before he made his choices.

Saint Tusa possessed a different and more cautious personality. He could be decisive when he wanted to be, but he understood the value of being patient. This was because he cared about his responsibilities.

Master Benedict could respect this attitude.

"The decisions I make about the Dark Zephyr will not only affect my future, but also the future of the Larkinson Clan, am I right?"

"That is correct, Tusa. As the first ace pilot of the Larkinson Clan, you bear a heavy responsibility to the people you serve. You have your own wants and needs, but you need to think strategically as well. How can you best defeat your enemies? How can you best protect the clan against catastrophic losses? A solution cannot always fulfill multiple goals at once. By choosing the configuration of the ace mech version of the Dark Zephyr, you are defining your role in the Larkinson Clan. With Saint Isobel Kotin indisposed for at least half a decade, you are expected to bear the burden of protecting your clansmen by yourself. This means that you must make sure you can fulfill your most essential duties by yourself."

All of these considerations put greater pressure on Tusa's shoulders. He was not exactly ecstatic about assuming much of the burden of protecting the Larkinson Clan, but that was the price of becoming an ace pilot.

From the moment he broke past the limits of an expert pilot so early, Tusa already understood that he needed to set an example and become a leader. It was impossible for him to ignore the repercussions of his decisions. He had become so powerful that each change related to him or his living mech could directly affect the lives of over a million Larkinsons!

Saint Tusa continued to look at the projection of the ace mech banishing different targets with the help of Ermelin.

He could imagine how the Dark Zephyr would become a more useful mech to the Larkinson Clan with the help of this resonating alloy.

However, was this truly how he wanted to fight?

"How do you think I should make my decisions?" Tusa asked.

"Hm." Master Benedict paused for a moment. "Instead of making your selection by focusing on the properties of specific resonating materials, it may be better if you take a step back and decide your future role and combat system first. Once you have fixated on a specific approach towards combat, I can give you a selection of several key resonating materials that fits your chosen style."

Tusa liked that plan much better. "Please offer me your guidance."

The Master Mech Designer reset the projection and began to display several different variations of the ace mech version of the Dark Zephyr.

Each of them were draft designs that Benedict hastily put together in order to visualize the different ways he could upgrade the Dark Zephyr.

"I have drafted several possible development routes for your living mech. Each of them possess their own strengths and weaknesses. I do not consider any of them to be superior to the others. They can all shine in the right circumstances. Let us start with the most familiar variant. The Base Edition of the Dark Zephyr is a straightforward evolution by substituting Perfidious Steel and Bissonat with Turbulenta and B-30 Shattersteel. You do not need to make too many changes to your combat approach and there is no need for you to learn entirely different skills either. However, your ranged options are limited, and you will lack the versatility to deal with many different complex combat scenarios."

In other words, this was the version of the Dark Zephyr that stayed true to Ves' original mech concept.

Tusa knew if he committed to this option, he would fully embrace the light skirmisher archetype and maximize its advantages at the cost of remaining shackled to many of its weaknesses.

"This is not a bad mech." Tusa said. "This configuration has always worked in the past. I see no reason why it would become less effective at the ace mech level. Turbulenta will not only make my Dark Zephyr virtually untouchable, but I can also distract powerful enemies without needing to confront them directly. B-30 Shattersteel synergizes well with it as it allows me to defeat any opponent over time as long as I never get hit in return. With the addition of my Saint Kingdom, I no

longer have to fear the risk of getting hit by weapons of mass destruction or huge saturation attacks."

"The Base Edition can fulfill the roles of a duelist and a saboteur quite well." The Master Mech Designer shared his own opinion. "Your Dark Zephyr in this case is best employed against powerful individual threats. Neither Turbulenta nor B-30 Shattersteel are hungry resonating materials, so you can entangle enemies for an extended period of time. However, the Base Edition does not have the ability to stop a truly powerful enemy from targeting other friendlies."

Aside from the obvious inability to launch strong ranged attacks, the Base Edition was quite rounded.

The combination between the resonating abilities associated with Turbulenta and B-30 Shattersteel, the Leap of True Freedom ability, the Dark Wind Passage Ultimate Ability and a couple of old prime abilities allowed the Dark Zephyr to fight or distract a lot of possible enemies at close range!

It should not be impossible for Tusa to deal with a much more powerful phase lord than the Eminence of Torment without any outside help!

However, Tusa did not entirely favor this option. It was so simple that it seemed as if he was too afraid to ascend from his third-class roots.

He did not forget that the Larkinson Clan had gained the qualifications to field first-class mechs now. A huge range of high technologies became available. The vastly stronger first-class power reactor alone was a gamechanger to the Dark Zephyr!

"If I don't think much about the other options, then I have no qualms about choosing the Base Edition." Tusa said.

Master Benedict smiled. "There are many more exciting options available. The second variant here is the Banisher Edition of the Dark Zephyr. As you can already guess, it is based on the integration of Erlemin. Combined with other adaptations such as outfitting your ace mech with a much faster flight system, this is a configuration that fulfills the role of a saboteur much better. There are many ways you can use the resonating ability associated with Erlemin to disrupt the plans of your enemies and produce large gaps in their defenses. It is still possible for the Banisher Edition to fight directly against powerful opponents, but it is best to leave this job for other ace mechs."

Tusa pressed his lips. He was not attracted by the Banisher Edition, as it pushed his Dark Zephyr into a support role.

This reminded him of the recent past when he was still an expert pilot. The Dark Zephyr had become severely outdated, preventing Tusa from accomplishing too much on the battlefield. He could only helplessly target weaker alien warships because his expert mech took too long to take out stronger vessels.

It was only when he managed to develop the Leap of True Freedom that his performance on the battlefield improved to a more satisfactory level.

Tusa did not want to go back to the days where his pitiful Dark Zephyr would get outshined by other and more impressive living mechs.

"The Banisher Edition sounds like it could be really useful if our clan has grown up to the point where it can field multiple ace mechs." The ace pilot guessed.

"Correct. If the other high-tier expert pilots of your clan have broken through, then it will gain at least one powerful offensive melee duelist in the form of an upgraded Riot or First Sword. The Dark Zephyr may have become an ace mech earlier, but if you ask most people who they prefer to send out in a single duel against a phase lord, they will overwhelmingly favor the other two ace mechs over yours. Since that is the case, you may as well give way to Orfan or Dise and specialize in a role that they cannot fulfill."

An ugly expression appeared on Tusa's face. He did not like the thought of giving way to others! He had never considered himself to be a weak duelist.

Yet... both Orfan and Dise lived for duels. They specialized in them, the latter more than the former. Tusa could not deny that an ace mech based on the light skirmisher archetype was not the ideal machine for dueling.

Ace mechs based on the medium spearman mech and medium swordsman mech archetypes excelled at single combat!