

Mech 4541

Chapter 4541 A Tale Of Defiance

Both Saint Sandro Gemini and Saint Kaia Gemini understood that they were dealing with a tough customer.

Of all of the talented and combat capable expert pilots they had met over their long careers, Venerable Joshua Larkinson presented them with a unique problem case.

It wasn't often that expert pilots developed too much sympathy and care for their enemies.

Most mech pilots tended to get rid of those sentiments over the course of their careers, especially after fighting a couple of actual battles.

Employers also tried to do their best to guide and steer the mentalities of their mech pilots in a direction that was meant to turn them into obedient killing machines.

This could clearly be identified among the gathered Larkinson expert pilots.

The more militaristic among them that had received expanded education or served in professional military units all knew better than to take the enemy's side.

One of the reasons why Venerable Joshua was noticeably softer than his peers was because he never got to serve in a professional mech army like the Bright Republic's Mech Corps after graduation.

He instead fell into the hands of the Larkinsons as soon as he graduated from a reputable mech academy.

This was great in that Joshua had yet to be instilled with strong institutional biases from the Mech Corps, but it was also detrimental because the man missed a lot of essential guidance.

Venerable Joshua would have never been able to become the expert pilot of today if not for his unique life trajectory. It was highly doubtful whether he would have been able to develop a life domain that allowed him to perfectly match the living mechs designed by the clan patriarch if he got stuck piloting generic military mech models for several years.

He was ultimately a product of his circumstances. Venerable Joshua's unusual sympathy towards both human and alien lives was a natural result of developing a close appreciation of living mechs.

"Your clan has been remiss in neglecting to address this problem of yours." Saint Sandro Gemini said with a clear expression of disapproval.

"I don't feel I have a problem." Venerable Joshua said. "I feel I am more human among all of you. Each of you think that killing humans and aliens is somehow normal, but why can't we question whether this is even right?"

"Here he goes again." Venerable Orfan contemptuously muttered. "Joshua is indulging his inner cosmopolitan again. Why don't you grow up and take your duties as a soldier seriously?! Newsflash, boy, you're a guardian! Hundreds of thousands of Larkinsons are depending on you to keep them safe in battle! The more you doubt your responsibilities, the more you allow our enemies to slip past your guard and harm our friends and family. Do you want to have the blood of fellow Larkinsons instead of the blood of our enemies on your hands?!"

Venerable Joshua almost stood out as his willpower surged with fury. "I DON'T WANT ANY BLOOD ON MY HANDS! I WANT TO LIVE IN A GALAXY WHERE NO ONE IS FORCED TO SPILL ANY UNNECESSARY BLOOD! IS THAT SO MUCH TO ASK FOR EVERYONE?!"

A few expert pilots wanted to open their mouths and press Joshua's foolish ideas down, but Saint Kaia Gemini leveraged her powerful Saint Kingdom to suppress them from escalating the argument.

The forced silence imposed by the Gemini ace pilot caused the temperature in the lounge to cool.

Joshua recognized that he had lost control over himself again and used this moment of forced silence to rein in his temper.

"I'm sorry." He eventually said after half a minute had passed. "None of this is your fault. I don't want to impose my struggle onto you all. I'm just a fool."

"We do not think you are a fool." Saint Sandro said with a smile. "You are, as you have said, more human than any of us. That is rare and maybe precious. Each of us here are killers. Some of us are even guilty of murder. While few people are willing to cast judgment on our actions, you are a rare breed of expert pilot that is willing to challenge the status quo because your heart is compelling you to do so. You are being braver than anyone else for asking all of the uncomfortable questions that everyone wants to avoid."

"It doesn't seem like anyone else besides me is interested in answering them, though." Joshua sardonically said.

"That is the reality that not just you but any expert pilot with a cause has to contend with. We all have our dreams and goals. Visionary expert pilots like you tend to have it worse than most, because your driving goals entail imposing your opinions not just on yourself, but every other human. You will not be happy unless you are able to convince everyone to adopt your brand of justice. Is that an accurate description of your ambition?"

"It is not an ambition, per se." Joshua replied. "I just think that everyone is wrong or at least led astray. The more we get pulled into this endless spiral of death, the more we lose our humanity. I don't know about you guys, but I don't want to turn myself into a monster that is willing to kill people at the drop of a hat."

Some of the Larkinson expert pilots began to look uncomfortable after Joshua prompted them to look inward.

Each of them had become aware of how much they had changed compared to when they were just starting out as mech pilots.

They were much weaker but also much more human back then. So much had happened after that time that caused them to become increasingly stronger while shedding the parts of themselves that they thought of as burdens.

Were they truly burdens, though? What if the elements they had wiped away from their psyches were instead vital to maintaining the most precious parts of themselves, which was the ability to connect with other humans?

Joshua knew from his close relationship with Ketis that she turned into a much more ruthless woman if she let her 'companion spirit' into her mind.

Though Sharpie looked like a cute miniature version of Ketis, the swordmaster became completely driven when she assumed her full might.

It was kind of scary how little affection Ketis had left when she was in her 'serious mode'!

Fortunately, Ketis was able to avoid the fate of his first girlfriend by being able to separate this 'double-edged sword' from her mind.

She usually deposited Sharpie into her Bloodsinger to make sure she remained human enough in front of everyone.

It was these odd experiences that made Venerable Joshua even more determined to cling to his ability to care, his sympathy towards life and his rather naive mindset!

Though the Gemini Saints didn't have access to the full story of what made Joshua so atypical among his peers, they could clearly sense that the young man was being utterly sincere and truthful.

That made this situation even trickier for them. The two ace pilots preferred not to confront this serious and problematic issue, but they were duty bound to render assistance, and they were not about to shirk their responsibilities.

Saint Sandro Gemini raised his palm, quieting the low discussion that had erupted after Joshua made his outbursts.

"You have a decision to make, Joshua. You cannot stand at the crossroads forever. Your growing doubts will consume you and sap you of your strength if you continue to procrastinate. You need to make up your mind and follow your chosen course to the end. If you are not willing to make the hard choices, then you will eventually lead yourself to a dead end where your prospects are bleak.

"Many expert pilots have stopped advancing because of this." Saint Kaia Gemini added. "Many of them are highly skilled and effective in battle, yet their resonance strengths have ceased to grow. Why is this the case? It is because they subconsciously recognize that they are no longer fighting for the right reasons. They are essentially lying to themselves, and you all know that this is a death sentence to expert pilots such as yourselves. As soon as you have chosen to go down this path, you must always stay true to your heart. Failing to do so will disqualify you from attaining any further greatness."

These explanations were quite insightful. While many of the gathered expert pilots understood at least a part of what the Gemini Saints explained, they never thought that lying to themselves could lead them to sabotaging their own growth.

Many of the expert pilots became a lot more introspective all of a sudden! The ones who the Gemini Saints had called out earlier were especially concerned about the possibility that they were lying their way to a dead end!

This outcome alone made the entire tutoring session worth it for the Larkinson Clan!

Both of the Gemini Saints smiled as they saw that their words had the intended effect.

Unfortunately, the only expert pilot that was still not out of the woods was Venerable Joshua.

"Let us share a small story with you all." Saint Sandro Gemini spoke in his calm and sagely voice. "Once, there was a pair of mech pilots who belonged to a family that was unusual to say the least. Just like the rest of their relatives, this pair of pilots chose a way of life that is highly controversial to the rest of human society."

"The pair of mech pilots had to endure constant abuse and recrimination throughout their career." Saint Kaia Gemini continued. "Just like the rest of the family, the mech pilots who did not fit in with the rest of the galactic crowd were confronted by a constant stream of critics who hurled abuse in their way. Some even chose to challenge the pair in mech duels."

Saint Sandro looked more intense. "The two mech pilots did not falter. They won a number of duels but also lost a few. Not every battle can be won. What is important is what they did after every loss. Did they lose heart in their way of life and gave up on it? No. They did not. They picked themselves up and used the shame of defeat to boost their training. After that, the pair of mech pilots began to win more and more duels and battles. They even managed to advance to expert candidates and subsequently expert pilots through their efforts."

"Now that they had achieved a powerful and respectful rank, the pair of newly minted expert pilots thought that all of the insults, mockery and challenges would cease at that point. They were wrong."

"They endured the same abuses all over again, but this time it wasn't regular people that tormented them, but fellow expert pilots from other groups."

"Duels are generally frowned upon at this level, but that does not mean they do not happen. The pair of expert pilots were forced to fight for their honor, their conviction and their family more times than they wished. They even became embroiled in larger battles where their entire family was in danger. Much of this happened because other people as well as the expert pilots among them could not tolerate a life philosophy that was different from the norm."

Saint Sandro sighed. "Those were trying times. The pair of expert pilots were forced to lead their family to one region after another. They could never stay in one place because they tended to attract more hostility from the locals the longer they imposed their existence on them. The losses were great, but the expert pilots never wavered. They fought for what they believed in even when it looked as if the rest of human society vehemently rejected their existence."

Saint Kaia Gemini smiled. "Eventually, the pair of expert pilots prevailed. They fought for their beliefs and their family so many times without wavering in their purpose that they have done the improbable. They succeeded in advancing to ace pilots in quick succession. Although this has exposed their family to an entirely new level of threats, they have always maintained their confidence that they will be able to gain the strength they need to fend off all of their challenges. They have to in order for them and their relatives to survive."

"As for their former enemies, particularly the expert pilots who survived the battles against their family?" Saint Sandro Gemini smirked. "Each and every one of them have failed to keep up. The vast majority of them have grown into stagnant and bitter expert pilots who learned too late that their attempts to divert their own failings by ascribing them to others has contributed to their lack of progress. They had become so consumed by their mechs, their piloting

skills, their material needs and most importantly their vanity that they did not notice that they had been lying to themselves the entire time."

"Learn from their failures. Learn from their shortsightedness. Learn from their ignorance."

"The greatest strength of an expert pilot is not their willpower nor their skill. It is their heart." Saint Sandro solemnly placed his palm against his heart.

Saint Kaia smiled towards the expert pilot that provoked this discussion. "Out of all of you, Venerable Joshua is the only one among you who is more honest to themselves. Do you know what this means in our eyes? He is the most promising candidate to become an ace pilot in the future."

"We have witnessed too many expert pilots who have become too caught up in compromising their ideals in order to fit in with the rest of human society."

"We may be soldiers, but we are not slaves. There is a difference between the two. We hope that you do not fool yourself into accepting other people's shackles."

Chapter 4542 Critical Thinking

"So that is why you have been so subdued the past few days?" Ketis raised her eyebrow. "All of this happened to you because you listened to a simple story that is clearly a biased retelling of the history of the Gemini Family and their famed ace pilots."

"It is a true story." Venerable Joshua insisted.

"You are letting a single source of information change your entire outlook towards your life and career! Don't you think you are being way too serious about this supposed lesson?"

"Then what else am I supposed to do? I was blundering around in the fog for a long time, sometimes without knowing that I had gotten lost. This is the first

time that someone shone a beacon for me. If I can follow the light, I can get out of this fog of confusion and regain my clarity!"

The female swordmaster stared at Joshua for a few seconds before she decided to take pity on her husband.

She reached out across the table and placed her calloused palm on his hand. The warmth of their contact seemed to bring them closer together.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't help you more. I would have wanted to lead you out of the fog myself if I was more capable."

"It's not your fault, Ketis. You are around the same level as me. You don't have the experience and insight of a pair of ace pilots. Those Gemini Saints have gone through a lot more ordeals. They have genuinely spoken from experience."

Ketis frowned at the mention of the Gemini Saints.

"That doesn't mean that you should automatically follow their example. No ace pilot is the same as the others of their kind. They are all strong and they have all overcome their challenges through different means."

"Some requirements are universal." Joshua shot back. "I don't think it is wrong to assume that I need to be true to my heart in order to become stronger. According to the Gemini Saints, our growth is fueled by our need to grow strong enough to realize my convictions and protect what I hold dear. As long as I am of the opinion that I am too weak, an invisible part of myself will make sure to stimulate my willpower so that it can expand in strength."

Ketis did not disagree with this assertion. "I am somewhat familiar with that theory. Many swordmasters believe in this as well, but have you ever thought it is not the complete picture? There are so many swordmasters back in the Heavensword Association who deeply believe they need to become a Sword Saint in order to safeguard the interests of their sword schools and their state,

but only a single individual among them have made the leap, and their advancements could mostly be attributed to the legendary Heavensword that symbolizes their office."

Joshua looked up at his dearest wife. "What are you trying to say?"

She sighed. "I'm a mech designer as well as a swordmaster. It is because of the former that I have learned to deal with theories and anecdotes. A proper scientist and engineer shouldn't blindly believe in the tales spoken by others. They should exhibit more critical thinking and determine whether the source is reliable and unbiased, whether you have received the full story, whether there are other alternatives that haven't been mentioned yet and whether the situation described by the story is applicable to your own circumstances."

"You sound as if the story of the Gemini Saints has no bearing on me at all. I don't feel that way. I have a strong sense that following their example can help me overcome my doubts and help me become an ace pilot sooner."

Ketis retracted her hand and leaned back on her chair. She rapped her fingers against the surface of the table.

"Let me tell you what I think about that story that the Gemini Saints forced down your throat. The simplified narrative they spun for you is a story that centers around defiance. It is a tale where the protagonists continue to get stronger and have all of their wishes come true the more they fight against the status quo. The antagonists meanwhile are other people who for one reason or another sought to take their family down."

"Uh, I guess that is the case."

"Have you ever thought that the protagonists might not be the good guys?"

Joshua frowned. "That is an intolerant remark. I never looked down on you because you were a former pilot and because your body had undergone so much genetic tampering."

"This isn't about me! This is about you and those damn Geminis! What I am trying to say is that just because the tale is told from the perspective of the Gemini Saints, it is natural for you to sympathize with them, but that is not necessarily the wisest thing to do. You need to take a step back and avoid casting any judgment on either side. Let's assume that the Gemini Family is neither right or wrong for trying to run an organization where every twin becomes a married couple. Do you think that they are completely in the right?"

"Yes. Well, maybe not so much."

"Why do you think the latter may be the case?" Ketis asked.

"Because... the Geminis want to pursue and possibly spread a way of life that is not naturally viable." The expert pilot slowly answered. "Technology may have solved the inbreeding and genetic defect issue, but human society isn't wealthy enough to give every single human access to designer babies. They are just too expensive and there aren't enough geneticists out there that can splice together so many designer babies. The vast majority of humans outside of first-rate states have to depend on old-fashioned natural reproduction to pass on their bloodline."

Ketis nodded. "You see the problem then. It is one thing for the Gemini Family to keep their practices to themselves. It is another thing for them to set a detrimental example to society. Of course, you can argue that their behavior does not really affect anything because genetic modification has become more widespread over the generations. I am infertile myself due to my genetic treatments so I have no choice but to resort to designer babies in order to have kids."

Both of them looked at their children. Their two adorable kids were cuddling together as they watched a cartoon drama.

"So what is it that you were trying to tell me, dear?" Joshua asked.

"Oh. My point is that the Gemini Saints gained their power from making lots of enemies. They drew strength from their defiance, but have you ever thought about all of the expert pilots who did the same but fell in the process?"

"Uhh..."

"There is a concept called survivor bias in science, Joshua." Ketis told him.

"Deriving your conclusions from successful outcomes will lead to a distorted conclusion of reality. If you have done your research, you should be able to find many more tales of defiance that have ultimately led to doomed outcomes. I won't bother to pull from the galactic net as we can draw from plenty of examples in our lives. Take Ves' demented cousin for example. What has become of Venerable Ghanso Larkinson when he turned his back against Ves, the Larkinsons, the Bright Republic and ultimately his own honor."

"...He's dead and his cause remains unfulfilled."

"What has become of Venerable Relia Foster and her quest to take revenge of Ves and the Larkinsons for... I don't know, stuff?"

"She died and can no longer protect her precious Vesia Kingdom."

"I can take out more examples, but I think you get the point." Ketis said.

"These are but a few illustrations where expert pilots became so full of themselves that they committed to fights that were clearly stupid but didn't bother to think whether their decisions were sane enough."

"Keeping my sanity is exactly why I am struggling right now! Sometimes, I feel like I am the only sane and normal person in the clan. Everyone just automatically thinks it is okay for us to deploy our mechs and use their awesome power to crush humans and aliens who weren't necessarily doing anything objectionable."

"So what do you want to do about it, hm?!" Ketis growled. "If you take your lessons from the story of the Gemini Saints, then I am afraid that you will

make the conclusion that the best and maybe only way to stay true to your heart is to follow it without any regard for the consequences. This means that you will turn yourself into a superidiot who only cares about trying to spread peace among the stars."

"That doesn't sound like a bad conviction to me." Joshua remarked.

"Others won't be kind to you because of your intrusive ideals!" She hissed. "In a reality full of fighting, none of the reigning powers want to put a stop to the conflicts. People will especially react poorly to you when you begin to spread a cosmopolitan message! You will make enemies, Joshua, lots of enemies."

"The Geminis also attract a lot of enemies no matter where they go. Their family is still going strong."

"This is different, Joshua! A message of universal peace and cosmopolitanism is much more dangerous. You might very well invite attention from the MTA or the CFA. Once that happens, you're dead. Poof. You're gone. At best, your wife and children will be left alone! At worst, we will go with you in order to snuff out any chance that we will want to take over your banner and continue your mission!"

"Saint Sandro and Saint Kaia told me that we shouldn't be deterred by fears and what-ifs. They believe that strength can only form from staying true to your heart."

Ketis wanted to wring her stupid husband's neck!

"That won't help you if you are dead! Have you ever taken the time to think critically like I told you? Now, I am sure that those two ace pilots didn't lie to you or tried to lead you astray, but is this truly the best way for you to go forward? What they proposed is nothing but a high-stakes gamble! Sure, your chances of advancing to ace pilot may be 100 percent, but if that comes at the

cost of lowering your chances of survival to 0.1 percent, is it truly as good as you think?!"

Venerable Joshua looked shocked. "Now that you put it that way, maybe... I was overlooking a few details."

"You did more than that. You didn't question the assumptions that you have made. Not enough at the very least. For example, have you ever thought that you can change your heart to something that is more palatable and less suicidal?"

"I would be lying to my heart if I do that? You can't change your inner desires!"

"That's stupid, Joshua! Who says that you can't change your heart, especially over time?! I used to believe that I would always live my life as a pirate in the old frontier. I never imagined that I would have kids and enjoy raising my family. I also couldn't believe that I would be able to become a high-ranking mech designer and a swordmaster at the same time. I never set out to become this impossible existence, but I worked hard enough and received enough luck to succeed beyond my wildest dreams."

"And how is that relevant to my situation?"

Ketis snorted. "Do I need to spell it out to you?! My heart has gone through many changes to the point where I am frequently forced to readjust my goals. That hasn't stopped me from becoming stronger. What we need is a goal. Any goal will do as long as it can motivate us into becoming stronger. I have big dreams, but I have no chance in hell to make it happen unless I become a sword god. I do not need to think about it too much. For now, I have much more modest and realistic goal posts in mind. Those are enough to drag me forward. The best part of this is that I can keep my head down and avoid making enemies that I am not equipped to fight."

"Oh. I see." Joshua became enlightened. "I never thought that your approach would work so well."

"Granted, I have yet to become a sword saint, so I cannot say whether my approach is completely correct, but at least I won't make too many enemies for myself and our clan. Pursuing your dreams is all well and good, but don't do so at the cost of unduly compromising the safety of your family and friends. Don't forget that you also have a duty to protect us all and keep us safe."

Ketis had uncomfortably reminded Joshua of his other major commitment.

"From the moment you decide to make a selfish decision and give us all up in order to impose your cosmopolitan on an unwilling society, you will implicate me, your children and the clan that you have vowed to guard with your life. I can think of no better way for you to betray what you hold dear in your heart."

The expert pilot glumly lowered his head. "You are right. I have overlooked too much stuff. Their example isn't really applicable to me as their family fully shared their ideals. That is not the case with me. It's funny, really. Family always comes first in our clan, but I was about to violate this principle because I became too enamored by the tale spun by the Gemini Saints."

Ketis relaxed now that she saw that her husband was no longer sounding like an idiot.

"That is what spiders do, Joshua. They spin a web in front of you that you will inadvertently approach until it is too late for you to withdraw."

"...Damn Geminis."

Chapter 4543 A Different Preoccupation

"The Geminis are right about one thing, though." Ketis said as she stooped from her seat at the dining table.

"What is that?" Venerable Joshua said as he looked up at his spouse.

"You need to make a decision. By that I mean a real decision about your future goals and purpose. You've been getting by with flimsy excuses that satisfy your need for answers for only a while until your thoughts stray back to your doubts again. Do you know why you keep bouncing back to the same dilemmas that have been plaguing you for so long?"

"...Is it because I'm unwilling to give an honest answer to the questions in my heart?"

Ketis shook her head. "It's because you are being too selfish. You are so set on making all of these decisions alone that you are forgetting about your greatest strength. You have always been stronger when you work together with others. I am always here for you, Joshua. More importantly, the Everchanger is also willing and able to help. You only have to ask."

Venerable Joshua widened his eyes.

"Of course! How could I forget about my mech?! My reason for fighting should never exclude the feelings of my living mech. How could I have forgotten about what the Everchanger wants in its life?"

"I imagine that the Everchanger doesn't want to impose its demands on you." Ketis guessed. "Mechs aren't meant to inconvenience people's lives. If you consider your machine to be a tool, then there is nothing wrong with that. If you want your mech to be a true partner in crime, then you need to stop thinking about yourself and start bringing those close to you into your decision making process. You might not be able to get through these challenges by yourself, but there are smarter people out there that can do the thinking on your behalf."

Joshua nodded at this argument even though he was still cognizant enough to recognize its flaws.

"I would have to trust that the people that I depend upon are reliable and competent enough."

"That is true. The ability to discern both of these traits is the mark of a good leader."

"You want me to become a leader?"

"Everyone with a sufficient amount of power becomes a leader sooner or later." Ketis stated. "I have learned that lesson myself as I have taken on more and more responsibilities after I became a Journeyman and a swordmaster. The stronger we become, the more we can do, yet we always find ourselves in situations where we just don't have enough. These are the times where we learn we can leverage our strength to build up a powerbase."

Venerable Joshua found it difficult to imagine himself doing so. Sure, he had led or organized small squads and teams in the past, but he was mostly moving with the flow in those cases.

"I have never really proactively done such a thing." He told his wife.

Ketis smirked.

"Then this is a good time for you to start. It will take your mind off the big stuff that has been bothering you again. Set a goal post that you can reach in the medium term rather than in the long term. You need something to work towards to drive you forward without leading you to make enemies out of everyone. I can think of no better way of doing so than by starting your own clique. By forming a large and productive organization that answers to you and caters to your every whim, you effectively have a force multiplier at your disposal. You can get ten times, a hundred times or even a thousand times as much work done than if you try anything solo."

A moment of silence ensued as Joshua mulled over her proposal. It was not in his nature to start and lead an organization of his own, but he did not have

any reason to object to it. As long as his activities did not clash with his existing duties and responsibilities, he figured it was alright to everyone.

After spending a bit of company with his wife and children, he moved over to the hangar bay where his trusty old Everchanger stood dormant alongside a couple of other mechs and expert mechs.

Though the machines all looked as if they had completely shut down, Venerable Joshua could clearly sense the liveliness hidden beneath their frames.

The Everchanger and its living mech buddies were probably socializing within the virtual environment of the Mental Simulation Training System.

Although the patriarch originally created the MSTS to serve as a much more accurate and realistic training simulator, it also served as an excellent base for many other intricate functions.

Dedicated research and development teams were constantly developing more and more functionality to the spiritual platform, although Joshua had heard it was difficult for the developers to make any direct alterations of the MSTS.

As soon as Joshua activated a command that automatically caused his expert mech to open up an entrance to the cockpit, the Everchanger pulled out of the MSTS and greeted its battle partner.

"JOSHUA." The speakers boomed a masculine synthesized voice. "YOU ARE BACK AGAIN. THE FLEET IS STILL ENGAGED IN FTL TRAVEL, SO THERE ARE NO PATROLS ON THE AGENDA."

"Can't I pay a visit to you because I wanted to hang out with you for once?"

"YOU ARE NOT JANNZI. YOU RARELY DID SO IN THE PAST, AND YOU HAVE STOPPED SPENDING YOUR FREE TIME WITH ME AFTER YOU

HAVE BECOME A FATHER. YOUR CHILDREN HAVE A MUCH GREATER DEMAND FOR YOUR ATTENTION."

Joshua grew warm as he appreciated his battle partner's concern. "Thank you for your understanding, but that doesn't mean I should neglect all of my friends. Ketis is dropping Kirian and Mayra off at daycare at the moment, so we have plenty of time to talk."

The eyes of the Everchanger briefly flashed. "I CAN TELL YOU HAVE A SERIOUS DISCUSSION IN MIND. YOUR MOOD AND WILLPOWER INDICATES AS MUCH."

"I had a good talk with Ketis and a few other people. I've been thinking about my reasons for fighting again."

"AH. AGAIN. YOU WERE DOING FINE IN THE PAST MONTHS. I THOUGHT YOU WOULDN'T HAVE A RELAPSE IN AT LEAST A YEAR."

The fact that even his living mech thought that Joshua would backslide again did not make him happy.

"Maybe you're right, but I attended a therapy session with the Gemini Saints of sorts. They forced me to confront the issues that I had supposedly solved but not really. It turns out that I can't dodge my problem by deciding that I should stand up for our clan first before anyone else. It's a lazy copout that won't get me far enough."

"HM, THAT IS LIKELY CORRECT. SO WHY HAVE YOU COME?"

"I've tried to figure out a more effective way to keep me going, but I haven't been able to figure out anything by myself. Ketis has tried to help me out but she told me that since I am so good at working together with others, I should turn this into a group project. She told me it would be a good idea to bring you into the loop since you know me so well."

"YOUR WIFE IS RIGHT."

The two talked a bit more until the Everchanger understood exactly what Joshua needed.

The mech fell into a brief silence as it began to process a lot of data.

"OKAY. I HAVE A SUGGESTION." The Everchanger spoke.

"Hit me." Joshua said.

"YOU WANT TO MAKE THE COSMOS A BETTER PLACE, RIGHT? YOU WANT AS MANY INTELLIGENT HUMANS AND ALIENS AS POSSIBLE TO STOP FIGHTING SENSELESS WARS AGAINST EACH OTHER AND START HOLDING HANDS WHILE LIVING IN COMPLETE HARMONY WITH EACH OTHER?"

"Yeah, that is basically it." Joshua reluctantly admitted as he readied himself to ridicule. "It probably sounds crazy to a mech that is designed to become an ultimate fighting machine."

"I RESPECT YOUR DREAM." The Everchanger surprisingly responded.

"DON'T FORGET WHO DESIGNED AND MADE ME. THE CLAN PATRIARCH INSTILLED ME WITH LIFE AS WELL AS HIS LOVE FOR LIFE. I AM NO STRANGER TO CRAZINESS. YOU MAY BE MAD FOR TRYING TO FIGHT AGAINST THE STATUS QUO THAT IS UNIVERSAL AS FAR AS I AM CONCERNED, BUT WHAT DOES IT MATTER? MECH PILOTS MUST STRIVE FOR SOMETHING, AND YOUR GOAL IS AT LEAST ON THE NOBLE AND BENEVOLENT SIDE."

Joshua felt touched again. His expert mech continually conveyed its support and approval towards the pilot.

"I... thank you for that, but I need more than a few words of encouragement."

"I KNOW. I WASN'T FINISHED YET. YOUR WIFE HAS MADE A NUMBER OF GOOD SUGGESTIONS, SO MUCH SO THAT IT GOT ME THINKING. SINCE YOUR ULTIMATE AMBITION IS TOO FAR AWAY AND YOU CAN'T FIGURE OUT ANY MORE IMMEDIATE GOALS TO WORK TOWARDS, WHY NOT HELP OTHERS FULFILL THEIR DREAMS IN THE MEANTIME?"

"Huh?"

"YOU CAN CHOOSE TO FIGHT AND WORK ON BEHALF OF OTHERS AS LONG AS THEIR GOALS ALIGN WITH YOURS. YOU CAN START BY USING YOUR INFLUENCE AND YOUR CLOUT TO HELP ME AND OTHER LIVING MECHS. WE HAVE BEEN LOYAL MEMBERS OF YOUR CLAN FOR SUCH A LONG TIME, YET WE ONLY RECEIVED BASIC ACCOMMODATIONS UP UNTIL THIS POINT. THERE IS STILL A LONG WAY TO GO BEFORE WE FEEL THAT WE ARE FULLY FLEDGED MEMBERS OF THE LARKINSON CLAN."

This was going too fast for Joshua. He sat up straighter on his piloting seat.

"You want me to advocate for living mechs? Why me? I don't know a single thing about politics. That has always been obsession for Jannzi and the..."

The young man trailed off as he realized why the living mechs couldn't count on those two individuals anymore.

A pulse of sadness and regret flowed through the Everchanger.

"THE SHIELD OF SAMAR HAD BIG PLANS IN MIND. THE LIVING MECH ALREADY SCHEDULED ANOTHER MEETING WITH THE CHIEF MINISTERS IN ORDER TO DEBATE ON ITS PROPOSAL TO SET UP NEW MINISTRY. IT HAD BEEN TRYING TO GET THE LEADERSHIP TO CHANGE ITS STANCE ON THIS ISSUE FOR YEARS, AND IT HAD COME CLOSER THAN EVER TO CONVINCING YOU STUBBORN HUMANS TO MAKE A CLEAR GESTURE OF SUPPORT."

"A gesture of support?"

"THE SHIELD OF SAMAR MIGHT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO BECOME THE FIRST NON-HUMAN MINISTER OF THE LARKINSON CLAN. YOU DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH THIS MEANS TO US. IT WOULD HAVE BEEN AN INSPIRING SIGHT TO ALL OF OUR KIND. BY ELEVATING A LIVING MECH TO AN EXECUTIVE POSITION WITHIN THE CLAN, YOU HUMANS WOULD SHOW THAT YOU TRULY TREAT US AS INDIVIDUALS."

This sounded like an extremely radical and dangerous course of action to Joshua! Even he knew enough about the Big Two to know that putting 'Als' in leadership positions was a great taboo in human society. He fully understood why the current leaders of the clan had tried to push this issue aside.

Yet... was it right for the clan to deny living mechs true representation?

Sure, their daily lives had improved remarkably after the clan finally became aware that living mechs also possessed complex desires, but it was clear that a lot more needed to be done.

Joshua began to warm up to the idea. In fact, he embraced this responsibility!

"I think... I might be able to work with this! It's just..."

"WHAT IS IT, JOSHUA?"

"Isn't this supposed to be Jannzi's job? She has more free time than any other expert pilot and I know that she was really passionate about this stuff. I thought she would have liked to take over the mantle from her late expert mech."

"JANNZI IS TOO LOST IN HER TRAUMA TO UNDERTAKE SUCH A RESPONSIBILITY. SHE STILL NEEDS HELP, AND AS LONG AS THAT IS THE CASE, SHE IS IN NO CONDITION TO HELP OTHERS. BESIDES, MY

FELLOW LIVING MECHS AND I BELIEVE THAT WE ARE BETTER OFF IF YOU ARE THE ONE TO LEAD THIS INITIATIVE."

"Why?"

"EVERYONE LIKES YOU, UNLIKE JANNZI. YOU HAVE A MUCH BETTER CHANCE OF GETTING YOUR DEMANDS MET AS YOU DO NOT HAVE A HABIT OF PISSING OFF THE PEOPLE WHO HOLD MOST OF THE REINS OF POWER."

"...That's true."

Chapter 4544 Advocacy

"Meow~"

"Oh hey, Lucky! Is your tummy still full? I brought a snack for you if you are up for it again."

"Meow meow."

"Oh, okay. I will set it down on the table so you can munch on it later."

Ves interrupted his design session and pulled his split attention away from the projects he was working on at this time.

His eyes blinked as he inspected the progress he had made in the past few hours. He had taken full advantage of his expanded cognitive capabilities to work on multiple design projects at the same time.

He had made amazing progress in upgrading the standards of his initial Blood Knight design, implementing an organic circulatory system in the Dullahan Project and studying highly advanced theories that taught him how to develop better transphasic gauss weapons.

If he wanted to, he could split his attention into even more threads, but he found that the quality of each individual task started to drop. He needed to

exercise this ability more and wait until he grew stronger before he could split his attention further and get more work done.

He was already happy with what he was able to do at the moment. His productivity had skyrocketed ever since he got back in the saddle.

"Joshua." He said as he felt the expert pilot's vigorous force of will approach his position. "It is not every day that you have decided to pay a visit to me. Is there anything urgent you wish to talk about?"

The fellow Brighter shook his head. "Not per se. I wanted to talk to you about an issue that is important to a group within the clan."

Ves grew confused and a bit suspicious. "Did someone put you up to this, Joshua?"

"Uhh... I guess. Just hear me out. The Everchanger wanted me to convey a request on behalf of all of the living mechs in our clan..."

Five minutes passed as Joshua frankly explained the issue of expanding the rights of the Larkinson mechs.

A lot of progress had been made since precocious machines like the Quint and the Shield of Samar initially spoke up, but status of living mechs still had a long way to go before they became happy.

"...With the Shield of Samar reduced to a head and Venerable Jannzi needing time to get past her defeat, someone had to carry over the torch. The living mechs have all agreed to let me speak on their behalf since they like me so much."

Ves looked curiously at Joshua. "Well, they chose correctly. Dealing with you is much less stressful than dealing with Jannzi or her former expert mech. Still, you haven't told me what kind of concrete actions you expect me to make."

"Well, the living mechs have a number of demands that they would really like to see fulfilled. For one, they want our clan to proceed with setting up a Living Mech Affairs Ministry where one of their own kind is put in charge."

"No." Ves immediately frowned. "Not possible."

"The Everchanger and company have asked for this several years now. Why can't you meet their demand?" Joshua pleaded to the clan patriarch. "They deserve more representation for everything they have done for us. Our machines have always supported us in battle without flinching, and they will continue to serve their purpose, but that doesn't mean they are happy with their current status. They want more love from the clan, sir. Is it too much to ask for us to make them happy?"

Ves sighed and lowered his eyes. "I don't like it either, but our hands are tied on this matter. In an ideal reality, I would have agreed to form this new living mech-oriented ministry a long time ago. I don't even have any objections towards the idea of allowing qualified living mechs to hold actual leadership positions. Just like you, I have a lot of hopes and expectations for living mechs as a whole. The best of them are growing smarter, wiser and more compassionate by the day."

"Then why not oblige them, sir?"

"You should know why, Joshua. The Big Two and more specifically the MTA has a well-deserved phobia against AIs or bots that become too powerful. AIs should always have an assisting function to the humans that make use of their services. In no way should AIs ever dictate, control or govern any group of people. That is a foundational principle of modern humanity ever since a lot of high-profile screwups during the Age of Stars and the Age of Conquest has shown us what can go wrong with unrestricted automation."

"Our living mechs aren't AIs!" Joshua passionately argued as he put his emotions behind this issue. "They are truly alive like you and me. We can both tell the difference. Many of the fears that our race developed about AIs don't apply to living mechs."

Ves shrugged at the expert pilot. "That may be true, but the rest of human society won't see it this way. All they will see is that we have stuffed a highly sophisticated AI into our mechs and foolishly granted them the power to turn against their human overlords."

"If the masses are the problem, then let's educate them all! We can do that, right?"

"We can, but a marketing campaign alone won't be able to reverse millenia of AI phobia. It takes much more than that to initiate a broad cultural change across a large section of the population. The only thing we can do on our end is to build up acceptance for living mechs within our own clan."

"Then why aren't we doing that, then?" Joshua asked. "Appointing a living mech to a ministerial position won't bother anyone else. It is not as if we are trying to replace the Star Emperor with the Quint or something."

Ves made a cutting motion with his arm. "QUIET! Don't joke around with that sort of talk! Lucky and I have done our best to make this design lab as bug-free as possible, but that doesn't mean that nobody can eavesdrop on us. It is best not to say anything that would give people the impression that we are trying to topple the head of the New Rubarth Empire!"

"Oh. I'm sorry. I should have been more careful with my words." Venerable Joshua apologized. "My point stands, though. Why should we bother with public opinion when the way we run our clan doesn't have anything to do with them? You have been pushing the limits many times. What makes this different?"

Ves crossed his arms as he leaned back on his chair. "Who told you that?"

"The living mechs. They keep in touch with each other. They witness quite a lot of stuff actually, either directly or indirectly through their mech pilots."

That had disturbing implications. Ves furrowed his brows as he realized that his living mechs might be rather liberal in sharing confidential secrets with each other.

"Those mechs need to learn how to handle sensitive information."

"That's one of the duties that the new ministry can undertake." Joshua deftly argued. "No clear authority aside from their own pilots is telling them what they can or cannot do. I know them well enough that they won't listen to any human figurehead. Either you or one of their own kind will be able to boss them around."

Ves doubted that, but letting an old and authoritative living mech like the Quint become their supervisor would definitely help with keeping the other living mechs under control.

"We can't, Joshua. I agree with your arguments, but no amount of good points are good enough in the face of extinction."

"What do you mean by that? Isn't that an exaggeration?"

"It's not." Ves grimly replied. "Do you think our clan has been rebuffing the requests of our living mechs for several years for no reason? Minister Shederin Purnesse and Director Calabast have both explained how much of a target we will paint on our backs if we dare put a living mech in charge of anything important. As soon as the news begins to spread, a coalition of disparate parties will band together to crush us whole."

Venerable Joshua found it difficult to imagine such a nightmare scenario.

"Why must it be this way? Is there nothing we can do to keep all of those forces at bay?"

"I seriously doubt it." Ves replied. "Let me put it this way. When the Gemini Family began to grow larger and more prominent, it attracted a lot of outside enemies, right? Why would all of those external parties regard the Gemini Family as their enemy to the point of actually organizing entire attack fleets to destroy a bunch of eccentric people who have never taken the initiative to harm others?"

Joshua needed a bit of time to think about the answer to these questions.

"It's because... they have moral objections to the Gemini Family. Maybe practical ones as well. They fear that the habits of the Geminis will spill over to their own societies, thereby popularizing a way of life that is objectionable in many aspects."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "That is roughly the case. Now look back to our situation. Don't you think our clan is in a similar position? As long as we formally put a living mech in charge of an entire ministry, a lot of paranoid, bigoted and scared leaders will take offense at our clan and seek to crush us no matter the cost. It doesn't matter whether the attackers are second-raters or first-raters. They are all motivated by the fear of seeing humans getting replaced by artificial constructs. We can't fend off so many enemies, particularly if they come from first-rate states."

This was a disappointing answer to the expert pilot. He had always thought that the clan could make much more changes, but it turned out that they were still fearful of public opinion.

"So we're stuck? Our living mechs won't be happy, sir."

Ves frowned again. He did not want to create a schism between his mech pilots and their living mechs.

"Joshua. I can't give a living mech its own ministry, but that doesn't mean I am helpless. I can still give the Everchanger or another living mech additional rights and responsibilities. It just has to be off the books. I don't want a single record to mention this appointment. I will drop by later and introduce a more formal structure and hierarchy so that they won't behave like a friendship club."

"Really? Well, it's not as much as our living mechs want, but it is better than nothing."

Ves smiled. "Negotiations tend to go this way. Congratulations, Joshua. You can tell your living mech buddies the good news. Discreetly, of course."

"Oh, uhm, yes. I will."

"What's wrong?"

"I didn't expect it to be so... easy."

Ves chuckled. "That's the advantage of being in charge of my own clan. I can set any rules I want, though I still have to pay attention to the reactions of different stakeholders. I am not ready to form this living mech ministry because of the high possibility of turning all of human space against us, but a smaller department that takes on many of the responsibilities of a ministry but without any of the official baggage is a good compromise. Your living mechs still won't be able to receive the recognition they seek, but it is a start."

Joshua looked happy. "That is great. Can I also talk about their other requests? They have been thinking and talking about what they want from us for a long time. They have always wanted to present their list of demands to you. It has grown quite a bit over the past couple of years."

"Very well. Let's hear it, then."

The expert pilot pulled up an electronic document and recited the first request.

"Our living mechs are tired of spending all of their time in the hangar bays and the mech stables whenever their services aren't needed." Joshua mentioned. "More and more of them are feeling left out from the real clan as most of their pilots and other humans spend their time in much more interesting places aboard our ships."

"That is what the MSTS is for, Joshua. I expanded their access to it so that they can hang around in their own virtual world."

"It's not real enough, sir. You and I both know that there is a big difference between spending time in reality and spending time in a false virtual environment. Mechs have the same need for real human interaction and human activities. They want to stroll through our parks. They want to play with our cats. They want to attend theater shows. They want to cheer on their favorite mech athletes in a busy mech arena. In short, they want to enjoy a more authentic living experience."

Ves became speechless for a moment.

"Uhm, Joshua?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You do know that mechs are tall and heavy mechanical constructs, right? Leaving aside their immense mass, their sizes are way too high for them to be able to do all of those activities you have mentioned!"

"That is why the living mechs want you to hook them up with human-sized avatar machines." Joshua shockingly revealed. "They want to become a part of the family, sir!"

"..."

Chapter 4545 Blurring The Lines

The proposal to set up a ministry of the clan that was supposed to be headed by a living mech was radical, but also old news.

Ves had already evaluated it from many different angles with the help of his advisors and decided not to take the risk.

This was an exceedingly dangerous action and could antagonize a lot of people in the Red Ocean.

All of his relationships with the MTA wouldn't be able to prevent the enormous backlash against his clan.

This was because he was certain that there were a lot of factions within the Mech Trade Association that would be eager to make an example of his clan for daring to put intelligent machines in charge!

Ves had managed to deflect this issue by offering a compromise that would probably work out as long as he didn't make anything official. The living mechs could regulate each other as much as they wanted so long as they did it behind closed doors.

They would essentially set up a secret order of sorts that was only known by the living mechs themselves. No human aside from Ves, Venerable Joshua and a few other people should even know about this secretive group.

While Ves was happy with this outcome, the next proposal that Joshua brought up sounded just as troublesome!

"Are you seriously suggesting that we should allow living mechs to essentially 'pilot' human-like constructs so that they can mingle with our clansmen and enjoy the experiences that humans like us take for granted?"

"Uh, it's not me who is making this suggestion. It's the Everchanger and the other living mechs that are clamoring to get out of their shells."

Ves let out a deep breath as he pressed his fingers against his temple. It seemed that his recent sublimation had not rid himself of the weakness of headaches.

"You goddamn bastard. Do you know what you are asking of me?! It's not enough to insist on a change that would allow mechs to hold actual authority in our clan. Now you want me to turn reality upside down by making it possible for mechs to pilot humans. Do you know how crazy the public will become when they hear about this crazy plan?!"

Venerable Joshua lifted up his palms. "Hey, as I have said, it's your own creations who are asking for this, not me! Besides, they aren't looking to replace us humans. They merely want to have fun and enrich their lives. It's hard for them to do so when they can only experience them second-hand whenever they interface with their mech pilots. Don't you think they deserve more for their loyal service?"

Ves grimaced. "I have already told you that what is fair does not necessarily determine what should happen. Do you know the implications of this crazy proposal? It will essentially blur the line between humans and mechs! It is one thing for humans to try and become mechs in order to become more powerful. It is another thing to humanize our mechs so that they can live the same lives as us! Aside from all of the existential questions that this might provoke, this will most definitely be a slippery slope where machines like the Everchanger will request ever more human privileges. Who knows whether they want to gain the right to procreate one day!"

"Why shouldn't we allow them that right?" The expert pilot questioned. "They haven't added the ability to have children on their wishlist yet, but I am sure it will only be a matter of time before that happens."

"The mechers will nuke us all!" Ves despaired!

It took a while for him to calm down from his emotional reaction to this crazy proposal. Although Joshua sounded quite persuasive, Ves was way too jaded to allow his sympathy towards living mechs to sway his feelings.

He was a leader. He had to juggle between many different interests. This matter was way bigger than the Larkinson Clan. He could not allow his irrational impulses to put him on the path of destruction.

"No." He told Joshua. "I'm sorry to say this, but human society is simply not ready for this. It doesn't matter if we keep it within our clan. People from the outside will see a dangerous development and will preemptively plot to destroy us without giving us a chance to prove that our actions are safe."

"Give our living mechs a chance! I truly think that they need to experience what humanity is like. Not only will this make them happy, but building up their own experiences will also help with their growth. Isn't that what you always wanted to see? Maybe this is the secret to helping them evolve to the next stage."

That was an interesting theory and one that resonated with Ves. It may very well be true, but that didn't mean that all of his other considerations suddenly became invalid.

He had restrained the use of his transcendence glow and his other controversial inventions because of how much of a target they painted on his back.

This was no different in his opinion. Everything that threatened his life and career had to be restrained until he became strong enough to endure the backlash.

Ves firmly shook his head. "No means no. I have already issued my judgment on this matter. Even if you somehow manage to convince the chief ministers to go along with this insane plan, which I heavily doubt will be possible, I will veto the proposal. I am highly aware of what the mechers think about issues such as this. I made sure to study stuff like this in the past in case I inadvertently put my existence at risk with my initiatives. The MTA has always

been clear that mechs are tools that exist for the benefit of mankind. It is best not to do anything that comes close to challenging this long-held stance."

The expert pilot looked frustrated. He found himself unable to articulate any arguments that would be convincing enough to work. This was not a surprise as he was not a trained diplomat or negotiator.

"Meow meow."

It was at this time that Lucky lazily flew over to Joshua and attempted to pull the pilot out of his depressed mood.

Joshua smiled and held the cat. He stroked Lucky's head as he thought of how he could return to the living mechs without crushing their dreams.

"Meowww..."

Lucky squinted in pleasure as the cat rolled around. His exterior metal plating smoothly brushed against Joshua's grasp.

The touch of all of that metal triggered a strange idea in his mind.

"Wait a second..."

Joshua looked down at Lucky and studied the gem cat with an appraising gaze.

"Meow...?"

"You're a genius, Lucky!"

"Meow?!"

"What are you on about, Joshua?"

"Look!" The expert pilot held out Lucky as if he was presenting a lion cub!

"Instead of connecting living mechs to avatar machines that resemble humans like you and I, you can put them inside cat bodies instead! If mechs such as the Minerva and the Everchanger begin to hang out with clansmen in the form

of mechanical cats like this, no one will be afraid that killer machines will seek to subvert humanity and take over our civilization. The mech cats will simply be too cute!"

"..."

Of all of the ridiculous ideas that Ves had heard as of late, this was certainly the most ludicrous of them all. There were so many holes in this altered proposal that he didn't know where to begin!

"No." Ves repeated his rejection. "A little change like this won't change anything. There is no way that the mechers would make such a simple mistake. Living mechs can still pose a great threat to human society no matter whether they interact with us through human avatars or cat avatars. In fact, you can even argue that the latter is more threatening because it is a more insidious means of infiltration! Cats are adored in every part of human space because they can be trusted to provide companionship without any ulterior motives. Trying to overturn this assumption is a really bad idea. I am not going to allow my living mechs to—"

—Nyaaaaaa!

Before Ves could finish his explanation, the Golden Cat abruptly manifested into existence!

The ancestral spirit's glow warmed up the room and made Lucky's eyes light up.

The gem cat left Joshua's embrace and greeted Goldie with a playful lick.

"Meow~"

Nyaaaa~

Ves looked annoyed at the interruption. "Why are you here, Goldie?"

The Golden Cat turned around and flew in front of Ves' face.

Nya nya nyaaaa.

"Are you being serious?!"

Nya!

"I am not changing my mind on this!" Ves replied. "We can wait before giving living mechs an opportunity to live among humans through the use of avatars. It's too early at this time."

Nyaaa nyaaaaa nyaaaaa!

"I know that! Joshua already told me that our living mechs are feeling constrained, but we cannot humanize them too quickly! Let's just wait a century or so. Once my products become popular enough, it will be easier to convince people to give them more rights. They won't fear living mechs as much as now because they have personally experienced that they are not as scary as they thought."

Nyaaaaaaa!

"I can't go any faster! A century is already a generous estimate because it will take at least that much time for me to gain the influence necessary to nudge the direction of the mech industry as a whole. Even then, I still need to build a broad coalition of support in order to push any proposed changes through the intense opposition that we will no doubt encounter."

NYAAAA!

Goldie actually began to grow angry at Ves!

"Do I need to repeat my arguments? I already issued my judgment."

NYAAA NYAAA NYAAA!

"Hey! Stop that! What are you doing, Goldie!"

Ves had to lift up his arms to fend off an assault from the Golden Cat!

The furious ancestral spirit flew around Ves and smacked him with her paws, though mercifully she retracted her claws.

That didn't mean that Ves was enjoying the experience, though. Goldie kept hissing at Ves as if he ate cat meat for dinner!

NYAAA! NYAAA! NYAAA!

"I am not going to change my mind!"

NYAAAAAAA!

"Go away, Goldie! Go bother someone else!"

NYAAAA! NYAAAA!

"Okay, okay, I will do it, Goldie! I will give a chance for our best and most important living mechs to live among our clansmen in mechanical cat avatars, is that what you wanted to hear?!"

Nyaaaaa...

Goldie calmed down and retreated from her angry state as soon as she got what she wanted. She lifted her head in a smug manner as she basked in her victory over Ves.

"You are being very impudent, Goldie." Ves glowered at his own creation.

"Our clan is supposed to be run by humans, not a spiritual entity who became too uppity for her own good."

Nyaaa nyaa nyaa.

"I know you are supposed to represent the will of our entire clan. That doesn't change the fact that letting an ignorant mob decide all of our policies is the height of folly!"

Nyaaaa!

"Don't worry! I'm not going back on my word. That doesn't mean I am going full throttle on this crazy plan, though. It is best if we limit the number of candidates and treat the initial attempt as a trial. More importantly, I also need to design cat avatars that can actually connect to our living mechs. I don't even know where to begin with developing a brand new control interface."

This was definitely a challenging side project, but a part of Ves was already interested to see what was possible.

Nyaa. Nyaaa. Nyaaa.

Ves waved his arm towards his active design interface. "Don't expect me to deliver a working project quickly. I still have lots of other projects to catch up to, and I haven't even completed all of the blessed weapon upgrades either. Give me time to think on how to design these cat avatars."

Nyaaa!

"What's in it for you, anyway? What is your agenda, Goldie?"

Nyaaa nyaaa.

"Oh, I see. So that's your angle. Very illuminating."

Chapter 4546 Sick Leave

"Hey Jannzi. Did I come at a bad time?"

The Jannzi that Joshua and most of the Larkinsons were accustomed to seeing in the past looked a lot different this time.

She looked a lot gentler and less intense this time as she assumed her role as a mother to a young but growing son.

Mercer Larkinson gurgled in joy as Jannzi served him a meal fortified with all of the nutrients a growing boy needed to optimize his growth.

After she leaned down to kiss her baby on the cheek, she turned to Joshua and gestured to her visitor to sit down next to the dining table.

"Why have you come?" Jannzi asked as her slumbering force of will began to surge in activity again.

It was as if she took offense at the intrusion of another expert pilot into her abode.

To her credit, she kept her posture relaxed as she stepped away from her son and moved closer to her ex-boyfriend.

"I tried to call you over the comm, but you weren't accepting them. I tried to send text messages to you instead, but I feel like they have fallen into a bottomless cliff."

Venerable Jannzi smirked and lifted her arms, making sure to show off her wrists. "That is because I have stopped wearing my comm and closed any other form of remote messaging."

"Huh?!" Joshua looked astonished. He couldn't wrap his head around why someone who lived in this age would cut themselves off like this. "Why would you do that, Jannzi? What if someone needs to convey an important message to you? What about your duties?"

"I have no duties. Not for the time being at least. I... well, after my recent talk with the Gemini Saints, I realized that I wasn't doing much aside from moping around. I can't mourn for my Shield of Samar forever. This is why I decided to accept the advice given to me and proceed to reset my life. I informed the Hall of Heroes that I wanted to go on a year-long sick leave and suspend all of my mech piloting duties."

Joshua grew concerned. "You went on sick leave? What about your training sessions? Your piloting skills will backslide if you don't exercise them enough. There are also the Shieldbearers. What will all of those hopeful knight mech specialists do now that you are no longer around to guide and tutor them in the hopes that they can become the next generation of expert pilots?"

The female pilot sighed as a part of her melancholy came back again. "I was doing no good to anyone in my previous state. I am disabled, Joshua. You don't know what it means for me to lose my expert mech. The Shield of Samar was more than a good friend or a cherished family member. It was akin to my other half or my close twin sibling. I don't know how to live without having its constant presence by my side anymore. I needed a break before I got any worse."

"If it's like that, then maybe you have made the right choice." Joshua admitted. "Sometimes, it takes courage to step away."

"Exactly. I truly feel bad for putting down all of my existing responsibilities. It will be okay, though. I made sure to arrange alternative learning channels for the Shieldbearers. They not only have subscriptions to a personalized virtual tutoring service, but I also made sure they could train with Venerable Linda Cross at least a couple of times every month. As for the rest... well, nothing I was working on was time sensitive. It shouldn't matter too much if I delay my work for a year."

It was difficult for expert pilots who valued duty so much to set aside their responsibilities to the public in favor of attending to their own personal needs.

She needed this, though. She would do no good to the Larkinson Clan and the many people who she cared about if she emotionally broke down.

Being an expert pilot did not make her immune to these kinds of issues. They were in fact more serious than ever because of their amplified strength and willpower.

"So what have you been doing during this time?" Joshua asked.

"I tried to be a better mother for my son. I walk around and chat with ordinary clansmen. I tried out a few hobbies. I started a small garden. I tried... to reconnect with my humanity."

"Well, whatever you are doing, I think it is working." Joshua said in an encouraging tone. "You were a lot more... abrasive in the past. Don't get me wrong. I respect you for standing up to your principles and beliefs. It was just that you were so absorbed with your crusade that it was hard for anyone who disagreed with you to like you. I'm glad to hear that you are working to explore your humanity again. I always thought that was important."

Jannzi sent an evaluating glance at him. "That is your greatest strength and your greatest fault. You have too much humanity, Joshua. You don't seem to have any problems with getting along with people, but I have always noticed that you can't seem to settle on a solid goal or purpose."

Joshua nodded. "Heh, I guess our relationship was never meant to be. We are too far apart from each other. Even though we are both working to rein in our excesses, I don't think we would ever be compatible with each other."

Both of them had moved on and hooked up with other people. Enough time had passed for them to get past their breakups. They could even look back at their past relationship with nostalgia.

Jannzi eventually grew serious again. "I don't think you came here because you wanted to check up on me and talk about old times. What is the reason for your visit?"

"Ah, despite your attempt to pull yourself away from your duties, I still think it is important for me to fill you in on what I have accomplished after taking over some of your duties."

Venerable Joshua told his fellow expert pilot the recent progress he had made concerning the treatment of living mechs.

The woman looked surprised when she heard that Joshua actually managed to convince Ves to make actual concessions.

"That blasted cousin of mine had been stonewalling me for several years." Jannzi said through gritted teeth. Her force of will started to get enflamed. "I don't know what you have done to change his stubborn mind, but it was about time for him to get a spine and take a step in the right direction. It's a shame he didn't go far enough."

Joshua nodded in agreement. "I've already conveyed the results to the Everchanger and company. They're disappointed, but they will make do with the concessions that they have received. They are already in the process of setting up a secret order that will remain completely unnoticed. It is meant to operate silently alongside the other institutions of the Larkinson Clan. The living mechs even picked a name for it. They decided to call it the Anima Order."

The other expert pilot furrowed her brows.

"If this 'Anima Order' is supposed to remain a secret, why are you exposing its existence to me and in front of my son no less?"

Joshua made a dismissive gesture. "It's okay. Once you have recovered from whatever it is you are suffering from, I'm sure you will go back and resume your old duties. While I have chosen to take over your job for now, I don't think I can do this forever. As for your son, I'm sure he can keep a secret, isn't that right, Mercer?"

The young boy who had almost finished his breakfast porridge giggled in response. "I will, uncle Josh!"

"What a clever boy you are. Your mother has raised you so well."

Jannzi shook her head in disapproval. The only reason why she didn't make a bigger deal out of it was because her own son was involved.

"Besides setting up this Anima Order, you also mentioned that the living mechs have also gained the right to walk among our clansmen in the form of mechanical avatars, right?"

"That's right, Jannzi. The goal was to give living mechs an opportunity to experience human life first-hand. It was important for them to be able to connect themselves to human-sized robotic avatars. They don't really care whether the avatars are made to look like plain metal robots or highly realistic androids that are indistinguishable from actual humans."

"Instead of that, they got cat robots."

Joshua chuckled a bit. "Yeah. That was an odd proposal from me. I just saw Lucky doing his thing and came up with the idea somehow. Ves originally didn't agree with this absurd idea, but Goldie showed up and beat him up until he relented."

That caused Venerable Jannzi to become more attentive. "The Golden Cat intervened in person?"

"Yes."

"Tell me exactly what happened back then. Give me as many details as possible and give me your interpretation of Goldie's messages."

"Oh, okay."

Venerable Joshua went into exhausting details as he described how the meeting unfolded. Jannzi continued to maintain a critical expression as she parsed the information that she received.

"Don't you think this situation looks suspicious?"

"Hm? In what way, Jannzi?"

"I'm not surprised that you can't see it. You aren't as detached to the event as myself." The female expert pilot said. "Let me explain my theory to you. First,

do you think it is a coincidence that Lucky just happened to stay close enough to you for you to put cats at the forefront of your mind?"

"Uhhh..."

"Do you think that it is a coincidence that you just happened to tie our living mechs to mechanical cat avatars of all things?"

"Ehmm..."

"Do you think that it is a coincidence that the Golden Cat broke her long-standing policy of non-interference and spontaneously appeared to coerce our very own clan leader into making a decision that he originally did not want to make?"

"That..."

"I've argued against Ves so many times and almost never managed to extract any concessions from him. Why did he uncharacteristically drop all of his concerns and objections and fold so easily after being subjected to light harassment from a glowing cat?"

"Now that you mention it, this does sound unlikely." Joshua muttered with a frown. "What are you getting at, Jannzi? Are you suggesting that Goldie deliberately pulled all of our strings so that we would turn mech cats into a reality?"

Jannzi crossed her arms. "It could be a coincidence, but I find that hard to believe. Don't you think that it is concerning that the Golden Cat is no longer content with staying in the background? It looks to me that she has become more political, and that concerns me. It is all well and good if she happens to support the same initiatives as us, but what if she opposes other items in our agenda?"

"I think your fears regarding her are overblown. Goldie is the invisible heart of the Larkinson Clan. She is connected to all of us. She pretty much embodies the collective will of all of our clansmen."

"That is what Ves originally designed her to become, but who knows how much she has grown since then? What if she has matured to the point where she is starting to have her own ideas on how the clan should be run?"

"Isn't that a good thing?"

Jannzi shook her head. "Not necessarily. There is something called accountability, you know. It is already bad enough that we can't really question Ves' decisions as a patriarch. What will we do if the Golden Cat becomes just as bad? Casting doubt on her is impossible. Do you know why?"

"Because she is so cute and beloved among all of our clansmen?"

"The Golden Cat is a god to our fellow Larkinsons." Jannzi answered.

"Questioning her is no different from questioning a god. Doing so in the middle of the clan will only get us crucified."

"..."

Joshua was shocked. He found it difficult to look at Goldie in a negative light.

"Jannzi."

"Yes, Joshua?"

"Aren't you exaggerating a bit too much?"

"...I see that she has got to you as well."

Chapter 4547 The Verdict

Venerable Jannzi had a lot to think about after she concluded her meeting with Joshua.

To learn that the Golden Cat blatantly intervened in an important policy matter caused her to develop all kinds of concerns.

It didn't help that the Golden Cat maintained an invisible connection to her. Most Larkinsons were not strong enough to notice this, but expert pilots such as Jannzi could clearly sense the vast and growing network that tied every Larkinson together.

It was how the clan could always root out spies and recognize people who didn't belong in their company.

Though the so-called Larkinson Network was probably the most important element that enabled the Larkinson Clan to grow so rapidly and become so successful in a short amount of time, Jannzi had never put much thought on its potential risks.

Although the Golden Cat came across as an innocuous spirit that was friendly towards any Larkinson, this did not change the fact that she was created by Ves, a mech designer who she did not have a high opinion of. His habit of taking risks and making impulsive decisions that were driven by his emotions regularly had a tendency to backfire on him and his clan.

It would be bad if Jannzi was forced to regard Goldie as one of Ves' many failings.

There was nothing much she could do about it. Goldie enjoyed such broad adoration and support from the Larkinsons that she would be painted as an alarmist if she tried to warn everyone about the potential dangers of the Golden Cat.

The only conceivable solution she could come up with was to influence Goldie's positions by changing the collective opinions of enough clansmen.

If Goldie was not completely out of control, then she should abide by the will of most of the members of the Larkinson Clan.

"This will be an uphill battle." Jannzi acknowledged.

It was anything but easy to sway the opinions of the masses. She had tried and failed enough times to know the pains of becoming a contrarian in a clan that almost universally supported the patriarch.

Sure, there were enough members of the clan who held alternative views. The Purnesses for example were not exactly fans of all of the expeditions and battles that Ves tended to embark upon.

Yet no matter whether it was herself or the Purnesse Family, neither of them possessed the gravitas or reputation to appeal to the clansmen.

How could she protect her clansmen if they didn't even acknowledge the threats in their own midst?

If Jannzi wanted her clan to take her warnings seriously, she needed to gain enough respect to make her voice heard.

She already knew a good way to ensure that she would get taken seriously by everyone.

"Patriarch Reginald Cross might be the biggest danger to his own clan, but his power is undeniable."

Just like any mech pilot, Venerable Jannzi always wanted to get better at her job. People like her were never short of reasons to pursue greater strength.

She wanted to be able to defeat all of her opponents before they inflicted any serious damage.

In addition to that, she never wanted to bear the pain of losing her mech and battle partner.

Jannzi already recognized that greater strength would lead to greater influence in the clan.

Now that she recognized that the future of the Larkinson Clan might be more precarious than she thought, she became more determined to pursue greater strength.

She had a mission to fulfill, and to do that she needed to spend her time in a more productive manner.

"Just because I am on sick leave doesn't mean I have to sit around all day."

Venerable Jannzi could not bring herself to pilot a mech at this time. This was why she picked up the comm that she had stowed in a drawer and started to make arrangements.

Once she was done with making her calls, she spent a bit of time with Mercer before dropping him off at daycare.

She then proceeded to go down to one of the training halls where a lot of mech pilots and other servicemen were exercising.

Jannzi nodded at every greeting she received from the clansmen she was passing by. She did not stop until she entered a private training room that was dominated by a modest sparring ring.

Another woman was already present in the room.

"Jannzi."

"Ketis."

The two women greeted each other with their words and their force of wills.

The latter was considerably more confrontational as both women were unwilling to give in to each other.

Ketis Larkinson frowned. She had already changed into a slightly protective training outfit after receiving an odd request from Venerable Jannzi.

Though she was always up for a good fight, she was not in the mood to make a new enemy.

"I came here because you told me that you needed my help." Ketis said as she planted the sheathed tip of her Bloodsinger onto the floor of the sparring ring. "If this is about something else, then I don't want anything to do with it. I originally planned to spend my time on furthering the Samurai Project at this time. Tell me why I postponed my design session."

Jannzi decided to be direct.

"I want your help in training my swordsmanship." She said. "I have always been diligent in training my fighting skills, and I continued to practice and develop the systematic sword fighting skills that I have learned in the academy a long time ago. It wasn't until I fought a true strong opponent that I discovered that my skills are far from adequate enough to fend off threats at that level. I need to get better, but I don't think I can do it alone. The lessons I learned from the academy won't cut it anymore. I need to rebuild my swordsmanship from the ground up so that I can make my successor mech proud."

The swordmaster listened to Jannzi and nodded in understanding. Ketis could clearly sense that Jannzi was being sincere, though she probably withheld a lot of information.

That didn't matter too much. All Ketis needed to know was that Jannzi wanted to reinvent her swordsmanship.

The biggest question was how far the expert pilot was willing to go in order to become better at wielding her sword.

"Before we talk any further, I would like to assess your current swordsmanship." Ketis spoke up. "Go to the changing room and gear yourself up for a spar. Make sure to pick up a sword and shield that closely matches

the equipment that you will be fighting with once our Design Department completes your new expert mech."

Jannzi wordlessly nodded and did as instructed.

She came back with an outfit that was heavier and offered more protection. She deliberately chose it because it weighed her down to the extent that she moved as sluggishly as a defensive mech.

Since she already carried such a burden, she opted to pick up a fairly lighter combination of sword and tower shield.

"Are you comfortable with fighting with all of that gear?" Ketis asked with a touch of concern. "Fighting with your own body is different from fighting with your mech."

"I am not a stranger to fighting this way, though I never dedicated enough attention to this sort of practice. I am sure you will find out how competent I am by testing out my skills."

Ketis smirked. "Good suggestion."

The sheath of her Bloodsinger automatically separated after she transmitted a silent command.

At one point in time, the famed greatsword of the Larkinson Clan's only swordmaster went through a makeover that caused its blade to take on an ominous red shade.

Just looking at it would make most weaker-willed people feel as if their limbs were about to get cut by its sharp blade!

Though Jannzi's willpower was more than adequate enough to brush aside this effect, this did not cause her to lower her vigilance towards this powerful weapon.

"I am afraid I will not be able to show you the extent of my fighting skills." The expert pilot said. "The quality of our gear is too far apart. Your sword can cut right through my sword and shield."

Ketis smirked but shook her head. "That won't happen during this bout. I have no interest in bullying you with my equipment. My Bloodsinger will only cut when I command it to. Treat your sword and shield as if they are as tough as the equivalents of your old expert mech."

"Very well."

"Start!"

Just as Jannzi expected, Ketis wasted no time and immediately went on the offensive. Her strong physique, her light and inadequate protection and her exquisite skill meant that it was much more appropriate for the Swordmaiden to take the initiative.

Jannzi on the other hand planted her feet on the floor and braced her shield so that it could easily deflect the opening sword strike.

Clang!

Before Jannzi could even hope to launch a counterattack with her sword, Ketis had already spun away in one fluid motion.

Since it was stupid for Ketis to attack a heavily armored opponent from the front, she circled around and attempted to strike Jannzi from the rear.

The expert pilot was already turning around to meet the next attack with the edge of the tower shield.

At the same time, Jannzi was able to launch her own strike much faster, prompting Ketis to back off and approach at another angle.

This intensive exchange went on for a few minutes. Despite all of the calories that Ketis was burning due to her frequent motions, she enjoyed this exercise as Jannzi was always able to keep up with the assault.

As the two women struggled to land a solid hit on each other with their swords, another struggle took place on an invisible level.

Jannzi's protective force of will began to clash and grind against the unyielding sharpness exuded by her opponent.

Although both of their extraordinary aspects were roughly similar to each other, there were still a few important differences.

For one, Ketis was a swordmaster who excelled at personal combat. Her force of will resonated excellently with her Bloodsinger. The two almost seemed as one as the Bloodsinger swung and struck as if it was an extension of its wielder.

Venerable Jannzi on the other hand could only fight at her best when she was piloting a mech. It was a lot more awkward for her to find herself alone and without any support from a living and intelligent partner.

The practice equipment were made of dull lightweight alloys that felt quite foreign to her despite their familiar shapes and dimensions.

Though her excellent training and adequate combat experience quickly allowed her to grow familiar with them, that didn't help much in her attempt to retaliate against Ketis' attacks.

Once Ketis was satisfied with seeing how Jannzi was able to cope with fast-moving opponents, she abruptly changed her fighting approach.

The swordmaster seemed to gain a lot of mass and momentum. She began to move a lot more ponderously as she struck Jannzi head-on with slow but powerful strikes.

CLANG!

CLANG!

CLANG!

Jannzi began to struggle in a different way as Ketis struck with overpowering blows that came at angles that were surprisingly tricky to block.

The expert pilot occasionally found her body reeling from the heavy impacts. She spent so much time on regaining her footing that she found herself unable to launch a single serious counterattack despite the fact that she was enduring fewer attacks than before!

As Ketis continued to escalate her attacks by slowly increasing the frequency and momentum of her greatsword strikes, Venerable Jannzi found that she was being oppressed on both a physical and spiritual level.

CLAAAANG!

It wasn't until Ketis struck Jannzi's sword in a heavy, two-handed upwards slash that the expert pilot's humiliation was complete.

Venerable Jannzi looked dully as her sword spun in the air before clattering onto the floor like a lost piece of equipment.

Silence fell as both combatants retracted their willpower and reined in their aggression.

Ketis did not look impressed. "I've learned enough about your swordsmanship."

"What is your verdict?"

"You suck."

"That... is to be expected." Jannzi said.

She had suffered from several handicaps that put her at a disadvantage, but she still took a hit to her ego. She shouldn't have succumbed so quickly.

"It's alright." Ketis said as she tried to offer the expert pilot an encouraging smile. "I can fix you, but not alone. I don't have much of an affinity in defensive sword styles, so I will have to bring over a Heavensworder that specializes in one. Is that alright?"

"I can accept that." Jannzi affirmed.

"Great! Our only condition is that you take our traditional swordsmanship seriously. We can turn you into a better fighter, but only if you adopt a systematic approach to swordfighting instead of learning our skills in an ad-hoc manner. Are you willing to commit to our ways?"

It took a moment for Jannzi to formulate her reply. She could sense that Ketis was being utterly serious about this issue.

"I am willing." Jannzi replied. "I have around a year to reform my swordsmanship. Please do the best you can to make me stronger. I want to do more than passively absorbing attacks with a shield by the time I can pilot an expert mech again."

She was willing to do anything in order to become a stronger guardian of the Larkinson Clan!

Embracing a foreign fighting tradition was but one of many prices she was willing to pay!

Chapter 4548 Fulfilling Obligations

While Jannzi committed to reinventing her swordsmanship, Ves spent his time on completing his commitments to the various pioneering groups that had concluded a trade deal with his clan.

He hadn't forgotten about all of the high-quality mech equipment that were stored inside their own separate containers in an enclosed and guarded cargo bay.

The guards and specialists accompanying the extremely precious expert mech and ace mech gear had been issuing more and more complaints about the lack of progress.

Ves had several reasons to stall his work on them.

He wanted to buy more time so that he could think about how to modify them.

He wanted to benefit from the implicit protection they provided so long as the trade agreements remained unfulfilled.

He also felt the need to supplement his knowledge by learning high-level theories that could better explain what was going on with all of the highly advanced gear.

While Ves wanted to stall his work for a few more days, he was afraid that pioneering groups such as the Gemini Family or the Adelaide Mercenary Company would accuse him of reneging on his promises.

He did not want to damage his credibility. It had played a helpful role in convincing his trade partners to get in bed with him, and he was sure it would help him close additional deals in the future.

"Oh well."

This was why he reserved a week in his schedule to complete this chore.

In truth, he didn't have to spend so much time on upgrading all of the mech weapons, but he wanted to spend enough time with each of them to properly appreciate their individual properties and design elements.

The expert mech gear was only mildly interesting to him. They weren't strong or advanced enough to maintain his interest for long. No matter whether they

were melee weapons or ranged weapons, they were not necessarily any better than the products designed for his own expert mechs.

The only gear that truly merited his full attention was the ace mech weapons entrusted in his care.

"Well, let's start."

Ves had to bring in the gear to his personal workshop one by one. Each time, a different group of guards and technicians closely accompanied the valuable pieces of equipment.

Though it was rather annoying for Ves to do his work in front of complete and total strangers who possessed no understanding of his craft, it became a lot tolerable when he told his guests to shut up and do nothing.

The first ace mech weapon that he chose to examine was the spear of the Royal Jeem.

At first glance, the weapon looked fairly standard if well-constructed. It did not possess a telescoping shaft or a wicked-looking speartip.

It was only after Ves inspected it up close that he was able to figure out its nuances.

"Its gimmicks are relatively subtle."

He was able to deduce that Saint Kalasandra Boojay wanted to wield a solid and reliable spear that would not break or falter no matter how much stress it endured in battle.

It had to be strong and solid enough to stay in one piece when the Royal Jeem fought against an opposing expert mech, so its shaft was thick and heavy.

While it initially looked as if the shaft was solid and uniform, deep scans revealed that it actually featured a much more complicated internal structure.

Ves couldn't decipher much of its functions. There were circuitry, capacitors, heat sinks and other components that were all designed to enhance the lethality of the weapon in different ways.

The only certainty he gained was that at least a part of this inner structure was devoted to enhancing the transphasic properties of the weapon.

"Dulo Voiken should be able to tell me more." Ves remarked. "He would probably go crazy if he was able to see this excellent weapon up close."

It was too bad that his deals with the various pioneering groups included strict secrecy clauses. Ves wasn't even allowed to describe what he learned to other people.

This prevented him from consulting a real spearman mech specialist like Dulo Voiken.

It was not a crippling hindrance. Ves could still derive a decent amount of insights from studying all of the ingenious and brilliant design solutions that he was competent enough to understand.

What Ves found even more interesting than the technical design was how Saint Kalasandra Boojay shaped its spiritual foundation.

Just as with the Thunderer Mark II, the powerful Saint Kingdom of an ace pilot altered and transformed every property of the mech spear, even the areas that the powerful Saint never thought about.

Of course, the spiritual foundation of the mech spear was also lacking in structure and sophisticated.

To Ves, the spirituality of the weapon gave him the impression that it was more than just a tool to stab an opponent.

It was a scepter and a symbol of authority.

Whenever the Royal Joom held this spear, Saint Kalasandra Boojay channeled her desire to rule over the battlefield.

Her desire to beat her enemies into submission was stronger than her desire to take their lives!

It took greater skill and majesty to force an opponent at the same level to kneel as opposed to driving them to their deaths.

Of course, given how proud and stubborn high-ranking mech pilots tended to be, Saint Kalasandra had never managed to force an equal opponent to kneel.

Her dream therefore remained unfulfilled, and the spiritual foundation of her weapon picked up on her regret.

"It's strange." Ves rubbed his clean and hairless chin.

Ever since he evolved to a higher life phase, he was able to exert greater control over his body. Something as simple as commanding his face to stop growing a beard only took a single thought.

He no longer had to order a shaving bot to keep his face as smooth as a baby's bottom.

His eyes lingered at the enormous spear that resembled a tree trunk when he was in close proximity to the weapon.

The mech spear and by extension the Royal Jeem was designed with dueling in mind. It would have fit right at home in the mech arena if ace mechs were allowed to fight in public exhibition matches.

Though Saint Kalasandra Boojay had lived a long and fulfilling life, her love and passion for combat remained as strong as ever!

This presented Ves with a difficult decision.

"Saint Kalasandra is too confident in her own strength. She won't be able to tolerate an equal partnership."

This meant that she might not be able to work well with the Phase King. It also meant that she would not be able to treat her living weapon as a valued battle partner.

"Saint Kalasandra is another Patriarch Reginald." He concluded.

If this was the case, then it was not appropriate for him to adopt the same approach that worked so well for the Larkinson Army.

Ves started to frown. "I can't turn it into a traditional living product, then. I don't want to make this spear alive only for it to become a slave to its master."

This meant that he had to turn it into an empty shell that Saint Kalasandra could seamlessly occupy with her powerful Saint Kingdom.

He couldn't come up with an alternative solution!

Once he figured out a plan, he proceeded to go to work. He began to modify the shaft of the spear by adding additional decorative elements to it. They hardly interfered with the technical performance of the weapon, but made it look a lot more regal and imposing.

As Ves gained more ownership of the weapon through these modifications, he was able to exert more influence onto the spiritual foundation of the weapon.

While he slowly started to use his touch to make the weapon alive, he also leveraged his formidable Spirituality to prevent any distinct and coherent personality and consciousness from taking shape.

He did not want to 'kill' a life that he had just created through his own efforts, so he made sure that the mech spear would essentially be able to function as a second skin for its user.

"Just like the Mars."

One of the few upsides to how Patriarch Reginald treated his own living mech was that Ves no longer dared to fool around too much when ace pilots were involved.

Their willpower and Saint Kingdoms were so strong that they could forcefully alter the spiritual makeup of any product in their reach!

Once Ves was done with his effort, he beheld the end product.

The mech spear gained a vibe that was highly reminiscent of the Mars. It had come to life, yet did not react to any outside stimuli. It was like a clone that possessed all of the right organs but didn't possess the spark of life.

"Gloriana could probably make a product like this." Ves determined.

Creating the spark of life was an ability that was exclusive to Ves. The best his wife could do was a pale imitation that lacked the most crucial ingredient.

It just so happened that a hollow life suited Gloriana the best. It perfectly matched her design philosophy as her vision of mechs was substantially different from that of her husband.

He could already tell that Gloriana would be proud with how he tackled this upgrade project.

The only incongruity was that Ves had tied the weapon to the Phase King.

Ves didn't know how Saint Kalansadra Boojay would be able to cooperate with the Phase King, especially when the latter had recently devoured the spirituality of a corrupted phase whale.

He shrugged. "Well, I did warn the Boojays beforehand. I'm not at fault if their arrogant ace pilot fails to cooperate with the Phase King."

After inspecting the weapon several times, he carefully put it back into its protective container before shipping it back to the secure cargo bay.

He proceeded to employ the same approach to the subsequent ace mech weapons.

Each powerful item told a vastly different story to Ves. He had no need to ask for any clarification as to the design of the products and the treatments of their powerful users.

The weapons of the Infinite Gear were very utilitarian in nature. Saint Robert Montagne had so many of them that he wasn't able to build a strong connection to any of them. Only the mech sword and the mech rifle possessed a stronger imprint from him, and that was solely because he utilized them little more than the rest of his arsenal.

Ves opted to make them alive because he genuinely believed that Saint Montagne was open-minded enough to handle this additional complication.

The ace pilot of the ace modular mech platform was a lot more open-minded towards new innovations than his peers due to the nature of his employer.

The Lehrer Foundation regularly came up with new and interesting products, and regularly tasked its pilots to put the inventions to the test.

Ves figured that as long as Saint Montagne was able to accept the weirdness of wielding mech weapons with independent personalities, he would be able to benefit from this change by developing powerful synergies.

Of course, if Ves had misjudged the situation, then the Lehrer ace pilot might decide to pull off a 'Reginald'!

"I really hope that doesn't happen." Ves prayed.

He encountered an unexpected surprise when he was done with his work. When he packed up his most recent work, the newborn living weapons had already begun to communicate with each other!

Their many shared traits caused them to treat each other as siblings. They became quite intimate with each other.

Not only that, but Ves also saw hints of resonance between them! It was as if they could generate true resonance without the active involvement of an ace pilot!

"That's new."

The reason why the weapons were able to do this to begin with was because they had all been baptized by the domain field of Saint Robert Montagne. He left behind enough remnants of himself in his mech gear that the individual weapons were close to imitating a part of his capabilities!

This presented Ves with a lot of interesting ideas.

Chapter 4549 Upbringing Choices

"I'm so jealous of you, do you know that?"

"I do. There is nothing I can do about it, though." Ves shrugged.

"Can't you share any details about the ace mech weapons that you have touched and worked upon in the past few days? I doubt the pioneering groups will mind it if you only tell one other person."

"I promised the Geminis, the Adelaides and so on not to divulge anything sensitive about those powerful mech equipment. That includes both direct technical specifications and more subjective impressions. I am always serious when it comes to abiding by the terms of a trade agreement, so I can't oblige you. The best I can do is talk about the more general insights that I have derived from my recent work. Will that make you happy?"

Gloriana glowered. "It will have to do. I am so frustrated by this situation! I should be the one to handle all of that powerful and fantastic equipment! I bet that you don't even know how lucky you are to gain the right to examine and alter all of this peak mech equipment. The quantity and variety of gear is so

much that I would have been able to get a lot closer to completing my next design applications!"

"Let's not talk too much about work." Ves spoke. "We reserved this afternoon for family time, remember?"

"I am aware of that, but I cannot take my mind off this issue."

Both Ves and Gloriana sat in their living room while they watched a fantasy drama. The show revolved around a rather childish and whimsical premise of a universe that was set in an endless flat plane of ground.

Ves did not have the faintest clue how that could even work in reality, but that was the charm of fantasy. The creators could selectively throw the rules out of the window. It worked as long as everything else was internally consistent enough to make the audience forget about the rule breaking in the first place.

"That pink elephant is so cute!" Andraste giggled as she sat on Gloriana's lap. "I want a pink elephant. Can I have one, mama?"

Her mother embraced her second tighter into her embrace. "We already have enough pets as it is. We don't have enough room for additional pets. Besides, elephants are too large, honey. They won't even fit through our hatches. We would have to keep it in a zoo or an enclosed area in one of our artificial parks to keep it in a pleasant environment."

"Awww..."

"We already have our cats. They can provide us with all of the companionship we need." Ves added.

"I want more!"

"You won't get one just because you ask."

"Meow."

"Miaow!"

Lucky and Clixie interrupted their cuddling and jumped up to Andraste so that they could press against the greedy girl and overwhelm her with their cuteness.

"Hihihihi! Stop that! I love you too, okay?! Alright, I get it. I won't replace you with a pink elephant."

The family continued to watch the silly fantasy drama. Marvaine became completely engrossed while Aurelia who sat in between her parents started to look at it from a more critical perspective.

It was rather odd for the eldest daughter to look at the drama as if she was at least two decades older, but that was part of the training that her mother instilled in her mind.

Her rapid maturation was a reminder of her designer baby origins and her intense education program.

Gloriana arranged most of the schooling for their children. She constantly tested their cognitive development and increased the density of schoolwork in response to their improved capabilities.

Each of their three children had already become considerably smarter than other designer babies at their level.

They were so abnormal in this regard that the geneticists and specialists over at the Witshaw & Yeneca became increasingly more nosy about the differences.

It was clear that the Larkinson Clan did not strictly follow their highly precise development programs to the letter. Somehow, the Larkinsons changed the variables of the organic products in a way that resulted in substantial physical and mental performance boosts, and they did it not once but thrice in a row!

The incongruities were driving the scientists of the famed genetics company crazy. Ves and Gloriana already had to reject their more insistent requests to collect tissue samples and perform invasive scanning on their precious babies!

This increasing abnormalities concerning their children was one of the reasons why Ves was eager to drop his reliance on Witshaw & Seneca and start developing his own designer babies in-house.

He looked down at his smallest and most precious child. Cute little Marvaine was the most expensive designer baby out of the series. His spirituality was so strong despite his young and tender age. The early development of his spirit seemed to have done wonders to his cognitive development, allowing him to devour science textbooks that only older kids could understand.

Ves was both proud and concerned at Marvain's performance.

As a father, he wanted his son and the rest of his kids to enjoy a blissful childhood that was free of concerns. Ves had enjoyed a rather happy upbringing aside from the early death of his mother. He did not want to deprive his kids of that same opportunity and have them grow up in a high pressure environment.

As a product of his environment, he wanted his children to quickly develop their competences and excel at their chosen fields. There was no way for people to live a comfortable life without the power to ensure their survival and carve their own place in society. The cosmos was a cruel and unfair environment where the only laws that applied were the rules of the jungle.

The tension between these two desires became an increasing point of contention to Ves and Gloriana.

While Ves wanted to give his children more time to enjoy what life had to offer, Gloriana felt it was more urgent than ever to make them as capable as possible once they became adults.

It was inevitable for their conversation to drift to the future schooling of their children.

"Aurelia is already on the right track, more or less." Gloriana remarked. "I would have preferred it if she was able to attend the exclusive school in Davute, but the advantage of putting her into our own education institutions is that we can exert much more control over her lesson plans. She is already several years ahead of the former friends and classmates she left behind."

She reached out to stroke her oldest daughter's lovely head.

In response, the girl looked up at her mother with pure and unrestricted love.

Ves also felt proud at his oldest daughter's academic performance. Her capabilities already marked her as a high-quality human resource. She possessed a lot of value even if she didn't have a connection to the Larkinson Clan!

That said, he didn't want his first child to get crushed under Gloriana's exceedingly high expectations.

"I'm fine with any study program as long as she isn't forced to take more classes than the other kids at our schools." He said.

Gloriana scowled. "That's not good enough anymore. Aurelia is a genius. Treating her more as a normal child will only hold back her potential."

"She has all of the time in the galaxy! Who cares whether she graduates from university a decade earlier than her peers. She only has one chance of enjoying a normal childhood and I am not about to let you ruin that. I also don't want you to put her under consistently high stress. Don't think you can get

away with anything excessive. There are Black Cats within our ranks that spend all of their working hours on monitoring our kids. The agents will warn me the moment you try to cross the line."

His wife became outraged!

"Ves! There is no reason to resort to spies to manage the way we raise our children. Don't you trust me to do what is best for them? They are my flesh and blood as well."

The look he gave her was enough of an answer.

Gloriana petulantly threw up her hands before she went back to cuddling Andraste.

"What about me, mama?" Their red-headed daughter looked up at her parents again. "I don't want to sit around and read through books all day."

"Learning is important, dear. You need to learn your numbers and understand the meaning of grown-up words before you do anything else. Words and numbers matter more than ever in this day and age."

"It's boring!"

"I think that is her genetic configuration at work." Ves surmised. "That, or she is just a regular little girl."

Gloriana looked thoughtful. "I am inclined to believe in the former. Aurelia was considerably less naughty and more controlled a few years ago. Andraste was born to become a soldier. In order to ensure that designer babies formulated for war do not reject their purpose and waste everyone's time, money and resources, they are genetically predisposed to more active pursuits such as combat training, sports and any sort of competitive activity. Normally, these urges shouldn't be too obvious for a designer baby at Andraste's stage, but maybe your work on them has activated these traits in advance."

That didn't sound quite right to Ves, but then again his limited understanding of biotechnology and genetics was far from enough to understand the mechanisms of his children.

"If that is the case, then we should encourage her to take up a sport." Ves said.

"Those are my thoughts as well. There are not that many sports that Andraste can participate in due to her age. We need to make a careful selection. What do you think about tennis?"

Ves frowned. "I don't like it. Let's hold off until two more years have passed."

"Normally, I would agree with you, but Andraste's body is much stronger than the typical children who start to play tennis."

As Ves and Gloriana went over several sports, Andraste made her own suggestion.

"I don't want to play tennis or football! I want to train with the Swordmaidens! Did you know that they have kids who are already starting to practice their sword swings? It looks so much fun, and it will help me get good at fighting really fast!"

"What?!" Gloriana jerked so much that Andraste bounced in her lap.

"Absolutely not, young lady! The Swordmaidens are vicious brutes who chop off each other's limbs as a hobby. They are one of the worst mech legions to train with for a future champion of your caliber."

"I don't want to play around with stupid balls!" Andraste loudly whined. "I want real combat training. If I train with the Swordmaidens, I can be strong with or without a mech."

Ves looked at her with concern. "You're too young to worry about your genetic aptitude. It is better for you to think about this when you are 10 years old."

Andraste petulantly crossed her arms. "I can't wait that long, papa. I have already made up my mind. I want to learn a good sword style. This way, I can either become the next Ketis or the next Venerable Dise."

Gloriana almost had a heart attack! "Neither of those uncouth brutes are acceptable role models for you. There are much more elegant women to model yourself after! Commander Casella Ingvar is much more clever, noble and refined than our other expert pilots. There is also your own mama that you can look up to, sweetie. Don't you want to become as beautiful and perfect as your own mother one day, Andraste?"

The baby girl looked flatly at Gloriana. "You're too skinny and weak in a fight. I need to be as big and strong as Ketis if I want to beat naughty boys in a fight!"

"ANDRASTE!"

If Andraste was not her own daughter, Gloriana would have wanted to choke the willful girl at this moment!

Chapter 4550 Little Squirt

"Auntie Ketis!"

"Oh hey, little girl."

Andraste slipped her tiny hand out of her father's grip and ran over to the edge of the sparring ring.

She pressed her cute nose against the safety screen as Ketis corrected the stance and repetitive sword motions of another woman by striking the limbs with a metal rod.

The strikes were hard and brutal, but the trainee endured the hits without releasing a grunt of pain.

Ves reached his daughter's position as he watched the ongoing spectacle with a bit of fascination.

It wasn't until Ketis stopped her corrective lesson a few minutes later that Ves finally opened his mouth.

"I didn't expect to see you here of all places, Jannzi."

"What I do with my time is not your concern, Ves."

The expert pilot in question glared at Ves but did not do much more. She was awfully winded and her entire body was covered with bruises.

She would definitely need to dive into a recovery pod to be ready for training the next day!

When Ves looked down at his daughter, he saw that she did not get repulsed by the rather brutal training session.

Instead, Andraste looked at Ketis with stars in her eyes. The little girl truly meant it when she claimed that the swordmaster was one of her idols!

Ves had to admit that his former student did look particularly striking at the moment. Her tall, athletic body conveyed an impression of tightly controlled aggression.

Though she had set her iconic Bloodsinger aside, she looked valiant and heroic in an exotic sense as she made sure to maintain a combat-ready stance with her practice rod even when there was no obvious threat in the vicinity.

The duality between her sharp mind and raw combat power made for an odd but effective combination.

Even people who weren't familiar with Ketis at all would be able to tell from her aura that she was an extraordinary individual!

It was no wonder why Andraste became so enthralled by Ketis. The Journeyman and swordmaster was the most ideal warrior in the Larkinson Clan who was not a mech pilot!

As Jannzi moved to a corner to internalize her latest lessons, Ketis moved closer to the newcomers and regarded both Ves and Andraste with an evaluating gaze.

True to her intelligence, she already figured out the purpose of this visit.

"You want me to train your little squirt?" She gruffly asked despite the fact she already knew the answer.

"I'm not a squirt!" The little girl complained! "I'm much tougher than I look! Just gimme a sword and I will show you what I've got!"

Naturally, none of the adults took Andraste's requests seriously.

"The Swordmaidens and I don't object to running a special training program for your daughter, but you've come far too soon. Training her when she's barely better than a rugrat will do more harm than good. Come back a few years later."

Ves shook his head. "Andraste will cry if we turn away right away. I promised her to give her a fair chance. Don't forget that she is anything but an average designer baby. Her mind, spirit and most interestingly her body are much more special than you can imagine."

This caused Ketis to take a closer look at Andraste. She already knew that Ves had subjected his own children to weird experimental treatments that caused them to develop their own miniature companion spirits.

How that was even possible, Ketis couldn't begin to understand. All she knew was that Ves might be right that she couldn't judge Andraste according to common sense.

The last time Andraste played with Kirian, she already noticed that her son was having trouble keeping up with Ves' daughter despite the fact that their ages were similar.

She checked her schedule and confirmed there was nothing urgent on her agenda for the day.

"Okay. If you think that Andraste deserves a shot, then I will see what she is made of. I still think she should be playing with her dolls, though."

"I don't have dolls! I have action figures!"

Ves held his daughter's arm and led her away. "Hush, now. Let's bring you to the changing room so that you can get ready."

He and his daughter reappeared a moment later. Andraste had changed into a special training outfit that covered her entire body including her head. It looked like a slightly fortified vacsuit with thin but decent padding.

The expensive suit also contained a host of other protective measures, but they should never kick in if everything went right. Ves just wanted them for his piece of mind.

Though Andraste was not used to the suit, she adapted remarkably quickly to her restrictions.

Her range of motion was still high and Andraste could easily run and perform acrobatics in the specialized training suit.

She was already skipping as she passed through the entrance of the sparring ring. Her red hair was tied into a cute ponytail that specifically poked out of her suit.

"Come on, auntie Ketis! Teach me how to fight with a sword!"

The swordmaster smiled indulgently at the little girl. "I haven't even begun to teach my moves to my son. No matter how much you have developed your

body, I will not turn you into a warrior just yet. Building up a proper foundation is important. I need to learn more about how your physique works before I can determine a more precise training plan."

To that end, Ketis raised her arm to a large weapon rack that was placed against the bulkhead in the distance.

Moments later, the smallest and lightest training rod detached from the rack and flew all the way over until it landed in Ketis' hand.

She fiddled with the weapon for a moment, causing it to become more compact and manageable for a little girl.

Once she was done with the adjustments, she tossed the cute little training rod at the girl without warning.

Though Andraste flinched, her instinctive reaction was quite on point. Her little hands grasped the spinning rod by the grip!

Both Ves and Ketis looked impressed at this feat.

"Okay. I am beginning to see what you are talking about." Ketis remarked as she held her rod in a defensive stance. "Andraste! Attack me with all you have got!"

"Uh, are you sure, auntie Ketis?"

"You can't hurt me even when I'm asleep."

"I don't know any fighting styles."

"You know how to hurt someone by swinging a stick, right? That is all I want from you today!"

"Okay..."

"Don't try to pull off anything crazy. You are liable to get into an accident."

"But—"

"—Stop!" Ketis barked. "I know what you were about to say. You wanted to say that your protective suit will help you prevent yourself from getting hurt by your own mistakes, is that right?"

Andraste's little head nodded.

"That is exactly what will get you killed in a real fight! If you want to train as a Swordmaiden, then you need to develop both strength and control. I will not allow anyone under our tutelage to become a danger to herself. If you cannot demonstrate enough discipline and control to me, then I will turn you away even if you have impressed me on a physical level."

Though Andraste was an overexcited girl who wanted to impress her idol with the flashiest moves she could manage, she was still smart enough to take the warning seriously.

The young girl forcibly calmed herself down to the point where she had reached a more reasonable level of excitement.

It didn't look as if she would ever be able to become calm and poised like Ketis, but that was pretty much a lost cause.

Andraste looked up at Ketis for a few seconds before she charged forward with as much speed as her little legs could allow!

She cleverly used her diminutive stature to her advantage and swung her thin and relatively rod at Ketis' ankles.

Though the swordmaster could have easily evaded this attack, she opted to deflect the attack by swiping her larger and lengthier rod downwards.

"Hey! That's not fair!" Andraste complained as her tiny body wobbled aside due to the force exerted onto her weapon.

"You are smaller and weaker." Ketis said. "Using your wits is an essential part to winning a fight. If you cannot be bothered to use your mind, then you will get killed sooner or later."

Andraste let out a cute but frustrated noise. "I can be smart as well!"

She no longer charged forward. Instead, she cautiously slid closer before she tentatively thrust her rod forward.

Though she had to get quite close in order to reach Ketis to begin with, the little girl was able to pull back in time before her weapon got struck a second time.

Of course, Ketis deliberately held back a lot of her strength in order to give Andraste a chance to perform her moves in the first place.

There was no way the little squirt would be able to get away with launching such pathetic attacks if Ketis was truly serious!

Andraste repeated her earlier move as she steadily circled around the swordmaster. She managed to learn a lot about Ketis' current strength and parameters, though the reverse was also true.

"Is this all you have got? Your lack of reach is your biggest disadvantage. You won't get anywhere by poking me from what you consider to be a noticeable distance."

"I-I was just planning out my attack strategy!" Andraste insisted. "I will show you my true power, now!"

Andraste let out a completely pointless war cry before she advanced at a brisk but reasonable pace.

She built up enough momentum to put actual force behind her next swing.

Though Ketis blocked the strike with casual ease, Andraste had already pushed her body against the seemingly immovable obstacle at an angle so

that she was able to circle around and launch an attack at a more awkward angle!

Though Ketis blocked this strike after she smoothly turned around, Andraste had already used her smaller and more agile body to her advantage by continuing to circle around.

Her attacks were rough and devoid of any proper form. She swung her rod as if it was a club rather than a sword and she made a lot of wasteful and excessive motions.

Andraste's technique was not particularly important. Ketis paid much more attention to the little squirt's body strength, agility, reaction speed, observation abilities, decision-making skills and other relevant indicators.

Surprisingly enough, Andraste still remained a bundle of energy after several minutes of high intensity movement.

The strength of her strikes hardly dropped and her technique was improving at a remarkably impressive rate.

Andraste was passively learning how to wield her rod after her opponent deftly exploited her greatest mistakes!

"Is that all you have got?" Ketis asked. "You're good for your age, but that does not mean you are ready for real swordsmanship training. This is not a game or a sport, Andraste. A real swordsman or swordswoman must be able to fight with the intent to kill. So far, I have sensed none of that from you. This is why you are not ready. How can a silly little girl understand what killing even means?"

Andraste grew more frustrated. She had already been enduring negative feedback for a while now. It became so bad that she no longer looked up to Ketis anymore!

"You're wrong! I know how to kill! Yaika, come out and show her your new trick!"

Maaw!

A black spiritual kitty emerged out of Andraste's head and dove into her little rod.

It was obvious that Andraste was copying one of Ketis' signature actions.

While Yaika was nowhere near as powerful or competent as Sharpie, both Ves and Ketis reacted with considerable shock as Andraste's little weapon became surrounded by a faint dark corona.

Yaika somehow found a way to put her recently developed death affinity to good use!

Now that Andraste had 'blessed' her own weapon with her companion spirit, she charged forward with greater focus and determination than before!

Ketis narrowed her eyes.

Before the empowered rod could come close enough to inflicting an attack that was slightly more dangerous than before, a much larger weapon struck it with such great force that it spun out of its wielder's grip!

Maaaw!

Ketis had even managed to push Yaika out of the spinning weapon!

"Ouch! That hurt!"

Andraste looked dismayed as she turned away from her current opponent to track the flight of her weapon.

That was a big mistake, but Ketis wasn't in the mood to admonish the young lady.

Instead, the swordmaster turned to Ves.

"Andraste needs training before she kills someone." She stated.

Ves tentatively nodded. "Yaika's power is too weak to kill someone outright, but she can still inflict harm on people's spirits. I would be happy if you could teach her restraint and control."

"Oh, I can teach her more than that." Ketis replied. "If she continues to maintain her interest in swordsmanship, my fellow swordsmen and I can train her to the point where she can develop her own sword style."

As far as the swordmaster was concerned, Andraste deserved nothing less with the power bestowed by her companion spirit!