

The Mech 6071

Chapter 6071 Observing the Other Side of the Coin

Ketis gazed at Ves' physical projection with an ambiguous expression.

Ves knew what she was trying to convey.

The swordmaster found his decision-making to be contemptible. At the very least, Ketis would have never made the same choices as him if she was in charge!

However, since Ves possessed greater authority than her, his orders took priority.

Of course, Ketis could have chosen to defy his instruction and take unilateral action through Sharpie. She truly wanted to give Venerable Dise a hand and allow her to escape the entanglement of the Emperor Tree's roots.

She ultimately did not do so. If Ves wanted her to hold back, then he must have his own reasons for doing so. His actions were not always righteous, but he had rarely if ever disadvantaged the Larkinson Clan.

The concept of enduring greater hardships in exchange for a greater payoff was deeply rooted among the Larkinsons. Even Ketis could not ignore how much the participants of this mission had grown.

It was just that Ketis did not like it that she had to watch on while so much misery, misunderstandings and animosity took hold of her fellow clansmen.

None of the mech pilots involved in the operation deserved to go through so much suffering.

Now, the careers of two newly ascended expert pilots came into question, while two high-tier expert pilots felt as if they had failed in their duties.

The only action that Ketis was allowed to take was to convey an emergency command to initiate orbital bombardment on the Emperor Tree.

Even then, the Transcendent Punisher Mark III's stationed on the Wild Torch only received their emergency orders after Taon had broken through.

By then, the incident could no longer be dismissed as a relatively simple case of friendly fire induced through enemy sabotage. The feud between Taon and Lanie had become etched in their very souls!

While Ketis couldn't help but regard this incident as a loss, Ves held the opposite stance.

He was trying his best from grinning!

As far as he was concerned, this mission yielded far more benefits and results than he could have imagined!

First, the strike force managed to retrieve a lot of high-quality samples. Aside from collecting sample specimens of the Emperor Tree's roots, bark, sap, leaves and so on, the expert mechs also managed to retrieve a whole wooden mech as well as fragments of one of the purple mechs!

The latter two were much more important prizes as far as Ves was concerned as they were vital to kickstarting his research on how to design a working Woodsap mech!

Aside from that, what happened to Taon and Lanie truly opened his eyes and enabled him to gain a better understanding of the variables at play when expert candidates broke through.

Unlike Ketis, Ves knew what was truly responsible for deciding on the criteria for breakthroughs and managing the actual process.

Most people thought that apotheosis was a spontaneous magical event that exceptional mech pilots managed to trigger by themselves, but Ves was aware of the actual truth.

The Red Kingdom decided and managed these pilot breakthroughs.

In his last talk with the Evolution Witch, Ves already received insider knowledge on a possible proposal to modify the Red Kingdom.

Earlier talks with the mechers also exposed the intention of loosening the breakthrough criteria.

In the past, many mech pilots who were otherwise powerful never earned the right to undergo apotheosis in the past. It was not because they were weak or lazy. It was because they possessed the wrong mentality or were lacking in honor. Bestowing these unstable time bombs with extraordinary willpower would lead to greater instability in the future!

However, red humanity couldn't care so much about stability anymore. Humans needed a lot more champions now. They particularly needed to nurture a batch of exceptionally talented and powerful champions that had the potential to evolve into god pilots in the following decades!

In short, the leaders of the human race couldn't afford to be picky anymore. Ves believed it was a good sign that the Star Designers had already implemented numerous critical changers to the operation of the Red Kingdom. They had moved much faster than he anticipated!

Their swift action was the primary reason why both Taon and Lanie successfully broke through despite their adverse conditions.

From a certain perspective, Taon and Lanie should have never been allowed to advance to expert pilots. They were too extreme and steeped in negative thoughts during their breakthrough moments.

Though Ves did not understand everything related to breakthroughs, he managed to learn enough to understand that every core characteristic of an expert candidate became amplified during the process of apotheosis.

This mysterious transformation caused every positive trait such as honor and kindness to become stronger and more defined.

The reason why lots of high-ranking mech pilots were honorable, respectful, diligent and truthful was because of the deliberate selection bias that governed the operations of the Kingdom of Mechs!

Now, the Red Kingdom diverged even more from its origin by getting rid of this selection bias!

This had grave consequences to the mech community in the coming years. Mech pilots who were treacherous, hateful and selfish would become even more despicable if they managed to step onto the path of godhood!

By giving mech pilots with negative traits an equal chance of breaking through, Ves expected to witness the emergence of a lot more expert pilots with faults comparable to Taon and Lanie!

In that sense, observing the emergence of two different distorted expert pilots truly increased his understanding of the greater nature of high-ranking mech pilots!

It was as if Ves had spent decades looking at one side of a coin all of the time. He may have become knowledgeable about the side that he was able to perceive, but that did not mean he understood the workings of the coin as a whole!

Only when the coin flipped over and exposed its other side to Ves would he truly be able to grasp the full depth of the mech piloting profession.

An additional bonus was how distorted expert pilots were able to induce more extreme mutations to their mechs during their breakthroughs.

Though Ves found it a pity that the strike force had to abandon the Zeal, the retrieval of a partially intact Elegant Rage already satisfied him a lot!

He had already ordered Ketis to ship the damaged machine to New Constantinople VIII.

Ves had a strong feeling he could advance his research on Woodsap mechs by a huge extent so long as he was able to get his hands on the current version of the Elegant Rage!

Aside from that, Ves already had other ideas on how he could convert his newly gained insights into concrete gains.

All of that could wait for another time. He first needed to address the current affair.

"It's time." The physical projection of Ves spoke up. "Let's have a chat with the two... Larkinsons. Which one do you want to speak to first?"

"Let us start with the least severe case. Lanie."

They both entered the cell that held the exhausted form of Venerable Lanie Larkinson.

It became abundantly clear that Lanie had already taken her first real step to becoming a god. Her willpower became a lot stronger and more noticeable than before.

While Lanie certainly managed to become unquestionably stronger than before, her willpower and psyche most definitely gained heavy scars in the process!

Normally, this was a development that many people appreciated, because anyone who developed such a potent aura always succeeded in earning the respect of others.

Right now, respect was not the right word to describe what Ves nor Ketis thought of the girl.

It was more apt to use the words pity or regret when facing the young expert pilot.

While Lanie certainly managed to become unquestionably stronger than before, her willpower and psyche most definitely gained heavy scars in the process!

It was like being confronted by an ugly wound from the moment that the two mech designers caught sight of the poor young woman.

Much of the liveliness and optimism that previously characterized Lanie's heroic persona had disappeared.

In their place, Lanie had begun to radiate a sense of caution and defensiveness that no one ever expected to see in a powerful expert pilot.

She briefly grew defensive when Ves and Ketis entered her cell.

Fortunately, she relaxed a bit, allowing her thorny willpower to subside to an extent.

It was still present, but it was no longer on guard against her visitors.

"Lanie..." Ketis spoke in a caring and informal tone. "How is your body? Do you have any lingering injuries?"

The woman laying in the bed shook her head. "My body used to be a lot more broken than this, but Kelly managed to put it back together."

"Ma-aow..."

A tired but distinctly green spiritual cat emerged from her head. The mutated companion spirit still radiated a bit of life and vitality, but she had already channeled much of it into her principal.

"Mrow."

Blinky emerged from Ves' head and slowly approached Kelly. The latter reflexively jumped back and hissed in fright!

"Ma-aow! Ma-aow!"

"Mrow mrow mrow."

Blinky took the initiative to open his mouth and spray a jet of life energy into the air.

Though Kelly still looked on guard, she cautiously employed one her recently gained abilities and cautiously absorbed the energy released by the other companion spirit.

Soon enough, Kelly's eyes lit up as she absorbed more and more life energy. It was remarkably easy for her to absorb and digest it. Her mood lifted as she became filled with life!

"Ma-aow!"

When Kelly dove back inside Lanie, the expert pilot began to look rosier. The expert pilot gradually managed to drive back her exhaustion and feel a lot less vulnerable than before.

"Thank... thank you, patriarch."

"You're welcome." Ves gave the young woman a gentle smile. "You are a Larkinson, after all. You deserve this bit of courtesy from me at least. It is just..."

Lanie looked deeply at Ves and Ketis before letting out a resigned breath.

"I am in trouble."

"You are." Ketis responded with a disappointed expression. "We roughly know what you have been through. No one deserves to get attacked from behind by a fellow comrade. What happened to you was injustice. While you are well within your rights to defend yourself, you should have stayed calm. There was no need for you to retaliate against Taon while the both of you were still in the field. While I cannot entirely blame you for this, it is a fact that you completely lost your cool and defied Joshua's orders. You crossed the line when you proactively attacked the Zeal with the intent to kill your fellow Larkinson."

A surge of red-hot anger welled up inside Lanie!

Her willpower became a lot more agitated, making Ves and Ketis feel a lot more unwelcome in her cell!

However, Lanie quickly reined in her emotions and bottled up her frighteningly powerful fury.

"..."

"Well? What do you have to say for yourself, Lanie?"

"What can I say?" Lanie sourly replied. "You most certainly have recordings of what happened. I cannot deny my actions. Can you truly blame me for trying to get back at the person who almost managed to kill me? Just because I barely managed to escape death does not mean that Taon gets to go free! Besides, no matter why he struck at my mech in the back, it is unquestionable that he was no longer my ally anymore. There was no way I could remain safe in the presence of the Zeal! Anything could happen that could cause Taon to make another 'mistake' and finish the job! I had to take him out for my safety and the safety of our clan!"

"THAT IS NOT FOR YOU TO DECIDE!" Ketis roared as she lost her cool herself! "YOU ARE A LARKINSON, AND SO IS TAON! YOUR STRIKE FORCE HAS ALREADY BEEN WARNED ABOUT THE EMPEROR TREE'S CAPABILITIES! IT WAS CLEARLY AN ACCIDENT THAT CAUSED THE ZEAL TO SHOOT AT YOUR MECH! WHEN YOU MANAGED TO RECOVER, YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE TRIED TO REPEAT YOU WOULD-BE MURDERER'S MISTAKE!"

"Then what should I have done instead?!" Lanie defensively shot back! "Did you expect me to stay meek and potentially give Taon another chance to finish me off for good?! Even if the Emperor Tree is at fault, it is Taon's fault that he got fooled by the calamity tree!"

"YOU SHOULD HAVE RETREATED AND LET OTHERS HANDLE TAON! WE HAVE RULES AND REGULATIONS FOR THIS! JUST BECAUSE YOU ARE ANGRY IS NO EXCUSE FOR YOU TO TAKE MATTERS INTO YOUR OWN HANDS! A SOLDIER MUST ALWAYS BE IN CONTROL! I THOUGHT YOU OF ALL MECH PILOTS WOULD UNDERSTAND THIS PRINCIPLE!"

Chapter 6072 Unrepentant

Ketis grew more and more disappointed with Lanie.

The once-promising expert candidate may have succeeded in realizing her potential and become an expert pilot, but her cognition had changed for the worse!

Lanie expressed no remorse about her actions. She believed with all her heart that all of her actions were justified from beginning to end.

No matter whether she made mistaken assumptions or defied her superior orders, Lanie stubbornly insisted that she did what every Larkinson would have done in her position!

This was a terrible sign that her distorted apotheosis had permanently broken her old self.

Ordinary mortals may be weak, but they happen to be quite flexible and malleable. They were much more susceptible to change.

Expert pilots were different. They were demigods who managed to attain their strength by gaining supreme confidence in themselves.

Lanie was no different in this aspect as she did not believe for a second that she was in the wrong!

In other words, to admit that she had acted in error would contradict the basis of her extraordinary willpower!

It would literally shatter if she was truly forced to recognize that she had acted in error!

Although Ketis most definitely knew about this considering that she was a swordmaster herself, she possessed her own principles! She deeply condemned Lanie's excessive actions and could not accept all of the nuances that factored in the latter's case!

"Ketis." Ves firmly said as he took hold of the swordmaster's arm, causing her to halt. "Stop. Remember who you are. You may be the commander of Task Force Solus, but it is not your place to cast judgment on Lanie. That goes for Joshua and Dise as well. Each of you are too involved in this case to remain impartial. It is the responsibility of others to take a look at Lanie's circumstances."

"Sir...?" Lanie spoke as she looked up at Ves' projection. "What... what will happen to me? What is this about casting judgment? I... I did nothing wrong. I was merely defending myself."

The fact that she still had the temerity to make this claim was proof that expert pilots truly did not abide by common sense anymore!

It also appeared that this mental problem was particularly more severe in the case of distorted expert pilots!

"Whether you acted correctly or in error is no longer up to us to decide." Ves explained to Lanie.

"The Larkinson Clan has a rule that if there are allegations that mech pilots commit severe misdeeds, they must present themselves in front of a tribunal of Larkinson expert pilots. I am afraid you cannot avoid this process. It doesn't matter what you believe. What matters is what the tribunal of your peers thinks about your conduct. You can trust in their integrity if nothing else. They will pay attention to your mitigating factors and decide whether your attempts to retaliate against Taon are justified or not. For now, you must remain in custody, so please stay put."

Suffice to say, Venerable Lanie was anything but amused at this. She still believed that she was fully in the right. Even if she broke a few rules here and there, she had been acting for the greater good as far as she was concerned.

How could the Larkinsons not see who was the greater threat!

"...Fine." Lanie said in resignation. Just because her willpower became permanently scarred by her trauma did not mean she had lost all of her brains. "If you want me to participate in this circus, then so be it. Is Taon still alive?"

"Yes."

That caused Lanie to sneer. "Then at least tell me that you will drag Taon in front of the tribunal as well."

"That is a given." Ketis confirmed. "His personal failings originally caused this disaster. He must definitely account for himself."

"Good! I hope that you will treat him fairly. He almost killed me. I can never forgive him for that. If the tribunal judges him guilty and sentence him to death, can I be the one to do the deed? I would like nothing more than to look at him in the eyes and strangle him to death with my own two hands!"

The thorny aura surrounding Lanie's prone form received a lot of stimulation. The more she imagined her retribution towards Taon, the more her willpower became excited!

Ves and Ketis exchanged brief glances with each other. This was anything but a healthy mindset! It was completely unacceptable for a Larkinson to dream about killing another Larkinson!

"We have protocols." Ves answered in a restrained tone. "Look, I know that Taon has become the least favorite Larkinson in your word, but don't forget who is truly responsible for setting up this chain of events. Taon is just the patsy who pulled the trigger. The true mastermind who plotted your demise is the Emperor Tree. This calamity plant is the rightful target of your resentment."

"I haven't forgotten about that stupid tree!" Lanie aggressively snarled! "The Emperor Tree needs to die sooner rather than later! Tell me that you will chop it up and burn it down as soon as possible! The longer it lives, the greater the chance it will create more Taons!"

Though Lanie sounded unreasonably paranoid about this, Ves could believe that the Emperor Tree may truly be capable of dominating the minds of other Larkinsons.

Every calamity beast was capable of influencing the minds of those that stray within their sphere of influence, but the Emperor Tree was a rare exoplant that specialized in this aspect!

Unless the Larkinsons found a way to increase their defenses against the Emperor Tree's subversion, Ves could not justify the decision to keep it alive and well over a longer period of time.

Given the calamity plant's frighteningly powerful learning ability, several Larkinsons were afraid that the previous confrontation with the strike force had taught it a lot more about the power of human mechs!

The Emperor Tree was most definitely working hard to develop specific countermeasures against the two expert mechs!

Once the calamity plant became strong enough to overwhelm the defenses of Chimera Base and defeat the task force's mech units, it was already too late!

"Don't worry, Lanie. We have already begun to transfer Venerable Isobel Kotin and the Promethea back to the Reticula Corein System. Once they arrive, the task force is instructed to act against the Emperor Tree as soon as possible."

Ketis grimaced when she thought about what they must do next. "It will be hard to put down the Emperor Tree without provoking the other calamity beasts. The orbital bombardment that freed up the First Sword and the Everchanger has alarmed at least several nearby calamity beasts, and maybe alerted several other ones as well. The Darkdrill Hives have become more active, which is not a good sign. We still need to plan our 'hunt' carefully."

It became vital for the Larkinson Clan to get rid of the Emperor Tree before it improved too much.

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That was good enough for Lanie. She relaxed and sank into her bed. "Have you talked to Taon yet? No. You didn't. If you stop by his cell, can you send him my regards?"

"Maybe."

When Ketis and Ves' projection left Lanie's cell, they both remained speechless for a moment.

Both of them had grown profoundly disappointed at how Lanie ended up. If she was unable to recover from her scars...

"If Lanie is indicative of the expert pilots of the future, then I am not so certain that the Age of Dawn is as wondrous as before."

"Don't worry, Ketis. Haven't you taken a look at the expert pilots who managed to break through during the Battle of Torment? I haven't studied their records in detail, but they seem pretty decent as far as I know."

The two chatted a bit more before they moved over to another cell.

Once they entered, they immediately focused their attention on a much more obviously injured expert pilot.

Though Taon enjoyed much greater protection as his sturdy cockpit was located deep inside the well-armored Zeal, he did not manage to avoid harm.

Taon did not possess the ability to boost her regeneration like Lanie, so he had to rely on more conventional forms of treatment to heal from his injuries.

He was not unconscious, though. His eyes remained open, though they looked a lot more hollow than before. It was as if all of the hope and piety had been sucked into a black hole.

When Ves and Ketis approached Taon's beside, they felt a lot more disturbed than when they came up to Lanie.

Taon possessed two distinct auras. His main one possessed a destructive element to it. Ves frowned as he could feel the expert pilot willpower expressing indiscriminate hostility towards everyone and everything.

It was as if Taon wanted nothing more than the entire universe to go to ruin!

The only reason why Taon's force of will did not start breaking down the bed or the surrounding medical instruments was because it was too weak when he was by himself.

Only when he piloted a proper expert mech would his domain start breaking down any nearby matter.

The second aura originated from Taon's companion spirit.

"Hoot. Hoot."

The spiritual owl looked radically different from before! Even though Sirca was clearly perched on a nearby railing, the companion spirit radiated an aura that seemed to repel any form of attention as well as spirituality!

Sirca's active rejection was so total that it not only kept Ylvaine at bay, but also blocked Taon's connection with Goldie!

Of course, the Golden Cat did not really have a good opinion of Taon at the moment. The trial had yet to start, but the ancestral spirit had already developed her own judgment towards the expert pilot!

Anyone who possessed just one of these inclinations undoubtedly needed mental counseling.

For a single individual to possess both the desire to ruin everything as well as strong antisocial tendencies, that person had undoubtedly gone mad!

"Taon."

"Patriarch. Swordmaster."

"You don't particularly sound happy to see us, Taon."

"I... failed to live up to your expectations." The expert pilot wearily said. "I... wanted to prove I can be strong without relying on the Great Prophet. What did I do? I sought his help because I couldn't finish a single job. I should have known better than to trust the guidance of a design spirit that was not supposed to be there. I just... never thought about it. I really thought that it was Ylvaine that guided my aim. It's my fault, but not entirely."

"What do you mean, Taon?"

"Ylvaine... is not a good influence to our clan." The expert pilot surprisingly claimed! "We were all fools for believing in the nonsense spouted by a false prophet. The more we listen to him, the more we are being trained to pray to him. It is no wonder that hardly any mech pilot from the Eye of Ylvaine has become an expert candidate. There is no hope that any of them can become an expert pilot, because they all share the same fault as mine. We would rather put our faith in the fantasy of Ylvaine than to believe in our own strength. This is a mistake. We should never pray to him anymore. If we want to free everyone from the poison that is faith... we must bring every false god to ruin."

Ves almost shuddered when he heard those ominous words. It sounded as if Taon wanted to share his deranged manifesto!

"I know that you have been... misled, but don't you think that your response is a bit too extreme?"

Taon's empty eyes stared up at Ves in silent judgment.

"Please explain why you saw fit to murder your own living mech." Ketis interjected. "Do you know what crimes you have committed? If you are dissatisfied with the Zeal and no longer want to partner with him anymore, then you could have at least waited until you have returned! As long as you issue a request, we would have been happy to exchange your Zeal with a regular Transcendent Punisher mech!"

The injured expert pilot softly scoffed. "The Zeal... let me down. He betrayed me, just like Ylvaine. I did what was necessary at the time. I... sacrificed his life so that I could become stronger in the process. Since my living mech isn't of use to me anymore when he is alive... then he can only be useful to me when he is dead. I do not need him anymore. I have become strong enough to fight my own battles."

What a bastard!

Chapter 6073 Response to Failure

Ketis glowered as she changed into a training outfit and picked up her Bloodsinger.

The talk with Taon went just as poorly as the talk with Lanie.

The former citizen of the Ylvaine Protectorate had completely changed after returning from the Emperor Tree.

The old Taon was dead, and so was his living mech.

What remained was a fallen expert pilot who had become defined by his traumas rather than his virtues.

Though Ves and Ketis attempted to talk sense into the morose expert pilot, 'Venerable' Taon remained completely unmoved by their arguments.

Just like Lanie, Taon expressed an extreme degree of mule headedness when it came to his new beliefs.

Ketis found it unbelievable that just because an enemy took advantage of Taon's faith, the expert pilot immediately turned against Ylvaine and every other 'false god', whatever that meant!

The expert pilot and his owl-like companion spirit became completely out of sync with the rest of the Larkinson Clan. Venerable Taon's trust had been struck so hard that he found it difficult to trust others anymore.

It was deeply depressing to see a once-promising champion and example of the Eye of Ylvaine fall to ruin due to honest mistakes on the battlefield.

Was there a way to treat Taon's severe traumas and restore his mind to a healthier state?

Possibly.

Was the Larkinson Clan capable of performing such a difficult transformation?

Maybe.

Turning Taon into a productive expert pilot was doubtlessly a herculean task. The Larkinson Clan owed it to its own mech pilots to honor their sacrifices and invest a good amount of resources to treat the injuries they accumulated over the course of their service, but... there was a limit to how much the clan was willing and able to spend.

Was it really worth it for the clan to redeem Taon? Did he even deserve this treatment?

Ketis could not make up her mind on this matter. She was not suited to this sort of decision making. She was a mech designer and a swordmaster. She possessed a lot of expertise in the fields she was passionate about, but she still had much to learn before she could excel as a leader.

The fact that the latest mission spun out of control in such an extreme fashion clearly taught her a few painful lessons about relying too much on assumptions.

"Ves is right." She muttered to herself as she strode into one of the large training compartments of the Wild Torch. "When you play with fire, you will eventually get burned."

It was the job of a good leader to take these potential scenarios into account and prepare enough contingency plans to mitigate the damage.

Ketis had not arranged enough redundancies and backup measures that could have stopped the two newly arisen expert pilots from developing a deadly feud with each other.

Now, she feared it was already too late to repair the damage. Taon and Lanie had become completely hostile towards each other. There was no way the Larkinson Clan would be able to remain in harmony anymore!

Ketis stopped glowering when she began to sense Venerable Dise's powerful sword intent.

The high-tier expert pilot had taken refuge in the training chamber shortly after Ketis recalled her and her expert mech back to orbit.

The dark-skinned Swordmaiden clearly turned introspective after her turn from her encounter with the Emperor Tree. She barely spoke with the other Larkinsons and hardly registered what was taking place around her. She had practically closed herself off from every external stimuli.

This was why Ketis decided to go through the trouble of talking with Dise in person as opposed to talking to the expert pilot by remote.

As Ketis entered the sparring ring, she did not choose to confront Dise directly. The Journeyman Mech Designer instead warmed up her body by jogging in circles while swinging her personal greatsword in a relaxed and graceful manner.

The wind whipped as Ketis steadily built up her momentum. The Bloodsinger began to exude more eagerness as Sharpie began to look forward to locking blades with Dise's own greatsword.

Dise finally snapped out of her stupor and looked up at her fellow sister.

"Ketis."

"Dise."

The two did not exchange any further words until Ketis finally completed her warmup. Her athletic form shone as a sharp sword aura covered her body like a small protective layer.

Though Ketis was not able to pilot a large and powerful war machine like Dise, an orthodox swordmaster still possessed her own tricks!

Dise did not possess the ability to generate a resonance shield outside of the cockpit of her mech, but she carried a personal shield generator that could offer similar protection.

Not that the two Swordmaidens cared about that. Both of them had become so skilled in their swordsmanship that they were confident they could avoid accidents!

As Dise rose to her feet and gripped her Unending alloy greatsword, her demeanor changed as her instincts as a warrior took hold again.

The vulnerability she exhibited a moment earlier had disappeared, but Ketis knew better.

Dise still couldn't get over the mistakes she made during the last mission. She just hid her feelings behind her habitual combativeness.

"Hah!"

Ketis decisively stepped forward and chopped her Bloodsinger at her fellow sister!

Clang!

Naturally, Dise easily blocked the incoming strike, but did nothing more.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The two extraordinary swordswomen proceeded to exchange blows. They started out at a slow pace, but steadily escalated their speed. They exerted themselves increasingly more, causing their blood to pump faster and their body heat to rise!

"It's not your fault." Ketis said. "Accidents happen. No one knew that the Emperor Tree was that smart and powerful."

Dise snarled and began to channel greater power into her greatsword, causing her next swing to unleash a blade of sword energy that Ketis easily deflected.

"You do not get to say that! I failed, plain and simple. I am an expert pilot. I should be better than this. People call me an ace pilot candidate because I have reached the ceiling of my current rank. I used to believe in their words, but it is only now that I have woken up to the truth. I do not deserve to break through to ace pilot and catch up with Tusa. I still need to develop my swordsmanship."

"Your swordsmanship is fine." Ketis spoke between blows. "You are the most skilled swordswoman in the Larkinson Clan. Even I struggle to keep up with you due to your superior resonance strength and the time you have invested in your training. How many powerful sword techniques have you learned?"

"Too many, and that is precisely what is holding me back!" Dise declared as she executed a Bladestorm.

A storm of sword energy attacks swept across the sparring ring, striking the energy shields protecting the venue but got dispelled by Ketis' exquisite defensive move.

"Your techniques set you apart from the other melee expert pilots, Dise. None of them can win a duel against you because their mastery over their weapons can never catch up to yours. Even the stronger and newer expert mechs are unable to overpower your First Sword most of the time."

Dise used to take pride in that. For example, the First Sword was pretty much two mech generations behind Venerable Benjamin Larkinson's Blood Star Mark II, but it was not uncommon for the former to defeat the latter in a practice spar!

Dise's extraordinary sword style and mastery was much more sophisticated than the more practical swordsmanship mastered by Ves' grandfather.

Of course, the old veteran and former retiree possessed his own bag of tricks that allowed him to defeat the Swordmaiden expert pilot so long as he was allowed to utilize the full range of the Blood Star Mark II.

The more modern expert mech's superior defenses, mobility and ranged armaments easily allowed Benjamin to employ a kiting strategy!

As long as his Blood Star Mark II utilized his superior mobility to maintain his distance from the First Sword, the former could easily take potshots at the latter with impunity!

Benjamin only admitted defeat when his expert mech was forced to fight against the First Sword by exchanging blows with their blades.

He readily admitted that he was completely outclassed when it came to pure swordsmanship!

All that should have given Dise an ample amount of confidence. Yet it was only after her First Sword became entangled by the roots of the Emperor Tree that she recognized her own arrogance.

Vainglory did not equate to strength!

The sparring session heated up as both swordswomen began to strike harder and faster!

"I failed!" Dise recriminated herself. "It was my duty to look after Taon and Lanie, but I could not come to their aid during the time they needed it the most!"

"You are not a nanny, Dise, and the two are not children. The two former expert candidates are soldiers who volunteered for a dangerous mission. They sought a challenge in order to find their breakthrough chances. From the moment they decided to confront the Emperor Tree, they should have already taken into account that they might not be able to return alive."

"I know that, but I shouldn't have gotten stalled for so long! My mech and I should have been able to slice our way through all of those roots, but we failed to get out by relying on our own power. We had to wait until the orbital strike interrupted the Emperor Tree to finally get loose. That was not supposed to happen!"

Dise's frustrations caused her to channel more power into her greatsword. Her sword strikes gained more momentum, making it difficult for Ketis to stand her ground.

"I see that you are not resigned to your current state." Ketis spoke as she continued to keep up with Dise's forceful sword techniques. "That is good. Anyone can fail. What matters is what happens next. That is what separates the winners from the losers. What do you intend to do now that you have understood the gap between you and the truly strong?"

"Get stronger." Dise responded. "I will never let myself get trapped by the likes of those roots again. I have identified two fundamental problems that hinder me from doing what is necessary to win every battle."

"And those are?"

"First, my defense is too inadequate. Much of the reason why I have to restrain my blade and forgo opportunities to attack is because the First Sword cannot withstand too much damage. Sure, my mech has the protection of a resonance shield, but it is far from the strongest among the other expert mechs. I increasingly feel as if I am piloting a mech made out of glass."

"You are piloting an outdated offensive expert mech. No one expects your First Sword to endure as many attacks as the Bastion." Ketis pointed out.

"I am not claiming that the First Sword should be converted into a defensive mech." Dise responded. "I am not blaming my failures on my battle partner's lack of major upgrades either. It is my approach to swordsmanship that is the problem. I have lost focus in my pursuit of strength. I learned and created too many sword techniques. I have an entire library of them, but I wasted so much time on coming up with new ones that I have never seriously improved my execution of any

of them. That needs to change. I have decided to limit my repertoire and develop a more concise sword style that truly encapsulates my will and conviction."

As Dise shared her intentions, her swordsmanship shifted in real-time. Her greatsword slowed down, but struck with increasingly greater force. The expert pilot no longer thought about pulling off all kinds of fancy moves, but tried to stick to the fundamentals whenever possible.

Only occasionally would her greatsword light up as she executed a sword technique that she favored.

Dise utilized her swordsmanship to communicate how much she committed to her new plan!

Ketis welcomed this change. Her eyes lit up as she felt that Dise's sword heart was quietly sublimating into a more condensed and solid form.

It was as if Dise was forging a renewed inner sword for herself!

As the expert pilot continued to enact her new plan, her strikes gained so much force that Ketis could no longer keep up with the increase in strength. She continually had to step back in order to unload the forces impacting against her Bloodsinger!

Dise used to borrow a lot of concepts on sharpness from Ketis, but she had chosen to set much of it aside in order to pursue her own approach towards swordsmanship!

Chapter 6074 Unbreakable

As the sparring session began to wound down, both Ketis and Dise still retained their excitement.

Dise had taken her earlier failure in stride. Her mood recovered over the course of the sparring session. The more time she spent on condensing and refining her new swordsmanship, the more momentum she applied through her attacks!

The two Swordmaidens engaged in an unspoken form of communication.

Ketis eagerly encouraged the expert pilot to develop her new swordsmanship. The mech designer helpfully reduced her role to that of a practice dummy so that Venerable Dise was able to redefine her personal sword style.

By the time Venerable Dise completed the prototype of her new approach towards sword combat, her body grew exhausted due to the intensive exertions, but her willpower hungered for more!

"Congratulations, Dise."

"Thank you, Ketis." The expert pilot responded in a lighter tone now that she had recovered her mood. "I am still upset about how I failed to come to Taon and Lanie's aid, but that will be the last time I let our comrades down. If I ever end up surrounded by roots or other obstacles, I will do my utmost to push my way out by force. I will no longer fear every attack. Even if I cannot evade them, I will put my complete trust in the steel of my mech!"

"Your mech isn't actually made out of steel. It currently consists of Unending alloy and many other metallic and nonmetallic materials." Ketis couldn't help but correct her sister.

Dise shrugged her shoulders. "It is a figure of speech."

"It is quite unusual for a swordsman mech specialist to put so much emphasis on defense. Why don't you favor an approach that is all about attack? As long as your attack power becomes high enough to cut down every adversary, there is no need to consider defense anymore!"

"I... have considered that approach, but that fits your ethos more than mine. Maybe it is because of my lingering connection to Qilanxo, but I cannot ignore the matter of defense. Even if my First Sword finally completes her makeover, I do not think that the technical improvements alone will help her withstand every attack. Only by making my mech unbreakable will I be able to overcome every powerful enemy with confidence!"

This was a rather distinct deviation from the Swordmaiden approach towards combat. The mech legion's mech doctrines always emphasized the need to combine strong attack with good control and maneuverability.

So long as the Swordmaiden mechs were able to strike at the right time and disengage from the enemy whenever they wanted, they would definitely be able to gain the upper hand!

If the Swordmaiden mechs got bogged down in a tough fight against enemies that had them at a disadvantage, then they already failed!

From what Ketis was able to gather from Dise's words and swordsmanship, the high-tier expert pilot sought to succeed where other Swordmaidens faltered.

It was... strange, to say the least. Dise was the first expert pilot of the Swordmaidens. Everyone just assumed that she would embody all of the classical strengths of her mech legion!

"I think I understand your logic, but... what if piloting an unbreakable mech and wielding an impervious sword is not enough? If you focus too much on defense, how will you be able to spare enough energy to attack and kill your foes?"

A swordsman focusing on defense was not an absurd idea in itself. As a swordmaster, Ketis had dabbled in many sword styles developed by the Heavensword Association that possessed a defensive focus.

From coordinating with physical shields to specializing in counterattacks, many different swordmasters in the past figured out ways to fend off incoming attacks with greater effectiveness than was normally possible.

However, their ability to go on the offensive could not keep up with their more conventional peers.

Ketis had legitimate concerns about Dise's shift in development strategy. The First Sword had acquired a good reputation for being the strongest offensive melee mech of the Larkinson Clan.

As far as defense was concerned, there were other melee mechs that could do a better job in this aspect.

The Riot carried a lot more armor and proved to be a lot tougher than people gave him credit for. The upcoming upgrade would make the expert spearman mech even more unkillable!

The Everchanger was not as thick and massive, but he was able to regenerate from all but the most severe damage. What happened to the Elegant Rage in the last mission was a good indication of the expert hero mech's unreasonable ability to bounce back from his injuries!

As for the First Sword... aside from wielding a large and very hardy masterwork greatsword, Ketis could not really think of anything else that gave her a pronounced defensive advantage.

How would Dise be able to excel in defense while making sure that she did not waste the offensive advantages of her expert mech?

The swordsman mech specialist grinned at the mech designer. She raised her greatsword.

"Respa."

Her powerful companion spirit emerged from her head. Respa currently took the form of a greatsword that looked like a miniature copy of the Decapitator.

As soon as Respa merged with the large blade, the weapon began to exude a much greater threat than before!

Unlike Sharpie who straightforwardly granted any weapon wielded by Ketis an unnaturally sharp edge, Respa seemed to be obsessed with beheading foes!

Though Ketis was supposed to be winding down, she instantly became more alarmed as she felt a faint threat towards her life from Dise's greatsword.

Of course, the threat was only faint. Venerable Dise was not a full swordmaster, after all. It was already amazing that she could make Ketis feel uncomfortable.

"I feel a slight sting on my neck." Ketis commented. "It is... a disconcerting sensation. I cannot ignore it or get rid of it. Is Respa that eager to separate my head from my neck?"

The aggressive air surrounding Dise's greatsword subsided. The expert pilot deliberately relaxed her posture and gave Ketis an apologetic smile.

"I wanted to show you that I still have a way to retain my killing edge. During the last mission, I witnessed how Lanie and her companion spirit were able to empower the Elegant Rage in two different ways. That gave me enough inspiration to try something similar. I will continue to focus on making my mech as unbreakable as possible, while Respa will do her best to help me behead my enemies as easily as possible."

Ketis finally understood the expert pilot's complete scheme. It was a rather ambitious and difficult one to fulfill.

"I can see how well they complement each other." Ketis said. "Pardon the pun, but it will allow you to excel in completing decapitation strikes. Normally, I would say that it would be difficult for you to decapitate starships, phase whales, the Emperor Tree and other difficult enemies, but... I feel that Respa has already made deeper attainments in beheading. So long as she goes far enough, you will eventually be able to 'decapitate' any enemy on a conceptual level."

What did that mean?

It meant that even if Venerable Dise confronted an enemy without a clearly defined 'head' like the Emperor Tree, her powerful mech would still be able to kill the calamity beast by striking it at a specific location only once!

Of course, Venerable Dise was completely unable to do so at this time. She may come a lot closer to doing so if she managed to advance to ace pilot, but even then she would be limited to performing instant kills on swarms of weaker opponents.

Still, Ketis was more than happy to see that her sister not only formulated a cohesive plan, but also had a good chance of realizing her ambitions!

The two talked a bit more about swordsmanship and other related topics. Ketis had little reason to discuss more substantive subjects.

Dise was on the right track. The powerful expert pilot was more than capable of fleshing out her new combat approach through her own efforts.

Hours later, Ketis approached the hangar bay where the Everchanger had arrived.

Her husband had already left the cockpit. Similar to Dise, Venerable Joshua also grew disappointed in himself. He had become more deeply affected by his failures and the tragedies that resulted from them. As the commander of the strike force, he held immediate responsibility over what had happened.

"Joshua." Ketis gently greeted her husband as she kicked off the deck and floated towards the open cockpit. "It is not entirely your fault, you know. I am partially responsible for what happened by not insisting on a more cautious approach. The planning of this mission wasn't good enough. In hindsight, we should have taken the Emperor Tree's ability to twist people's minds more seriously when we know that it had already turned many exobeasts into suicidal aggressors."

The expert pilot was surrounded by his own gloomy air. His liveliness and optimism had dimmed as he continued to sit on the edge of the cockpit entrance.

"I know I don't carry all of the blame, but... I could have saved them, you know. If I was able to fight my way out of the envelopment of purple mechs and annoying branches, I could have arrived in time to stop the fight between Taon and Lanie from getting worse. Now... two of our clan's brightest prospects have become tarnished."

Ketis sat down next to Joshua and embraced him in an affectionate hug. "I will tell you the same story I told Dise. You are not entirely to blame. We made a plan and we thought it worked. Things can always go wrong. No one can win a battle every time. What matters is not that we suffered a loss, but what we must do in order to prevent a similar outcome in the future. How much progress have you made in that? Have you figured out why you fell short, and what you must do in order to remedy your problem?"

"HIS PROBLEM IS SIMPLE." The Everchanger interjected without invitation. "MY BATTLE PARTNER IS NOT STRONG ENOUGH. HE SPLITS HIS ATTENTION AND HASN'T FULLY FIGURED OUT WHAT HE MUST FIGHT FOR AND HOW HE WILL DO A BETTER JOB."

The high-tier expert pilot's expression grew complex. "I guess I can't avoid it anymore. I did put a lot of thought into those matters. I have a lot of simple dreams, but I realize I can't make any of that happen if I don't grow stronger. We used to live in a time where everyone looked up to high-tier expert pilots like myself. Now... I understand how little that matters when confronting a calamity plant like the Emperor Tree. To think that there are more native creatures who are around the same level. If enemies like these continue to evolve across the Red Ocean, then I can't remain stuck at my current rank. I need to break through and become strong enough to challenge a big enemy like the Emperor Tree by myself."

"That is easier said than done, Joshua. According to our own analysis, Saint Tusa and the Dark Zephyr Mark III won't be able to kill the Emperor Tree. Their burst damage is high, but they are not

good at inflicting damage on a massive scale. The calamity plant has demonstrated such unreasonably high regeneration capabilities that it will just heal whenever it gets struck by a serious attack."

The story was a bit more nuanced than that. The analysis had only been conducted with the assumption that the Dark Zephyr remained a quasi-first-class high-tier expert mech.

Once it got upgraded into a much more powerful first-class ace mech, then the threat posed by the Dark Zephyr would undoubtedly increase, though not as radically as most people anticipated.

However, it was much more appropriate to use the right tools for the right job. Ketis was much more optimistic about Venerable Isobel Kotin and the Promethea because they excelled at taking down massive opponents!

As for Joshua, Ketis could not figure out what her husband intended to do in order to make sure he gained the upper hand in future confrontations.

Did he even have a plan?

Chapter 6075 A New Combat System

"I had a system." Joshua claimed. "You are already aware that I am close with nearly every design spirit, right? I can even get along with Ylvaine and the Superior Mother. I always made use of my relationships with all of those spirits to borrow their power whenever it was convenient. My Everchanger is the only Larkinson mech that can switch design spirits on his own initiative. That has given me a lot of flexibility in past battles. My companion spirit Willy strengthens my combat system even further because he can independently call down another design spirit."

In other words, Willy and the Everchanger were able to work together to call down two different design spirits at the same time!

The huge number of possible combinations increased the versatility of the Everchanger even further, allowing him to swap out a seemingly endless variety of advantages whenever it was necessary.

Joshua had spent a lot of time on building up his relationships and familiarizing himself with the powers of all of those design spirits.

It was a pity that he was unable to employ any of those strengths during the last mission.

"I can't fight at my best when my Everchanger is surrounded by Solus Gas." He said with a grimace. "I don't know what exactly makes this gas so special, but the fact that it can completely cut me off from the design spirits that can help me out in combat is frustrating beyond words. I was fighting with at least one hand tied behind my back. If not for this, the Emperor Tree wouldn't have been able to contain my expert mech for so long."

Ketis listened to his complaints. She eventually shook her head.

"Everything you have said is true. That still does not change the fact that a calamity plant managed to put you and your Everchanger at a disadvantage. It is not fair to blame you for being put on the backfoot by an enemy that is comprehensively stronger, but the fact of the matter is that you fought

far below your maximum potential in an adverse environment. That is not supposed to happen, you know."

Her husband grew more morose. His willpower dimmed as he thought back on everything that went wrong.

"Ves conceived of the Everchanger as a mech that is always effective and always reliable no matter the situation. He might not have designed your machine as a multipurpose mech, but the intentions are similar enough. It is a failure on the part of your battle partner that he is unable to make use of his strongest advantage, and it is a failure on your part to have no alternatives on hand that could make up for this gap." Venerable Joshua took this criticism hard. He should have been more prepared. He had already been stationed on Reticula Corein V for months. How could he have been negligent about preparing to fight in an environment with high Solus Gas concentrations?

It may have been excusable for him to be caught off-guard by the effects of Solus Gas when he first came into contact with this confounding gas, but this was not the case anymore!

"I need to do better." Joshua admitted. "As much as I like to fight together with different design spirits, I need to develop a new combat system that I can count on. It needs to be anchored around myself and my expert mech in order to ensure its reliability. I cannot allow my enemies or the environment to cripple us again by cutting us off from all of those powerful design spirits."

Ketis nodded in approval. "You are thinking in the right direction. There are expert pilots who are better off if they focus more on improving their strong points. That is not the best approach in your case, at least not all of the time. You are more useful to the Larkinson Clan if you address your newly discovered weakness and ensure it won't be a problem next time. Do you have an idea already?"

"I do, actually. Do you remember what happened to the Elegant Rage? For whatever reason, Lanie's breakthrough caused her companion spirit Kelly to steal some of my power from my Heartsword. She then proceeded to repair the Elegant Range, but not in a normal way. I don't have the foggiest clue how it is possible, but she actually managed to plug the gaps of her damaged mech with wood!"

Ketis narrowed her eyes. This was the second instance of an expert pilot taking inspiration from Lanie's actions.

Were the abnormal breakthroughs of the two former expert candidates truly so helpful to Larkinson Clan?

"I have already taken a good look at the Elegant Rage. I cannot design such a mech. In fact, I cannot even understand how it works anymore now that so many of its metallic components have been replaced by wooden ones. The wooden parts do not even work the same way! I think only Ves has a chance of deciphering and replicating this partially wooden monstrosity. Don't tell me you want Ves to turn the Everchanger into a partial wooden mech as well..."

"I can't deny that the thought crossed my mind." Joshua briefly smiled. "This is something for Ves to figure out. My idea is different, or at least I think so. What I have learned from the Elegant Rage's transformation is another way to become stronger. Instead of borrowing power from design spirits through connections that can always get cut off, what if my mech and I find a way to assimilate the power of others?"

"What?"

"Think about it." Joshua said with more and more eagerness in his tone. "I have a talent for getting along with others. In the same way, I have an easier time understanding their powers. Since I can learn a few tricks from design spirits, I can do the same with exobeasts as well. I only just came up with this idea and don't know if it works, but I think I can do it! Think about what I can do if I can copy the strange abilities of every powerful beast!"

That was a remarkably inventive idea!

Trying to assimilate the powers of exobeasts would further expand Joshua's versatility and repertoire. As long as he possessed a good grasp of his newfound abilities, he should be able to employ them even when he was fighting right on top of a Solus Gas vent!

Still, Ketis did not celebrate in advance. She directed a skeptical look towards the silly expert pilot.

"You have come up with a promising new strategy, but can you realize it? Can you execute it? What do you need to do in order to make it possible?"

"I have been spending a lot of time aboard the Dragon's Den since the start of the Age of Dawn." Joshua responded. "I was needed there in order to calm down all of the mutated beasts that the Larkinsons captured and stuffed over there. I managed to become quite familiar with a few of them. I think that... if my friendship with them grows deep enough, I might be able to... receive a part of their power, and channel it through my mech somehow."

"That doesn't sound concrete enough at all. I can already tell you will have to spend a lot of time on building up your new combat system. I doubt that Ves or I can help you in this. You need to conduct your own research."

Joshua's willpower began to lift as he looked forward to the challenge. "It will be worth it. I am sure of it. Think about the potential. It is one thing to copy the powers of a mutated beast. It is another thing to copy the powers of a calamity beast! If I can replicate even a small part of the Emperor Tree's abilities, I may be able to command an entire beast army of my own!"

Ketis snorted. "As if that is of any use. It is not as if you can dispatch your supposed army against alien warships. Even if you limit your beast army to ground action, it takes too much resources and effort to manage your 'soldiers' and transport them from one battlefield to another. What beasts can do, mechs can do better."

"Not entirely, dear. Mutated beasts are like a weaker version of expert mechs. They develop all kinds of magical abilities. They're not as strong as my Everchanger, but they are far more numerous. Think about what it would be like to field hundreds of mutated beasts at the same time? It would be unleashing a horde of discount expert mechs!"

"A horde with a total lack of coordination and cohesion. It won't work as well as you imagine."

"Okay, let's do this instead. What if I bring a few calamity beasts with me instead?"

"That won't work either, Joshua! It is impossible to control beasts! The Hunting Association is very clear about that! Look, you may be able to disprove this assumption if you somehow manage to steal the Emperor Tree's beast control ability, but you can only dominate weaker minds at most. Calamity beasts are far more powerful in general, and their intelligences are far more developed. You will not be able to bend them to your will."

"What if I befriend the calamity beasts instead of trying to enslave them?" Joshua proposed.

"I doubt that it is possible. Even if you manage to erase the natural hostility that exobeasts harbor towards civilized species, I very much doubt you will be able to keep them under total control. No one will accept your desire to add an unstable element alongside their own units."

"What if I borrow the power of the Everchanger to amplify my attempts to keep the calamity beasts under my control?"

"The power difference is still too great. You are an expert pilot. You are not on the same level as beasts that are at least as powerful as the Emperor Tree."

"Then what if I manage to break through to ace pilot and try again? I will definitely be able to succeed at that time! My Saint Kingdom will give me an enormous boost in keeping them friendly and pliant!"

Ketis hesitated for a bit. "I don't have enough data to know for certain whether your scheme will work. It is... plausible that you can effectively tame a handful of weaker calamity beasts, but have you thought that they can grow stronger and resist your control? There is always a risk that they will slip out of your leash and go on a rampage, thereby killing lots of Larkinsons in the process. Will you be able to bear this kind of risk?"

Her husband grew a lot less enthused about his idea. He could not deny that an accident like that might happen one day. He had already learned a painful lesson about accidents not too long ago. It would be a mistake to assume that the worst case scenario could never happen.

"I won't give up on this idea." Joshua stubbornly said. "It might not work out in the end, but I need to see it through. I think this may truly give the Everchanger wings. I don't need to tame calamity beasts and convince them to fight alongside me. I only need to assimilate their power, preferably willingly, but I am not opposed to taking their power by force if they are hostile to humans."

The two continued to explore Joshua's new ideas. Ketis did not entirely support this unconventional scheme, but she understood that her husband needed a new goal to occupy himself. She was happy as long as he wasn't moping anymore.

"I need to become stronger." Joshua stated. "Look at how many powerful beasts have managed to evolve to the level of the Emperor Tree in a couple of years. This is just one untamed planet among many in the new frontier. Think about how they will continue to grow until they reach the next stage. What if they become smart and strong enough to overtake us all? What if they can travel the stars and take away all of our living space? I think we need to prepare for a future where beasts and monsters become our greatest threat, and I think I am far better equipped at handling them than anyone else!"

Chapter 6076 The Larkinson High Court

The third year of the Age of Dawn had come and gone!

The entire clan along with the rest of red humanity held a festive celebration in order to commemorate the start of their independence from the Milky Way.

Though not everyone found the Great Severing to be an occasion worth celebrating about, the Red Two along with other major groups worked hard to build up pride and self-esteem of the humans of the new frontier.

The specter of the upcoming alien offensive loomed tall over everyone's heads. There were even analysts who claimed that the Red Cabal would surely ruin everyone's day by launching a surprise attack!

Fortunately, the troops on high alert ended up doing nothing but look menacing. The third year of the Age of Dawn eventually concluded with renewed expectations towards the future.

Alas, not everyone was able to tackle the new year with an optimistic outlook.

The Larkinsons had become consumed by the first high-profile trial since the founding of their clan!

This was not the first time the clan passed judgment over those whose alleged crimes merited serious consideration. With a membership figure that was rapidly approaching 2 million individuals, there were always cases where even the most well-meaning Larkinsons crossed the line.

Minor transgressions took place all of the time. These incidents were not really worth getting wound up over, and were often dealt with internally or through one of the many lower institutions.

Only a handful of cases reached a level of severity that compelled the Larkinson Clan to take them more seriously.

These incidents ranged from faulty maintenance leading to severe injuries or death, to a recruit of Terra origin who leaked a little too much information to one of his former employers.

The Larkinsons invested with the power to cast their judgment over these cases mostly consisted of professional judges from various states. They were all professionals who had been vetted and proved their competence through numerous ways.

Under normal circumstances, these judges possessed enough authority and respect to judge their fellow Larkinsons.

This time was different. The accused parties consisted of two expert pilots who built up their reputations over many years. Both of the newly ascended expert pilots had fought and risked their lives in dozens of battles. Each of them had gone above and beyond what the clan expected from a typical serviceman and made significant contributions.

Given the status and contributions of these two champions who had always been known as upright and honorable among the Larkinsons, both protocol and public demand forced the clan to convene a special tribunal to judge their individual cases.

Shortly after the new year celebrations passed, the concurrent trials of Venerable Taon Melin and Venerable Lanie Larkinson commenced!

Since the decision had been made to broadcast the trials, the solemn occasion took place within a special courthouse built inside the Spirit of Bentheim.

The selection of judges to preside over the special tribunal did not proceed without contention.

For a trial of this scope, the decision had been made to select 3 professional judges, 3 expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan and 1 high-ranking mech designer of the Larkinson Clan.

The selection of judges was done in an instant. Everyone knew that for these important trials, the judges had been reduced to legal clerks in all but name. The three professionals were all expected to attach themselves to an expert pilot and mirror the latter's judgment. The esteemed individuals

accepted this and were happy to assist the selected expert pilots in navigating the complex legal processes.

What truly mattered was the selection of expert pilots. Numerous volunteers brought their names forward, but it was not appropriate to select 3 among this enthusiastic group.

In the end, the Larkinson High Court selected Venerable Jannzi Larkinson due to how much she cared about the clan. The Court also selected Commander Casella Ingvar-Larkinson due to her expertise as a mech commander. Furthermore, Venerable Vincent Ricklin got added due to random selection.

"Why do I have to preside over these trials? I am not a judge! I don't have the faintest clue about the law!"

"That doesn't matter. You are not in the special tribunal because of your legal background. You have been selected as a judge for these cases because you represent a part of the soldiers of the Larkinson Clan. Look, don't pay attention to the legalese. Just listen and decide according to your own heart and principles. Decide what you think is best for the Larkinson Clan. An actual judge will accompany you and take care of all of the complicated paperwork and other protocols."

"Oh. Why didn't you mention that first?"

The selection of the mech designer also had to be made with care. Both Ves and Gloriana were the most authoritative ones, but that made them the worst possible choices. Gloriana and especially Ves already held a lot of executive power over the clan. Letting them exercise judicial power violated the principle of separation of powers and could lead to catastrophic abuse in the long run.

Ketis was normally a good choice, but she was in the chain of command when the disastrous mission unfolded, so she was anything but impartial. Her involvement already ruled out her selection.

Eventually, Alexa Streon accepted this important responsibility. She was not among the old-timers of the Larkinson Clan, but she received a rich education and had proven to be professional in all of her jobs.

It took over a week for Taon, Lanie and Alexa to depart from their locations and arrive in the Bortele System where the expeditionary fleet had decided to rest and recuperate. The Larkinson borrowed the Red Association's fastest couriers in order to expedite the journeys.

The special tribunal commenced shortly after the aforementioned individuals rejoined the expeditionary fleet. They had already made numerous preparations during the journey.

Thousands of Larkinsons serving in the expeditionary attended the proceedings in person whenever possible. Hundreds of thousands more clansmen chose to follow the live feed of the trials.

The actual process had been condensed into just two days. Nobody wanted the special tribunal to drag on for months or years. The allegations, while severe, only took place during a brief interval of time, so it was not as if it took a lot of time to go over all of the evidence and arguments.

Plenty of hard evidence became available by downloading and processing the recordings and data logs of the living mechs that had the misfortune of observing the unfolding tragedy.

Two key witnesses provided their own testimonies on what had happened. Venerable Joshua and Venerable Dise might not have been able to attend the special tribunal in person due to the fact that they were still a part of Task Force Solus, but they were allowed to take part by remote,

Since both of the witnesses were expert pilots, people did not doubt they spoke the truth.

The complication was that Joshua and Dise were both biased and held strong opinions of their own. The judges had to take these variables into account.

At the end of the second day, anticipation throughout the Larkinson Clan rose as the prosecution and the attorneys representing their two clients made their closing statements.

The judges all retreated for a while and returned to their bench.

Of the seven judges, Venerable Jannzi Larkinson assumed the role of chief judge. Her interest and investment in the trial surpassed that of all of her current peers!

Since the rules governing the special tribunal were a bit looser and more flexible than normal trials, Venerable Jannzi decided to turn this occasion into a lecture as well as an opportunity to pass judgment.

"Larkinsons." She spoke as she knew she held the attention of pretty much every Larkinson, no matter whether they were in the courtroom in person or watching from one of the many distant branches scattered across human-occupied space. "I am deeply disappointed today."

Her protective aura which she had honed through many battles and moments of introspection flared up, allowing every viewer to get a feel of how much this trial impacted her mood.

Jannzi exuded a lot of authority as her gaze seemed to penetrate straight into the eyes of every viewer. She along with the rest of the judges enhanced their stature by wearing slightly decorative dark red robes and special headdresses. The luxurious fabrics and the exquisite detailing of their outfits literally made them look taller and larger than life.

"When the Larkinson High Court initially came into existence, I hoped that it would never be used on this sort of occasion. How could one of our honorable and well-treated champions ever commit crimes severe enough to warrant this response from our clan? Our expert candidates and expert pilots come from different different backgrounds, but the Larkinson Army has always made sure to select soldiers who can be trusted to fight on our collective behalf. If there are any champions who have exhibited disconcerting behavior, then it is the responsibility of the Hall of Heroes to correct their mindsets."

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This was especially the case for the chief judge, who wore a militaristic gold sash that held all of her medals and decorations!

"The institutions of our clan did not fail." She continued with a voice enhanced by her strong willpower. "There is an abundant amount of evidence and witness testimony that indicate that Taon Melin-Larkinson and Lanie Larkinson have both behaved as exemplary members of the Larkinson

Clan. Our tribunal has no reason to cast all of this evidence in doubt. The accused have only truly made missteps during the infamous sample retrieval mission."

The air in the courthouse grew heavier as Jannzi clearly worked her way towards this fateful day and mission.

A proportion of the viewers shifted their attention to the accused. Both Venerable Taon Melin and Lanie Larkinson attended the trial while wearing their military uniforms, though stripped of decorations and anything too fancy.

The two frequently glowered at each other whenever they could. This forced the courthouse to place them far apart from each other while activating an opaque energy shield in the middle.

Now that the time had come for them to learn about their future in the Larkinson Clan, both Taon and Lanie set aside their irrelevant thoughts and paid close attention to Venerable Jannzi's words.

After Jannzi spoke about the circumstances of the mission for a couple of minutes, she finally addressed the accusations in chronological order.

"Venerable Taon-Melin-Larkinson, former serving and leading the Eye of Ylvaine Mech Legion, you stand accused of committing friendly fire. The evidence conclusively proves that you and the deceased living mech known as 'the Zeal' have both worked together to aim and fire the latter's devastatingly powerful Devora Cannon in the back of the living mech known as the 'Elegant Rage', who was piloted by the then-expert candidate Lanie Larkinson at the time. This has sparked a disastrous chain of events that compounded every mistake and led to errors that are hard to forgive. The only serious issue of contention is whether your deed is accidental or deliberate."

A lot of people clung to the chief judge's words. They wanted to know if the special tribunal was willing to excuse this outrageous act and whether the judges could justify their decision!

"Based on the evidence, the witness testimonies and other context, we have judged you... innocent of the crime of committing deliberate friendly fire on a fellow Larkinson soldier. We judge that you have committed an act of accidental friendly fire, which is a much less severe crime that is associated with much more lenient sanctions."

"What?!"

"This is an outrage!"

"He's a killer!"

The courthouse became noisy as many Larkinson soldiers became indignant when they heard this verdict!

From their perspective, Taon Melin had committed an unforgivable crime by stabbing one of his comrades in the back with a fatal blow!

None of the mech pilots wanted this to happen to themselves one day, so they strongly urged the special tribunal to condemn Taon Melin in the strongest terms!

So what if he managed to break through and become an expert pilot? A Larkinson with the blood of a fellow clansman on his hand did not deserve to be treated as family anymore!

Chapter 6077 Culpability

The courthouse continued to become filled with angry and indignant noises.

A clear majority of the attendees strongly objected to the decision of letting Taon get away with his heinous deed!

If his crime was deemed accidental in nature, then Taon would only receive a relatively minor punishment all-considered.

Unintentional friendly fire was still a relatively serious mistake, especially if it endangered a fellow Larkinson's life.

However, accidents always took place on the battlefield. The larger the battle and the more chaotic the fighting, the greater the chance of mechs striking other friendly mechs.

In truth, they happened so often that most Larkinsons simply shrugged it off. The damage was usually relatively minor as many living mechs enjoyed plentiful protection nowadays. They could take a lot of hits and still remain intact enough to evacuate to the rear.

However, an accidental strike from a quasi-first-class super-heavy hyper-velocity transphasic gauss cannon at close range far exceeded the scope of typical accidental friendly fire incidents!

That alone turned Taon's crime into a much more serious controversy. The Larkinson soldiers clearly wanted the special tribunal to make an example out of the recently ascended expert pilot!

The chief judge allowed the people in the courthouse to vent their emotions for a dozen or so seconds. Then, she picked up her gavel and slammed it down!

BANG!

The entire chamber instantly fell into silence as hidden devices precisely neutralized the voices of everyone who was not authorized to speak.

"Order, please. Let me continue. When we formed our judgment on Taon Melin-Larkinson's first charge, five of us have judged him innocent, while two have deemed him guilty."

The Larkinsons wondered which of the judges had sided against the majority opinion.

"When we determined the culpability of Venerable Melin-Larkinson's initial charge, we took into account the factors that rationalized his action. First, we recognize that the mission was inadequately conceived and planned. The two expert candidates chosen for this mission were clearly not as prepared to deal with the Emperor Tree as everyone thought. Not enough safeguards and backup plans have been made to prevent or address any instances where the expert candidates unwittingly fell under the sway of the calamity plant that has been codenamed 'the Emperor Tree'. Is it the fault of the accused that he fell victim to the mistakes of his superiors? Not necessarily. Put yourself in his shoes and think whether you could have done any better."

Jannzi provided a well-reasoned argument that successfully cooled some of the heated emotions among the Larkinsons.

At the very least, few clansmen believed they possessed the mental fortitude to resist the unreasonably strong mental manipulation of this dastardly exoplant!

"The commanding officers and the staff officers involved in the planning and the actual execution of the mission have definitely made mistakes." Jannzi continued on with a stern expression.

"Although our special tribunal is not tasked with bringing them to account, it is our opinion that

they are only guilty of being overconfident. They have allowed their biases against the supposedly 'primitive' and 'ignorant' native flora and fauna of untamed planets to underestimate the threat they can actually pose to our troops. We hope than none of our officers will ever make this mistake again."

The words of Venerable Jannzi applied to every Larkinson who assumed responsibility, but they were particularly directed towards Swordmaster Ketis and Venerable Joshua!

The physical projections of the two adopted grim and contrite expressions as the couple took this rebuke to heart.

"Returning to Taon Melin-Larkinson's first act of striking another Larkinson with a deadly attack, the consequences of this misdeed are particularly severe despite its accidental nature. Our rules and regulations make a strong distinction between friendly fire that result in minor injuries and friendly fire that result in severe injuries. In addition, a result that leads to death as an outcome is always treated as a heavy crime regardless of whether the accused is culpable. In this particular incident, we were not entirely certain whether to judge the outcome as severe or fatal. Technically, Venerable Lanie Larkinson did not perish. From a more practical perspective, she was as good as dead, and only a literal miracle caused her to scramble back to life. Ultimately, we have judged according to the letter of the law, which states that Venerable Melin-Larkinson's deed only resulted in severe injury towards a fellow clansman."

This was clearly not a popular opinion, but most Larkinsons were able to accept the argumentation used by the special tribunal.

"With regard to the culpability of Venerable Melin-Larkinson in relation to this charge, our tribunal is of the opinion that he is not responsible. His only failing is that he fell for the Emperor Tree's deception, but if an expert candidate was susceptible to this covert move, then it is too much to expect him or anyone else to do any better. We have definitely judged that Taon would never deliberately strike the back of another friendly Larkinson mech by his own volition. Anger towards him for pulling the trigger is completely misplaced. Save your ire for the Emperor Tree, who bears most of the culpability for this tragic deed."

Taon slightly relaxed as he managed to get off easy on one of his charges. Even though he had grown so morose and uncaring that he did not particularly care about farce of a special tribunal, he was still cognizant enough to recognize that it would be a lot harder for him to start his crusade if he bore the stigma of deliberately backstabbing a fellow soldier in the field.

Before the chief judge could address Taon's second charge, one of the other judges frantically waved his hand and attracted people's attention.

"Hey! I want to say my piece as well! I don't agree with this decision!"

It did not take much thought to recognize that Venerable Vincent Ricklin held a dissenting opinion. He and his companion judge were probably the only ones who voted against this judgment.

Jannzi looked annoyed. "Sit down and stay quiet, Venerable Ricklin-Larkinson. You may share your dissenting opinions after I have announced the entire verdict."

"I can't wait that long! Who made it so that I have to wait until you finally complete your lengthy saga? I want to say my own piece before everyone moves on from this matter!"

Though Jannzi could clearly deal with Vincent by squelching his voice, she ultimately sighed and waved her hand in his direction.

"Very well. You may proceed, but keep it short."

"Great!" Vincent said before he surprisingly assumed a more serious demeanor. "Everyone, I want to add my own opinion, not as an expert pilot and champion, but as a former grunt who struggled to fight and survive in the trenches like many others. I still remember the times before and after I joined the Larkinson Clan where I fought alongside hundreds if not thousands of comrades. I did not always pilot a melee mech in every battle, but whenever I did so, I always trusted my fellow soldiers who piloted ranged mechs to check their fire and be careful about attacking when their guns were at risk of striking friendlies."

The pilot of the C-Man spoke not just for himself, but every other melee mech pilot in the clan. Each of them held similar stances.

"I have also piloted my fair share of ranged mechs, so I know what it is like to be on the other side. Every decent mech pilot goes through 10 to 15 years of academy training just to be able to master all of the basic skills and rules of piloting a mech. I know first-hand that instructors literally hammer every cadet on trigger discipline, rules of engagement and other related stuff in the first couple of years. All of this is necessary to prepare ranged mech specialists for times when they are deployed in battle and positioned behind their melee mech buddies."

Mechs were powerful war machines that could inflict a lot of collateral damage. Skill and discipline were necessary to minimize the damage they could do to the environment... and other friendly mechs.

"Get to the point, Vincent."

"Such occasions are the exceptions rather than the rule." Jannzi said in order to be fair. "The mech pilots of the Transcendent Punisher mechs generally avoid opening fire at targets that are too close to friendly mechs as the explosion radius of their shells are often considerable."

"You're not my mother, Jannzi! I am getting there! Sheesh! Anyway, what I want to say is that it is the responsibility of the pilot who commands a gun that can strike at anything to exercise a lot of control over where he is leading his shots. It is better to withhold your fire than to pull the trigger when there is even the slightest of risks of hitting a friendly mech in the back. From the description of the mission, the Zeal obviously pointed his really big gun in the direction of the Elegant Rage. Maybe you Ylvainan artillery pilots have become used to calling for Ylvaine's help to thread the needle and make sure your shots precisely avoid every Larkinson mech and land a precision strike on an enemy unit, but this is really reckless behavior that should no longer be tolerated."

"Such occasions are the exceptions rather than the rule." Jannzi said in order to be fair. "The mech pilots of the Transcendent Punisher mechs generally avoid opening fire at targets that are too close to friendly mechs as the explosion radius of their shells are often considerable."

"I admit that it doesn't happen too often, but when Taon made the Zeal point his huge Devora Cannon in the vague direction of the Elegant Rage, a red flag should have popped in his mind that it is a really bad idea to open fire. According to Taon's own testimony, he recalled that he angled the Zeal's main gun forward and a lot further downwards. It was his fault that he forgot that this was

where the Elegant Rage occasionally flew in order to get rid of enemy units that approached from this direction."

That made everyone more thoughtful. Melee mech pilots had a greater tendency to take Venerable Ricklin's side.

Jannzi tried to close this particular argument. "Ultimately, Venerable Melin-Larkinson did not perceive himself to be breaking from established behavior at the time he committed his incident of accidental friendly fire. If he acted in error, then it is because the commanding officers and rule makers of the Larkinson Army have failed to tighten the rules and regulations. We recommend that they correct this circumstance as soon as possible."

Commander Casella Ingvar glowered as Jannzi issued this opinion. The mech commander had indeed neglected the potential for disaster with regards to this issue.

The chief judge finally addressed the second charge.

"Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson could have ended his culpability shortly after he realized that he made a grave mistake. It is abundantly clear that he recognized shortly after the Elegant Rage had been struck that he had turned himself into a liability on the battlefield. He understood that he had been compromised once. That means he could be compromised again. The best possible decision he could make was to retreat right away. He did not. Instead, he made one of the worst choices by lingering in place and turning himself into a target from a vengeful Larkinson mech pilot."

It was not yet time for the special tribunal to cast their verdict on Lanie's deeds, so the chief judge kept her gaze on Taon.

"An altercation ensued where the Zeal was put at a heavy disadvantage by an Elegant Rage that was empowered by forced resonance. Another miracle occurred where Taon Melin-Larkinson successfully broke through to the rank of expert pilot. Yet it is during this critical process that he committed his second misdeed. He personally confessed that he has killed the living personality that occupied the Zeal, thereby turning his battle partner into an empty shell that no longer holds any independent life. He did so without authorization from a legitimate authority figure of the Larkinson Clan or the consent of the Zeal himself."

The air grew tense as the chief judge was about to announce the special tribunal's answer to Taon's second charge.

"We are of the opinion that Venerable Melin-Larkinson is innocent of the crime of murdering the Zeal in times of battle."

"WHAAAAT!"

This sentence completely exploded the Larkinson Clan!

It was not just the Larkinsons themselves who were indigent at the special tribunal's verdict.

The living mechs and particularly the third order living mechs of the secretive Anima Order especially objected to this judgment!

"THIS IS NOT JUST!" The Everchanger complained!

"ARE WE NOT EQUAL TO HUMANS?!" The Riot roared!

"ORDER!" Jannzi banged her gavel yet again! "Let me finish my explanation!"

Chapter 6078 Setting An Unfortunate Precedent

Jannzi knew that judging Taon innocent of the second charge would lead to an outcry of controversy, so she understood and sympathized with the Larkinsons who objected to this decision.

That did not mean that the Larkinsons should judge their crimes based on their feelings and subjective opinions.

Once she slammed the gavel, she gave the masses a brief moment of time to regain their composure.

"In order to understand our response to Venerable Melin-Larkinson's second charge, we should first consider the definition of murder. The dictionaries of standard language slightly vary in their descriptions, but it is commonly understood that the act of murder involves the unlawful deprivation of a human life and with premeditation. There are three key concepts in this definition. In this particular case, there is no doubt that Venerable Melin-Larkinson took the Zeal's life as a deliberate act. He has confessed to this deed himself. Whether he did so with premeditation is arguable, but let us assume his act already meets two out of three requirements. Now if you have any logical brain, you should have already figured out that it is one requirement that has caused us to reject the charge of murder. The Zeal... is not human, and therefore cannot be 'murdered' according to our understanding."

"That's a crap opinion!"

"Who cares what is written in all of those stuffy dictionaries! My battle partner is just as alive and important as any other clansman!"

"The patriarch doesn't agree with this opinion!"

The chief judge was not ignorant of all of the objections.

"We understand your feelings and opinions on this matter." Jannzi solemnly spoke. "However, it is a fact that the laws of the Larkinson Clan only bestow human rights to humans, in line with every other state and major organization of red humanity. Simply put, murder can only take place when committed to other humans. The laws of individual states might diverge from each other due to historical and cultural reasons, but there is a high degree of commonality when it comes to the basic principles. Murder can be committed on a baseline human with 100 percent human DNA. Murder can also be committed on a highly augmented human whose genome has been altered so much that he only retains less than 10 percent pure human DNA. In the latter case, what matters is that the augmented individual still recognizes that he is human, and that society treats him the same way. Even heavy-gravity variant humans are still treated as human, so our civilization has adopted a lot of flexibility with regards to this issue."

That was simple enough to understand, even if a lot of humans treat dwarves differently in practice.

"On the other hand, every human polity has unanimously decided that it is not acceptable to extend human rights to any alien or distinctly non-human species. No matter whether they look almost identical to actual humans, their ideas and opinions are fundamentally misaligned with humanity. It is absurd in the past as well as in the present to extend any rights towards any alien species. You cannot 'murder' an orven because the alien does not enjoy the protection of human law in the first place. At most, the orven can be taken captive, upon which he turns into the property of a human party. Killing the orven prisoner is treated as destroying one's property, more or less. Such actions

can still be punished, but the responses are much less severe. The convicted criminal mostly ends up paying compensation."

This was an important detail that added vital context to Jannzi's next words.

"When it comes to living mechs... I am sorry, but our laws still treat them as objects, both during the time that the incident took place, and today. It does not matter whether living mechs are categorized as animate or inanimate objects. According to our laws, they are akin to machines that are governed by particularly advanced AIs. Now, as a Larkinson mech pilot myself, I deeply disagree with this official stance. I never agreed with what the law says and always regard my Bastion as a living entity that possesses just as much intelligence, emotion and dignity as any human. The Bastion has fought and suffered for our clan. Her predecessor even sacrificed her life so that I may live! My living mech has saved the lives of many Larkinsons, both human and non-human, and she has done so willingly all the time. Yet... our legislative body has never amended or updated our laws to officially recognize the stance that many Larkinsons hold towards living mechs."

"..."

That was undoubtedly true. No one really paid attention to this discrepancy. Very few Larkinsons ever imagined that a Larkinson mech pilot would emerge one day that actually killed his own living mech!

This was a huge oversight, and that had led to this difficult situation.

"Now, our clan is not inflexible to the point where we take every law literally." Venerable Jannzi spoke in a softer tone. "As a matter of policy, we try to avoid making our clan to rulebound. In no way do we want to encourage clear misbehavior or mistakes because the laws on our books have never accounted for a deviating circumstance. The problem our special tribunal has grappled with is that there are multiple competing principles in play."

The expressions of multiple judges changed. None of them found it easy to navigate all of the different arguments.

"Let me state that we want the laws of our clan to have meaning. They should not be dismissed solely because it is convenient. Without a code that every Larkinson can recognize, our clan will end up in anarchy sooner or later. On the other hand, it is undeniable that many Larkinsons and especially our soldiers have long recognized that living mechs are equivalent to humans. Our clan has therefore developed a culture where living mechs are already de facto humans. Unfortunately, our old laws still regard living mechs as de jure objects. A contradiction has arisen, one that has never emerged in the Larkinson High Court in the past. No matter what decision our special tribunal makes, it is inevitable that we set a precedent today."

That meant that it was within the special tribunal's power to bestow living mechs with human rights. Then why did it refuse to take this obvious step?

"Let me be honest with you all." Jannzi addressed the clan. "The other 6 judges of the special tribunal along with myself are all in unanimous agreement that we have treated living mechs as near-equivalents of humans for so many years that we should just make it official today. We deeply appreciate and honor the sacrifices they have made on the battlefield. They enjoy inferior treatment to our human members, but endure much greater risks. Third order living mechs have also reached a

degree of intelligence and sapience that matches humans in most ways. They far exceed pets such as cats and dogs in this regard. In fact, even our ancestral spirit treats them as equal members of our greater family. Since living mechs possess the capacity to feel emotions, they can develop just as much love and affection for the Larkinson Clan as humans such as ourselves. Why should our deny our brotherhood?"

Many people were wondering about that question as well.

Jannzi grimaced as she addressed the ultimate reason why they could not do so. "As much as we are willing to set a precedent that will change our treatment and recognition of living mechs forever... we are not just bound by our own laws. As formal members of human civilization, we are also bound by the laws of the Red Two. According to the laws set by the Red Association and the Red Fleet, it is absolutely forbidden to extend human rights to anyone or anything that does not meet their broad definitions of 'human'. As flexible as they can be with extending human rights to heavily augmented individuals, trying to do the same to distinctly non-human living mechs has never been allowed. In fact, the mechers and the fleeters have declared this sort of action to be taboo."

"Oh."

"That...."

Many Larkinsons became cowed at the mention of the Red Two and taboos. It couldn't be helped. The deterrence of the Red Two and their predecessors was just too great! Everyone knew that any human that dared to violate a taboo would provoke a harsh and immediate response from the Red Association and the Red Fleet!

Venerable Jannzi's expression clearly showed what she thought about this taboo. "To put it in simpler terms, our hands are tied. No matter how much we want to raise the treatment of living mechs so that they can truly stand equal to humans such as ourselves, we are literally forbidden from doing so by the Red Two. If we try to force this change regardless of the consequences, we would contradict one of the central principles of RA jurisprudence, RF jurisprudence, Terran jurisprudence, Rubarthan jurisprudence and so on. We will become the nail that sticks out. Not just the mechers, but every other human group will be eager to hammer us down!"

That decisively ended the debate on trying to extend human rights to living mechs.

"Look, if you want this reality to change, then we cannot do this alone." Jannzi explained to the crowd. "This is not a matter of clan law. It is a matter of galactic politics. If you want our society to treat living mechs more fairly, then you must wage a campaign across human-occupied space and win broad public support for a change in the fundamental laws and principles of human civilization. Even then, you must convince enough top stakeholders who hold most of the power of major states and organizations to support your initiative."

That was clearly not in the Larkinson Clan's power to do so. It would be better if everyone just forgot about this fanciful idea.

The chief judge finally returned to the original subject.

"As I have stated before, we judge Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson innocent of the crime of murdering the Zeal. However, we also judge him guilty of inflicting serious and irreparable damage to a key military asset of the Larkinson Army. The Zeal is not his personal property. Officially, it is handmade by Patriarch Ves Larkinson, who has personally entrusted the custom and personalized

copy of the Transcendent Punisher Mark III to the then-expert candidate as his designated mech. Under no circumstances has the pilot become the legal or practical owner of the mech. This is common practice in nearly every state and organization."

That was a relatively clever way to still force Taon to account for the crime of 'damaging' the Zeal.

Jannzi pinned the former Ylvainan with a judgmental stare. "During the entire period where our clan gave you the privilege of piloting the Zeal, we never gave you permission to kill the living personality that inhabited the machine. You never bothered to ask permission by your own admission. You ruined a unique living mech, a masterwork, that can never be replicated and whose value far exceeds the cost of producing the mech frame. The monetary damages... are considerable to second-class mech pilots."

Taon decided to speak up at this time. "I admit I killed the redundant living personality of the Zeal, but I did not destroy it entirely. Lanie and Venerable Dise both inflicted a lot of material damage to my machine. Venerable Joshua outright killed what remained of the Zeal!"

"SILENCE." Jannzi rebuked the accused. "Venerable Lanie Larkinson's crimes shall be dealt with later. As for the actions taken by Venerable Joshua Larkinson and Venerable Dise Larkinson, both of them are justified in their actions. Venerable Joshua Larkinson was the operational mech commander of the strike force during the mission. It is well within his authority to order the destruction of an important asset of the Larkinson Clan for the purpose of denying it to the enemy. As for Venerable Dise, she acted to save your life by separating your cockpit from your ruined mech. The life of a single Larkinson mech pilot far exceeds that of an 'object' such as the Zeal. In fact, the point is moot at that time, as you already killed your living mech."

Before Jannzi moved on to Taon's third and final major charge, Jannzi briefly took the initiative to address the clan.

"Our special tribunal can only judge Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson to this extent. We strongly recommend our legislative body to update our laws and properly define detailed laws with regards to the treatment of our living mechs. We may be constrained by the galactic laws imposed by the Red Two, but there is still leeway into raising the value and importance of living mechs so that their treatment is much more closely matched to humans. I think this is the least we can do to our loyal machines."

The members of the Larkinson Assembly certainly got the message. They definitely intended to open a debate on this subject the first chance they got, if only to quell the rising discontent from all of their existing living machines!

Chapter 6079 Homicide

Many Larkinsons following the court proceedings in person or from remote began to develop an incredulous thought.

Venerable Taon Melin might actually be able to get away with deliberately killing a third order living mech and fighting against Lanie with the intent to kill.

Sure, the prosecution also charged Taon with a bunch of other crimes, such as conduct unbecoming of a champion and disobeying the direct orders of a superior, but it was the three biggest ones that truly mattered to the clansmen following the two-day trial.

People who learned about the mission and how it ended up in disaster all wanted Taon to account for his actions. It would be bad for morale if everyone gained the perception that Taon essentially managed to get away with murder!

It didn't matter what the Red Two said about designating living mechs as property rather than life forms that deserved to be treated in the same way as humans.

In the years that Larkinsons got along with their living mechs, they truly treated the latter as friends, comrades in arms and even family.

The increasing prevalence of third order living mechs in the Age of Dawn caused a lot of mech pilots to develop even more intimate relationships with their battle partners!

In virtually every case, mech pilots loved their living mechs more than their pets if they had any. It was not that the ever-popular cats were not cute enough. Living mechs just received a lot more affection because they materially contributed to the success of their clan!

Everyone recognized that the Larkinsons wouldn't have risen to greatness at such a rapid speed without the novel advantages provided by their living mechs. Each of them felt a lot of gratitude towards their patriarch for designing multiple series of exclusive mech models for the clan.

It was very easy to understand the differences these living mechs made. The expeditionary fleet always fielded mechs from multiple partners of the Golden Skull Alliance.

Though the mechs of the Cross Clan, the Boojay Family and so on all possessed their own distinct strengths and styles, the Larkinsons couldn't help but regard their own machines as superior.

This was because unlike those other mechs, the machines of the Larkinsons were never static. They always grew stronger and better over time. The difference in combat effectiveness between a factory fresh machine and a years-old weathered mech was very obvious!

The coordination between mech and mech pilot improved. The living mech also became more proficient in absorbing and handling hyper technology. The older Larkinson mechs even earned enough trust to take autonomous action without needing to ask permission from their pilots!

In short, the benefits of living mechs may be intangible and difficult to quantify, but every Larkinson acknowledged their existence. People had an especially strong reverence for third order living mechs, which broke away from their less developed cousins by gaining the ability to speak and act a lot more closer like intelligent humans!

Murdering one such magnificent living mech, one that the patriarch had painstakingly made into a unique and celebrated masterwork mech, was no different from sacrilege to the living mech fanatics!

Ironically, the Larkinsons who turned against Venerable Taon the most happened to be his former compatriots among the Eye of Ylvaine!

"He is unrecognizable. What happened to our former legion commander?"

"The old Taon is dead now. The man who bears his face has turned away from the Great Prophet. Look at what his blasphemy has brought him. His soul has been corrupted by darkness. We can no longer welcome him back into our midst."

"The former legion commander has done incalculable damage to our faith! How are we supposed to convert more individuals to our righteous cause when one of our greatest heroes and representatives has just made an enemy out of every Larkinson?!"

Though Ylvaine did not bear any direct blame for what unfolded on that untamed planet, his specter undoubtedly loomed large over Taon's shoulders!

The dishonorable expert pilot had long been shaped by the Great Prophet. Many people became convinced that the reason why he became so susceptible to the Emperor Tree's manipulations was because he had already been trained to behave this way by his design spirit!

In that sense, perhaps the disgraced expert pilot may have actually made a valid point. Humans shouldn't develop a dependency on supposed gods, especially ones that exploited them for their own selfish purposes.

Whatever the case, Venerable Jannzi Larkinson was not yet done with Taon. She still had to present the third and arguably most important charge.

The expert pilot in red peered down at the accused with a gaze that held no family affection in the slightest. Though Jannzi had to restrain herself due to the expectations of her current role, she made no effort to hide the fact she already regarded Taon as a traitor to the clan.

"Before his sudden breakthrough, Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson displayed a remarkable degree of hesitation and restraint towards his fellow Larkinson. Whatever her motivations and circumstances, Venerable Lanie Larkinson had shown unrelenting aggression in her actions. We do not like it, but in this instance we deem it reasonable for Taon to fight back in order to protect himself. This is especially the case when he is attacked by an expert pilot who just broke through and empowered her living mech with forced resonance. We hold our champions to higher standards than ordinary soldiers, and the stronger they become, the more they must channel their power wisely."

Taon's expression grew more morose as he remembered the final moments of his weakness. He had abjectly failed to defend himself against Lanie and her mutated Elegant Rage. The former Ylvainan truly feared for his life. He badly wanted to obtain help to fend off the expert pilot that went all-out to kill him, only for no one to come to his rescue.

"Our special tribunal is faced with another difficult question." The female expert pilot continued. "When Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson was on the verge of getting killed by his fellow Larkinson, he miraculously broke through. This fortuitous advancement granted his Zeal the power to temporarily repel the Elegant Rage and gain a fighting chance to survive this undesirable encounter."

Neither Ylvaine, Goldie, Venerable Joshua or Venerable Dise lent him a hand.

He ultimately broke when he realized that he was all alone. None of the people and design spirits he depended upon proved to be reliable in the time where he needed them the most.

Taon felt that he had made a grand discovery when he realized that the only person who could save his life was himself!

That had been the most profound and liberating moment of his life. Even now, the shadows of his breakthrough still lived on in his mind. Only his desire to slay his would-be murderer sitting on the other side of the courthouse surpassed his enthusiasm for propagating his news views!

"Our special tribunal is faced with another difficult question." The female expert pilot continued. "When Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson was on the verge of getting killed by his fellow Larkinson, he miraculously broke through. This fortuitous advancement granted his Zeal the power to temporarily repel the Elegant Rage and gain a fighting chance to survive this undesirable encounter."

Jannzi briefly paused in order to give everyone time to recall this scenario.

"The question we face is this: when the pilot of the Zeal broke through, was he within his rights to fight against Venerable Lanie Larkinson and the Elegant Rage with the intent to kill? It is not in dispute that he and his adversary disobeyed direct orders to suspend their fighting and separate from each other. By their own admissions, both of the accused strongly desired to take the lives of each other. Their words as well as their overflowing willpower at the time made it abundantly clear that they both regarded each other as threats that they must eliminate at all cost. If just one of them demonstrated just enough restraint and sobriety to pull back, the other would not have a reason to sustain their aggression anymore. Alas, this did not happen, so the two both felt it was necessary to go all-out to fight for their own survival."

Many Larkinsons frowned as they imagined what they would do in such a situation. Would they fight back just as hard as Taon did? It was clear that Venerable Lanie had fallen into a state of madness. It was important to remember that she could not be reasoned with and seemed hellbent on killing the culprit that was almost responsible for her death!

"As soldiers, we are expected to obey all orders and the rules and regulations that describe how we are permitted to act." Jannzi stated. "However, we all recognize that there are many unforeseen situations where the existing rules and standards provide no ready answers on what you must do. This is exactly one such case. Did he commit a crime by fighting back with all of his strength with the express purpose of killing Venerable Lanie Larkinson and her Elegant Rage?"

The chief judge sighed. "When we placed ourselves in Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson's shoes, we found it hard to argue that he had any other choice. His adversary's overwhelming intent to kill him was obvious. This massively limited his options. If he ejected his cockpit, the Elegant Rage would immediately pursue it and stab her borrowed blade through the fragile shell. If Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson fought back with greater restraint and forbearance, he would almost certainly lose the duel and die in a short interval of time."

She waved her hand, summoning projections of the Zeal and Elegant Rage shortly after Taon's breakthrough.

The two mechs looked a lot different from when they started out. The changes brought by forced resonance and the aggressive resonance shields surrounding their forms caused the machines to look incredibly menacing!

"In a duel against these two mechs in their current states, our special tribunal recognizes that the Elegant Rage enjoys a strong advantage in this matchup. Melee mechs are always able to gain the upper hand against ranged mechs at close range, and the radical changes that affected both of the machines in question did not alter this universal dynamic. Let me be honest. If I or any other

Larkinson expert pilot sat in the cockpit of the Zeal during this time, we would still be hard-pressed to repel the Elegant Rage without resorting to lethal attacks. We cannot expect a Larkinson who was only an expert candidate a short time ago to outfight a notable duelist and exemplar in melee combat at close range. Only by treating Venerable Lanie Larkinson as a lethal threat that must be dealt with in the corresponding manner can the pilot of the Zeal obtain a glimmer of hope."

The air around her grew heavier as Jannzi asked a few very poignant questions. "Is it wrong for our mech pilots to struggle for survival? Venerable Melin-Larkinson undoubtedly disobeyed direct orders and broke numerous rules by trying to kill Venerable Lanie Larkinson. His motivations for doing so are not entirely pure. We recognize that he is motivated by survival, but he has also developed a strong animosity towards his latest enemy. Even now, the former pilot of the Zeal has made no efforts to obscure his intention of murdering Venerable Lanie Larkinson, though the latter admittedly shared the same intent towards the pilot that originally struck the first blow."

This sounded like a huge mess. Both parties behaved unreasonably, but were they truly wrong to go out of their way to kill each other?

That was a difficult question to answer.

The chief judge took another deep breath. "This has been one of the most painful decisions our special tribunal has made in its short decision. After much consideration, we are of the opinion that Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson is not guilty of attempting to murder Venerable Lanie Larkinson. Instead, we rule that the accused has instead engaged in an act of attempted justifiable homicide. We acknowledge that Venerable Melin-Larkinson was justified in his attempt to go all-out in killing his powerful adversary. He rightfully recognized that he was subject to an imminent and unavoidable danger of death. We are of the opinion that when a mech pilot truly believes he will get killed or suffer grave bodily harm, he is not wrong in fighting back as he has a right to self-defense. This right may occasionally take precedence over obligations such as following lawful orders. Therefore, we will judge his remaining charges with greater leniency as he is not entirely culpable."

"..."

The audience all reacted with shock. While Jannzi presented clear logical arguments that backed up the opinions of the special tribunal, the Larkinsons still couldn't accept what they just heard.

Was Taon... actually allowed to get away from his misdeeds?

"THIS IS AN OUTRAGE!"

Chapter 6080 Non Compos Mentis

The special tribunal ultimately acquitted Taon of most of his charges!

Despite all of the hard evidence that showed the Zeal attacking the Elegant Rage with deadly intent and despite the expert pilot's own brazen admissions of his various misdeeds, this did not necessarily mean he was in the wrong!

Venerable Jannzi Larkinson, Commander Casella Ingvar and Venerable Vincent Ricklin all looked incredibly conflicted. The troubling case challenged all of their principles and forced them to make decisions that they did not necessarily agree with. They would definitely get haunted by the verdicts they issued on this ignominious day.

Serving as judges was a tough and difficult responsibility, but... they still had to do it. Expert pilots did not shirk their responsibilities. They all knew that they were much better suited to judge their peers. In the strong mech culture of modern human civilization, it was common belief that demigods should not be judged by mortals alone. Only other high-ranking mech pilots understood their own situation best.

As the noises of outrage and indignation continued to spread throughout the entire clan, the judges of the special tribunal all looked like they swallowed a bitter pill.

The most impulsive among the judges decisively stood up and demanded everyone's attention!

"LISTEN!" Venerable Vincent Ricklin demanded everyone's attention. "We really tried, okay? We don't like what Taon has done, and we like his open admissions even less. I would like nothing more than to punch him in the face as far as I am concerned. We don't have any other choice, though. The reason why we decided that his actions should be treated as attempted justifiable homicide is because we cannot expect any other Larkinson to do any better. The only pilot among us who may be able to outfight Lanie while piloting her improved Elegant Rage is Saint Tusa, and even an ace pilot would probably struggle to stay alive when piloting a heavy artillery mech that is way outside his specialization."

The male expert pilot let out an exasperated breath. "This entire screw up could have ended in a good way if either Taon or Lanie backed off first. That would have given the other pilot a chance to step back as well and end this fight. That did not happen. Something called the prisoner's dilemma forced both of them to fight to the death because just one of them backing off would mean he or she would get killed."

This was a problem that was incredibly difficult to solve in a perfect fashion if only one out of the two actors was willing to step back.

"It sucks, but what do you expect them to do? Are they supposed to roll over and let themselves get killed? That is absurd! No one deserves to die like a dog! Self-defense is a real thing, and our clan should never force our mech pilots to commit suicide due to stupid stuff like this. We based our judgment on what we would do if we ended up in the same situation as Taon. We figured that we would fight back just as hard as him. In no way should you allow yourself to get killed by another Larkinson, especially if you don't deserve it and pose no threat to the clan."

Venerable Jannzi concurred with her male counterpart. "Venerable Vincent Ricklin speaks true. From the moment we donned our red robes and assumed our current responsibilities, we made our decisions based on what is good for the clan, not what is good for Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson. The fact that he is acquitted of the most severe charges should not be interpreted as acts of leniency. You should instead interpret them as attempts to be fair and just. We cannot be perfect, but we strive to set the score straight so that we may ultimately improve our clan."

She proceeded to announce the special tribunal's rulings on Taon's other charges, which were quite many. He was definitely guilty of conduct unbecoming a champion and voicing threats of death. His culpability was much more severe because the expert pilot openly and unrepentantly voiced his desire to kill Lanie regardless of the fact that their initial battle had already ended!

There was no excuse for his behavior related to these charges and more, but the special tribunal was forced to dial back Taon's culpability due to two recurring reasons.

"We understand that our clan will most certainly object to the leniency that we have granted to Venerable Melin-Larkinson, but... the defense has made a convincing case that he should be judged less harshly due to the presence of multiple mitigating factors." Jannzi spoke without much emotion.

"First, Venerable Melin-Larkinson acted under extreme provocation. During the entire incident, he has never acted on his own volition. He has made all of his actions in response to the Emperor Tree and Venerable Lanie Larkinson. As we have already explained earlier, self-defense is a legitimate response in most situations and takes precedence over many laws. Even his act of killing his living mech can be excused when he genuinely believes that doing so will give him a greater chance of survival."

Being a bastard... was not a crime.

"Second, the accused has undergone extensive psychological examinations starting from his departure from the field. He has proven to be frank and highly cooperative with us. Aside from letting himself get deceived by the Emperor Tree, he bears no shame in the actions he has taken. This has allowed our excellent mental health professionals to develop a detailed understanding of his psyche and mindset. They have diagnosed him with multiple psychotic disorders."

In other words, Taon was certifiably insane.

"Guilt cannot be established, at least fully, if there is a lack of mens rea. When Saint Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson agreed to utilize his Saint Kingdom to interrogate Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson, the latter has unambiguously demonstrated an absolute lack of guilt or acknowledgement of wrongdoing. His advancement to expert pilot has... apparently put him in a permanent state of non compos mentis. What he has done is wrong according to us, but in his mind, he believes he is absolutely right. Does that excuse him from every crime? No. We do not intend for him to escape every responsibility, because insanity should never grant anyone a license to kill and destroy."

The chief judge proceeded to announce the special tribunal's rulings on the remaining lesser charges.

All in all, it became increasingly unlikely that Taon would receive a severe punishment such as execution. Much of his actions could be excused in one way or another.

This realization disappointed a lot of Larkinsons, but... they were no longer of the opinion that the special tribunal came to the wrong conclusions. The reasoning of the judges was simply too sound. If anything, the people should complain to the Larkinson Assembly for not doing a good job at putting together laws that could impose greater punishment onto Taon.

"The sentencing of Venerable Taon Melin-Larkinson for his crimes shall take place after we have announced our next rulings." Jannzi eventually spoke as she shifted gaze away from the offending expert pilot. "We would first like to share our opinions on the charges levied against Venerable Lanie Larkinson. This will not take as long as our judgment of her actions are based on the same arguments and legal principles that we have mentioned before."

The female expert pilot in question perked up and straightened her back. She knew that her moment had come. Lanie grew a lot more optimistic about her chances now that she had witnessed Taon practically getting away with both actual and attempted murder.

The special tribunal might not have made decisions that pleased the masses, but it had already proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that it had acted fairly. The 7 judges all took their responsibilities seriously and did not let their emotions dictate all of their decisions.

Many people gained greater faith in the institutions of the Larkinson Clan. At the very least, the Larkinson High Court successfully managed to establish its prestige in the hearts of every clansman!

Jannzi paused for a short moment before she addressed Lanie's charges.

"From the beginning, Lanie Larkinson got struck from behind by the most powerful weapon of a quasi-first-class heavy artillery mech. By all rights, she should have died right then. If the Zeal's imposing Devora Cannon had aimed higher than the Elegant Rage's lower back section, then the cockpit would have been pulverized, leaving no chance for the fragile human body to remain intact in any recognizable form. Multiple mech designers have analyzed this scenario and calculated the numbers. They unanimously agree that any direct hit towards virtually every rear torso section should have been powerful enough to disable the Elegant Rage and end the life of her mech pilot."

Most Larkinsons already had a good guess of where Jannzi was taking this story.

"Venerable Lanie Larkinson's breakthrough is mostly considered a miracle, but we believe that it is a result borne through her own actions and efforts to obtain greater power. This distinction is not important, but what matters is that she has not only managed to preserve her life, but gain enough martial might to defend herself, flee from the battlefield with her life and mech intact and counter kill the culprit responsible for putting her in extreme distress."

The chief judge of the special tribunal slightly lowered her shoulders as if to express her helplessness and disappointment at this situation.

"From the moment of her breakthrough, Venerable Lanie Larkinson's psyche has undergone an extreme and permanent change, similar to her counterpart. Our mental health professionals have diagnosed similar psychotic disorders in her. She has become permanently afflicted by delusions that drastically altered her view of the cosmos and caused her to develop an extreme fixation towards Venerable Melin-Larkinson's demise. We do not believe that the label of non compos mentis applies as strongly to her as it does her adversary, but she is clearly not sound in mind."

That meant that Lanie was bound to obtain greater leniency.

"Combined with the very concrete attempt on her life, she is subject to the same mitigating factors that reduce her culpability. Starting from the time of her breakthrough, we have determined that she was not in a good state of mind, and that she was correct in believing that Venerable Melin-Larkinson continues to pose a threat to her life. However, there is one crucial difference that has given us reason to judge her more severely than her opponent!"

Lanie looked confused. What did she do that made her more guilty than Taon?

The chief judge directed a harsh gaze towards the younger female expert pilot.

"According to the expert testimony provided by several mech designers, the Elegant Rage, both the original and the altered version, is a melee mech that is oriented towards speed, maneuverability and excellence in melee combat. Our special tribunal has determined that Venerable Lanie Larkinson is able to fight against the Zeal with greater restraint, especially at close range. Both the

Heartsword and the strange thorns on the surface of her mech are weapons that can be used to disable and neutralize the threat posed by a large machine such as the Zeal without needing to kill the pilot. The fact that Venerable Lanie Larkinson sought to kill Venerable Melin-Larkinson regardless of the alternatives is deplorable."

Lanie began to have a bad feeling about this. Jannzi truly looked pissed as she continued to speak!

"Venerable Lanie Larkinson miraculously managed to repair her Elegant Rage from a nearly broken state to a fully repaired condition. In fact, she has even managed to apply spontaneous ad-hoc upgrades that our own mech designers do not fully understand. What is without doubt was that the improvised repairs and upgrades to her living mech has made her machine better than ever. The question now is whether she is justified in continuing to fight the Zeal to the death."

Jannzi called up the projections of the two mutated mechs yet again.

"According to the expert testimony provided by several mech designers, the Elegant Rage, both the original and the altered version, is a melee mech that is oriented towards speed, maneuverability and excellence in melee combat. Our special tribunal has determined that Venerable Lanie Larkinson is able to fight against the Zeal with greater restraint, especially at close range. Both the Heartsword and the strange thorns on the surface of her mech are weapons that can be used to disable and neutralize the threat posed by a large machine such as the Zeal without needing to kill the pilot. The fact that Venerable Lanie Larkinson sought to kill Venerable Melin-Larkinson regardless of the alternatives is deplorable."

Lanie began to have a bad feeling about this. Jannzi truly looked pissed as she continued to speak!

"We also recognize that in an environment that is characterized by a high concentration of Solus Gas, all it takes for Venerable Lanie Larkinson and the Elegant Rage to save their lives is to turn around and evacuate from the field of battle. Expert pilot or not, Venerable Melin-Larkinson is unable to target and strike at any mech at a distance surpassing several kilometers. With the mobility demonstrated by the Elegant Rage in her forced resonance state, it should take very little time to cross this distance."

The chief judge angrily glared at the younger expert pilot who still believed that she had done nothing wrong!

"Venerable Lanie Larkinson declined to follow Venerable Joshua Larkinson's instructions. She also declined to make a good faith attempt to de-escalate this situation. Our special tribunal has no choice but to rule her guilty of the charges of disobeying the order of a superior officer as well as attempting to commit voluntary manslaughter! Do take note that both of these crimes are subject to the aforementioned mitigating factors, so her culpability is not as severe as it sounds. Nonetheless, her agency during the incident was undoubtedly greater. She had the power to end the fight right then and there. The fact that she willfully refused to do so is a disappointment!"

Another surge of disbelief and indignation spread from the Larkinsons!

They did not quite understand why Lanie was guilty while Taon got away easy. Did it matter that much that Lanie piloted a different kind of mech?