

Mech 2881

Chapter 2881: Singular Representative

Over several weeks, the Swordmaidens gradually began to stand out from the immense crowd of foreign competitors.

Plenty of strong and powerful swordsmen and mech pilots from different states managed to attract an abundance of attention during the boisterous festival. The allure and benefits of performing well in the Great Omanderie Festival were so great that a lot of foreign delegations trained just as hard as the seeded participants from the Heavensword Association!

Hundreds of notable competitors turned into stars overnight. Hundreds more faded into obscurity as soon as they faced defeat.

As the Swordmaiden competitors progressed through the tournament, the weakest amongst them already began to drop off. In the face of a huge number of well-trained and well-prepared competitors, the shortcomings of the Swordmaidens became increasingly more obvious.

Though the greatsword-wielding women always attracted a lot of attention due to the characteristic weapons they wielded, there were still adversaries who exerted enough control when facing such intimidating weapons.

The disparity became especially obvious during the mech combat matches. The Swordmaidens were still just getting started with the Diligent Mark XXIV while many other competitors had already mastered the ins and outs of this basic swordsman mech model.

Aside from standout mech pilots such as Commander Sendra and the rest of her five-woman team, every other Swordmaiden mech pilot ended their runs in the individual and group tournaments.

"These damn mechs are restraining us too much! It's too hard to swing a large sword with these weak-armed Diligents!"

"We still have Sendra to carry us forth in the mech combat tournaments."

"Don't count on her to go much further. She barely overcame her last opponent in the individual mech combat tournament. Her last group match was even more tragic. Only her own Diligent remained standing at the end of the match, and it had lost an arm and nearly its entire frontal armor in the process."

While the tournaments were about to reach their middle stages, the Swordmaidens already lost hope of reaching it for the mech combat tournaments.

If the Swordmaidens prepared for them a year in advance, then they might have been able to make it further. Even if they did not choose to wield shorter and more nimble swords, they could have still mastered the Diligent Mark XXIV's to a much greater degree!

"We came too late." Venerable Dise said to the glum Swordmaidens after the end of another disappointing day. "A year ago, none of us thought we would be taking part in the greatest swordsmanship tournaments in Majestic Teal. We were still piloting third-class mechs back then while either hanging out in Cinach VI or struggling to defeat Nyxian pirates. We have come far since then. This is our true victory. As for the Greater Omanderie Festival, this is just a recruiting venue to us. Let the Heavensworders obsess about reaching the finals. We have no need to earn supreme glory."

The Swordmaidens slowly cheered up after hearing this. Over the past few weeks, everyone slowly became immersed in the competitive atmosphere of the Omanderie System. The planet they were on along with the rest of the state had seemingly transformed into a huge celebration. No matter where people traveled, there was no way to escape all the news and gossip about the tournaments!

Venerable Dise looked expectantly at Sendra, Ketis and the rest of the elite personal combat team.

"That said, we still need to work harder in order to attract promising recruits. So far, the quality of swordswomen who applied to join our sisterhood is still on the low end. If we want to attract a greater quantity of promising mech pilots and infantry soldiers, we need to stand out from the crowd of other notable foreign competitors. At this point, we can only place our hopes on reaching the middle stages of the personal combat tournaments."

Ketis looked up at that. "Will you finally grant us permission to carry our Unending greatswords in the field?"

Several other Swordmaidens showed eager looks. While they understood the need for discretion, they long yearned to prove to the Heavensworders that they could compete on them on an equal basis!

The women had much greater hopes for their performance in the personal combat tournaments. While the Swordmaidens primarily centered around piloting swordsman mechs, they never slacked off when it came to pushing every single sister into becoming a great swordswoman in their own right!

The drop-out rate of their grueling training program was horrendous for that reason, but this was the only way to ensure that every woman that remained was fully qualified to fight side-by-side with other sisters.

This was also why it was so important to recruit a lot of swordswomen during the festival. If the Swordmaidens missed this opportunity, then there was no way to replenish their depleted numbers in a short amount of time.

With the other mech forces of the Larkinson Clan such as the Flagrant Vandals and the Penitent Sisters planning to bolster their ranks by adding at least a thousand mech pilots each, the Swordmaidens feared they would become completely irrelevant if they continued to be restricted to fielding a single mech company!

Venerable Dise exchanged glances with Commander Sendra. It was clear that they had already discussed their options beforehand.

Sendra took a deep breath. "After weighing our options, I believe it is best to keep our Unending armaments under wraps. There are two reasons for this. First, the Larkinson Clan is not on solid footing at the moment. That might make it seem we are vulnerable. I don't want to tempt fate even if the Heavensworders are doing a good job in maintaining order. We have already seen how that can go wrong in the Life Research Association."

"We have the backing of Miss Harcourt." Another Swordmaiden noted. "Won't she be able to cover for us even if we pull out weapons made with first-class materials? We are not the only competitors who have brought remarkable weapons to the arena grounds."

She was right. One of the reasons the seeded competitors managed to overcome many opponents with ease was because they relied on the power of their weapons to achieve crushing victories.

At their level of training and preparation, there was no need for the young Heavensword swordmasters to wield ordinary weapons in order to attain more practice.

They could easily obtain this training on their own terms. If they deliberately wielded ordinary weapons and happened to face off against a dark horse with unusual advantages, then these promising warriors might get knocked out of a tournament early, which would be a huge shame!

Commander Sendra sighed. "While there are certain groups of foreigner competitors who have shown swords that do not lose out to ours, their origins are much greater than ours. They come from powerful state-backed institutions or belong to a powerful noble house and such. Our Larkinson Clan can't compare to those big players at the moment, so if we pull out several powerful greatswords at once, we will only draw the wrong kind of attention. Miss Harcourt is a helpful host, but don't forget that she is just a Journeyman. The degree of cover she can provide is only so much."

Although her words sounded reasonable, the Swordmaidens were not resigned to this outcome. Why must they fight with one of their hands tied behind their backs while all of the others could bring all sorts of amazing weapons into the arena?

"She's not finished yet." Venerable Dise quieted the unruly Swordmaidens. "Let her continue."

Sendra smiled. "Do you really think we would decide to keep our heads down completely? Then you are wrong. While I still think it is best to keep our best weapons under wraps, I think we can still afford to show off one Unending greatsword. As long as one of us is able to make it further in the personal combat tournament with the help of this fantastic weapon, we will definitely be able to attract a lot of attention without drawing too many repercussions."

Ketis and the rest widened their eyes. This was quite a good solution to their problem! If they suddenly unveiled multiple Unending greatswords, then many people would think that the Swordmaidens must have more.

However, if they only pushed out a single sister with an exceptional weapon, then the public would just think that the Swordmaidens had already done their best to obtain it. This was not that unusual actually as multiple notable groups of competitors poured the bulk of their funding and resources onto their champions.

Many groups believed it was much better to field one excellent champion rather than five warriors who were merely 'very good'.

The Swordmaidens quickly looked amongst themselves. Who would be their lucky champion? After a few moments, their gazes soon shifted back to Commander Sendra.

Aside from Venerable Dise, no one was stronger than Commander Sendra. She was the natural choice to represent the Swordmaidens in this regard. The fact that she led their sisterhood made it even better. A strong leader always attracted a lot of interest in the organization they led.

Commander Sendra smirked. "I know what you are thinking. I don't think that any of you object if I become your champion, but I have a different idea. Ketis, what do you think about earning greater glory than the rest of us in the arena?"

"What?!" Ketis looked astonished. "You want to pick me? Are you sure? I can't beat you in a fair fight! I'm just a mech designer!"

"It's exactly because you're a mech designer that I have decided you are our best choice. If you think about it, what kind of champion is more remarkable, a dedicated mech pilot and warrior like myself, or a rare swordswoman who also happens to be a very competent mech designer?"

"That... is..."

It was difficult to argue with Sendra's logic. Ketis had already attracted some fame due to her unusual combination of competences.

Even though she didn't really feel she had become a true mech designer, that was only because she constantly compared herself to Ves. Having been stuck in her mentor's shadow for so long, she really didn't feel proud of all of the swordsman mechs she designed up until this point. Their quality was so much worse than the products of the LMC that she didn't even want any of her Swordmaidens to pilot her work!

"Don't look down on yourself." Venerable Dise softly said. "You are still young, and becoming a Journeyman is not too far away for you. That is already a remarkable accomplishment. From what I understand about mech designers, it takes a lot of work, effort and talent to become an Apprentice of your caliber. Many mech designers, including second-class ones, have to work full-time to reach your height, but you managed to do it while at the same time keeping up your swordsmanship. In any other state, you might sound like a fool, but in the Heavensword Association, you are the envy of many local mech designers!"

That was true. Angelique Harcourt frequently expressed her admiration and incredulity at Ketis.

Ketis looked a bit conflicted. "I'm not sure, commander. This is a major responsibility. While I am glad to receive this opportunity, I am afraid I won't be able to make it far enough than if you take my place."

Sendra stepped forward and patted Ketis' shoulder in a reassuring gesture. "It's okay. It doesn't matter what ranking you will reach. Just enjoy the experience and broaden your horizons. Dise and I have seen how much you revel in the personal combat duels. Each match not only makes you a better swordswoman, but also a more insightful mech designer, is that correct?"

"That's... right. Sometimes, I gain new ideas. Other times, I realize that some of my old ideas need adjusting."

"Then fight with your heart's content. We will all support you, Ketis. If you can make use of this opportunity to improve your ability as a mech designer, then we will all benefit a lot more when you finally design exquisite swordsman mechs for us. With all of the experience you have gained by competing against some of the rising young swordmasters of this state, your work has the potential to transform how we fight in the future!"

This was an ambitious vision! Ketis did not dare to think that she would be able to improve so much during the festival, but her eyes already started to burn with desire.

In order to avoid letting down the expectations of her fellow Swordmaidens, she was determined to make it into later stages of the personal combat tournament! As long as she was able to break into the top 1000, she would definitely be the first Apprentice Mech Designer to earn this honor!

Chapter 2882: Scabbard City

While the Swordmaidens decided to allow Ketis to bring out the big guns, she did not choose to do so immediately.

The impact of unveiling her primary weapon against a regular tournament participant would not be great. Showing it off in a match that she was confident in winning with a normal weapon would also clue in every subsequent opponent of her full strength.

It was better to keep her personal greatsword in reserve until she faced her first challenge. While there was a small risk that the opponents before then may have hidden their strength as well, Ketis had surprises in store.

"I know you want to come out and help me defeat my opponents, but it's too early for me to bring you out. Let's wait until we bump into the better Heavensworders. You'll enjoy the fight a lot more."

Swish. Swish.

Although Sharpie had yet to express its power in any way, its presence alone was enough to give Ketis an edge in her matches. Sharpie was not just her intangible 'pet', but also her sword will, at least that was what she thought.

No matter what kind of existence Sharpie turned out to be, the sentient sword will was an extension of herself.

Ever since Ves had given it life, Sharpie constantly helped her with increasing her affinity with swords. It also played an invaluable role in developing her nascent design philosophy.

Her intuitive understanding of sharpness had even grown as of late due to all of the stimulating duels she fought!

Not only that, Ketis constantly gained new inspiration for potential mech designs whenever she encountered a different kind of swordsmanship.

Throughout her stay in the Heavensword Association, she slowly felt that she had truly entered a haven for sword fanatics like her. Just the people of the state alone made her and her fellow Swordmaidens think that they belonged here. The Larkinson Clan couldn't even begin to match the local highly-developed swordsmanship culture!

"We should issue a request to the clan to allow us to settle in the HA. We belong here. There are so many interesting sparring partners here that I can learn something everyday!"

"The clan would never agree. The interests of the Larkinsons aren't based in these parts. The Red Ocean is their true stage, and ours as well."

No matter how much the Heavensword Association accommodated sword lovers of all kinds, the Swordmaidens weren't used to living in such a utopian society.

It was too perfect. The Swordmaidens grew up on the frontier and constantly had to survive in the midst of pirates. Even after joining the Larkinson Clan, they never fully shed their feral nature.

Only in adversity would they be able to obtain true strength! The motto and ideals of the Larkinson Clan resonated with their mentality. This was one of the most important reasons why the Swordmaidens were content with their current arrangements.

Even though the Swordmaidens all knew that they would be departing the Heavensword Association sooner or later, they still wanted to enjoy the new locale while they were here. It was very likely that they would never have the opportunity to visit such a unique state again.

While Ketis spent most of her time participating in matches, exercising her body or receiving valuable pointers from Venerable Dise, she could not keep her body active at all times.

"You should go out and explore Omanderie." Commander Sendra advised as Ketis finished running some laps in the garden of Harcourt's villa. "Augmented or not, you are still human enough to need a break every now and then. Give your muscles some time to recover and do something fun."

"I'm not here to go on a vacation." Ketis frowned as she hydrated herself with a special nutrient solution. "You put a lot of responsibility on my shoulders. I dare not slack off and disappoint your expectations."

"That's why you need to cleanse your mind. Once you face off against the stronger Heavensworders, I don't want you to enter the arena while you are tired and fatigued. The opponents you will meet in the future are so good that you can't afford to make too many mistakes. This is because their scientific understanding of swordsmanship has reached such a high level that all of them are freaks in their own rights."

Under Sendra's continued persuasion, Ketis eventually acquiesced and took the afternoon off in order to explore some of the local sights.

Out of safety precautions, she decided to let a small squad of Infinity Guards escort her around. The mercenaries hadn't been doing much so far, but they could definitely make life easier in several ways.

When Angelique Harcourt heard about the outing, she immediately invited herself.

"You didn't have to come. I can manage on my own." Ketis said to the smartly-dressed Journeyman.

Angelique wore a blue coat over a fashionable ensemble that made it clear that she was a woman of means.

In comparison, Ketis opted to wear a simple brown outfit while wearing her favorite beret to cover her horns.

The other woman approached and linked her arms with the reluctant Swordmaidens. "You don't know this planet as well as I do. I know a lot of good places that will interest you. The Greater Omanderie Festival encompasses more than just the tournaments. While the exciting matches are certainly the centerpieces of this celebration period, there are many other interesting events that are not as intense. Come on! It will be fun!"

The two women along with their escorts boarded a vehicle and headed into the city.

During the short ride, Ketis looked out of the window and beheld the large amount of low-rise white structures interspersed with lots of greenery.

Scabbard City was the capital planet of Omanderie III and one of the main venues of the festival. As the site where the tournaments were being held, millions of tourists and participants had arrived, causing the city to become more boisterous than any other moment.

Despite the huge draw of visitors, Scabbard City still offered plenty of space for more despite the lack of high-rise structures. Only a handful of districts featured any structures that were taller than mechs.

"Omanderie III is not an industrial planet." Harcourt explained. "It's meant to be a haven for swordmasters and swordsman mech pilots. Scabbard City is especially geared towards accommodating their needs. Some of our finest mech academies and swordsmanship schools are headquartered here. If you need any consulting, you can approach one of the many companies that are specialized in helping you improve. Whether you want to solve a problem with your swordsmanship, need some advice on the direction of your design philosophy and so on, there is definitely a service provider who can fulfill your needs."

Ketis looked very intrigued at the options. "I didn't know you could do all of that. Are these services open to foreigners such as myself?"

"Of course. I wouldn't have mentioned them otherwise. Unlike the LRA, we don't believe in keeping most of the good stuff to ourselves. We welcome visitors who are earnest in advancing the development of swordsmanship. We're not afraid of competition. In fact, it would be better if the rest of the star sector catches up in this area so that we will be able to experience more sword styles. That said, business is booming right now due to

all of the tournament participants looking to obtain some extra help. You will need to wait at least a week before a slot opens up due to the previous clients dropping off. Next time, you should make a reservation in advance."

The Swordmaiden mech designer lost interest once she heard that. "There won't be a next time."

Their vehicle soon arrived at its destination. Ketis, Angelique and their bodyguards soon came out and ventured alongside the broad avenues that were lined with trees and different monuments.

Due to the current celebration, the locals put up a lot of festive decorations. Lots of flags, banners and projected visuals caused the city to turn into a huge draw for tourists.

While most of the visitors came from other parts of the Heavensword Association, Ketis also spotted some Hexers and Fridaymen.

There were remarkably few Lifers around, but these people rarely ventured outside of their state to begin with. Even if they decided to go on an exotic holiday, the civil war that had swept across the biotech-oriented state left very few Lifers in the mood to enjoy their holidays.

After ten minutes of walking and taking in the scenery, Angelique led her guest to their first destination for this outing.

"These swords!" Ketis gasped. "They're all old!"

"I knew you would love this place." Angelique grinned. "Welcome to the Sword Graveyard. Our state possesses many notable swords. Each of them has a story. While they are ordinarily stored in protective vaults, hardly anyone can appreciate the weapons there. This is why our state pulls out a selection of swords and plants them in parks like these. For the duration of the festival, any visitor can admire the swords up close. They might even be allowed to take them away if they satisfy special conditions. Don't bank on that, though. On average, only a dozen or so visitors are able to succeed."

From the entrance of the park, Ketis estimated that she saw over ten-thousand different swords. Many of them were man-sized but there were still hundreds of large blades that absolutely towered over humans!

Those swords were meant to be wielded by mechs!

Every sword was planted tip-first into the ground. Although it looked as if the Heavensworders haphazardly planted them into the soil, Ketis could tell that each insertion was carefully prepared for. None of the swords incurred any damage and

wouldn't tip over. Near-invisible energy screens prevented bystanders from casually pulling the man-sized swords out of the ground."

If anyone wanted to take out the swords that were eligible to be taken away, they had to satisfy the unique conditions attached to them. Only a small proportion of swords offered these opportunities.

Ketis approached the first weapon that was comparable to a greatsword. It was a rather rustic-looking claymore that possessed a chipped edge and heavy signs of wear and tear.

She tried to imagine what its owner was like and how the weapon was wielded in battle.

While she could have easily learned all of this by reading the projected information sign, she preferred to rely on her own feelings and observations.

"This is a nice sword." She eventually sighed. "Its quality isn't the best and the craftsmanship isn't very refined, but I can tell that the swordsmith put real love into his work. It's a pity that its owner and user didn't use this weapon very often. The blade hardly spilled any blood."

Angelique smiled ruefully at the shabby claymore. "While we love swords, we don't have that many opportunities to wield them in battle. Our state is at peace and what little friction takes place is not enough to give many people the opportunity to put their training to actual use. This is one of our state's persistent problems."

The weapon was one of the least-impressive displays in the Sword Graveyard. The only reason why it was here in the first place was because its owner was a notable personality back when he was alive.

When Ketis concentrated her mind, she did not feel any resonance with the weapon. The claymore hadn't been designed with the best possible sharpness in mind. Instead, its creator placed a lot more emphasis on other qualities.

She wandered else and passed by numerous smaller blades until another unusual sword caught her attention.

"Is this... an organic weapon?"

"Yup." Angelique nodded. "It's probably from the LRA. We don't make these bioswords ourselves."

The biosword was an odd contraption to Ketis. Its hollow blade was made out of bone and was covered with strange gaps. The one-handed weapon also featured a squishy, fleshy hilt that made it seem as if it was made out of human flesh!

Ketis momentarily experienced some unpleasant flashbacks about her fight against the Grey Watcher turned monster.

Chapter 2883: Jelly

Although a part of her was very fascinated with the organic sword, she mainly felt repelled by it. Just imagining herself wielding it presented a discordant image to her. The weapon was simply too weird!

"What are the holes for?" Ketis frowned in puzzlement. "Are they meant to siphon the blood of whoever gets stabbed with this weapon?"

"No. Apparently, the biosword is meant to discharge plasma from these cavities. The entire reason why the hilt is so fleshy and elaborate is because it houses the mechanism that generates and releases the plasma energy."

A plasma weapon! Ketis gained a lot more respect for the weapon.

"I don't think this weapon saw much use. It's still in good condition and it's also fairly recent to boot."

The ages of the weapons planted in the Sword Graveyard varied. Some of them were less than a decade old but there were also numerous blades that had gained fame a century ago!

While the older swords were not necessarily the better ones, Ketis felt more drawn to them for some reason. It might have been due to the influence of Ves. Under his tutelage and guidance, she gained a greater appreciation for durable products that grew stronger and more personal over time.

It was a pity that none of the weapons she encountered were alive, especially in the same way as her personal greatsword.

After years of getting spoiled by living mechs and living products, Ketis found it difficult to muster too much enthusiasm for lifeless and unresponsive objects.

Angelique clearly noticed her restrained mood as they inspected various exotic-looking weapons.

"What's the matter? Are the swords here not to your liking? There are more exciting and exclusive ones when we get closer to the center of the Sword Graveyard."

"It's not that. Many of these swords are all respectable in their own way. It's just that they don't quite have what I'm looking for. I sort of expected more given what I've heard from the Heavensword Association."

The swordmasters of the state were truly dedicated to the sword. Ketis thought that translated into taking great care of their weapons. She heard stories of legendary swordsmen trying to develop such a close relationship with their blades that they even carried them into their beds!

According to Ves' teachings, any person was able to inspire some life and develop a bond with a closely-cherished object. In practice, it was a lot harder than it sounded to achieve anything significant.

This was why she tried to sense whether any of the swords felt comparable to the equipment and mechs made by Ves, but none of them stood out in this manner.

After inspecting dozens of personal weapons, Ketis and Angelique finally approached the first sword built for a mech.

The massive metal monstrosity cast a tall shadow over the people who came to admire it. The weapon was merely a shortsword that was meant to be wielded by a knight mech, but its dimensions in comparison to a human were so imposing that no one thought it was too small!

Though the mech sword did not possess any intrinsic life, Ketis nonetheless began to appreciate the weapon from the perspective of a swordsman mech designer.

"This is a traditionally-forged sword!" She said in a mildly impressed tone. "Every step is made with as much manual effort as possible. I can see all of the personal touches that make this weapon unique."

While it was impossible to forge a mech-sized weapon completely with handheld tools, there was a large difference in relying on an automated production line to fabricate a sword and employing a high degree of manual control over specialized forging machines.

The latter was not only more cumbersome and time-consuming, but also exhibited a greater chance of failure. If the end product suffered any severe defects, all of the time and effort spent on making it was pretty much wasted!

The time of highly-skilled craftsmen was very precious. It took a lot of studying, training and practice to forge an entire mech-grade sword in a traditional manner. This meant that even an ordinary artisanal mech weapon was of great value.

While Ketis knew the theory and steps behind forging a comparable weapon, she never truly succeeded on her own as of yet. She still didn't feel ready enough to embark on such a great project.

Harcourt was different though. As a Journeyman from a state that was obsessed with swords, she would never be able to earn respect in her state if she was unable to forge unique weapons for her mechs.

"There are quite a lot of swords like these in our state." She explained. "While custom-forged weapons are not cost-efficient at all, our best sword wielders all prefer to fight with something tailored to their specific styles. Each mech designer or swordsmith that is capable of forging blades like these possess distinct advantages that make their swords stand out from others."

"What is your unique characteristic?" Ketis asked.

Angelique responded with a proud grin. "My blades are lighter and swifter while not sacrificing any structural integrity. While the differences aren't too big as of yet, I am constantly improving my techniques. The blades I am capable of forging pair exceptionally well with my fencing mechs."

"How long does it take for you to forge one of your custom swords?"

"It depends on a lot of factors. As long as you are in a good workshop, it typically takes a day to forge a sword that you can be proud of. It might take longer for larger and more complex weapons, but the chance of something going wrong goes up drastically if you need to spend multiple days making your weapon."

The pair of women continued to talk about the ins and outs of forging mech-grade swords. Angelique might not excel in this aspect, but she still possessed enough ability to make Ketis look up to the older and more experienced mech designer.

Soon enough, they drifted away from the huge shortsword.

Once they ventured closer to the center of the transformed park, they encountered more valuable and significant weapons.

Security was higher around these parts as well. Armed guards constantly patrolled the grounds in order to ensure that no one tried to break the energy screens and take the swords away.

While no one was stupid enough to do so, there were always greedy idiots who thought they could outsmart the sophisticated security measures employed by the Heavensworders.

Each time Ketis inspected a different bladed weapon, whether it was a longsword, a saber or a dagger, she gained a new appreciation for those types of swords.

"We don't adopt a strict definition of a sword." Angelique said after Ketis asked why knives and daggers were included in the Sword Graveyard. "We love all weapons that

share the same characteristics. The approach and handling of these different types of weapons are all similar. This is the criteria we use to judge whether a weapon is a sword or not. It might not be the most precise definition, but it is one that works."

Ketis found herself agreeing with her companion's opinion. "The concept of a sword is broad enough to include many different forms. It doesn't make sense to toss them all aside."

In fact, Ketis became attracted to a knife. She spotted a small crowd forming at a wooded location.

The pair of mech designers moved closer and saw that there was some kind of contest in progress.

A hopeful-looking teenager took hold of a composite practice sword and chopped it into a large block of jelly-like material.

The composite sword possessed a broad edge, which made it very hard to make a small cut mark. The broadness of the blade caused the practice sword to dig a thick groove in the jelly.

An old man in the uniform of a mech pilot shook his head. "Fail. Your technique is too crude. You need to cleave through the testing substance, not shove through it. Look at how wide and rough these marks look."

The so-called testing substance slowly restored itself to its old condition. Once it turned back into a straight and even block of jelly, someone else took over with the practice sword.

The result was no better than the last one.

Ketis shook her head at the sight. "Awful. The blade might not be sharp, but they can still adjust their technique so that the cut becomes cleaner."

"If you think you can do better, why not try?" Angelique suggested.

"Alright, but you try as well. I'm curious how good you actually are with wielding a sword. You only told us that you aren't great at swordsmanship."

"I wasn't lying, Ketis. I'm afraid I'll make you laugh."

The two women patiently stood in line. Despite their higher status compared to the other people that had gathered here, neither of them thought about cutting the line.

The presence of the old and likely retired mech pilot who administered the test was enough to deter anyone from acting improperly. Even if his personal strength wasn't great, his bearing and attitude made him a little more special.

Once the two women finally received their turn, Angelique decided to go first. Unlike the others, she opted to perform a sharp and vigorous stab.

From the moment she stepped forward to the moment she retracted the tip of the practice sword, she had momentarily acquired a sharper and more intense demeanor!

All of that quickly faded once she stepped back.

The hole she managed to pierce through the testing substance was quite impressive. Ketis could see that Angelique possessed enough skill to perform a clean and efficient stab.

"Fail. You are supposed to chop the testing substance, not poke holes in them. Get out of the way and let the next young lady make her attempt."

Despite the old man's rudent remark, Angelique merely shrugged and handed over the weapon.

Ketis frowned when she grasped the practice weapon. It was made out of heavy composites, but the feel and weight of it was incomparable to a genuine metal sword.

She looked towards the old man.

"Chop the testing substance while trying to make the cleanest cut possible. I will be evaluating your attempt by looking at the cleanness of the cut, the thickness of the displaced testing substance, the technique you employ and the ease in which you wield your weapon."

"What do I get if I score high enough?"

The old mech pilot grew subdued. "I'll allow you to inherit the personal knife of my closest friend and battle comrade. He loved his combat knife. It accompanied him throughout his military service. In his will, he stated his desire to pass it on to a younger warrior who can wield it to its true potential."

She grew hopeful. Yet when she shifted her gaze to the knife that was half-planted into the soil, her anticipation quickly faded.

The personal weapon that the old man's comrade supposedly cherished over many decades was just a high-quality service weapon without any signs of life. It didn't matter if it had acquired numerous marks of age, or if it showed signs of loving and caring

maintenance. Without sensing anything that made it special to her, Ketis didn't really care for the weapon.

She just wanted to see how sharp of a cut she could make with an imitation weapon.

Once she took some deep breaths, Ketis concentrated while lifting the practice blade.

In order to prevent her capabilities from leaking to any potential tournament adversaries, Ketis did not draw upon Sharpie's help, much to the living sword will's disappointment.

Instead, she tried to rely on her base 'superpower', which she considered was sufficient for the job.

"Cut!"

The one-handed weapon chopped straight through the top of the testing subject and smoothly descended further!

While her cut looked simple, the practice blade seemed to glide through the testing subject. The weapon acquired so much sharpness that it was as if she was wielding a thinner sword!

When her practice blade finally reached the table where the testing subject rested upon, the sword finally stopped after colliding against the metal surface.

Once Ketis pulled out the sword, the old mech pilot looked astonished when he saw the clear cut mark on the surface.

A weapon as blunt as the one he handed out should have never made such a mark! It was too weak!

The old man's eyes suddenly turned fiery. He quickly stepped forward and grabbed Ketis' shoulders.

"You are it. You are it! You are the heir that I am looking for! You are the chosen one who I have been looking for! Only a swordsman or swordswoman who can cut this cleanly is qualified to further the legacy of my sword school!"

"Wait, what?!" Ketis brushed away the old man's arms and took a few steps back.

"That's not what you said earlier. I just wanted to cut that funny jelly stuff, that's all! I didn't come here to inherit any legacy!"

"Nonsense. From today onwards, you are my heir!"

Chapter 2884: Sword Schools

"You! Get away from me. Your breath stinks!" Ketis complained as the old mech pilot who conducted the test.

"No! I have spent over three decades to find a suitable inheritor for my legacy and the legacy of my brother. I will not let you go, not after I am close to fulfilling my late brother's wish!"

"I didn't sign up for this nonsense. I just want to win that old knife of yours."

"Oh, that piece of junk?" A cunning smile appeared on the old man's face. "That's not really a storied weapon. There is no grand owner or story behind it. I just bought it from a flea market a week ago for the price of a restaurant meal. It's an ordinary surplus blade. There's nothing special about it. I just banged it up a bit before polishing it in a way that makes it look like it has a history."

What? The knife was a fake antique?

"You... you... you scammer!"

"Hey, as long as I can reel you in, it's worth it! Do you know how long I've waited to find a swordsman who can make a cut as smooth as yours?"

The Swordmaiden mech designer frowned deeper and deeper as the old man kept harassing her. She was quickly reminded of one of Ves' sayings.

Stubborn old people were extremely troublesome! This was especially the case for those with ambition or those who were looking to pass on their legacies.

Their desperation, their lack of fear towards their looming death and their intense desire to leave a mark of their existence behind turned them into some of the most unscrupulous people in the galaxy!

According to Ves, the best way to handle these people was to either let them talk until they tired themselves out or get away from them as fast as possible!

No matter what benefits they offered, they always came with a lot of strings attached. There was no free lunch!

"I'm not interested. I'm just a visitor here. I already trained in another sword style, and I have no intention of turning my back on it! The fact that you're even suggesting me to change it is a grave insult!"

Ketis tried to brush away the creepy old man who clung to her arms. Though she possessed more than enough strength to push away the stranger, she was afraid of harming someone and getting into trouble.

If she hurt someone and got caught, then she would undoubtedly face sanctions. This was bad because the Heavensword Association adopted a zero tolerance policy for the duration of the Greater Omanderie Festival. If any guest committed a crime that was more severe than littering, then they would lose the qualifications to attend or participate in any of the events, including the tournaments!

Though Ketis already felt that the man who attempted to solicit her was a trained warrior, his wiry, skinny body belied his age.

Even the strongest warriors grew feeble after the ravages of time aged their bodies and worsened their lingering injuries!

Therefore, she dared not to exert too much of her prodigious strength. She tried to be as gentle as possible in pushing the insistent man away, but the problem was that he wasn't taking the hint!

Fortunately, her bodyguards finally stepped in. Two of them strode forward and gently grabbed the old man by the arms before carefully dragging him back.

"No! Don't take me away! Just listen to me! You're a great fit for our sword style! Do you know what kind of opportunity you are missing? As long as you accept my appointment, you will immediately take over my position as the interim director of an officially-recognized sword school! If you're a swordmaster, then that's even better! You can become the head of our sword school and evolve our sword style to suit your own tastes."

Ketis grew confused. She turned to Angelique. "What is this geezer talking about? What's this about sword schools?"

The Journeyman Mech Designer took on a disgusted expression. "It's nothing. You don't need to be concerned about this matter. People like him are merely the remnants of a fallen club. There are many sword schools in the Heavensword Association that have risen and fallen over the years. Some of the latter aren't able to recognize reality and try to do anything to scam random people into taking over their troubled schools. It's a massive burden because you will have to take over all of the debt and other problems associated with these troubled organizations."

"You blasted woman!" The old man cursed at Angelique. "Our Annihilator Sword School may have fallen on hard times, but it can completely return to its glory as long as the young lady next to you takes it over. While the effect of her swordsmanship is admittedly different from that of our Annihilator Sword Style, that is not inherently a bad

thing as she can put her own mark on it! With the inheritance and accumulation of our majestic style, she can completely become a swordmaster without comparison!"

Angelique shook her head as the guards continued to drag the old man away. "Let's go. You don't need to get caught up in this kind of business."

The two mech designers sped up and walked far away. While they attempted to go back to admiring the different swords planted in the Sword Graveyard, they weren't in the mood anymore.

Throughout the tour, Ketis couldn't help but grow curious at what the old man was about. Why did he insist on picking a foreigner like her to inherit his legacy?

"I just looked up the Annihilator Sword School on the galactic net." Angelique said. "Don't let the name fool you. This school is just a shadow of its former self. Forty years ago, it may have been respectable, but after its founder and only swordmaster died, it all went downhill from there. The man who solicited you is Fred Walinski, the interim director and only remaining registered member of his school. The last disciples and other personnel removed their names from the registry eight years ago. Once the interim director dies, the Annihilator Sword School will truly become a fallen sword school, which is exactly where it belongs."

Ketis had a feeling that she wasn't comprehending the full story.

"What are sword schools exactly? I understand the meaning of the words, and I've heard people mention it before, but it sounds like their significance is greater than I initially realized."

"You're most probably correct, Ketis. Sword schools are the most respected organizations in the Heavensword Association. First, you have to understand what a valid sword style is to Heavensworders like myself. Do you think that any sword style, even ones that date far before the Age of Mechs, is worth obsessing over?"

"Clearly not. Anyone who has practiced swordsmanship can develop a new style. It's usually a bad idea for most since they don't possess the knowledge, experience and feel to develop a set of moves that is better than a style that has been developed over centuries. The best that you can do is to adapt the style to suit your own approach and physical properties."

Angelique slightly shook her head. "While everything that you have said is correct, more or less, it is not what I am driving at. Do you know what makes the seeded competitors in the tournaments better than anyone else? It is not a coincidence that they have dominated the finals since the beginning. What makes them special?"

"Uhm... they're better at sword fighting than anyone else?"

"That's a simple answer, but it's not the entire story. The truth of the matter is that all of the seeded competitors are swordsmen that have touched upon the true essence of a valid sword style. They are called sword initiates because unlike other warriors, they can express the true power of a real and valid sword style!"

"Uhm, what?"

"Let me give you an example." Angelique said and accessed a short clip stored in her comm. "Watch carefully."

The clip showed two seeded competitors matching up against each other in a different tournament. They postured against each other before the person wielding a fencing blade struck out against someone who wielded twin blades.

The twin blade swordsman attempted to parry the incoming stab, but at the moment of contact, a small but forceful explosion erupted that pushed the parrying swords aside!

The tip of the fencing sword continued to snake forward and collided against the energy shield that appeared over the protective suit of the twin blade user!

However, at the moment of contact, yet another explosion took place! Even if the strange detonation failed to break the powerful energy shield, the victim had undoubtedly lost the match!

Ketis tried to figure out what had happened. "Those explosions are weird. I doubt that these swordsmen are allowed to bring bombs to their matches. Is the sword responsible for generating those explosions?"

"No." Angelique shook her head. "The fencing sword is made out of hard and special materials, but none of the exotics used in its forging are able to generate this effect on their own. It's the wielder of the weapon that is responsible for channeling this destructive effect."

"Huh?" Ketis blinked.

Did these swordsmen possess superpowers of their own?

"I know it looks incredulous, but this is what true sword styles can do. Our Heavensword Association wouldn't exist if swordsmanship was merely about technique and nothing else" Angelique stated. "What we care about is the essence of swordsmanship. Every earnest swordsman seeks to attain enlightenment. Practising a strong and remarkable sword style is the best way to do so. While it is a bit complicated to explain, you can basically say that every sword style that can achieve an effect beyond what is possible in reality is enough to support the establishment of a sword school."

"So this Annihilator Sword School teaches a powerful sword style?"

The Journeyman laughed. "There are good sword schools and bad sword schools. Those that are popular and good at making their disciples stronger are the core institutions of our state. All of the seeded competitors come from these top schools. There are only hundreds of good schools in our state. These are the ones that every Heavensworder looks up to. Billions of young and hopeful sword students apply to them every year, but even the biggest schools only accept thousands of them per year. They are extremely selective and only accept the best."

That sounded like a big deal to Ketis.

"What about the other schools?"

"The ones that fall outside this category usually have problems. There are millions of schools like this, many of which have long been forgotten. Perhaps their sword style is weak. Perhaps it is stronger, but difficult to pass on. Perhaps their sole founder and swordmaster has perished without anyone in the school qualified to step up. This happens to be the case for the Annihilator Sword School. From what I've read on the galactic net, the Annihilator Sword Style is the real deal, but it is difficult to master. At its strongest, it can reverse a battle, but only one person truly mastered it in the history of the school."

Those who were capable of developing a sword style with notable effects were usually expert pilots. Their extraordinary powers easily allowed them to form techniques that conform to their strong characteristics.

What was remarkable about these sword styles was that others could learn them as well!

Ketis widened her eyes when she learned of this. "Are you telling the truth? Non-expert pilots can channel powers like these as well?!"

"That's why they are called swordmasters." Angelique responded with a smile. "A good sword style not only teaches a set of moves, but also passes on the dogma behind them. As long as swordsmen with talent are compatible with the dogma, they can channel the sword style in a way that allows them to perform moves like the one I showed earlier despite not being expert pilots themselves. There are more ways to become a god besides becoming extremely good at piloting mechs. This is a heritage that predates the Age of Mechs. Before humans aspired to become god pilots, they dreamt of becoming sword gods!"

Sword gods! This was the first time that Ketis became exposed for this term. Her heart and sword will shook as she tried to wrap her mind around the concept.

Chapter 2885: Swordsmanship Tradition

While Ketis heard some fantastical claims about the Heavensword Association, she always dismissed them as rumors and exaggerations.

Even though she found a way for her to develop her own superpower, she gradually learned she was the exception rather than the rule.

Every other mech designer in the Design Department had never managed to achieve something comparable to her ability to make every blade sharper. Even if her fellow mech designers found a way to make their design philosophies more useful, the effects were very marginal and virtually indistinguishable from that of a regular trained person.

Therefore, the stories she heard about Heavensworders being able to shoot wind blades or manipulate gravity never sank in. Whenever she saw footage like the one earlier, she attributed the remarkable effects to the construction of the sword.

As a mech designer, she knew quite well that there were lots of unstable exotics in existence that were capable of warping reality in some fashion. Phasewater was just one of the more recent and most impactful exotic to do so. Other substances were capable of reducing gravity, negating kinetic force or amplifying temperatures.

Of course, utilizing those materials was very hard. Most of them were fairly fragile and easy to break. Their effects were also inconsistent and easily disrupted. Material scientists like Master Katzenberg dedicated their lives to invent new alloys and composites that were capable of replicating the effects of raw exotics in a stable and usable package.

However, according to Angelique, it turned out that the Heavensword Association eschewed these kinds of weapons!

"Just like how a mech must always remain under the control of its mech pilot, a sword cannot do all of the work on behalf of its wielder. What is the point of becoming a swordsman when any random person on the street can hold a blade that can tear through the fabric of space? Using such blades is considered cheating because it devolves the practice of swordsmanship. The goal of our pursuit is to elevate ourselves, not our weapons. One of the criteria that our state uses to certify a swordmaster is that he must be able to channel his powers with a plain sword made out of a mundane material like iron. Many swordsmen have never gotten close to this point."

Ketis briefly recalled her own experiments on imbuing random fruit knives with her superpower. Did this mean that she was effectively a swordmaster?

"Okay, I think I understand why swordmasters are a big deal here. It's rather amazing that expert pilots are able to pass on a portion of their powers through teaching.

However, not everyone is a mech pilot or expert pilot. Is it really possible for a norm to become a swordmaster?"

Angelique proudly nodded. "It is! Our state has poured more research and development in this aspect than many other organizations. While we cannot claim to be the absolute best in swordsmanship, in an age where the pursuit of piloting mechs has trumped every traditional fighting practice, we are one of the few people in human space who still aim to preserve our old ways."

Though Ketis was obsessed with swordsmanship, she was not a fan of tradition. She was very well aware that most people today didn't think there was anything special about it. Most mech pilots were willing to learn how to wield a sword, but they only invested enough time to acquire a repertoire of moves before focusing their training on other mech piloting aspects.

As for norms, the use of swords in personal combat had long ceased to be a fixture in warfare. Outside of duels, ritual combat and special circumstances, swords were completely irrelevant to soldiers!

Rather than waste time on learning how to wield a weapon that was only useful when the enemy was at point-blank range, it was much more efficient to invest all of that practice time in improving marksmanship.

Due to uneven scaling, rifles and other ranged weapons were much more effective at the infantry level. It was only when armor became bigger and more massive that it was able to resist ranged weapons long enough for mechs to get close to other mechs!

In this scenario, a mech that wielded a sword could easily butcher a rifleman mech!

This was why mechs that wielded primitive swords and other melee weapons were not a joke, and why swordsmanship was still a somewhat serious discipline.

Yet to take it as far as the Heavensworders sounded ridiculous even to Ketis.

While she was aware that the Swordmaidens were also obsessive about swordsmanship, this was more of a means to bring sisters closer together while instilling discipline in them. The Swordmaiden approach towards swordsmanship was very practical and devoid of any extraneous philosophies.

Perhaps the style she learned didn't come with any fancy tricks, but it belonged to the Swordmaidens, and that was enough. She could always compensate for what was missing with her own superpower.

"Is it possible for mech designers to become swordmasters?" Ketis curiously asked.

"It has never been done." Her companion replied while sighing in regret. "None of us are resigned to this truth. Nearly every mech designer in our state tries to do their best to polish their swordsmanship while keeping up with their work or studies, but we don't have enough to achieve results in both pursuits. We can only choose to excel in one of them. That is the choice I made as well."

"What do you think about my chances, then? You've seen me fight. I also managed to pass that old man's test."

"Don't get too cocky. You don't understand anything about what it takes to become a genuine swordmaster. It is already a minor miracle that you have attained a degree of swordsmanship that is enough for you to compete in the tournaments, but sooner or later you will have to make a difficult decision. The amount of time and effort that swordsmen need to put into becoming a swordmaster is so great that it consumes their entire lives. How can they spare any time to become a good mech designer?"

Ketis wanted to refute Angelique's scepticism, but she still had some reservations about revealing her superpower. She knew quite well that her design philosophy had more to do with it than her attainments in swordsmanship.

Commander Sendra was much more skilled in swordsmanship than her, but the mech pilot was completely unable to evoke any extraordinary effect!

From this standpoint, it didn't matter how well Commander Sendra performed in the tournament. The true insiders weren't interested in swordsmen and swordswomen who fought according to mortal means.

It was only now that Ketis realized that the tournaments mainly centered around the swordmasters who had stepped onto the path of becoming sword gods.

Whether they were mech pilots or simple norms, their dedication to their respective sword styles had reached such an extreme that they were easily capable of warping reality while wielding average weapons. These amazing individuals fully deserved to be recognized as swordmasters!

By the end of their visit to the Sword Graveyard, Ketis gained a more thorough understanding of the power structure and overall goal of the Heavensword Association.

Whereas the Life Research Association sought to supplant conventional technology with biotechnology, the Heavensword Association primarily existed to elevate swordsmanship to the point of creating sword gods!

She suddenly thought about the people at the top.

"Wait a minute... is the Heavensword Style the strongest of all styles?"

"You can say that." Angelique nodded. "I have heard from some of my teachers that there is a mystique to the Heavensword Style. It's not an ordinary sword style. For one, the Heavensword Saint is always the strongest swordmaster in our state regardless of his or her prior identity. The style is also rumored to come from the mythical Heavensword, which happens to be a mysterious relic in itself."

"Are you saying that the Heavensword predates modern swordsmanship?"

"Who knows. These are all rumors. Even citizens like myself don't know the full story behind the sword that symbolizes our state. All we know is that whoever holds the Heavensword and inherits its accompanying style is undoubtedly the closest to becoming a sword god out of every swordmaster. That is why his or her leadership is always unquestioned!"

These matters flew way over Ketis' head. While she was curious to learn the truth about the Heavensword, she was much more preoccupied with helping the Swordmaidens recruit good swordswomen and getting back to the main fleet in order to get back to designing mechs.

As Ketis and Angelique began touring more sights such as a museum, a luxury shopping center and a meeting place for mech designers, they began to share deeper insights on how swordsmanship intertwined with mechs.

During this tour, Angelique brought up a fascinating theory.

"Do you know that many Heavensworders believe that the progression of high-ranking mech pilots is originally copied from our swordsmanship tradition?"

Ketis looked incredulous at the other woman. "Do you have any proof? This is an incredible claim. If this is true, why haven't any of us outside this state heard about it? Swordsmanship would become a lot more popular throughout the galaxy if this is the case!"

Angelique shrugged. "I don't know why it is more known. Maybe the MTA deliberately suppresses the truth. You have to be aware of the times we are living in right now. Nothing is allowed to supplant the majesty of mechs. Neither warships, weapons of mass destruction or unrestricted genetic modification have been able to break through this blockade. How can our swordsmanship tradition possibly do any better? I think this is also one of the reasons why the founders of our state ventured all the way to the galactic rim. They weren't welcome in the core regions of human space anymore. Only in a backwater like the Majestic Teal Star Sector are we allowed to develop our swordsmanship in peace."

What she described was nothing less than a conspiracy! Ketis grew a bit nervous. If the MTA truly plagiarized the progression of swordmasters and applied it to mech pilots,

then this revelation was damaging enough to affect the prestige of high-ranking mech pilots!

The claim basically implied that mechs weren't inherently special!

To many people, the emergence of superhumans called Star Designers and god pilots was one of the strongest reasons why mechs were so dominant in human space. Before mechs arrived on the scene, humans had no way of transcending their mortal existence. Every human was equal more or less.

Extensive genetic modification did not make humans closer to god. Instead, as the latter half of the Age of Conquest had already proven, recklessly inserting alien genes into the human genome only turned humans into monsters.

If the adoption of mechs didn't provide such a strong and accessible way for certain individuals to become more than human, then it was doubtful that most of human society would abandon the use of destructive warships that quickly!

Despite knowing that this claim was likely related to a taboo, Ketis couldn't help but grow curious about it. As someone who loved both mechs and swords, how could she not be interested in a theory that claimed they were much closer related than she initially thought?

"Do you have any concrete indications that back up what you have just said?"

"Well, just compare how we classify both high-ranking mech pilots and swordmasters. To us, expert candidates are equivalent to sword initiates. Expert pilots are equivalent to swordmasters. Ace pilots are pretty much sword saints. As for god pilots, I don't think it takes much time for you to be able to link them to sword gods. It's a pity that we have never witnessed the birth of the latter. Our state is incomparable to the rest of human civilization. For now, sword gods are purely a theoretical existence. Perhaps some might have existed in the past, but I don't have access to any information that can prove this assertion."

Ketis wasn't aware that so many different ranks of swordmasters existed, but now that she knew, she could obviously see the parallels.

Yet... she still felt a bit skeptical.

"Did the MTA really copy your homework? What if it's the other way around? What if swordmasters modeled their progression after expert pilots and so on began to emerge?"

"That's impossible, Ketis. The history of the Heavensword Association predates the Age of Mechs. We existed before the arrival of mechs and the MTA. We already had swordmasters back then. We have entire databases of books and footage to prove this.

As far as I am concerned, our swordsmanship tradition is the ancestor and original source of modern-day mech piloting tradition!"

Chapter 2886: Dubious Scheme

Ketis had no way to judge whether Angelique's theories had any basis in reality. A part of her wanted to dismiss the Journeyman's fantastical claims as nationalist myths.

Having traveled through numerous states, she had already become exposed to different cultures. One of the observations she made was that every state made up stories in order to stand out.

It was easier to inspire and unite citizens if they all believed in the same claims that somehow inflated their pride and belonging to the state!

Yet the theories that Ketis learned appealed to her as an avid swordswoman and a passionate swordsman mech designer.

Some stories just sounded so good to her that she didn't want them to be wrong!

Of course, this was not the approach she was supposed to adopt as a mech designer and an engineer.

While it was fine to become attached to certain theories, someone who was steeped in the sciences must always try to be as objective as possible.

Any person who failed to apply objective criteria to judge any theory was biased at best and a conspiracy theorist at worst!

It was due to her background as a mech designer that she was ultimately reluctant to

As she began to think further on what Angelique said, she noticed a small but important incongruity.

In one instance, she claimed that the MTA based its mech piloting tradition on swordsmanship tradition. Once the mechers got what they wanted, they suppressed the swordmasters and pushed them away from the center of human civilization in order to marginalize the truth.

While all of this sounded plausible, Ketis couldn't help but recall that the Heavensword Association indeed predated the rise of mechs and the MTA.

How could the Heavensworders be exiled to the edge of human space when the MTA didn't formally exist as of yet? Even if mechs already existed before the Age of Mechs, they were still obscure at the time! Before entering the mainstream, the early supporters

of mechs shouldn't have been powerful at all. How could they ever exert enough pressure to kick swordmasters out of the galactic center?

This strange and obvious inconsistency caused Ketis to grow more cautious about embracing the nice-sounding claims. She had spent enough time with Ves to know that if something sounded too good to be true, it was usually a scam!

Ketis began to suspect that the Heavensworders weren't honest and upright as their public image attested. Perhaps Angelique Harcourt had more in common with the old man than she thought.

The Heavensworders obsessed too much over how special they were compared to other humans. While swordmasters sounded like amazing people, Ketis was deeply aware of how irrelevant they were in modern society.

So what if swordmasters could employ superpowers? Were they capable of defeating a mech? No! If any swordmaster was foolish enough to challenge even the cheapest mech, the latter could easily end the battle by squashing its foot on the puny human.

If a swordmaster just happened to be powerful enough to pose a threat to a mech, then he or she could still be defeated with ease by getting shot by a mech-grade rifle!

Even if Ketis was generous enough to assume that there were some rare individuals who could do the impossible like the Heavensword Saint, that still didn't change the point. How many of them were there in the Heavensword Association? Probably no more than ten, and that was a generous estimate.

Compared to the paltry number of swordmasters who were capable of challenging mechs, the amount of mechs and mech pilots was much greater! Any random outfit could easily slay a legendary figure like the Heavensword Saint despite the immense disparity in importance and significance between the two. Swordmasters were simply too far behind the times to stay relevant!

"Maybe that is the true reason why the swordsmanship tradition has never been able to rise again." Ketis guessed. "It takes a disproportionate amount of time and effort for an entire population to produce a single swordmaster. If that person is also an expert pilot, then he can at least defeat hundreds of mechs in battle, but if he doesn't possess any genetic aptitude, then there is hardly any point!"

She was well aware that her own pursuit of swordsmanship could be described in the same light. She had it easier than other people, though. Not only did the candies allow her to retain both of her pursuits without falling behind, her attainments in swordsmanship directly improved her ability as a mech designer.

In this context, she believed she successfully distinguished herself from the foolish Heavensworders.

Her thinking eventually caused her to voice a declaration.

"I am a mech designer first and a swordswoman second."

From the moment she said those words, she felt that everything was right in the cosmos. For a long time, she tried to be good at both in equal measures. It was only after she began to focus more on the latter that she recognized that this was her true calling.

Even though she liked to become good at wielding swords, if she truly had to make a choice, she could live without using her sword in battle ever again!

"What I can't imagine is never designing another mech in my life!"

If she was in Angelique Harcourt's position, she would have made the same choice. Becoming a good swordswoman sounded nice, but if she was better at designing mechs, then it was a smarter idea to focus on the latter.

"It's just like how mech pilots never try to become mech designers and vice versa. No human in the galaxy can possibly be good at both."

Even without the hurdle of genetic aptitude, mech designers would still be reluctant to waste too much time in becoming an excellent mech pilot. The most likely outcome was that they would become mediocre and forgettable in both professions.

Ketis had always been aware that she was in danger of suffering a similar fate. Though she already affirmed that she would never let her swordsmanship pursuit affect her mech design career, for now her unique circumstances gave her the luxury to have it both ways.

That might change once she became a Journeyman or Senior and had to devote more time on her mech designs in order to keep up with Ves. She never forgot about her goal of catching up with her mentor. She wanted him to treat her as an equal instead of his student!

When Ketis returned to the villa and reunited with her fellow Swordmaidens, she only hung out with them for a short time before Venerable Dise entered the room and issued a summons.

"Ketis. Please follow me. There is something we need to discuss."

A minute later, Ketis entered an office room. Three people were already present aside from Venerable Dise. While she expected the presence of Commander Sendra and Angelique Harcourt, she was completely flabbergasted by the presence of the last person.

"It's you!"

"Hello, Miss Ketis. Am I pronouncing your name correctly?" The old mech pilot from the Sword Graveyard greeted.

Ketis did not deign to reciprocate the greeting. Instead, she threw a stony look at the other Swordmaidens in the room.

"What is the meaning of this? Did you get hoodwinked by this shameless old scammer?"

Commander Sendra chuckled while Venerable Dise let out an awkward cough.

"Ketis... please calm down. There's a reason why he is here, and it is not because we fell for his scam."

"Are you sure about that? Because to me, it seems that you are just about to convince me to fall for his scheme as well?"

"BE SERIOUS, KETIS." Venerable Dise flared her force of will. "NOW SIT DOWN AND LET US EXPLAIN."

Ketis instantly grew meek and sat down on her chair like a good little Swordmaidens.

"Prior to calling you in, Director Fred Walinski sought us out in order to make an intriguing offer to us." Commander Sendra began to explain.

"How the hell did he manage to track me down?"

"Oh, that's easy." The old man casually said. "I recorded your appearance and searched for it on the galactic net. It turns out you are taking part in the personal combat tournaments, so I quickly learned your name and your affiliation. After that, it is a simple matter of calling in some favors in order to find where you are staying. Even if our Annihilator Sword School is close to becoming extinct, I still have some means!"

Ketis glowered at the supposed director of the sword school. This sounded awfully close to stalking! Shouldn't it be a crime for creepy old men to track down the address of innocent young girls?

Commander Sendra remained amused throughout the exchange. "Ahem, while I am aware you don't have the greatest impression of Director Walinski, he has prepared an offer to us that happens to complement our overall goals. That alone is well worth hearing him out. Will you do so, Ketis?"

Seeing that she wasn't able to get out of this predicament in any other way, Ketis slumped her shoulders. "Fine. What is this all about, then?"

"When we initially entered the Heavensword Association, we always planned to remain modest. We don't want to follow in the footsteps of our patriarch and cause so much disruption that the locals would paint a target on our backs. That is why even if we have the tools and means to perform better in the tournaments, we still insist on holding back in order to avoid rocking the boat."

"That is a clever approach. We don't need to perform too well in order to meet our goal." Ketis commented.

"We can do better." Sendra stated. "While we didn't have this option before, Director Walinksi's cooperation has given us an alternative."

Ketis had a feeling that she wouldn't like what she was about to hear. "Does that have anything to do with the Annihilator Sword School?"

The old man grinned. "That's right, young lady! I am offering it to you with no strings attached! As long as you formally consent to taking it over, you will not only become the owner of an authentic Heavensword institution, but also gain access to the library of techniques and dogma that underpin my brother's Annihilator Sword Style. Whether you choose to change your sword style or use what you have learned to augment your existing style, the gap between you and the seeded competitors will definity narrow!"

"What is the point of that? I don't want to be bothered by all of this irrelevant stuff!"

"Ah, that is where you are wrong, Miss Ketis. You see, as long as you officially become the new head of the Annihilator Sword School, you will automatically gain the identity that matches it. In concrete terms, it means that you will effectively become a citizen of the Heavensword Association. It would be even better if you manage to get recognized as a swordmaster after the tournament. In that case, you won't just become the interim director, but become the absolute head of your new sword school, which will allow you to make any changes you want to it. You can even change our Annihilator Sword Style if you wish!"

While Ketis wondered why she even needed all of that, Commander Sendra directly got to the point.

"Ketis, if you become the head of his sword school, you'll effectively become an insider to the Heavensword Association. The people here don't care if you were just a foreigner until recently. They care much more about your attainments in swordsmanship than stuff like that. As long as you show you have the potential to become a swordmaster, the Heavensworders won't mind if you go further in the tournament. In fact, they'll cheer you on as much as they do with any native participant!"

The woman in question still remained dubious about this plan. "All of this sounds nice and well, but I have seen some of the skill employed by those who can make it this far.

They are extremely good swordsmen and I don't have the confidence to perform well at this level."

"You are being too modest. Have you forgotten about the Annihilator Sword Style? I'm sure that it can teach you a thing or two if you go over its scriptures. Even so, with your special greatsword and your battle-tested skills, it is not impossible for you to reach the later stages of the tournament! As long as you get in the top 100, you'll not only be able to attract more recruits for us, but also raise the quality of applicants, which will help us make the Swordmaidens stronger on a much shorter timeline!"

"You don't understand the attraction of a successful sword school yet." The old man said with a taunting smile. "As long as you perform well and defeat a couple of seeded competitors, you will undoubtedly be able to signal the rejuvenation of our Annihilator Sword School! While I don't expect your performance to attract billions of applicants like the top sword schools, it should not be a problem to convince ten-thousand or so swordsmen to approach our sword school."

"Think about how the Larkinson Clan would react if we came back with thousands of swordsman mech pilots and elite infantry soldiers. Wouldn't that be a sight? We would instantly turn from the weakest mech force to the strongest one in the clan!" Sendra exclaimed.

What an ambitious dream!

So this was why Venerable Dise and Commander Sendra supported this dubious scheme! While Ketis could understand the logic behind the plan, it sounded way too shaky to her! All this nonsense about taking over a derelict sword school and performing well in the tournament might actually help the Swordmaidens to become great again!

Chapter 2887: Ketis the Skeptic

The proposal that Fred Walinski put on the table offered a lot of potential benefits to the Swordmaidens.

Currently, Ketis and the rest of her sisters were merely foreign participants in the tournaments organized under the umbrella of the Greater Omanderie Festival.

This was a low identity. Regardless of their accomplishments in other battles such as the highly notable Battle of Reckoning, the Heavensworders hardly heard of it. They were much more preoccupied with domestic matters and only cared about news that was directly related to swordsmen and swordmasters.

Only a small proportion of the domestic audience knew there was more to the Swordmaidens than other foreign participants. The Heavensworders and tourists that applied to join their ranks were always those that had done their research or knew of the Larkinson Clan beforehand.

The numbers were too paltry!

Even though hundreds of women had already sent in their applications, their overall quality fell short of what Commander Sendra was looking for. Her plan called for attracting a huge crowd of aspiring recruits, employing harsh criteria to filter out the elite among the hopeful women before putting them in a hellish bootcamp that would quickly mold them into proto-Swordmaidens.

It didn't matter if few of them were accustomed to wielding greatswords. Commander Sendra felt it was okay to diversify a bit and begin to field swordsman mechs that wielded lighter and more flexible blades in order to cover different roles.

For example, the Swordmaidens were very lacking in terms of defense. It might be helpful if they could field knight mechs that also happened to be decent at leading charges.

Light mechs also paired badly with large, two-handed weapons. It would be handy if the Swordmaidens acquired some mech pilots that specialized in wielding shorter blades. It was an extremely bad idea to equip greatswords to slender mechs that tried to maximize their speed and acceleration!

While diversification was definitely on the agenda, Commander Sendra never lost sight of the core identity of the Swordmaidens. All of these extra additions should never come at the cost of losing their main purpose as an assault mech force. They were the sword of the Larkinson Clan!

All of these women had to come from somewhere, though. The most important requirements for this recruitment plan to work was to raise the quantity and quality of applicants.

The more women applied, the greater the probability of encountering compatible warriors!

The greater the average qualifications of the crowd, the easier it was to meet their quotas!

Ketis thought that the approach that Venerable Dise and Commander Sendra adopted before would have been sufficient. They could have done better, but their shaky foundations and lack of backing in the Heavensword Association caused the leaders to err on the side of caution.

Yet the ambitious new direction that Commander Sendra just presented increased the risk factor by at least ten times!

"I can't believe this." Ketis uttered with a shocked expression. "Are you mad? Not even Ves is this crazy. We are only capable of fielding a single mech company at this time.

How can we possibly digest thousands of Heavensworders and other foreigners at a time? Our stomachs will burst apart from overeating!"

"Don't undersell yourselves. While I have only come into touch with you Swordmaidens for less than a day, your rustic martial tradition is quite solid. With an expert pilot presiding over your organization, no Heavensworder will dare to act too presumptuously." The old man reassured.

Ketis frowned deeper. "Why don't you put Venerable Dise in charge of your crappy sword school, then? She's a much more impressive swordswoman than I. As far as I'm concerned, I'm the last person who should be put in charge!"

"It won't work." Sendra shook her head. "Fully-realized expert pilots and swordmasters aren't allowed to compete in the tournaments. The events are held in order to put the focus on the younger generations of swordsmen who have the most to prove."

Fred Walinski nodded in agreement. "It's not that wise for swordmasters to show off too much. Also, I have briefly experienced Venerable Dise's swordsmanship. While her martial prowess is truly comparable to some of the swordmasters that I know, her style is not a good fit with the Annihilator Sword Style. I vowed to my dying brother that I would seek an inheritor that can further his legacy, and throughout my three-decade long search, you are the only swordswoman that has ever come this close to matching our style!"

"I already have a sword style! It's the same one that every Swordmaiden trained in! I will not give up the teachings I grew up with in order to adopt something completely different!"

"Ketis." Venerable Dise gently spoke up. "While I appreciate your loyalty to our sword style, you don't have to be so possessive about it. It is a standard style that is plain and distilled to a repertoire of essential moves. You can do far more with a sword than what we have taught. Every Swordmaiden expands her initial repertoire with additional techniques that suit their own physiques and preferred approach. You don't have to abandon the Swordmaiden Sword Style to adopt another one. Who said that swordsmen and swordswomen are only allowed to practice a single style?"

"My brother's wish is for his style and teachings to be passed on to the younger generations." Walinski said. "While I would prefer it if the Annihilator Sword Style is able to continue in its purest form, after waiting so long for a successor, I can live with a future where you incorporate the most useful essence of my brother's sword style in your own fighting style. As long as his legacy continues to be passed on in some form or another, his existence and hard effort is not wasted."

Ketis still did not feel comfortable with the situation. Both her leaders and the old man were putting a lot of pressure and responsibility on her shoulders. She had never

participated in an undertaking as massive as this! How could she possibly bear all of this weight on her shoulders?

"I'm not a full-time swordswoman. I'm a mech designer."

"That doesn't matter to me." The old man shook his head. "According to Miss Harcourt here, you are a rare multi-talented individual. With the talent and ability that you have already shown, I am sure you can learn the essence of the Annihilator sword Style in a short amount of time."

"I can't run an entire sword school. I don't have the time or inclination to do so. I suck at management."

"Many swordsmen are bad at management." Walinski easily replied. "That is why you leave most of the work to others. No swordmaster spends the majority of his time on administrative work. There are deputy directors and elders who can take care of the actual business of running a sword school. I can effectively take care of this as long as you take over my original position."

"I don't want to stay in the Heavensword Association. The Swordmaidens and I are part of the Larkinson Clan, and we have already embarked on an expedition to the Red Ocean. We'll be traveling hundreds of thousands of light-years away from this state!"

This time, Walinski looked a bit troubled.

"Yes, I have heard that from your leaders. This is an inconvenient condition, but not an unworkable one to me. As long as you retain at least a part of the structure of our sword school in your fleet, it will be alright. I think it is quite helpful if your Swordmaidens begin to incorporate multiple separate sword styles. Not every swordsman or swordswoman is suitable to wield a greatsword."

Dise and Sendra both agreed with this statement. They already presented their vision of a larger and more diversified mech force.

The amount of objections grew less and less. As Ketis continued to voice her doubts, the supporters of the new plan continually shot her down.

There was one glaring issue left.

"Fine." Ketis sighed in resignation. "I can see that the many ways in which this can go wrong hasn't deterred you at all. I'm curious though. You and your brother are obviously men. How can we possibly integrate you and your stupid sword school in the Swordmaidens?"

Commander Sendra smirked. "That's not a big deal. We can set up the school under the Larkinson Clan instead of the Swordmaidens. That way, both men and women can

become its teachers and students. We'll essentially off-load all basic and fundamental swordsmanship training to this new branch organization. Any promising women that stand out during sword training will receive an invitation to join our sisterhood. As for the men, they can pick from any of the other mech forces in the clan."

Essentially, the Annihilator Sword School would become a division under the Larkinson Clan's Education Department instead of the Swordmaidens!

All of this went way over Ketis' head. It was clear that Commander Sendra already set up an elaborate new scheme after plotting with Fred Walinski. They had already thought over every single angle!

She sighed. "Will all of this even work? I mean, I get what you are trying to achieve, but I seriously doubt taking over a sword school and performing well enough in the tournaments will actually win over ten-thousand mech pilots and swordswomen."

"You are underestimating the prestige of swordmasters to those who are steeped in our culture." Angelique Harcourt spoke up for the first time. "Any strong swordsman who understands just a tiny portion of the essence of swordsmanship is already worthy of respect. Their ability to teach others on how to embody this essence is even more desirable. Still, all of this is dependent on your ability to defeat other seeded competitors in the tournaments. If you can't beat any of the future swordmasters of more prestigious and successful sword schools, my fellow Heavensworders won't find you so attractive anymore."

"How strong are these seeded competitors, exactly?"

"They are strong. Very strong." Fred Walinski admitted. "They are equipped with top-notch swords that are not only tailored to their fighting style, but also enjoy some of the best training facilities and instruction in our state. Each of them is a sword initiate, which means that they are already close to mastering a true sword style. As long as they keep accumulating and pass the most difficult steps, they will undergo a thorough transformation that will turn them into true swordmasters. Of course, the latter aren't allowed to compete in the tournament. Anyone who breaks through in mid-battle will earn supreme glory, but must also retire from the arena."

According to the theory that Angelique had mentioned earlier, the transformation that Walinski mentioned was essentially the swordsman equivalent of apotheosis. How much these two processes matched was an interesting question.

Ketis grew a little more at ease now that she confirmed she wasn't expected to win against swordmasters.

Through her frequent practice spars against Venerable Dise, she knew she had no chance against their ilk!

While she was more than capable of kicking Venerable Joshua's butt in a practice bout, her boyfriend wasn't a dedicated swordsman to begin with. Even then, he steadily closed the gap as they kept training and sparring whenever they were together.

Against Heavensworders who lived and breathed swordsmanship since they were born, even their so-called sword initiates were formidable opponents in her eyes!

Venerable Dise smiled. "You can do it, Ketis. I have confidence in your swordsmanship. No matter where you take it, always remember that your sword style has to suit yourself instead of the other way around. From what Walinski has told me, the Annihilator Sword Style can offer several new possibilities to you that can help you close the gap against these sword initiates."

"Are the techniques of the Annihilator Sword Style that good?"

"Perhaps. Many of them are difficult to learn in a short amount of time. Also, don't just look at their power and potential. Try and figure out which parts harmonize with your own fighting style and integrate whatever you like. Find your own sword style. Neither the Swordmaiden Sword Style or the Annihilator Sword Style can take you to a higher level of swordsmanship by themselves. Only the style that fits you best is the key to attaining true mastery."

Maybe Venerable Dise was right. Maybe Ketis should be moving beyond any single existing style in order to push her swordsmanship to a higher level. While she never intended to abandon her pursuit as a mech designer, that did not mean she wanted to stagnate as a swordswoman!

"Is it possible to become both a Journeyman Mech Designer and a swordmaster at the same time?" She quietly wondered.

Chapter 2888: Annihilator Sword School

A shuttle landed in the outskirts of Scabbard City.

Amongst shabby white-walled homes and various cheap and affordable workshop buildings, a single neglected campus stood out from the rest.

Aside from occupying a bit more space than the other lots, the site also featured a large, three-story structure that was notable for its state of disrepair!

The peeled coating, the obvious signs of corrosion and even the partially-collapsed sections all showed that whoever owned this building did not invest any money in maintaining it over the years!

"So this is the prestigious location of the great Annihilator Sword School." Ketis mildly said. "How... quaint."

Commander Sendra, Angelique Harcourt and a number of other Swordmaidens exited the shuttle and beheld the urban decay.

When Fred Walinski exited the shuttle last, he did not exhibit any shame. "This isn't the original campus of our sword school. When my brother became an expert pilot, he initially founded his school in one of the more central and desirable districts of Scabbard City. This is one of the privileges that the Heavensword Association bestows to expert pilots and swordmasters. Back then, we didn't worry about money issues at all. As long as our demands weren't too excessive, we could obtain sword coins from many willing sources."

At their level, it was impossible for expert pilots to get broke. Their amazing skill and strength made them incredibly useful in multiple different capacities. They could even earn entire mechs as long as they tutored a group of mech pilots!

The group strode forward and stopped in front of a statue that depicted a heroic-looking man.

While the bronze-like metal statue was well-made and resistant to corrosion, that did not stop birds from soiling it and weeds from growing over its surface.

"This is my older brother." Fred sighed as he looked at the face of the statue. Their features bore a close resemblance to each other. "Venerable Trey Walinski was a powerful expert pilot and a dear relative of mine. He always worked harder than me. It was no wonder that he managed to undergo apotheosis while I had to train decades more just to push myself to the level of a pseudo-sword initiate. I have no chance of ever catching up to my late brother in my lifetime, let alone revive our school by myself."

From the way the sculptor depicted Venerable Trey, Ketis could see that the expert pilot oozed confidence. The deceased expert pilot was a much greater man than his shameless and unsuccessful sibling!

Venerable Dise stepped forward and bowed in a formal fashion. She showed her respect from one expert pilot to another.

While her movements might not conform to local etiquette, Fred appreciated the gesture.

"My brother would have loved to exchange his views on swordsmanship with you. It's a shame he isn't able to do so now that his body is buried in a grave."

"How did he die?" Ketis wondered. "From what you have told me so far, Venerable Trey ought to be in his prime of his life before your school lost its head. Did he perish on the battlefield?"

Fred grew glum. "I would have preferred that, but no. The Heavensword Association sometimes gets embroiled in border skirmishes, but we haven't entered into any major conflicts for quite some time. My brother... suffered from a disease that has taken his life."

That was an awful fate for an expert pilot who still had a bright future ahead of him! Even in the Age of Mechs, humanity was still unable to cure every affliction.

Yet technology had advanced so far that people had access to many different treatments. Common injuries and diseases no longer threatened the lives of ordinary people!

"Did your state do anything in its power to save your brother? What about bringing him to the Life Research Association? The doctors over here are some of the best in the star cluster."

"Do you think we haven't tried? My brother developed a brain disease. It's a very rare condition that is slightly more prevalent in people with his genes. Out of all of the possibilities, he had to be the one to contract it. Our school would have been in a completely different state if I was the one who contracted the disease instead!"

Obviously, Fred was burdened by a lot of misplaced guilt. The Swordmaidens gave him some time to regain his composure. As much as they empathized with the loss, Venerable Trey had already died a long time ago. The time for condolences was already over.

"Let's head inside." He softly said.

While the school structure looked like it was a few steps away from collapsing, it was still in working condition. The electronic lock straightforwardly accepted the interim director's code before opening the double doors.

The group entered a foyer room of some sorts where dust and other signs of neglect marked the barren interior.

The large hall should have featured some furniture, but the state of the school was so poor that Fred had sold these assets a long time ago. There was barely anything of value left in this decrepit structure!

Ketis scrunched her nose as she looked back. Their footsteps left obvious marks on the carpet of dust.

"Couldn't you have acquired a cleaner bot or something? Even the cheapest ones can keep the dust away."

"I can't. The school organization is burdened by a lot of debt. I have tried to keep the Annihilator Sword School aloft for three decades without its swordmaster, and I could have never kept it going if I was any looser with spending what little money I can gather. I can't even power most of this building. The only working power lines make sure that the security system is up and running. I can't allow anyone to burgle the life's work of my brother, though I doubt that any thief is courageous enough to despoil the teachings of a swordmaster."

Not even the cruelest thief in the Heavensword Association dared to steal the belongings of a swordmaster! The status of the latter was too high among the locals!

After passing through some empty and unused rooms and corridors, they finally reached a traditional-looking hall that should have exhibited the splendor of the Annihilator Sword School.

As it is, Fred had already sold or gotten rid of the banners, the sword racks, the ornaments and any other useless possessions.

A sword school was nothing without its swordmaster. As long as the founder or only competent practitioner of a sword style was gone, the remaining structure of a sword school was on a timeline.

If the dormant sword school could not find or train another swordmaster, it would eventually have to cease its operations!

This already happened a lot of times in the Heavensword Association. The number of sword schools who fell and became history was at least a hundred times greater than the number of active and prospering sword schools!

Some of them grew big. These big schools were easily able to maintain an uninterrupted legacy because they brought up multiple swordmasters. Even if one of them died, others still remained.

Smaller schools were less able to retain multiple swordmasters. They also had less students, and whoever they managed to enroll were usually less talented and capable as well. This significantly reduced the chance of training new swordmasters!

"The training of swordmasters is incredibly difficult." Fred Walinski spoke from personal experience. "At our prime, we enrolled thousands of disciples. While many of them were more casual students, we intensely trained a couple of hundred swordsmen who were very determined to inherit the Annihilator Sword Style."

"It failed?" Ketis asked.

"We had too little time. My brother died too early while our school was just beginning to ramp up. If we had an extra decade, we might have been able to foster a sword initiate

or two, but as it is, the attraction of our sword style quickly faded once we lost our only expert pilot and swordmaster."

The Annihilator Sword School did not empty out instantly. The casualties left in the first couple of years. Some even quit as soon as word got out that Venerable Trey was hospitalized!

The more dedicated disciples stuck around longer. After all, they invested years into training this specific style. It was not that easy for them to switch to another, especially when they were still young. Time was precious to them so the sunk cost fallacy had kept them hanging for one or two decades.

Yet... without the guidance of a swordmaster, these hopeful students lacked instruction on how to touch the essence of the Annihilator Sword Style. No matter how much documentation Venerable Trey left behind, those words were dead and static.

"Even I haven't been able to master the Annihilator Sword Style, and I received the most instruction." Fred sighed yet again as he approached a single vault at the end of the hall. "I only managed to gain an inkling of understanding by continuing to push myself. The fact that I only became a pseudo-sword initiate through my efforts is a clear sign that I don't have the talent to become a swordmaster."

Ketis wondered what a sword initiate was supposed to be in relation to mech pilots. According to her speculative guess, a sword initiate was analogous to an expert candidate, but a rank below that didn't exist in the mech piloting community.

Fred spent a minute to unlock the old but sturdy vault. Once he managed to disarm all of the security features, he withdrew a couple of items and placed it on a simple table.

First, he put down a couple of handwritten books.

Second, he unsheathed a one-handed saber and carefully placed it on the table along with its scabbard.

Third, he carefully put down a number of old but sturdy-looking data chips.

Lastly, he put down some official-looking documents.

"This is our entire inheritance. This is everything you need to take over our school and continue our sword style. Will you accept this inheritance, Miss Ketis?"

She didn't answer immediately. She first took in the different objects. The traditional-looking books had to be Venerable Trey's personal writings on his sword style. The fact that he took the trouble to write his thoughts was a sign that his books were truly significant.

The saber attracted her next. She didn't recognize the alloy of the blade, but she could tell it was a good quality one, comparable to her Breyer alloy weapons.

The shape of the saber was shaped in a way that facilitated the process of cutting through annihilation.

Ketis couldn't guess what was in the data chips, but she probably figured it contained all of the administration and other boring stuff of the sword school. Perhaps it also contained additional writings on the sword style.

As for the pile of documents, their value was largely symbolic. Taking possession of them was a part of the tedious process of becoming the owner of the sword school and granted her the qualifications to become a citizen of the Heavensword Association.

Right now, none of these objects interested her. She didn't even care about Venerable Trey's writings on his self-invented sword style.

Instead, she became intrigued by the late swordmaster's weapon.

She reverently reached out to pick up the saber. She brought it close to her face and examined the flat of the blade.

"Good weapon. I see you've still taken care of it over the years. It only needs a bit of polishing to shine again."

"The saber is called Shiva. It is my brother's trusty companion. I am aware that you already possess a weapon of your own, but I hope you don't put Shiva in a closet. Please fulfill the wishes of my brother and keep it at your side. It longs to be used in battle."

"Shiva, huh? Good name." Ketis muttered as she tried to sense whether it contained any life.

Swish swish!

Surprisingly enough, Sharpie felt there was more to the relic! Without asking Ketis for permission, he jumped outside her mind and entered into Shiva's body!

Chapter 2889: Invalid Physics

Ketis almost wanted to scream out!

What was Sharpie doing?!

Shiva felt a little warmer to the hand. Ketis sensed that Sharpie had found something interesting inside the weapon. Apparently, the attraction was so great that her sword

intent simply moved over on its own accord without asking her whether it was okay for it to move!

The only reason why she didn't panic was because her intuition and other senses didn't signal any danger. If the situation was any different, she would have tried to pull Sharpie out of the blade!

Of all of the people in the room, no one sensed that anything had happened. They all thought that Ketis was having some private moment with Venerable Trey Walinski's personal weapon.

Only Venerable Dise furrowed her brows for a moment. Perhaps she sensed something odd with the help of her force of will. Perception wasn't its strong suit, though.

As the seconds went by, Ketis felt that Sharpie became happier and happier for some reason. She also sensed that her sword intent felt a bit different over time.

Was it changing?! That wasn't supposed to happen! Her sword intent should reflect her swordsmanship! Even if Ves made it alive for some reason shouldn't be a reason for it to change without her input!

Fortunately, Sharpie soon ended its little jaunt. It jumped back into her mind with a satisfied feeling.

Ketis grew suspicious. She attempted to probe her sentient sword intent, but it largely felt the same aside from some indescribable differences.

What had happened? What had changed? Even though Ketis tried really hard to express her puzzlement at Sharpie, her darned sword intent acted as if nothing was wrong!

She gave up on questioning her insubordinate sword will and turned her attention back to Shiva. The saber did not look any different from before, but as she stared into its surface, she felt a bit different about it than before.

A moment ago, Shiva was just a curious weapon to Ketis. She did not feel any intimacy with the weapon because she knew it used to belong to someone else. Furthermore, it wasn't a greatsword, which seriously reduced her interest in owning it. She even hesitated whether she should refuse to carry it on her person despite Fred Walinski's wishes!

Her upgraded CFA greatsword was her true weapon of choice. Even though it was rather inconvenient to bring it everywhere, she didn't want to part with it. She had fought so many battles with it and spilled so much blood. Even after enhancing it with Unending alloy, she completely felt as if it was an extension of her body.

When Ketis initially picked up Shiva, she completely lacked that sense of closeness and ownership.

Yet after Sharpie rummaged through its interior, some of that changed.

While she still felt a lack of intimacy, she somehow had the impression that the saber belonged to her now!

This was confusing to her! Whatever Sharpie had done caused Shiva to recognize Ketis as its rightful owner and wielder.

At the same time, Ketis also felt as if the weapon belonged to her hand. While her sense of ownership of Shiva wasn't as strong as her CFA greatsword, it was still remarkable how comfortable it felt in her hand.

"Strange."

She did not recklessly swing the weapon or do anything fancy with it. All of that could wait. She carefully put Shiva back onto the table and directed her attention to the pile of books.

"These books contain the unfiltered and unedited thoughts and ideas of my late brother." Fred Walinski noticed where she directed her gaze. "The words inside can be a bit... disorganized... but as long as you spend some effort into deciphering them, you will be able to learn the theory behind the Annihilator Sword Style. Of course, that is just the first step to mastering it. I cannot count the amount of times that I have read my brother's scriptures. His recorded thoughts are too profound for me even after decades of study and experimentation."

Ketis grew intimidated by what she heard. "I won't necessarily be able to do any better, you know. If the contents of these books don't click with me, I seriously doubt whether it is useful for me to dedicate my time to puzzle out the ramblings of an expert pilot."

One of the lessons that Ves had taught to her was that expert pilots were only good at fighting and little else. These brutes were geniuses on the battlefield but dunces everywhere else. She had no expectations about how the former head of the sword school structured his writings.

Even so, she still picked up the book at the top. Once she flipped it open, she quickly realized that it was specifically written to introduce newcomers to the Annihilator Sword Style. At least that was good.

The opening quote immediately captured her imagination.

"Swords exist to kill. We exist to destroy."

Although Venerable Trey Walinski wasn't creative enough to come up with a more dramatic phrase, the motto he invented for his sword school was quite bold. Ketis kind of liked it. The words were simple and direct.

"Do you know why this saying represents our sword style?" Fred asked.

"Please explain."

"As you undoubtedly know, swords can inflict damage in a number of ways. Due to their propensity for slashing, the most ubiquitous form of damage they deal comes in the form of cuts. Certain swords can also be thrust onto a target, thereby leaving a nasty puncture behind. In rare and special occasions, you can also use the flat or the pommel of a bladed weapon in order to bash a surface."

"I already know all of that. Every sword style tries to find a good way to deliver as many of these wounds to the target as possible. Swords exist to kill, and they rely on these different types of damage to do their jobs."

Fred nodded in approval. "Good. You have a good grasp on the true nature of a sword. I'm glad you aren't one of those delusional idiots who think that swords exist to create peace or that they are meant to protect. Swords are killing implements and nothing else. Now, what if you could make them even better at killing?"

"Is this the part where you explain to me what 'Annihilator' stands for?" Ketis interrupted the pattern of the conversation.

The old man gave her a wry smile. "Well, since you are a mech designer, you probably know what the word stands for. In short, my brother was really good at destroying things. So good in fact that he even used it as the basis for successful advancement to expert pilot. To him, the sharpness and sturdiness of the sword didn't matter too much for him. Whereas other swordsmen seek to rely on those two properties to cut or pierce into a target as deeply as possible, my brother sought to inflict damage in a different manner: annihilation!"

This was where Ketis grew skeptical again. "Are you serious? You know what annihilation means, do you?"

"I may be the only remaining member of this sword school, but I know the basics. In physics, annihilation is a reaction where a particle and its antiparticle collide. For some reason, pushing them together causes them to disappear. In their place, the energy that is equivalent to their mass gets released."

This was indeed a short but succinct description of annihilation. When described in this fashion, the reaction sounded innocuous.

In truth, annihilation was much greater than anyone who heard about it realized! It was not only an essential component in how the cosmos took on its current shape, but also served as the core of many powerful and destructive processes!

From lighting up enormous balls of gasses into stars to allowing humans to destroy entire continents and planets, the power of annihilation was one of the most destructive natural phenomena that both nature and civilization wielded!

To claim that someone trained in a single sword style could harness this destructive power sounded extremely absurd to someone as well-versed in the sciences as Ketis!

"I wouldn't be surprised if you pair annihilation with a positron beam weapon. After all, that's how these weapons pretty much work. Yet I can't imagine how you can possibly apply it to a sword of all objects, especially plain ones like Shiva!"

Seeing that Ketis remained unconvinced, Fred knew he had to show her that the Annihilator Sword Style wasn't an exaggeration!

"May I demonstrate our sword style with Shiva?"

"Be my guest. I mean, the weapon used to be yours."

Fred reverently picked up the saber from the table and held it in a comfortable grip. He looked around and approached a solid wooden pillar, one of many that spruced up the ceremonial hall.

The pillar was as thick as a cow. Ketis had no doubt that the wood material was extra solid as well.

Perhaps with a sword as sharp as her CFA greatsword, she might be able to cut deep into it, but she doubted she possessed the strength to make her blade go all the way through.

Once Fred entered into range, he took a few calming breaths before adopting a serious stance.

His eyes turned sharp and his expression became serious. The vibe he exuded had clearly changed from a harmless old man to a swordsman who possessed a little bite!

Ketis briefly turned to Venerable Dise. The expert pilot looked at Fred with some respect.

"He's a swordsman, alright. He hasn't wasted all these years."

Even Ketis had the impression that Fred could give her a run for her money if he was still in his prime.

Sadly, he was fifty years too old. His body had already aged to such an extent that his current display was merely an echo.

Fred did not seem to pay any notice, though. After making some sufficient mental preparations, he finally lashed out with Shiva!

For a moment, Ketis had the illusion that an explosion of darkness had struck the pillar.

This faint impression disappeared in an instant though.

Immediately, she realized that something was missing.

"There's hardly any sound."

A sword, regardless of its properties, should have elicited some sounds when it was cut into a solid wooden pillar.

The fact that Ketis didn't hear anything was very disturbing to her! Outside of vacuum environments, this shouldn't happen!

She soon directed her attention to the aftermath of the attack.

A wooden pillar exhibited a thin, precise cut that went a quarter of the way through its width. While this did not sound like much at first, Ketis was deeply impressed.

Even if Fred was a trained swordsman, someone in his physical condition should have never been able to drive a saber like Shiva this deep through such a large and solid object!

She soon gazed deeper into the cut. She saw that it looked abnormally smooth. Not only that, the surface of the cut sides was briefly covered by some strange black shadows before they dispersed.

Obviously, something amazing had just happened! If her guess was correct, Fred's swing somehow managed to annihilate the wooden matter in front of the blade for a brief moment of time!

"This isn't possible." Ketis became increasingly shocked. "This can't happen. How can someone who isn't an expert pilot and doesn't rely on any high-tech equipment be able to perform so many abnormal annihilation reactions without releasing enough energy to blow up the entire city!"

Fred Walinski easily pulled out the saber from the pillar and smiled. "I have learned that it is best not to think too deeply about the science behind our techniques. Simply do your best to will your blade to annihilate everything before it and it will happen, one way or another. It's a pity that most people are incapable of performing even a fraction of

what I just did. However, I think you will be able to fare better. Would you like to try and perform this technique as well?"

"Huh?" Ketis was still trying to process what she had just witnessed. "I don't know anything about this technique! I haven't even read through the introductory book of your sword style yet. You can't expect me to replicate your trick."

"Ah, but I believe you will be able to achieve a much greater process due to your talent. Please, satisfy my curiosity and prove my judgement right. Just go over the introductory book once and try and see if you can make use of what you have just read."

Fred looked at Ketis as if she was the chosen one. At this point, he had invested so much faith in her that he was already convinced that she exceed his result in the first day!

Chapter 2890: Swish Swish

It made no sense.

That was what Ketis thought after reading and skimming through Venerable Trey Walinski's scriptures.

Obviously, the deceased Heavensworder expert pilot was not a scientist. Yet every decent mech pilot had to study at least some level of physics in order to gain an essential understanding on how mechs actually worked and how to fight in various environments.

Mech pilots who understood not just how, but why mechs that moved faster always consumed more energy faster would always be able to manage their energy reserves better.

Mech pilots who understood the basics of orbital mechanics and knew the difference between acceleration and velocity would be able to maneuver much more skillfully in space.

Mech pilots who understood the concept of heat capacity and knew how rapidly a mech dispersed its heat in vacuum, air and water environments would be able to keep their mechs cooler.

In short, learning just a little bit of scientific knowledge could comprehensively improve the judgement and subsequently the performance of any mech pilot!

Therefore, Ketis expected that a prosperous and well-run second-rate rate like the Heavensword Association would surely emphasize the basic sciences.

While it was too much to ask for mech pilots to learn as much as mech designers, they should at least be able to master high school-level physics!

Yet when Ketis read through Venerable Trey's chaotic and unedited ramblings, she sensed the man had probably forgotten at least 80 percent of what he learned.

Sure, the late expert pilot and swordmaster showed some indication of understanding. Venerable Trey readily referred to the concept of potential energy and kinetic energy.

However, that was where the science part ended.

Just as Ketis thought that Venerable Trey's writing would make actual sense, the scriptures went into a completely different direction!

For example, the books constantly emphasized the accumulation of energy, only to unleash it in a manner that completely defied conventional science.

According to the expert pilot's own words, the essence of the Annihilator Sword Style laid in destroying every obstacle in the path of the sword.

At its peak, the scriptures claimed that the sword style should even be able to cut through neutron stars, one of the densest and hardest objects in the galaxy!

Ketis almost fainted when she read this claim. What a shameless boast! Any mech that came close to such a dense and heavy star would probably fall apart due to the enormous gravitational stresses affecting its frame.

"It's like I have to turn my brain off in order to appreciate these scriptures."

The problem was that she couldn't. She was a mech designer. She learned enough science and engineering to know how reality was put together by a myriad of physical laws and phenomena. Even though humanity still possessed a shallow and incomplete understanding of reality worked, she was quite sure that a layman like Venerable Trey was absolutely wrong on many matters!

She listed a couple of glaring impossibilities.

First, where did all of the potential energy come from? Merely holding the sword did not magically charge it up with enough energy to generate antiparticles in an environment that was filled with conventional matter.

Second, how could a swordsman possibly generate antiparticles without any advanced technology? By wishing it into existence?

Third, how come those antiparticles didn't annihilate with the material of the blade or the molecules in the air and release a massive amount of energy, thereby causing an explosion that was violent enough to destroy an entire city?

Fourth, how could a swordsman ensure those antiparticles only annihilated the matter immediately in front of the blade and prevent the release of so much energy?

These were just a fraction of the many inconsistencies and impossibilities that Ketis stumbled upon. She grew increasingly more convinced that Venerable Trey didn't even know what he was talking about!

"It can't be antiparticles! It's impossible! His sword style must be doing something else!"

Yet try as she might, she couldn't even begin to guess at the truth of the Annihilator Sword Style. The best guess she could come up with was that Venerable Trey was able to form some kind of mystical force field that had the effect of erasing matter from existence.

This also matched with what she observed from Fred Walinski's impressive demonstration. It made no sense for him to create antimatter out of thin air. Generating an energy field was much easier, though still questionable considering the lack of advanced equipment.

However, the reason why she preferred this alternate theory was because she had already managed to accomplish this herself!

Only superpowers were able to defy physics, and Ketis had successfully demonstrated this ability many times!

Even though the effects were different, the process was roughly the same. Ketis obsessed over sharpness while Venerable Trey focused on a more direct form of destruction.

There were differences, though.

As a mech designer, her thorough understanding of the sciences granted her a very realistic outlook on what sharpness meant and how it could be achieved. At most, she chose to invest herself in a couple of unproven assumptions that could be made real as long as she furthered her research over the course of her mech design career.

"Mech designers wish to prove their assumptions real."

In contrast, expert pilots like Venerable Trey Walinski didn't see reality this way. They instead made bold claims that had no basis in reality and essentially utilized their transcendental strength to make it happen anyway!

This basically sounded like expert pilots possessed superpowers, but this sounded weird, because mech designers also possessed superpowers.

"Are we... more similar to each other than we thought?" She wondered.

Ves had never taught her much about his own secrets, so Ketis lacked the knowledge to rationalize this question. She vaguely felt that mech pilots and mech designers might actually be two sides of a coin rather than two completely separate entities.

"If this is so... can I drill a hole in the coin and connect the two sides?"

She shook her head. This was a stupid metaphor. High-ranking mech pilots and mech designers were much more complicated than she could possibly figure out at the moment.

After turning her attention back to the Annihilator Sword Style, she eventually concluded that she lacked the mindset to accept it. So many assumptions were so objectively untrue that she couldn't put it in herself to believe them at face value.

"I'm a mech designer, not an idiot!"

Mech pilots didn't necessarily know any better. Their shallow education in the sciences caused them to lack the background and critical thinking that was necessary to know what was plausible.

However, it was exactly because mech pilots didn't know the limitations that they were able to surpass the limitations of the laws of physics and develop superpowers for some reason!

Ketis grew increasingly more doubtful and confused. She knew that Ves had a hobby in figuring out the nature of expert pilots and how to facilitate their breakthroughs, but she had never touched upon this subject until recently.

It helped that she already knew a thing or two about expert pilots. Her regular interaction with Venerable Joshua allowed her to learn how he regarded his own abilities.

"Joshua told me that he simply saw reality in a different way than others."

He constantly viewed everything in the perspective of life. He also believed that everything had the potential to become alive, and that he could resonate with them if that was the case.

To be honest, Ketis thought that Joshua was kind of silly a lot of times, but somehow he made all of it work. His absolute confidence and conviction in his own views grew stronger when his superpower affirmed his flawed theories.

"Do I have to do the same?"

She had a feeling that this was how every expert pilot and swordmaster worked. They all developed silly notions that somehow came true because they turned into superpowers.

The problem she had was that this was a completely opposite approach from that of a mech designer. One based their superpowers on science while the other based their superpowers on fantasy!

If Ketis was just an ignorant Swordmaiden, then she would have been able to accept the scriptures. Yet because of her abundant knowledge and sound logic, she struggled to accept even the most basic assumption.

"Everything that's written in these books breaks the law of conservation of energy! This is impossible! Not even my sharpness superpower can do that!"

She looked around. After Fred Walinski challenged her to learn the Annihilator Sword Style, she chose to study the books in private. The office used to be filled with dust, but opening the window and sweeping the barren floor quickly took care of that. It did not do much to spruce up the faded and decaying wall decorations.

Right now, she had already spent two hours on this endeavor. Due to her augmented cognitive functions, it didn't actually take long to read through all of the books. She instead spent the majority of the time trying to reconcile all of the inconsistencies she noticed.

She failed.

She knew that she was at an impasse. Unlike her lovable boyfriend, Ketis felt it was impossible for her to deliberately make herself stupid enough to believe in the fantasies espoused by Venerable Trey. Reality simply didn't work this way!

After feeling that there was no use in going over the books, she closed them all and set them aside. There was no point in rereading them. She already knew the theories they espoused by heart. The problem was accepting them. Her mind simply could not do that.

"Should I take a mind-altering drug or something?"

She seriously considered this option because she saw no other way to dumb herself down and alter her judgement. Yet she was afraid she might have to inject herself with the strong stuff in order to sufficiently suppress her intelligence!

This was not a viable solution!

Her eyes shifted over to Shiva, the Destroyer. The relic of the Annihilator Sword School strangely felt like it belonged to her after Sharpie paid a visit to it. Now that she had studied the Annihilator Sword Style, she understood why the saber was forged this way.

"It's a good blade to channel the power of destruction."

While Ketis completely failed to comprehend the mechanics behind the Annihilator Sword Style, she had no problem figuring out its other aspects. Its sword techniques, its overall approach and the recommended tactics that Venerable Trey had formulated all made sense.

The sword style demanded an explosive and intensive approach. Anyone who adopted this style had to finish their opponents as quickly and decisively as possible, because each attempt at performing annihilation imposed a huge burden on the wielder!

Though the costs were great, the results were even greater. At its best, a sword empowered by the Annihilator Sword Style had the potential to cut through any physical barrier!

No matter if it was a protective suit, mech armor plating or even ship hulls, anything composed of matter could not pose any hindrance because the materials in front of the blade simply disappeared from existence!

Of course, the Annihilator Sword Style was not omnipotent in its ability to cut everything. It fared less well against non-physical barriers such as energy shields.

Dodging or preventing the attack from landing were also effective ways to counter this sword style. If the sword never reached its target, then its power became invalid.

That did not take too much away from the potential of the Annihilator Sword Style. Ketis grew somewhat attracted to it despite the fact she already possessed a sword style and focus of her own.

"I don't want to give up like this."

Perhaps all of this thinking and theorizing was pointless.

"Maybe I should just try it out."

Shiva called to her.

Ketis could not resist the temptation and picked the weapon up. She did not feel that much different from the first time she held the saber.

She adopted a serious expression and tried to go through the tenets of the Annihilator Sword Style.

"Swords exist to kill. We exist to destroy."

She swung the saber, but nothing happened. The slash was utterly normal and devoid of any extraordinary characteristics.

Her cheeks reddened a bit. She felt like a fool at the moment!

"How the hell can I fix this?"

She suddenly recalled what happened before. An interesting idea came to mind.

"Sharpie, can you help me out? I just want to channel the new sword style I learned."

Swish swish swish!

Ketis didn't expect much at first, but her living sword intent became quite enthusiastic all of a sudden.

A moment later, she felt as if some kind of switch had flipped. Sharpie no longer felt as sharp as before.

Instead... it exuded a different vibe!

Her mentality changed in a subtle and unknown way that crept her out. Extra thoughts entered her mind that were never there before.

Even though she felt incredibly disturbed at the uncontrolled changes in her mind, her intuition signalled that nothing was wrong.

She spontaneously followed an impulse and approached a wall. She lifted Shiva over her head and began to concentrate a bit. After several seconds of accumulation, she swung it down in a strong and unwavering chop!

Shiva cut completely through the wall as if it wasn't there. When the blade passed through the solid stone material off the wall, not a single sound reached her ears. Instead, the strange black glow that surrounded the blade had silently annihilated any material in its path!

It took a moment for Ketis to snap out of her concentrated mood.

Her eyes widened as she beheld Shiva and the impossible cut she left behind.

"Sharpie... what did you do?"

Swish swish!

