

## Mech 3211

### *Chapter 3211: First Blood*

The mech arena could potentially accommodate a hundred-thousand Larkinsons. It could even host more if it erected extra floating stands that stacked on top of each other.

This was excessive, though. Perhaps it made sense to expand the capacity of the arena by that amount if the clan numbered a million people, but at the moment it barely surpassed 175,000 individuals.

Was that a lot? Certainly. Was it enough to justify stuffing more than half of them in a single location? Most definitely not! Who knew if a terrorist plotted to destroy the arena or the entire capital ship? Though the security forces along with the Black Cats were on full alert, no one could truly guarantee whether the site was safe.

It was bad practice to put too many eggs in a single basket. Drawing too many Larkinsons away from their posts also weakened the defense of the clan. There were less crewmembers on duty aboard important combat ships and less mech pilots to go on patrol.

Therefore, in order to give everyone a chance to attend the week-long ceremony, the clan only limited the attendance to 40,000 people at most. Everyone who wanted to witness the events would have the opportunity to do so but only for a couple of time slots spread out over multiple days.

The first batch overwhelmingly consisted of the former citizens of the Heavensword Association. Their enthusiasm for this ritual was the highest and they were critical to setting the tone of the entire event.

Indeed, as soon as Fred started to speak, their excitement already rose to an impressive height. Back in their former state, the sword community regularly held tournaments, exhibitions and events of all kinds. The citizens had been trained to look forward and enjoy these opportunities to see impressive swordsmen in action for generations!

"Ketis! Ketis! Ketis!"

"Dise! Dise! Dise!"

"Swordmaidens forever!"

Due to his difficult life experiences, the deputy director of the Annihilator Sword School easily maintained his composure. He had witnessed the best and worst of what humanity had to offer. Addressing a crowd of tens of thousands of spectators along with

more than a hundred-thousand observers watching the internal broadcast was child's play.

He raised his arms, causing the crowd to quiet down again.

"Fellow Larkinsons. As you know, our clan's great mech designers are about to create one of the most important mechs of our lineup. Each and every expert mech designed by our prestigious Design Department are not only works of art, but living mechs in the truest sense of the word. I have had the privilege of approaching each and every expert mech including the latest one that is still waiting to be unveiled and I came away completely convinced of their superiority. With the crucial aid of our great and generous clan patriarch, even a single of our expert mechs is already better than the best expert mech of the Heavensword Association!"

The audience cheered at this wild and exaggerated boast!

"I have witnessed many smartly-designed expert swordsman mechs over my long life." Fred stated in a softer tone. "I have spent many hours admiring my deceased brother's expert mech. Its designers have done a good job at matching it to my brother's piloting style. Yet I always felt that there was something missing from his expert mech. In fact, when I observed the other expert mechs developed by the Heavensword Association's mech industry, I also gained the impression that they were missing a crucial element. Do you know what they are lacking?"

The audience stayed silent, but many of them already formed educated guesses.

Fred unsheathed his personal weapon from his waist. The saber looked plain and unassuming. However, knowledgeable swordsmen could already tell it was a fine quality blade that the director had lovingly owned and used for several decades.

"It is just like my Steen. The swordsmiths who forged this blade are excellent at their craft and understand the construction of swords and sabers like no one else, yet whenever I gaze upon my weapon, I cannot deny it suffers from an intrinsic flaw. The swordsmiths only understand one side of a weapon. They spent so much time and effort on learning how to master the craft of forging a sword that they have never been able to wield them or use them as effectively as actual swordsmen!"

Fred directed a rueful smile towards his Steen as he brought it forward so that the flat of its blade mirrored his eyes.

"Does that make me hate my weapon? No. Every blade is precious. A true swordsman should love every sword indiscriminately regardless of the individual faults they might have. It is their skill that should determine whether they are worthy of recognition."

Fred slowly sheathed his Steen.

"However, I cannot deny that a good weapon can be crucial to swordsmen. We love our weapons. They are more than tools to us. They are our partners and our lifesavers. Just look at the Heavensword Saint himself. For generations, the Heavensword has continually passed on from one swordmaster to another. As soon as a new Heavensword Saint takes office, they always explode in strength and quickly become the strongest swordsman of the galactic rim without any dispute!"

The old man swept behind him. The mech designers had already begun to fabricate the first parts at the open workshop.

"The Heavensword is shrouded in mystery. Who forged this epic sword? How was it made? It is clear that the ancient swordsmith who crafted this relic weapon was better than any other smith in our former state. Despite thousands of years of development, the swords forged by the greatest swordsmiths are still lacking compared to the works of the greatest master swordsmiths."

The man looked grim for a moment before his lips slowly curled into a grin. "What if I tell you that this is no longer the case? Rejoice, Larkinsons! For the first time in history, we are graced by the existence of a mech designer who is simultaneously a bona fide swordmaster!"

A large projection appeared over his head that showed Ketis at her greatest. Her legendary tournament match against Sword Initiate Ivan Reid played out. The older version of her Bloodsinger flowed with power as she fought with power that was far beyond that of any average soldier!

"A year ago, Swordmaster Ketis Larkinson astounded the entire Heavensword Association for being the first swordswoman to simultaneously break through as both a swordmaster and a Journeyman Mech Designer. However, up until now, she has only truly exhibited her strength as a swordmaster to us. Now she and her excellent peers will be showing to us that she not only excels at destruction. For the following seven days, she shall be exhibiting her ability to create in a way that no other mech designer or swordsmith can compare."

The crowd of Heavensworders idolized Ketis above all else in the clan. Not even Ves garnered as much respect as her. It was no surprise that the first speaker completely put the spotlight on the most unique swordmaster of the entire sword community.

The old man looked so expectant that he could already see the miracle that the savior of his sword school was about to create. "There are no Journeymen who are also swordmasters except for Ketis. There are no swordmasters who are also high-ranking mech designers except for Ketis. She is utterly unique and incomparable. With her combined skill and expertise, there is no one in the galaxy who understands the construction of swords and how to wield them better than her! Now, let us witness and stand testament to her first attempt to forge, nay, reforge a mech sword and fabricate the expert mech that shall wield this great weapon!"

A loud jubilation erupted from the crowd as fireworks exploded above their heads and projections of Swordmaiden mechs in battle dazzled their eyes.

In the large circular arena, the first of many rituals took place. Twelve veteran Swordmaidens wearing nothing but simple combat clothing strode out while wielding their trusty greatswords straight in front of their heads.

Hidden entrances built into the floor opened up to levitate several large and ferocious exobeasts. Each of them surpassed the size of an elephant. Their footsteps alone were enough to crush a human being!

The exact species of these wild and untamed beasts varied. Some looked similar to reptilian dinosaurs. Others dripped slime from their semi-morphous bodies. The exobiologists of the Larkinson Biotech Institute had scoured the markets of Amswick thoroughly to acquire the most suitable combat opponents for the Swordmaidens on foot.

Unlike designer beasts, wild and natural exobeasts were always solid fighters. Eons of evolution had continually culled the weak and only allowed the strongest and most competitive predators to thrive on their native alien planets.

Despite their huge differences, every exobeast recognized the tiny human forms as both their prey and a threat. Different roars and screeches escaped from their throats as they all thundered forward to smack or bite their puny foes!

The hunts had commenced!

"Get 'em, Swordmaidens!"

"Blood! I want to see blood!"

"Cut them from limb to limb!"

The different beasts all failed to hit their opponents as the Swordmaidens all expertly dodged the lumbering charges of the powerful beasts. Their huge size and momentum may ensure that any human hit by them would definitely be defeated in an instant, but it also allowed the augmented Swordmaidens to evade the charges as long as they employed the right timing.

The duels began in earnest at this point as the huge beasts and their Swordmaiden opponents all played cat and mouse with each other. Despite the bloodthirst in the eyes of the veteran warriors, they were more than patient enough to wait for a better opportunity. They utilized their prodigious strong physiques to perform basic acrobatics and efficient movements.

In no circumstance did they ever lose their footing. Their training allowed them to be extremely aware of the local terrain. No matter whether there was slime, pieces of bone or other miscellaneous objects strewn on the ground around them, the Swordmaidens always moved while maintaining a high degree of control.

Eventually, one of the Swordmaidens finally saw a great opportunity. The muscular woman in question noticed that the white-furred mammalian she was facing was primarily an ambush predator. Though the monstrous creature's pouncing attacks were very quick and difficult to anticipate, now that the creature had failed half-a-dozen times, it was already starting to flag.

Thus, when the white beast pounced forward yet again and failed to land its claws or teeth onto the Swordmaiden who expertly rolled away, the monster took just half a second longer to recover from its exertion.

"HAAAAAA!"

The tip of the greatsword thrust into the thick and tough hide of the tired exobeast. The Swordmaiden did not attempt to drive her sword in deeper but quickly pulled back regardless of what happened just in time to evade an angry clawed swipe.

"WUUUUHHHAAAAAA!" The large monster's injured throat uttered as purple blood began to stain its previously pristine white hide and the ground underneath.

After landing this initial blow, the Swordmaiden no longer adopted a passive posture. She wasn't willing to wait until the exobeast bled out. Instead, she amped up the pressure and actively sought more opportunities to land additional blows.

The crazy white exobeast snapped its jaws forward and swept its sharp claws in many different directions. Yet its berserk movements only caused it to expose more openings. Someone as skilled and experienced as a Swordmaiden easily managed to strike when the creature was unable to form a response.

Multiple cut and stab wounds began to ruin the furred exobeast's body! Blood poured from multiple wounds which ultimately weakened it to the point where the Swordmaiden was able to step on top of the animal's defenseless head.

With a single stab through the top of the neck, the Swordmaiden managed to vanquish a natural predator despite the comical disparity in size!

As blood continued to drain from the mutilated corpse, hidden gravitic modules began to gather them and guide them into streams that slowly flowed in the direction of a giant chalice placed in front of the highest stage where Fred had just held his speech.

The bronze-like chalice was as tall as a mech but its diameter was much wider. Its artful surface was speckled with luminar crystals that glinted in the light in an interesting manner.

As more Swordmaidens hunted down their bestial foes, the blood of the latter also flowed into the giant chalice... It didn't matter whether their blood was red, purple, green or blue. The lifeblood of all of these powerful alien creatures blended together in an enormous pool!

### *Chapter 3212: Spilling Blood*

As the giant chalice was being filled with the blood of a dozen different exobeasts, the four Journeymen diligently proceeded to perform their various tasks. They started out small and focused on producing the smaller and more delicate components first.

The roars and shouts that reverberated throughout the mech arena did not reach the open workshop. A special energy barrier filtered out every sound vibration before it could reach the center of the arena ground. This ensured that the Journeymen were able to work with complete concentration.

There were still differences, though.

The energy barriers provided the Journeymen with an unobstructed view of the theatrics and the crowd outside.

Different mech designers dealt with this novelty in different ways.

Gloriana hunched close to her workstation and leaned close until her entire vision was surrounded by projections and display screens.

She was obviously not a fan of all of the unrestrained outbursts and ritual fighting that went on outside the open workshop.

Juliet did not go as far as to block her vision of the ceremony outside. Instead, she narrowed her concentration and disregarded anything that wasn't relevant to her task of fabricating the parts that made up the flight system of the Decapitator Project.

Compared to the two women, Ves and Ketis reacted in a different manner to the unusual circumstances.

This was not the first time that Ves performed his craft in public. From competing in the Leemar Open Competition to pitting his products against biomechs at Ruuzon Arena, Ves had plenty of opportunities to rid himself of stage fright.

His abundant confidence in his own abilities as a mech designer kept him stable. No matter what others thought about his work, he knew he was able to do his work well.

Different from his wife, Ves did not shun the crowd and the ceremony. His spiritual senses received more stimulation than usual due to the raw emotions the spectacles evoked.

With each speech, with each sword that struck its mark and with each instance where a Swordmaiden vanquished her foe, the rousing emotions of tens of thousands of Larkinsons spiked.

Even the most spiritually dull individuals would be able to feel a hint of the human energy generated from the collective!

As someone who possessed a lot more sensitivity than that, Ves experienced the celebration of life in a deeper and more profound fashion. In fact, his deep connection to the Larkinson Network amplified this sensation as he was able to perceive the overflowing enthusiasm on a more direct level.

He worked a little harder and he became infected by the glee around him. He did not want to disappoint the crowd and aimed to inject more life in the parts he made.

Ves ultimately did not undergo any radical shifts. The output of his work was a little better than when he worked on the Vanguard Project but not by much.

He enjoyed the spectacle, but its theme and focal points did not center around himself. He was a side character today as the rituals and the current audience were overwhelmingly pinning their hopes on Ketis.

"Well, it's fine. The Decapitator Project is Ketis' pet project. It is only right for her to grab all of the attention today."

Just as expected, when Ketis was finally working on a mech that completely conformed with her extreme specialization, she transformed into a substantially different mech designer.

The air around her became fully charged with her own will as she had taken back Sharpie from Bloodsinger.

Ketis kept Sharpie separate from her mind most of the time for various reasons.

Whenever the companion spirit occupied Bloodsinger, her personal greatsword constantly accumulated strength. Though the pace was slow, as long as Sharpie kept occupying it over time, the weapon would likely complement Ketis much better in a couple of years.

Second, she entered a much more serious and absolute mindset when she adopted her full swordmaster guise. Though she became the indomitable swordswoman that she

had always yearned for, the lack of levity caused her to come across as far too serious for her liking.

Ketis did not want to turn herself into an inhuman warrior who only thought about training and killing all the time. Her sharpness orientation compelled her to hone her blade and self-developed sword style so she would become even more ready to defeat her next challenging opponent.

While she did not object to working hard to improve herself, she did not want to lose too much of her humanity in the process.

Her relationship with Joshua and her love for the Swordmaidens were just some of the relationships that brightened up her day and made her feel fulfilled. When she took Sharpie back in her mind, her affection still existed, but they became overshadowed by her overarching ambitions.

She certainly didn't aim low. She not only vowed to become the best swordsman mech designer in existence, but also wanted to become a sword god in her own right.

It was already nearly impossible to reach the top of one profession. To aim for the top of another profession at the same time had never been done, at least when it came to this unique combination.

Ketis was not ignorant of her low odds. In fact, it was exactly because she recognized how many challenges she needed to overcome that she was so driven when she adopted her full swordmaster persona.

Ketis the woman was an optimistic mech designer who believed she would be able to reach her goal by working diligently and waiting for the right opportunity to arise.

Ketis the swordmaster was a driven warrior who only believed in her own strength and abilities! Instead of waiting for serendipity to arrive and allow everything to fall into place, her unyielding persona instead wanted to create her own opportunity!

"I shall craft the weapon that shall make Venerable Dise stronger with my own two hands!"

Her aura grew so strong that even Ves was able to feel it despite standing more than fifty meters away. Her will honed her concentration to such a degree that she was able to fabricate parts that were so good that even Gloriana wouldn't be able to issue a word of complaint!

As Ketis began to work, she did not forget that she was forging a weapon for another person and not herself.



Sharpie's native domain centered around absolute sharpness. While this completely complimented Ketis whenever she worked on a mech that needed a sharp blade, in this particular instance it was not the best fit.

Though Ketis and Venerable Dise were both products of the same environment, they had diverged substantially when it came to developing their own sword styles.

Whereas Ketis obsessed over sharpness, Venerable Dise was a warrior who fought to protect and shield her fellow Swordmaidens against threats that they could not defeat on their own.

The tragic battle against Venerable Foster was one of the most terrible disasters the Swordmaidens had ever suffered. The inability of Commander Lydia and her fellow sisters to overcome the powerful Belisarius piloted by the talented Vesian expert mech had led to a trauma that still haunted every surviving Swordmaiden.

Due to the great responsibilities thrust onto her shoulders as well as her bond with Qilanxo, Venerable Dise's strength revolved around her determination to guard her fellow Swordmaidens and other Larkinsons against enemy champions that were too powerful for them to resist!

Ketis extensively sparred and compared notes with Venerable Dise. This allowed her and Sharpie to shift their mindset and think like a protective guardian who guarded her own tribe.

The air around her took on a different vibe as she and her companion spirit both lost their sharp edge. Instead, they gained a more protective and challenging air as she looked ready to draw her blade and put her life on the line in order to guard those she cared about.

For the moment, this mood only affected herself, but when Blinky invisibly emerged from Ves' mind and began to weave his design network, the minds of the other three Journeymen became infected by a powerful will!

"This is different!" Ves widened his eyes as he tried his best to prevent the changes from ruining his current work assignment.

The design network was only capable of filtering a minute portion of Ketis' empowered will. Under normal circumstances, this amounted to only a tiny amount of influencing that barely affected Journeymen.

People like Ves and Gloriana were already strong-willed in their own right. Even if their wills had not undergone any profound transformations, they were anything but average as their design seeds functioned as powerful bastions that preserved the essence of their design philosophies and their most important personality traits.

Even so, now that Ketis channeled her full strength as a swordmaster, her unyielding spirit as well as her interpretation of Venerable Dise's conviction hit the other mech designers harder than usual.

It took a few minutes for every other mech designer to adjust to the changing circumstances.

Every Journeyman took to Ketis' influence rather differently. Ves was the most open about welcoming her powerful influence. His adaptability and his experience in working in wildly different circumstances enabled him to roll with the changes and adjust his own approach without too many issues.

Juliet and Gloriana were less able to adjust their own approach. They partially blocked Ketis' influence as they were unable to cope with such a powerful will that did not match with their own temperaments.

Instead, the two women merely took Ketis' enhanced presence as guidance on how they should orient their own work. It became a bit easier for them to fabricate their parts in a way that conformed more closely to the intent of the Decapitator Project.

While Ketis guided the work of the other three Journeymen through the design network in various ways, outside of the open workshop the first great ritual was about to commence.

After conducting scores of duels against impressive exobeasts of different sizes, the veteran Swordmaidens who displayed their hunting prowess in full splendor had all retreated towards the middle of the arena grounds until they surrounded the open workshop in a loose circle.

The victorious Swordmaidens held their bloodied blades vertically in front of their heads and faced outwards.

The giant chalice in front of the highest stage was filled with the blood of scores of different exobeasts. Due to the blending of so many different blood types, the soup had turned into a sickening shade of murky brown. The smell emanating from this massive pool alone was probably enough to poison a human to death!

Soon, a Swordmaiden wearing the uniform of a commander floated onto the stage and unsheathed her personal Unending alloy greatsword.

Commander Sendra raised her weapon high. "To wield a sword is to spill the blood of others! The greater the blood, the greater the warrior! We Swordmaidens shall never stop until we have flooded the entire galaxy with blood! Let my sword bear witness to our vow!"

When she reached the lip of the chalice, she bent down to dip the blade of her weapon into the pool. Once she drew it out she resolutely struck the side of the container with her blade!

Cracks started to form and spread from the impact site. The chalice, which once appeared grand and noble, now started to fall apart as the spreading cracks practically disintegrated its entire structure!

The blood that the giant object previously contained plunged to the ground and began to flood in many different directions.

However, the audience soon noticed that the blood did not spread indiscriminately. Instead, the dark and muddy blood began to branch out in different winding channels that had apparently been dug into the ground but had been kept obscured until this moment.

The seemingly-random patterns slowly turned into elaborate constellations. Each bright star represented by buried luminar crystals were connected by channels of mixed alien blood.

Soon, the luminar crystals shone until they unleashed light beams that stretched high above! It wasn't until they hit the luminar crystals that had cleverly been embedded into the high ceiling that encompassed Twilight City that the beams traveled no further!

At this moment, the entire arena ground surrounding the open workshop had turned into a forest of light beams!

### *Chapter 3213: Sing*

If the earlier spectacles already generated a lot of awe among the audience, then the great ritual that Commander Sendra had just initiated was a feast for everyone's eyes!

A lot of hidden technology buried underneath the surface came to life and began to manipulate the various elements in many intricate ways.

For example, after the luminar crystals on the surface all shot weak but constant weak light beams to the ceiling, the blood channels that connected the different constellations all broke up, causing the alien blood to pool around the active energy emitters.

Hundreds of different vortexes emerged as the converging pools of blood all began to spin like cyclones. The spinning streams of blood all started to ascend along the seemingly-solid light beams like snakes, causing many different helixes to take shape.

Once the helixes reached a decent height, they began to do something drastic. They flowed inwards and flowed into the deadly light beams, causing them to burn up instantly as they became bombarded by a considerable amount of heat and energy!

Lots of smoke started to sizzle from the places where the blood met its end. In the end, all of the alien blood that the Swordmaidens had spilled just earlier had been purified by the beams that represented the cleansing light of stars.

Soon, the only blood that was left was the liquids dripping from the blades of the silent and vigil Swordmaidens surrounding the open workshop. Once they received a hidden cue, they simultaneously stepped forward and walked in a synchronized motion until they reached the nearest active light beam.

The warrior women solemnly knelt and bent their heads forward until the top of their skulls pressed against the flat of their bloodied greatswords.

When they drew back, their foreheads and portions of their hair became smeared with the blood of many different species. If they hadn't received treatments beforehand, the blood would have corroded through their skin and affected health in many different ways!

Once they marked themselves with the blood that they had personally spilled, the Swordmaidens resolutely threw their weapons into the active light beams!

Hidden antigrav modules secretly captured all of the thrown weapons and made sure that they remained within the active area of the light beams.

It was a good thing that the Swordmaidens participating in this ritual wielded Breyer alloy swords instead of more expensive Unending alloy swords.

Even so, this was a difficult sacrifice to many of the sisters. Though the blades they discarded were recently-made and not their personal weapons, it went against the instinct of a swordsman to mistreat a fine blade.

The powerful energies coursing from floor to ceiling quickly melted the swords into slag. Yet before the energies could vaporize the metal completely, the antigrav modules pulled them out and began to mold them into balls that subsequently soared into the skies until they hovered above the energy barriers that enveloped the open workshop!

Soon, more and more gravity exerted from different directions began to press the hot and molten metal into a single amalgamation. The larger collection of metal soon began to mold into the form of a greatsword!

Cool air blew from many different directions and rapidly reduced the temperature of this giant, air-casted weapon.

Of course, swords that were made in this manner were not as tough and sound as properly-made weapons, but the giant metallic weapon served a symbolic meaning.

After floating above the mech arena for a single minute, it suddenly began to plunge onto the top of the energy barrier with its tip pointed downwards!

The first energy shield flared as it resisted the cooled weapon. Moments later, the straight light beams that were previously pointing outwards suddenly began to shift their angles until they tilted towards the center.

Hundreds of different beams attacked the giant sword from different directions, causing it to heat up and melt yet again!

The molten metal that emerged from this converging attack surged away from the center even as the luminar crystals slowly powered down and deactivated the light beams.

The cooling metal remolded back into a giant sword even as it floated back down. Once it reached the highest stage, a single Swordmaiden stood in the center.

The woman unsheathed her personal greatsword. The Unending alloy weapon slowly began to glow as Venerable Dize resonated with it with her will!

She did not even take a step forward in order to move close enough to strike the molten blade with her weapon.

Instead, she continued to focus her will in order to accumulate more energy. As her blade glowed brighter and brighter, she eventually reached her limits. The blue corona that surrounded and extended past her greatsword practically dwarfed her in size!

"As a mech pilot, I mainly fight against mechs instead of monsters." The expert pilot stated. "Regardless of whether my next opponent is organic or mechanical, I shall always slay the monsters that threaten our clan! Let my sword prove my sincerity!"

With a powerful cry, Venerable Dize struck the giant metal sword with her own glowing weapon! A powerful energy wave surged forth and instantly split the recently-cooled weapon apart and shattered the split pieces until nothing but fragments remained!

These fragments slowly flew away even as Venerable Dize retracted her will and calmed herself down. She sheathed her greatsword and turned around and stepped away.

An explosion of awe and joy erupted from the entire audience! It was quite rare for them to witness a swordmaster or an expert pilot with the power of one to exhibit their formidable abilities in public.

The powerful show of force completely stimulated the Heavensworders and other people within the crowd!

"Venerable Dise! Venerable Dise! Venerable Dise!"

The Swordmaidens down below who each sacrificed a weapon all rose up to their feet and saluted towards the retreating expert pilot. Once they paid tribute to their greatest warrior, they retreated from the arena grounds as well.

Up in a VIP box, Venerable Joshua looked confused.

"Tusa, do you know what this stuff is supposed to mean?"

The fellow expert pilot shrugged. "Beats me. It has something to do about blood, stars, swords and cutting everything apart. That's the most I've been able to catch."

A snort sounded from the side. Venerable Jannzi directed a disdainful expression towards the two men.

"The Swordmaidens are praying for a powerful new sword for their champion. They need the strongest blades in order to spill enough blood to drown the galaxy."

"Is that it?" Joshua scratched his head. "That sounds rather extreme."

"Well, that's the Swordmaidens for you." Jannzi shrugged.

"And you're okay with that, Jannzi?"

"I'm okay as long as it is used to kill the right people. I don't want to spill innocent blood. Our clan should never stoop so low. If Venerable Dise ever crosses the line, I will put my shield in the path of her sword and halt her atrocities myself if necessary!"

Hopefully that would never happen, but who knew what the future held.

Back in the open workshop, the climax of the great ritual had produced the greatest spike in emotions in the mech arena to date! The urges and desires of all of the attendants simultaneously surged in the same direction. The energy in the entire venue aligned in such a fashion that both Ves and Ketis became swept with a strong sense of purpose and momentum!

While Ves only got a moderate boost in motivation out of this surge, Ketis became a lot more driven because of this spike.

Her eyes practically glowed as she began to perform her work with greater efficiency and precision. She also began to perform some additional improvisations that should lead to tiny increases in performance.

Several days passed by as the grand event continued onwards. The Swordmaidens and Heavensworders performed several great rituals throughout the days. They spaced

them out and timed them so that they only took place when Ketis could most use the help.

Between these periods of peak excitement, the showmakers held other rituals that were more subdued in size and scope. It was impossible to keep an audience of spectators on the edge of their seats for hours at a time. By cleverly managing the excitement levels of the changing audience, they were able to contribute their energy over and over again without overdrawing their own excitement.

The parts that the Journeymen had made were undoubtedly affected by the rituals and the responses from the audience. This validated the theory that fabricating an important mech in front of a large audience had the potential to increase the quality of the output.

However, the results were more mixed than Ves expected. When they reached the halfway point, Ves took a moment to survey the work done so far. The components fabricated by the different Journeymen were not substantially better than normal.

The parts produced by Ketis were clearly the best. She was the most susceptible to rituals and their consequences. The components that would form the mech sword of the Decapitator Project were especially stunning. Ketis had clearly leveraged her dual expertise as Journeyman and swordmaster to create sharp and exquisite components that would soon be used to upgrade the Unending alloy sword taken from the Bright Sword Prime.

Compared to Ketis' earnest efforts, the work performed by Juliet and Gloriana were less affected due to their different mentalities. They approached their work from a different direction and did not feel connected to the crowd and the energy it generated.

The story might have been different if the rituals were centered around the Superior Mother and the audience largely consisted of Penitent Sisters.

Perhaps Ves could test differences in the future when it was time to fabricate another Hexer mech.

"First, I have to finish the Decapitator Project."

As blood continued to spill and swords continued to swing outside the open workshop, the Journeymen soon moved to a more critical stage.

While Ves, Juliet and Gloriana began to assemble different parts into a solid mech frame, Ketis split away from the rest to reforge an existing mech sword.

She stood behind the command console of a giant forging machine that had been especially configured for her use. It had even been upgraded with additional modules bought from Talulah Silver and Amswick to increase its ability to handle Unending alloy.

The advanced forging machine heated up and began to partially break down the original Unending alloy greatsword so that it could take on a new shape and integrate better parts.

The periodic waves of emotions that continued to affect her psyche caused her to become continually more invested in her important task. Her will became more honed as she set aside more and more of her humanity in order to become the instrument that was better able to forge the strongest mech sword for the Decapitator Project.

Yet despite passing on her increasingly more driven will to the others via Blinky's design network, it was not enough.

As seven days came and went, Ves retreated from the finished expert mech frame with an impassive expression.

"The expert mech is good, but..."

Ultimately, the outcome of this fabrication run matched his expectations. How could it be so simply to produce another masterwork? The Decapitator Project might look a little more exquisite than the Vanguard Project but it still wasn't close enough to the crucial masterwork threshold.

If it was just a bit better, Ves would have been able to employ a gem to push it over. As it was, it seemed his stash would continue to remain untouched.

Even as Ves began to accept the reality as he saw it, he sensed an explosion of will and energy from behind!

He rapidly turned around only to find that Ketis had finally completed the extensive reforging of Venerable Dise's original mech sword.

The initial one was optimized for the Bright Sword Prime.

The new one was supposed to be a much better fit for both Venerable Dise and her new expert mech.

Yet much to his astonishment, the mech sword was more than that.

Before his eyes, Ketis openly channeled the pristine and incredibly impressive blade that she had crafted while committing everything from her mind, will, body and heart.

The result was a giant greatsword that was better than her Bloodsinger, better than the greatswords wielded by other Swordmaiden mechs and better than nearly every other sword from the Heavensword Association.



When Ketis reached out and placed her palm on the flat of the enormous blade, the giant mech sword sung to life!

"Masterwork..."

Ves couldn't believe what he was seeing. He never encountered this situation before. He turned his gaze towards his wife only to encounter even more confusion.

"The weapon is a masterwork... but the expert mech that is supposed to wield it is not." Gloriana summed up the result.

Was this a success... or not?

While the couple tried to make up their minds, the audience didn't think so much. The more knowledgeable members among them could instantly recognize how remarkable it was. To the true lovers of swords, the mech sword reforged by Ketis had become a transcendent weapon that every mech pilot dreamed of wielding!

"A mastersword! Swordmaster Ketis has forged a mastersword!"

Once the news spread among the crowd, the clansmen all stood up and roared at the results of seven days of crafting! From beginning to end, Ketis focused most of her efforts on making the strongest sword possible, and she succeeded in meeting her goal!

"SWORDMASTER KETIS! SWORDMASTER KETIS! SWORDMASTER KETIS!"

Ketis took in the validation from her supporters even as she deepened her connection to the weapon that she had made. The sword resonated so much with her heart that she felt that she was able to wield it regardless of the fact that she wasn't even large or strong enough to lift such an immense object!

Her sharp eyes raked across the entire surface of the giant sword as she already began to reap the rewards of creating a weapon that had the potential to become as legendary as the Heavensword!

In her attuned perception, the weapon that she had made was alive. Not only that, it sung to its creator with a song that only true swordsmen could hear.

"Sing!"

*Chapter 3214: Hogging All The Good Stuff*

"Well, that happened." Ves flatly said as the show had finally ended and the Journeymen retreated to the backstage. "We met our goal... or not. It depends."

An hour had passed since the mech arena had turned into a cacophony of celebration and exaltation. Among the tens of thousands of Heavensworders who especially returned to the venue at the final day and the final hour, witnessing the birth of a masterwork sword was one of the greatest events that they have ever experienced!

Even now, the enthused Heavensworders spread word of this amazing feat of craftsmanship to the rest of the clan. In fact, they even relayed their news to their former home, causing the distant sword fanatics all the way back in the Heavensword Association to celebrate this occasion as well despite all of the light-years of separation!

If not for the fact that the clan forbid any footage from leaking out, the distant state would have blown up even more!

Even so, the immensity of Ketis' accomplishment could not be overstated. Very few master swordsmiths of the Heavensword Association had managed to equal her already-legendary feat, and most of them only managed to make their magnus opuses in the last decades of their illustrious careers.

The fact that Ketis managed to forge a masterwork mech sword when she was still in her early thirties signified a lot of promise!

It was for this reason that interest from the Heavensword Association had intensified. Ves even had to order Minister Shederin Purnesse to watch over Ketis and speak on behalf of the Larkinson Clan. The young swordmaster may be many things, but she was not a professional diplomat.

Ves threw a brief glance at her. Shederin Purnesse looked to be in his element as his projection hovered next to Ketis. The two calmly engaged in a conversation with the projected forms of an entire delegation of Heavensworders.

From their uniforms, markings and body language, Ves tentatively managed to distinguish a couple of swordmasters, mech designers, swordsmiths and other officials.

It seemed that the significance of creating a masterwork sword was a lot more exciting than any other masterwork!

"We made more progress than any Journeyman should have accomplished. Any step forward should be celebrated." Juliet opined.

Gloriana did not look pleased at all. She frowned as she hugged Clixie against her chest.

"Ketis could have at least shared the bounty with us! We all worked on the Decapitator Project. Why is she the only one who can receive credit for this accomplishment?!"

Ves placed his hand on her shoulder to shush her. "Don't be too upset, Gloriana. Didn't you manage to study and glean a couple of new insights from seeing a masterwork mech sword take shape? It is still a product on the second rung of the ladder. Each chance for us to glimpse upwards is a precious learning opportunity."

"I know that, Ves, but how many insights did you manage to obtain this time?!"

"Uhhmm..."

Gloriana snorted. "I thought so. Despite working together on the same expert mech, only Ketis gained anything useful this time. We were hardly different from bystanders this time!"

The cat she embraced reacted as well.

"Miaow."

Ves couldn't help but stand up for his former student. "I think you know quite well that it's not her fault that we failed to make any substantial gains. We only have ourselves to blame for not caring as much about the Decapitator Project as Ketis. She was the only one of us who treated it as a passion project. She poured so much work into designing a new mech sword and figuring out how to reforge an existing one into a new one that her contribution to this project is a multitude higher than ours."

"That's because she hogged all of the good stuff to herself!"

"And why is that wrong?" Ves puzzlingly frowned. "You may be excellent at technical design, but you can't surpass Ketis when it comes to designing a swordsman mech even if it is a custom one. The extra work she put into the Decapitator Project neatly compensates for her lack of contribution on other projects such as the Amaranto."

"Back when we fabricated the Amaranto, Ketis managed to ride on our coattails! We've generously carried her along when we created our latest masterwork mech! Why can't she repay the favor when she had the opportunity to do so this time?"

Ves sighed. "None of us can exert any control over that. I seriously doubt that Ketis has held back in any way. Just look at the finished expert mech of ours. Does it look as if it is a masterwork mech or close to it? No! The expert mech frame correctly reflects our skill and effort into making it. From what I can see, we haven't contributed anything noteworthy. Do you disagree?"

His wife grunted in frustration. She couldn't argue against his logic but that didn't help with soothing her frustrations. She looked enviously at the mech sword that had been placed on the side. The large and inspirational work of art was a different kind of masterwork than what she and her husband typically made.

Even masterworks came in different flavors. It was hard for Ves and Gloriana to distinguish them at their current level but they could already sense that the mech sword was remarkable in a different manner.

"Our results are already far above expectations." Juliet said in an attempt to shift the subject. "No matter who deserves credit, our clan will become a lot more notable in the mech industry because of this. We have tentatively proven that the Amaranto is not a fluke. Although the mech frame of the Decapitator Project is not a masterwork, we were still able to showcase that we are anything but average Journeymen. In the right circumstances, we create wonders."

That caused Ves to reflect on the elaborate ceremony and how much of it contributed to the current results.

When Ketis finally ended her initial exchange with the Heavensworders, she walked over to her colleagues with a smile. She had already pushed Sharpie back into Bloodsinger so her personality became more youthful again.

"Thank you, everyone." She sincerely said and bowed. "I couldn't have done it without all of your help."

Gloriana grumpily nodded. "You're welcome."

After a rather terse exchange, the four decided to take a closer look at the latest masterwork creation that had been produced by the clan.

The Journeymen already sensed the restrained lethality of the weapon as they approached. The closer they moved, the more they felt the inherent threat and guardedness of the blade.

To Ves, the mech sword was alive in a different way that he was accustomed to. Much of it came from Ketis instead of him, which was natural as he hadn't contributed much to the design of the sword.

Though he still tried to keep himself apprised on what Ketis had planned for the mech sword, now that he finally saw the realized version up close, he discovered that there was a considerable distance between him and his student when it came to designing and making swords.

"This is the power of specialization." He whispered.

"Indeed." Juliet nodded in agreement. "This is a great asset to the Swordmaidens. It can even become a permanent part of the heritage of our clan."

"Why would you say that?" Gloriana asked.

"Think about the meaning of the Amaranto. It's an expert mech that is completely designed to fit a single individual. That's great because Venerable Stark will be able to progress much easier than others. What I am wondering about is what will happen to the Amaranto in the future. Once Venerable Stark grows too old or has outgrown this masterwork expert mech, what can we do with it? We can't assign it to another expert pilot because we have to deconstruct its entire design just to make it compatible with someone else."

Without an expert pilot, the masterwork expert mech could no longer be employed in combat. This meant that it would likely be relegated to a museum exhibit just like any outdated machine. Aside from admiring its excellent craftsmanship and commemorating its historical accomplishments, there was no other use for the Amaranto in the distant future.

Juliet turned to Ketis. "Let me ask you this question. Can this sword of yours be wielded by other swordsman mech pilots in the future?"

Ketis frowned. She never thought about this issue before. She turned to her best work and scanned it as if to find an answer from the sword itself.

"I'm not entirely sure yet, but I think it's possible. Mind you, the size, dimensions, balance and other properties of this mech sword is completely tailored to Venerable Dise's fighting style as well as the parameters of the Decapitator Project. My sword will perform the best when it is paired with the two. If you change these variables, I can't ensure whether my blade will offer the same benefits. Likely not, but who knows."

Ves became quite intrigued at where this was going. "So the masterwork mech sword can theoretically be passed on to another mech pilot and mech?"

She nodded. "It's possible, but... it depends on whether the sword agrees. It's alive, you know. I can hear it sing to me. Right now, it is still a young weapon, but it is already attuned to Venerable Dise. I don't think my weapon wants to be wielded by anyone else as long as its battle partner remains alive and well."

"What about after that?" Ves pressed. "What if Venerable Dise retires or something?"

"I think... she might be able to encourage her sword to partner with another worthy wielder if she's still alive." Ketis reluctantly said. "If not, the sword can decide whether someone else deserves to use it in battle on its own. The best way to pass it on is to train a Swordmaiden who adopts a similar mentality and fighting style to Venerable Dise."

"An heir, in other words."

Ketis nodded. "That will work. That's quite common in the Heavensword Association, you know. The sword schools are really big on inheritances and stuff. That's why

swordmasters put so much effort into training their disciples. Once the older ones are no longer fit enough to hold their treasured swords, they pass it on to someone who can keep their legacy alive and bring it to greater heights. If it has worked out for the Heavensworders, I can't see why it wouldn't work for this as well. Venerable Dise is already in the process of training a batch of promising mech pilots in the form of the Blade Mistresses."

"The mech pilots who are a part of these retinue squads are more like interns rather than disciples." Ves noted. "The membership of groups like the Blade Mistresses rotate every once in a while to give other promising mech pilots an opportunity to receive personalized guidance from one of our expert pilots. As far as I am aware, the relationship between the two hasn't reached the level of a master-disciple bond."

"That's true, but that can always change. Venerable Dise just has to wait for the right Swordmaiden mech pilot to come along. The veterans among the Swordmaidens won't do. They've already found their own directions and their potential isn't the highest. There are a lot of recruits to choose from, though Dise might not pick any of them up. You can't rush this kind of decision."

"I understand."

Ves was already happy that there was a possibility for the mech sword to become a treasured heirloom to the Larkinson Clan. Since it was made out of Unending alloy, it would definitely remain relevant even if his clan reached first-class standards one day. The living weapon also possessed growth qualities so it would definitely become an even more significant relic in the distant future.

"This is a real treasure." He smiled and continued to admire the gigantic blade. "It also deserves a name of its own. Have you thought of any yet, Ketis?"

"Let's ask Venerable Dise first... This mech sword is dedicated for her use."

#### *Chapter 3215: Naming Rights*

Venerable Dise was not too far away. She between the mech sword and the expert mech that was meant to wield it. She admired them both in equal measure.

As an expert pilot, she felt a kinship with the Decapitator Project.

As a swordswoman, she felt drawn to the mech sword.

This was not really a problem. Either way, she benefited immensely from being able to use just one of them. If she was able to utilize both at the same time, then she would probably become one of the happiest swordsman mech pilots in the region!

"Dise!" Ketis jogged over and grasped the expert pilot's hands. "Do you like my handiwork?"

"I don't have any words to say. I'm deeply grateful for what you've done for me. This expert mech and this sword are more than I have dreamt of. I can't wait to utilize them both."

Ves lightly coughed. "You'll have to keep those urges in check until we've reached another star system. You won't have to wait as long as Venerable Orfan, though. Now that we have completed this fabrication run, we no longer have a reason to stay in Amswick. We'll be departing for the Smiling Samuel Star Sector soon enough."

"That's good news, because I am really itching to swing that excellent new sword." Dise let out an eager grin.

No swordsman or swordswoman could resist a good sword! No matter the scale or medium, a true sword lover appreciated masterfully crafted swords of any kind.

"Since this expert mech and accompanying sword is made for your use, you get to decide how to call them." Ves explained. "Have you thought of any good names?"

Venerable Dise shook her head. "I did think about it for a couple of months, but now that we have come to this point, I don't think I'm qualified to name them. Ketis, I'll let you decide."

The Swordmaiden mech designer blinked. "You want me to name your stuff?"

"They're yours as well as mine. They would have never existed without your hard work. I didn't even dream about being able to wield a masterwork sword. The fact that you have managed to deliver one is a great gift. I feel even more certain about giving the honors to you. It just feels right."

"Okay..."

Ketis hadn't expected Dise to pass on the honors to her, so she needed to take a moment to process this unexpected turn of events. She looked deeply at both the mech frame and the mech sword and tried to generate fitting names based on her intentions and what she was able to sense from her creations.

"The Decapitator Project is my first true swordsman mech. Even though I designed it in collaboration with others, it is the first time since I became a Journeyman that I was able to realize my vision and implement the solutions that I developed on my own. I will always be grateful for the trust that you have put in me despite not having published any ordinary swordsman mechs as of yet. I consider this mech to be my proper start as a swordsman mech designer."

How could she encapsulate the meaning and the significance of the Decapitator Project into a single name? She struggled to make a suitable choice as several minutes passed by with silence.

Neither Ves nor anyone else spoke up to offer any guidance. Something as solemn as naming a significant creation had to come from the heart.

Eventually, Ketis settled on a choice.

"Let the expert mech be known as the First Sword."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Ves thought that she might select a fancier or more sophisticated name like Scarlet Tide or Omicron, but it turned out that her naming sense hadn't improved at all since she last named her companion spirit.

Even though Gloriana and so on did not look impressed, it was still a name that fit the expert swordsman mech in a way.

"It's simple and to the point. I like it." Venerable Dise smiled at Ketis. "We Swordmaidens don't bother too much with deeper meanings and crap like that. The actual performance of a mech matters a lot more than how it's called. Besides, this expert mech of mine is quite simple and straightforward to begin with. There's no need to dress it up with anything weightier."

Whether she said that because she truly believed in her words or because she wanted to please Ketis, her lack of objection meant the name was set. From now on, the mech that had resulted from the Decapitator Project would be known as the First Sword.

"What about the masterwork mech sword?" Ves asked with a hint of dread.

"It's a sword designed to protect by felling giants. Let's just call it the Decapitator. Since it is good enough to serve as the code name of our expert mech, let it live on as the defining name of this precious blade!"

Well, it worked, and that was all that mattered. Gloriana didn't have any standing to complain considering the silly name she bestowed on the masterwork version of the Blessed Squire. If she could get away with calling it the Little Angel, then she should just let Ketis enjoy her own moment!



After they decided upon the names of the expert mech and its sword, the expert pilot and Journeymen soon split up. The former insisted on spending more time with her new gifts while the latter all began to wrap up the project.

Once they completed all of the necessary arrangements such as the return of the workshop machines, the mech designers all shuttled back to the Spirit of Bentheim.

Both Ves and Gloriana continued to remain engrossed in their own thoughts as they walked back to their grand stateroom. Lucky and Clixie cutely circled them for a while before moving off to a nearby cat bed in order to groom each other.

"Meow."

"Miaow."

The wedded couple prepared for bed as well. They cleansed their bodies and changed into their pajamas before they slipped in their shared bed.

Ves couldn't help but rub his palm over his wife's growing belly. Seeing that his unborn daughter was still in a healthy and vigorous condition caused him to smile.

"There's still a couple of months to go, Ves." Gloriana looked amused at his antics. "We'll be able to hug our little baby soon enough."

"I look forward to that."

Once Ves had his fill of caressing her belly, he settled on his side of the bed. Before he drifted off to slumber, his wife addressed one more topic.

"If Ketis can make a masterwork, so can I." She softly insisted even as her exhaustion was starting to get the better of her. "Let's leave the Bulwark Project as last. If there is one thing the Swordmaiden girl has proven, it's that you can still upgrade an existing product into a masterwork. I feel more hopeful than ever for the Bulwark Project, but if we want to maximize our chances, we need to leave it as last. I don't want to turn just a single part into a masterwork like Ketis has done. I want the entire package to reach the second rung of the ladder!"

Ves yawned and turned his body around. "Haven't you forgotten about your brother's expert mech? The Chimera Project and the Bulwark Project might be the last two expert mech design projects of our clan, but our design run won't end until we have delivered an expert mech for Brutus."

"So?"

"Don't you want to leave the best for your brother as opposed to Venerable Jannzi?" Ves raised his eyebrow. "I mean, look at it from this angle. If you expend all of your

energy and passion on the Bulwark Project when it is our sixth completed expert mech, you won't have much time to recharge and ready yourself to fabricate your brother's expert mech. If you tackle it sooner, then you can spend the extra weeks or months as we work towards completing the Chimera Project to recharge your reserves. Doesn't that sound like a more optimal solution?"

His wife looked a little less doubtful as she contemplated his proposal. "I'm not so sure..."

"Which expert mech do you care more about? The Bulwark Project or the Star Dancer Mark II? You need to make a choice, Gloriana. You can't have it both ways."

Now that she was forced into this position, she had no choice but to pick family over her professional interests.

The Bulwark Project had a lot going for it. As an expert heavy space knight, its mech type along with its design concept aligned with Master Willix's actual design philosophy. It was the mech that evoked the most interest and passion out of the MTA Master, though that wasn't saying much.

Venerable Jannzi's expert mech also spoke to Gloriana because there was just so much for her to design. The huge bulk and volume of this weighty machine granted her a lot of room to express her creativity. She loved to spend long stretches of hours puzzling different parts and structural elements together in a way that minimized any inefficiencies.

Yet... the recipient of the Bulwark Project simply didn't matter as much as her flesh-and-blood brother. Ever since Venerable Brutus lost his expert mech during the Battle of Reckoning, the poor male Hexer had been left hanging for over a year as he entrusted her sister to provide him with a replacement machine.

Considering how much Gloriana loved her older brother, she couldn't bring herself to support her previous argument anymore.

"Fine..." She sighed. "You'll get your way. We can finish the Bulwark Project first before we complete the Chimera Project. I guess it will work out better this way as the various side projects related to the latter are taking longer to complete than we thought."

Ves grinned as he closed his eyes. He finally managed to get his way!

"Good. Just make sure you don't slack off when we finally fabricate the Chimera Project. Otherwise the same thing that happened earlier will happen again. You don't want to be left out of the opportunity to make another masterwork, right?"

"Right..."

The two finally called it a night and fell into slumber.

After enjoying a long and unrestrained rest, the pair woke up a lot more rejuvenated the next day.

"I want to inspect the First Sword and the Decapitator a bit more today." She told Ves.

"I'll be on the bridge. Now that we have finished our business, we can finally say goodbye to the Amswick System."

Not that Ves spent a lot of time and effort into getting to know it in the first place. The expeditionary fleet remained well outside of the border to the inner system, as did many other visiting ships and fleets.

When Ves and Lucky wandered over to the bridge, they settled and waited until every ship in the combined fleet sounded off. Once it became clear that every vessel was ready to move, the entire fleet transitioned into FTL travel without any issue.

"How long will it take to cross into Smiling Samuel and rendez-vous with the Vulcanite greeting party?" Ves asked a navigation officer.

"Around two weeks, sir."

Ves nodded. "Very well. Please inform me if there are any changes to the schedule."

After so many ups and downs, he was finally about to complete one of the Supply Missions that the System had issued to him years ago. He felt greatly relieved that he was finally able to lift a burden off his shoulders.

Though he wanted to complete the Supply Missions sooner, it wasn't his fault the System's standards were so high. Ves still hadn't heard about any of the other ultra-rare exotics. Perhaps the only realistic way that he would be able to get his hands on weird materials like Yondu Milk was to go on another Mastery experience.

"Later." He whispered to himself... "Not now. I still need to finish my remaining projects..."

### *Chapter 3216: Dwarf Mechs*

The journey into the Vulcan Empire was a contentious one to say the least. Even though Ves had made an agreement with the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan, his allies didn't want to fly straight into a black hole!

It took a lot of effort to assure both his allies and his own clansmen that Smiling Samuel was not as dangerous as a black hole. Too many people had read or heard all kinds of awful stories about the dwarves while the fleet was parked in Amswick.

The locals constantly exaggerated the menace of their archenemies whenever they interacted with outsiders. The Empire of the Lost was filled by traumatized survivors and descendents who inherited the hate and fear of their parents towards the dwarves.

Ves personally thought that the mania towards the Vulcanites had reached an excessive degree. Though the Lost were justified in demonizing their threatening neighbors, the Golden Skull Alliance did not play any part in this local turf war.

No matter how much tensions flared between states, it was of no concern to transient travellers such as the Larkinson Clan.

In fact, Ves was even willing to do business with the dwarves if it was convenient to do so! It was too bad that he didn't intend to expand his business presence in the Fermi Star Cluster.

"There's also another problem. The dwarves don't like to pilot conventional humanoid mechs."

Their hatred against the tall folk did not just lead them to question the true nature of their supposed patron god. They also moved away from piloting normal humanoid mechs in favor of bestial mechs and most notably dwarf mechs.

A dwarf mech was exactly what it sounded like. It was a shorter but much more stockier version of a typical humanoid mech. Its contours basically matched that of a dwarf scaled to the size of a war machine.

From what Ves had heard about the Vulcan Empire's mech community, the local mech industry was relatively young but already came up with numerous innovations that increased the competitiveness of dwarf mechs.

Dwarf mechs were characterized by their lower profiles. This not only made it a little harder to hit them at range, but also conveyed substantial defensive advantages when fighting up close.

Since dwarf mechs did not stretch as high as traditional humanoid mechs, they also possessed a lower center of mass. They were a lot more difficult to trip and they remained rock solid even when the terrain became unstable.

Of course, just like the dwarves themselves, the mechs that took on their form performed quite well in heavy gravity environments.

The advantage was so substantial that even the so-called 'tall folk' preferred to pilot dwarf mechs whenever they had to deploy on a heavy gravity planet for an extensive amount of time.

"Heh, the dwarves probably don't like that." Ves chuckled.

That said, dwarven mechs also came with significant downsides. If that wasn't the case, they would have become a lot more ubiquitous than today.

Their short and stocky limbs made it a lot more difficult for normal mech pilots to get used to piloting them. Many pilots described the experience as turning into a fat and muscular child. They simply couldn't make the same movements that they had been accustomed to making as normal human adults.

While this issue went away with time and practice, there were other downsides to dwarven mechs that were not as easy to brush away.

Dwarf mechs were characterized by worse than usual mobility. For one, they possessed shorter pairs of legs. That made them a lot slower when they traversed on land. They were also a little more awkward to maneuver in the air and in space.

The lack of length in their limbs also made it more difficult for them to perform melee attacks. Though they were able to hit harder than an equivalent normal humanoid mech, their shorter reach and reduced range of motion mostly limited them to performing simple and more straightforward moves.

Their deviating forms also suffered from lower carrying capacity and less efficient heat management. These were important factors for ranged mechs, so they suffered a small disadvantage even at range.

Overall, the complications surrounding dwarf mechs ultimately stopped them from gaining popularity in circles outside dwarven communities. The only reason why the latter clung to using dwarf mechs was because they identified with the stockier machines!

While Ves was aware of these well-documented disadvantages, he did not automatically look down on dwarf mechs. They offered a lot of value under the right circumstances and fulfilled certain niches very well.

"At the very least, they are one of the most efficient mech types in heavy gravity environments."

Quadruped mechs actually offered a lot more stability in the same locale, but moving four limbs was a lot more energy-intensive than moving two limbs. Dwarf mechs occupied a sweet spot where they offered a reasonable amount of stability while still remaining fairly energy efficient.

"Well, it only matters on the few settled planets that possess higher than normal gravities."

One of the ironies of the Vulcan Empire was that most of its settled planets possessed standard gravities. The dwarves had taken them all over from the former human states

that occupied the various territories before the dwarven revolution. These planets had all been terraformed and featured a lot of expensive infrastructure that took decades or centuries to accumulate.

Even though the dwarves preferred to settle on heavy gravity planets, the fact of the matter was that there were too few of them that were terraformed and developed. Not even the Vulcanites could afford to start from scratch.

This had led to the current result where the overwhelming majority of dwarves resided in the former homes of the tall folk they hated. The gravities they were subjected to were also a lot lighter than their bodies could handle. This came with all kinds of complications that Ves didn't bother to explore.

"I'm not a dwarf, so why should I care?"

Ves wasn't in the mood to get back to designing mechs right away, so continued to spend some time on reading up on the Vulcanites and the dwarves in general. He became surprisingly engrossed in their lives. They had developed quite a unique culture that was eerily familiar yet also different in a couple of crucial details.

"It's like looking at a twisted mirror of humanity."

While Ves contemplated the dwarves, his two cats engaged in their weekly tussle for dominance.

"Meow!"

Mrow!

Both Blinky and Lucky rolled as they scratched and bit each other. They continued to cry out aggressively as they tried their best to assert themselves as the top cat aboard the Spirit of Bentheim.

Mrooow!

"Meow meow!"

Unfortunately, this fight ended as anticlimactically as the last. Though Blinky was not a weak cat by any means, Lucky was far more experienced and durable. After swiping Blinky one last time, the gem cat proudly lifted his head and arrogantly claimed victory.

"Meow!"

The purple spiritual cat hissed resentfully at Lucky before returning to Ves' mind in order to recuperate and plot his next takeover.

"You dumb cat." Ves muttered to another part of himself. "What makes you think you can beat Lucky? He's a blooded cat. Who knows how much his body count is. As for you, I don't think you've taken the life of a single opponent."

Mrow mrow...

Hey, I'm not going to put myself anywhere close to a fight if I can help it. I'm not going to stray onto a battlefield just so that you can acquire some actual battle experience. I don't care what talents you've acquired. Your non-combat functions are much more valuable to me. I didn't make you because I wanted to find a replacement to Lucky. I made you so that you can provide me with the utility that my first cat is incapable of providing."

"Meow!"

"You're too inconsistent when it comes to producing gems!" Ves glared at his mechanical cat. "It's already been a few months since you produced those Bastet gems. Don't you think it's time for you to pay your rent again?"

"Meow meow."

As Ves argued with his cat, his office chimed.

"Hmm? Who is visiting?"

It turned out that Ketis wanted to drop by in person. When Ves let her in, she waltzed in and dropped herself onto one of the couches.

Swish swish.

"Meow~"

Bloodsinger approached Lucky, allowing Sharpie to greet its friend.

"I thought you would be eager to spend more time with your new creations." Ves stated.

The younger woman waved her hand. "I know my work. There's hardly anything worth studying for me. I can always look at the First Sword and the Decapitator later. They're not about to run away or anything."

"Ah, I guess you're right. You're being surprisingly patient about it, unlike my wife."

She huffed. "That's one of the reasons why I'm glad to get away for a moment. She can be a bit of a handful to be around sometimes. I'll just wait until she has her fill of my masterwork."

"Good idea."

"So... I haven't received any word from the MTA." Ketis said. "While I don't think any of us has transmitted the news to the mechers, I'm sure they learned about the Decapitator by now. How long do you think I have to wait until I have to play host to MTA Master?"

Ves thought about it for a moment. "I'm not sure if Master Willix or the rest of the MTA will even bother to drop by again. A masterwork mech sword is not as significant as a masterwork mech, you know. From their perspective, a single masterwork mech part won't substantially increase the odds of breakthroughs."

He also thought that Master Willix must be so tired of getting yanked by the Larkinsons that she would probably throw her hands up this time and get back to her usual business.

"That's wrong!" Ketis insisted. "A sword is by far the most important companion a swordsman could have. To Dise, it's fine if the expert mech is flawed. What concerns her a lot more is the quality of the sword. She will definitely benefit a lot from wielding such a fantastic weapon!"

"Let's see how it will turn out. Maybe you're right."

After discussing this topic, Ves brought up another matter.

"What do you think about the ceremony that the Swordmaidens and Heavensworders held in Venerable Dise's honor? Can you tell me whether you think that it has helped you in forging a masterwork mech sword?"

Ketis nodded without any hesitation. "It has definitely affected me in many ways, and mostly for the better. I think it was a brilliant idea to fabricate our expert mech in the company of those who care the most about it. Seeing all of the people around us and recognizing that they are all invested in our work conveys a lot more meaning to our work."

"Is that so? Because the rest of us didn't really gain that much."

"That's because this expert mech design project was not as personal to you." She stated. "This is not your fault. I know that you and your wife made an earnest effort into designing a good expert swordsman mech. It's just that this is not enough. I have a much more personal stake in providing Venerable Dise with the most powerful weapons possible."

This difference illustrated the importance of meaning and emotional investments. One of the downsides of designing so many remarkable expert mechs at a time was that it was hard for any mech designer to maximize their enthusiasm for each of them. It would



have been a lot easier to get invested in all of the remarkable projects if the Design Department had spaced them out over a span of multiple years.

It was a pity that the Larkinson Clan needed all of the expert mechs sooner rather than later. Ves did not regret the opportunities that he had potentially missed by deciding on the current approach. Producing any masterwork from these difficult projects was already a bonus in his eyes.

After a bit more chit chat, Ketis finally broached the real reason why she wanted to talk to Ves.

"I know that we still have a couple more projects to complete, but I'd like to hear your input on a couple of proposals that I have been thinking about for a while. Remember my Monster Hunter concept?"

"I do."

"Well, I no longer want to wait after we have completed this round. My idea goes like this..."

#### *Chapter 3217: Personality Collision*

After several days of travel, the expeditionary fleet finally reached a quiet star system at the edge of the territory controlled by the Empire of the Lost.

Since this region was situated close to the border that led straight into dwarf territory, the Lost refrained from settling in the nearby star systems.

After all, who wanted to live right next door to a bunch of hateful dwarves? Even if the property prices were rock bottom, the Lost would have to be coerced in order to get them to live so close to a threat that still haunted their nightmares to this day!

As a result, there were lots of barren and even abandoned star systems which only hosted a large amount of automated listening posts and platforms.

When the fleet settled down after transitioning out of FTL travel, the Blinding Banshee immediately went to work and began to employ her formidable sensor arrays to sweep the surrounding spaces.

"What did you find?" Ves asked Calabast's projection as he sat on the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim.

"Well, we managed to detect a large amount of passive and active listening devices, all of them automated." The spymaster responded. "None of them are within several light-seconds close to us so it is unlikely that the Lost have anything that can break our interference methods. We expected the Lost to deploy a lot of warning devices in this

buffer territory, but the quantity of them surprises us. We have already detected over a hundred-thousand of them so far and it is highly likely that the true quantity is at least a hundred times more."

That did sound excessive. Space might be empty for the most part, but it was a considerably hostile environment. Any device floating in space or embedded into asteroids for long periods of time tended to get bombarded by all manner of space hazards. Radiation, solar winds, dust grains and other space junk could easily knock these sensors out at any time.

Each of them needed to be repaired or replaced on a regular basis. While the wealthier states usually set up an automated repair system where bots constantly addressed any problems on an ongoing basis, even that came with its issues.

Of course, none of this was particularly relevant to Ves and the Larkinson Clan. They only needed to be aware that the Empire of the Lost cared a lot about what went on in their buffer region.

"Will this be a problem?"

Calabast shook her head. "No. We'll just have to deploy more interference bots and take a few more precautions, that's all. Distant sensors won't pose any threat to our information security. It's only when they get close that things can get tricky, but we're currently in the outer system of a barren star system. It's too uneconomical for the Empire of the Lost to saturate so much volume of space with short-range listening devices."

"Will it be safe for us to try out our new expert mechs?"

She nodded. "Just make sure the expert pilots don't go overboard. The long-range sensors can still pick up huge spikes of energy."

"I'll be sure to take that into account."

The initial deployments were still allowed to proceed. The expert pilots had already grown impatient and Ves deemed it important for them to familiarize themselves with their new war machines.

The Larkinson Army deployed its mechs and bots in large numbers yet again to ready the field.

This time, the Avatars of Myth and several other mech legions took a backseat.

A noticeable number of Vandals, Swordmaidens and Heavensworders deployed this time in order to witness and support their favorite heroes. The enthusiasm among their personnel was palpable as they entered formation or started their patrols.

Nothing could be allowed to interrupt the inaugural deployments of their greatest mech pilots!

One of the more noteworthy mech pilots that deployed in space this time was Commander Casella Ingvar of the Living Sentinels.

The Quint appeared a little more remarkable when piloted by the female expert candidate. Though the highest leaders such as General Verle and Patriarch Ves no longer paid much attention to the masterwork Bright Warrior these days, it was still an exquisite masterwork mech in its own right!

"Do you feel it, Quint?" She asked as she closed her eyes.

After a short wait, the expert mechs began to show up in force.

The Dark Zephyr launched into space first. The dark, lithe expert mech was hardly noticeable as it silently flew out with minimal disturbance. Though the expert light skirmisher had long been overshadowed by the newer and flashier expert mechs, Venerable Tusa Billingsley-Larkinson did not particularly seek the limelight in the first place.

"I hope I won't get beaten by the other two though." He whispered to himself. "I can probably run circles around Venerable Orfan's lumbering mech, but that new expert swordsman mech is a lot trickier..."

The Amaranto showed up next. Its red frame along with its shining crystalline rifle caused it to draw way more attention than desirable. Usually, rifleman mechs weren't supposed to draw too much attention to themselves.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to make the sniper-oriented expert mech more discreet when its principal design spirit was the Illustrious One. This turned the Amaranto into a rather eccentric machine that eschewed silent threats for more overt pressure.

Any mech pilot who took a good glance at this expert mech would immediately conclude that they did not want to be targeted by the business end of its rifle! The luminar crystal rifle looked so powerful and luminous that people began to feel blinded if they stared at it for too long!

Back in a control room aboard the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves took a look at his own work and silently compared it to Ketis' work.

He sighed. "I guess I'm not suited to take luminar crystal technology to the next level."

He had already chosen his specialty. It was not for nothing that his previous masterwork mechs were all machined that were characterized by their living qualities. This was the aspect that excited him the most.

Though luminar crystals were spiritually reactive to a degree, they did not appear to be alive in the same way as Ves preferred. He also lacked passion in essential fields such as optics, crystallography, energy weapon systems and many other subjects.

Only a mech designer dedicated to energy weapons could elevate luminar crystal technology to the next level. This was why he deliberately pushed his student Zanthar in this direction.

"If I want to make more masterworks by myself, I need to focus more on my own specialty." He reminded himself.

This was one of the lessons he learned after witnessing Ketis succeed and quizzing her about it afterwards.

Though there was much that she wasn't able to put into words, Ves still understood that the combination between her passion, commitment, expertise and maybe other factors were crucial to pushing her beyond her usual limitations.

It was hard for mech designers to generate such a strong degree of obsession for designs that didn't fire them up that much.

"Maybe this is the true advantage of narrow specializations."

By giving up on becoming good at designing a large swathe of mech designs, people like Ketis were able to save all of their energy and enthusiasm for the few types of mechs that did strike their fancy.

In fact, the same effect applied to Gloriana to an extent. Every expert mech design project was an opportunity for her to employ her design philosophy to the fullest. If not for the fact that they were working on multiple expert mech design projects at a time, she would have been able to maximize her passion for each of them instead of having to ration it like now.

Ves briefly glanced at his pregnant wife. Once she had gotten over the fact that she rightfully missed out on making a masterwork mech last time, she turned back to normal and exhibited genuine curiosity about the performance of their latest two expert mech designs.

Once the first two expert mechs took up their positions, the moment that everyone had been waiting for had finally arrived.

The third expert mech of the Larkinson Clan finally activated and emerged from the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim accompanied by an explosion of energy and ferocity!

"Whoa!"

The Vanguard Project had come online and flew out into space in a loud fashion. Its shaky blue resonance shield wobbled while the resonance strength meters wobbled intensely.

An alert quickly sounded in the control room. The mech designers and the various analysts immediately tried to figure out what was wrong.

"Venerable Rosa Orfan isn't exerting enough control over her new expert mech!"

"Her life signs are rising! She's enduring a lot of stress and neural strain at the moment!"

"Tusa, Stark, be ready to intercept the Vanguard Project if Orfan isn't able to suppress her own machine." Ves commanded as he grew a little worried.

He feared that this might happen, though he never thought the chances were high. He felt glad that he decided to wait and reach an empty star system as opposed to conducting the first activation inside the Discentibus or Vivacious Wal.

Who knew how much damage those capital ships would incur if an expert mech went berserk inside their hulls!

"Damnit, Ves! What did you do with the Vanguard Project?!" Tusa shouted even as his Dark Zephyr flew closer in order to the straining expert mech.

Ves tried to figure out what was wrong with the Vanguard Project.

Unlike with the other expert mechs, the design spirit didn't play a major role in the Vanguard Project. Though Ves initially thought about employing Zeigra or a combination of him and other design spirits as the expert spearman mech's patrons, he eventually decided against this option.

Zeigra was a hostile design spirit and Ves had never forgotten about that. He had learned his lesson about feeding hidden dangers after dealing with Nyxie.

Though Zeigra received a lot of spiritual tribute these days due to the widespread use of his Doom Guard and Ferocious Piranha models, much of it was low in quality.

If Zeigra started receiving more high-quality spiritual feedback from expert pilots, then it might become one of his more powerful design spirits. That would make it much harder for Ves to keep the former Crown Cat in line!

Ves opted for a more boring selection instead. He picked Qilanxo because of her intimate relationship with Venerable Orfan and because the Vanguard Project possessed substantial defensive capabilities.

Qilanxo also watched over the First Sword for similar reasons, though her influence on the expert swordsman mech was even less.

"It's not the design spirit." He concluded.

He could vaguely tell that Qilanxo wasn't interfering at the moment. This was a struggle between the expert pilot and her expert mech.

"This is strange." Gloriana spoke up. "We briefly detected a similar struggle between Venerable Stark and the Amaranto, but it quickly went away. Why is Venerable Orfan struggling so much? The Vanguard Project is completely tailored for her use! The mech should welcome her company!"

"The Vanguard Project is also weaker than the Amaranto." Ves added. "It's not a masterwork either."

Venerable Tusa managed to control his Dark Zephyr with ease and he expected nothing different in the case of Venerable Orfan and her new expert mech. To see such a difficult struggle playing out in front of everyone's eyes was an unexpected complication that could easily turn into a disaster!

"Damnit, what's the problem?! Qilanxo, tell me what's going on! Do we need to worry?!"

The former sacred god wordlessly conveyed her message to him. His eyes narrowed as he digested what he received.

Gloriana turned to him and guessed what had happened. "What did the proto-god say?"

Ves waved his hand at the projection displaying the convulsing Vanguard Project. "Venerable Orfan is a prideful expert pilot. The Vanguard Project which we have designed with her inclinations in mind has turned into a prideful expert mech. Now... what do you think will happen when you put two prideful individuals together?"

"...Oh."

"Yeah... Maybe we should have thought about that beforehand."

*Chapter 3218: Clash of Prides*

Qilanxo only relayed what was taking place inside the struggling expert mech but did not take any further action.

The battle for dominance had to be resolved by the participants themselves! It was not appropriate for a third party to intervene. Though Qilanxo was more than strong enough to put her foot down and break up the fight between the two squabbling entities, that would only postpone the resolution of this conflict.

For better or worse, the expert mech and expert pilot had to come to an accord on their own. The only way for them to put down their rivalry and work together was to acknowledge each other as equals.

"That's easier said than done." Ves quietly muttered. "These two hardheads don't seem to be easing up anytime soon."

The clash of personalities between the recently-created Vanguard Project and its prideful expert pilot continued to escalate with each second that passed. The true resonance affecting the expert mech grew more discordant and unstable.

Ves and the others gathered a lot of new data in the process, though they weren't particularly happy about it. Who cared about observing a new phenomenon when their hard work could blow up at any point in time?!

"Push the Vanguard Project away from the Spirit of Bentheim! Do we have a tractor beam? No? Then use gravity! Use whatever gravitic modules you have on hand! In fact, activate all of them! It doesn't matter if they're all weak and inefficient at this range. As long as they work together, they can push the mech in question away!"

Hundreds of different gravitic modules began to affect the Vanguard Project. At these ranges, the force of their pushes wasn't much. Still, a single hand might be able to push forward a mech, but several hands pressing at the same time was a different story!

It was quite fortunate that the Vanguard Project was floating in open vacuum and did not engage its flight system at this time. Slowly but surely, the dangerous expert mech continued to eject away from the Spirit of Bentheim and the rest of the Larkinson fleet.

"Be careful about its orientation! Don't turn the expert mech around. If it ever performs a battle charge for some reason, then don't let it blow open a hole straight into my precious factory ship!"

The alert level had risen throughout the fleet. Though no one expected an emergency to arise at this quiet time, the Larkinsons nonetheless responded quickly and professionally.

First, the entire expeditionary fleet moved away from the potentially dangerous expert mech. It was quite troublesome to instruct every single ship in the fleet to move without any sufficient warning or preparation, but no one kicked a fuss this time.

Second, the Larkinson Army began to set up a very wide perimeter around the Vanguard Project. A lot of interference bots flew back and surrounded the problematic expert mech in order to avoid airing any further dirty laundry out into space.

This was quite an embarrassing incident after all! It reflected poorly on Ves and the other designers that they developed an expert mech that couldn't even get along with its own intended expert pilot.

Gloriana did not have good words for this failure. "This is your fault, Ves. I don't think I have ever heard about expert mechs turning against their own pilots until today. Only you could bungle this up because your mech is alive. Why haven't you accounted for this possibility?!"

"I didn't think that something like this would happen!" Ves defended himself. "In almost every case, my living mechs are glad to be used by their pilots. They are programmed not to treat their users as hostile. This instruction should be even stronger when it comes to expert mechs. They're designed to work with one pilot only to the exclusion of everyone else. It doesn't make sense why the Vanguard Project is able to set aside its own programming!"

Gloriana rolled her eyes. "Have you forgotten about something? Life doesn't always work the way it's supposed to. Living humans are supposed to abide by the law and cherish their families, but that doesn't stop them from breaking the rules or hurting their own loved ones at times. Whatever instincts they have been programmed with doesn't determine their actual behavior. This is life!"

Ves had to admit that she made a good point. Anyone who was smart enough to think for himself was capable of going against their own instincts. This applied to both humans and living mechs. As someone who designed a lot of living mechs, Ves was keenly aware that his products didn't always act according to his intentions.

Making mechs alive was a double-edged sword. While these self-aware and self-thinking mechs granted a lot of benefits to mech pilots, there was always a possibility that this could turn into another direction.

The only reason why Ves hadn't put up his guard against this possibility these days was because it never really happened. The Devil Tiger was the mech that had the highest chance of turning against its user, but his mother had hijacked his first masterwork mech before he could see his experimental plan come to fruition.

After that, he never really designed any other mech where he had to take this risk into account. The only edge case was the Doom Guard which was not that big of a deal.

Therefore, he was caught completely unaware this time. The ongoing clash between Venerable Orfan and the Vanguard Project signified that Ves should have been paying a lot more attention on the compatibility and fit between their two personalities!



"Next time, you and I need to sit together and have a good talk on how to shape the personality of the living mechs we design." Gloriana insisted as she continued to glance at the data readouts. "Your living mechs have become stronger, and that's good, but it's like raising a boy without active parenting. If we don't keep an eye on our child, he might grow up to become a delinquent!"

Though her analogy sounded rather silly, it helped Ves gained a bit of perspective. Gloriana approached this issue from the perspective of a parent raising a child. Perhaps that was a good way to put this topic into context.

"I'll make sure it won't happen again next time." He promised.

That was all well and good, but that did not address the current issue. The Vanguard Project was already a finished mech. It was out of the question to soften its prideful character especially as it was still active and out in the field.

Ves had no choice but to remain in the control room and watch the situation play out from a healthy distance.

At this time, the Vanguard Project's resonance shield grew darker while its shape contorted into a spiked ball. Its limbs jerked uncontrollably while its flight system started to release bursts of thrusts that sent it floating in random directions.

"Do I have to carve a hole in this new expert mech in order to pull out Orfan from her cockpit?!" Venerable Tusa asked as his Dark Zephyr hovered closest to the out-of-control expert mech.

"Don't move unless ordered!" Ves replied over the communication channel. "You're going to deal catastrophic damage to the Vanguard Project and Venerable Orfan's confidence if you forcibly pull them apart. This situation is not unsalvageable. The threat isn't too great at the moment so let the situation play out. This struggle is taking a lot out of both of them. They can't keep up this confrontation forever."

He was right. Inside the decorated cockpit of the Vanguard Project, Venerable Orfan was gripping her controls tightly as she gritted her teeth. Her head was growing uncomfortably hot as she exerted her mind and will towards taming her new expert mech.

"I... am not... going to let my own mech call the shots! I'm the pilot here! Who the hell do you think you are?! I will never let myself become a laughing stock in the galactic mech community! If you think you can turn me into the first expert pilot who is being piloted by her own expert mech, then think again!"

Though the Vanguard Project wasn't able to articulate its thoughts into spoken words, the spike in aggression was more than enough to convey its meaning.

Neither side wanted to be ridden by the other. They were too prideful to give in. What was worse was that their insistence on gaining more say than the other prevented them from reaching a middle ground!

"You rebellious bastard! Sit down and let me be in charge! If not, I'll douse you in oil! I'll change your coating from orange to pink! I'll let Venerable Stark treat you as target practice!"

The chaotic fluctuations emanating from the expert spearman mech grew even more berserk after Orfan made her threats. The expert mech moved as if there were two different wills in the same body. Its movements grew even more erratic as the stubbornness of an expert pilot directly fought for dominance against a mech that was designed to be just as indomitable as its pilot!

When Ves and the others heard what Venerable Orfan shouted against her own expert mech, they wanted to palm their faces.

"Idiot!" Ves cursed.

Just because people were capable of becoming expert pilots didn't mean they were smarter than anyone else. They were just more hard-headed than normal people, that was all. Venerable Orfan showcased once again that expert pilots were not wiser or more enlightened than other people.

They were still humans with many of the same flaws and vulnerabilities as any individual!

Though Ves understood that it was best to allow the expert pilot and expert mech to come to terms on their own, it didn't seem likely that this would ever happen.

He would rather take the risk to intervene than to allow this already precarious situation to explode.

Ves activated a direct channel to the Vanguard Project.

"Venerable Orfan! Wake up and stop trying to dominate your expert mech! You're not supposed to treat your living mech in this fashion."

"I can't..." The struggling expert pilot replied. "If I let go, my own mech will gain the upper hand."

"I'm not saying you should let your mech be in charge." Ves responded. "I'm asking you to find a middle ground. You need to trust in your expert mech. It will help you and protect you as long as you develop a good relationship with it. Can you do that, Orfan?"

"That's easy for you to say! The moment I let up even a tiny bit, it will instantly take over. My mech isn't in a cooperative mood!"

Ves tried his best to figure out a solution. "I think the expert mech isn't trusting you because you aren't trusting it either. It is directly connected to your mind. You can't hide your true thoughts towards it as long as you are interfacing with it. What you need to do is to be a better person and offer reconciliation."

"And then what? Let my own mech take advantage of my lack of defense?"

"Just trust your mech for once! No matter how hostile it appears right now, don't forget that it has been designed to serve as your battle partner. It shouldn't truly wish to do you harm."

"Well, if you were in my shoes, you would probably change that opinion very soon! I don't feel good at all at the moment. That's a strange way of not doing any harm!"

Despite her objections, Venerable Orfan was ready to try out Ves' proposal. This fight had been going on for a while now and it had already drained much of her mental strength. She wasn't able to keep up her defense for long anyway, so why not give this other solution a chance?

The hardest part was letting go. She needed to sincerely convince herself to stop seeing her own expert mech as an adversary or an unruly steed that needed to be tamed.

"Maybe... I should just take a leap of faith."

Orfan was a decisive expert pilot, so once she settled on a plan, she immediately decided to give it a try.

Her resistance faded as she tried her best to convey her willingness to compromise and cooperate with the Vanguard Project.

For a moment, the expert mech stopped convulsing. Its resonance had faded as Venerable Orfan finally gained a reprieve. Just as Ves had said, the expert mech did not truly wish to do her harm.

"Thanks, buddy. Can we talk now?" She asked her mech.

It was at this time that she sensed a much gentler probe from her expert mech. Though it was very guarded, she finally began to smile as she no longer felt that her own mech was ready to start another round.

"Look... I may have been too heavy-handed... I'm willing to take a step back. You and I are supposed to be buddies, so let's start acting like it... Let's stop this stupid fight

before we embarrass ourselves further. I don't think either of us want to become the laughing stock of our clan!"

*Chapter 3219: Exerting Control*

The frightening incident had come to an end. After fighting against her own expert mech for several long and tense minutes, Venerable Orfan at least managed to forge a basic understanding with her own expert mech.

Ves had the feeling that it was not as deep as he would like, but it was at least better than nothing. The immediate threat had been dealt with and the duo had finally set upon the right path.

It was a close call, though. Ves hadn't been certain whether his suggestion would work out. Fortunately, his understanding of one of his own products turned out to be accurate enough.

The Vanguard Project was a prideful expert mech, but it was not inherently opposed to being piloted by Venerable Orfan.

It was just a fussy brat that didn't want to be told what to do. Pressing it would only make it hit back harder.

The same applied to Venerable Orfan to an extent. When these two brats were put together and told to cooperate, it should have been obvious that they wouldn't begin to hold hands and agree to partner up right away.

"Ugh." Ves pressed his fingers against his forehead. "It feels like I'm managing a bunch of children instead of mature expert pilots."

Venerable Orfan was not fit to resume the initial test run after this ordeal. Though she and her expert mech hadn't dueled against any opponents or performed any significant piloting feats, they had battled against each other in an arena that was just as dangerous and exhausting!

"Just go back, Orfan." Ves commanded the expert pilot. "The telemetry isn't too good right now. Your physical and mental state have deteriorated too much and we don't know whether your expert mech is still able to function properly. At least allow it to check it over before you can try again. Does that sound okay to you, Venerable?"

As much as Venerable Orfan wanted to refute his words, she couldn't ignore reality to such a great extent. There was little she could do in her current state. Her concentration was already shot to hell and her will was too worn to even resonate with her brand new expert mech.

"Fine." She said. "I'll head back and take a good, long rest."

"Do you need the Dark Zephyr to ferry your expert mech back to the Spirit of Bentheim?"

"I CAN GO BACK BY MYSELF! DON'T PATRONIZE ME, VES!"

"Okay, okay! Calm down, woman!" Ves hastily replied as he leaned back.

Everyone waited until the Vanguard Project limped back to where it emerged from. Though the flight of the expert spearman mech didn't exactly inspire a lot of confidence, Venerable Orfan managed to land her mech onto the deck without tripping over or crashing against a bulkhead or something. That was a pretty decent conclusion to this stressful incident.

Given the near-disaster that had just taken place, Ves and the others felt a lot less certain about allowing Venerable Dise to activate her new expert mech for the first time.

Who knew whether the First Sword was just as prickly and competitive towards its pilot as the Vanguard Project. If Venerable Dise wasn't able to get along with the personality of her living mech, then they might face another disaster, but this time the threatening machine would be armed with a mastersword mech sword!

"Do not abort this run." Venerable Dise spoke through the comm channel. "I won't lose control like Venerable Orfan. I am different from her and my First Sword is different from the Vanguard Project. Trust me. I will not pose a threat to the clan."

Ves exchanged glances with his wife.

"We'll allow you to have a go, but only with added restrictions." Gloriana eventually decided. "You'll have to leave the Decapitator behind for the time being. If you ever lose control, then at least your expert mech won't be armed with a powerful weapon that can cut through any mechs or ships. We'll also tow your mech out into open space before you are allowed to interface with your machine. Do you agree with these conditions?"

Venerable Dise grunted. "I've dealt with worse. Just do it. I don't need any delays."

"Uhm, stand by for towing."

A short delay ensued as a quartet of Bright Warriors piloted by the Blade Mistresses approached the Spirit of Bentheim. They attached cables along several anchor points across the First Sword's frame and slowly towed it out into open space.

A fifth Swordmaiden mech headed inside and reverently carried the Decapitator. Only Legion Commander Sendra was worthy to transport the masterwork mech sword that Ketis had lovingly created.

In order to be absolutely safe, the clan decided to park the First Sword at least fifty kilometers away from the nearest ship. This was a ridiculous distance but no one wanted to take any chances. The power of expert pilots and expert mechs did not conform to common sense. The only way to reliably reduce the chances of getting hurt was to put plenty of distance between the incident and anything important.

A lot of mechs that had been originally assigned to guard the perimeter and assist in the test run had fallen back as well. The only objects that kept the First Sword company were a lot of bots. Even if the expert swordsman ever went crazy, the Larkinson Clan would only lose a bunch of equipment in that case.

After the technical staff performed their final checks, Ves finally gave the word.

"You can activate your mech, Venerable Dise. Make sure to treat your expert mech with respect."

"I treat all of my weapons with respect." The Swordmaiden expert pilot replied.

She proved her words by resolutely activating her mech. As her mind interfaced with the mech and her will enveloped its graceful form, she immediately began to commune with the machine that she had been waiting to pilot for a long time.

Different from the uncontrolled movements and fluctuating resonance that had characterized the Vanguard Project's initial activation, the First Sword was as stable as a statue. It remained completely still even as the telemetry showed that the man-machine connection was incredibly active.

Soon, a smooth blue resonance shield formed around the First Shield. Its stability and lack of fluctuations visibly demonstrated that Venerable Dise managed to attain full control over her expert mech!

"She did it!" Ketis whooped on the other side of the control room. "I knew she could do it! A Swordmaiden always masters her weapon!"

Whether this was true or not, Venerable Dise and the First Sword took to each other like fish to water. No matter how many data points Ves tried to scour, none of them showed any hint of danger.

"How are you feeling, Dise?" Ves decided to ask the expert pilot in person. "Are you experiencing any difficulties?"

"I'm doing great. My expert mech isn't as unruly as the Vanguard Project. Ketis forged it to become my instrument. It knows exactly what it is and who I am. It's not about to run out of control."

She demonstrated that by performing basic moves. The expert mech soared in different directions while performing a series of slow but increasingly more intense unarmed combat moves.

A lot of new data poured in as Ves and the others gained a greater insight on the First Sword's maneuvering capabilities. The expert mech featured a lot of agility and range of motion, allowing it to perform moves that were impossible for human bodies to copy without breaking a few bones in the process.

After the First Sword performed enough routines to provide a sufficient amount of data to the mech designers, Ves reluctantly agreed to return the Decapitator to its rightful wielder.

"We're about to give you back your sword. Now, don't get too excited right away. Let's start slow and build up from there, okay?"

Venerable Dise impatiently nodded. "I understand. I'm still in control."

When Commander Sendra's mech approached the expert mech, it had to stop as the pressure emanating from the First Sword was quite formidable.

"Your sword, Venerable."

The Bright Warrior gently threw the Decapitator to its intended wielder. The blade silently crossed the distance until the First Sword grasped the hilt in a solid, two-handed grip.

The moment the expert swordsman mech held its masterwork mech sword, several things happened at once.

First, the resonance meters spiked.

Second, Venerable Dise resonated with the giant weapon.

Third, the Decapitator began to glow with power!

"It's singing! The sword I've forged is singing!" Ketis enthusiastically remarked as she leaned closer in order to observe the footage.

To Venerable Dise, attuning to a sword was a much more significant event than attuning to her expert mech.

To her, the First Sword was little different from a suit of combat armor. It was still a vital piece of equipment that directly affected her combat performance, but it did not completely define her as a warrior.

What swordsmen and swordswomen truly cared about was the sword they had trained their entire lives to wield. The significance of wielding a sword was much greater than getting accustomed to a new suit of armor, and this was little different!

"We're detecting elevating life signs." Gloriana warnedly said. "Venerable Dise's stress levels are rising!"

Ketis held out her palm "Wait! Don't interrupt this solemn occasion! Dise is excited. She's not under attack. Just give her time. There's no way the sword I've made for her will rebel."

Venerable Dise continued to exhibit more activity and so did her mech and the sword it wielded. The true resonance that enveloped them both rose substantially as the expert pilot had become extremely excited.

The Decapitator even started to glow brighter. However, before it could build up to an alarming level, it slowly dimmed as Venerable Dise finally reined it in. Soon enough, the expert mech and its sword reached a stable condition.

Ves let out a soft breath. "Everything okay, still?"

"Yes. I just became a little overwhelmed. This sword... is so much more than I thought."

"Well, try it out then. We have already gone over the basic movement tests. Let us see what you can do with your new blade."

A string of sacrificial dummy bots approached. Each of them varied in size, toughness and mobility characteristics. They all zipped around in random directions, making it fairly challenging to pin them down.

It was no problem for the First Sword. The expert mech engaged its flight system and used its superior mobility to rapidly close the distance. After unleashing one clean cut, it neatly bisected a small and agile bot.

The First Sword proceeded to chase down other bots and cut them precisely in the middle without fail. Venerable Dise exhibited excellent control and efficiency throughout this basic exercise, signifying that she was truly harnessing her expert mech instead of the other way around.

"Alright, let's try something more challenging." Ves suggested. "A couple of heavy-duty lifter bots should be bringing a large plate of hull armor over. It's a piece taken off the hull of the Graveyard. Try and cut through it as much as possible. You can use all of the power you can muster."



The thick plate was larger and much thicker than a mech. When Ves said that it was taken from the hull of a capital ship, he wasn't kidding. The outer plate was so thick that the length of Decapitator couldn't even penetrate all of the way through!

Ordinary swordsman mechs wouldn't even dream of trying to carve through all of that solid plating. Even if the quality of the materials wasn't particularly high, the sheer depth was already intimidating in itself!

Venerable Dise did not look deterred. As she resonated with her mech, she began to activate one of the resonance abilities associated with the Decapitator.

The Bissonat integrated in the core of the Decapitator reacted to Venerable Dise's will and began to empower the weapon with sharpness beyond compare. That wasn't all though as Venerable Dise also began to resonate with the essence of Qilanxo that Ves had poured into the Unending alloy that the weapon was made of. This caused the blade to be covered with a special sheen that exuded a mysterious energy.

Once the First Sword was done with charging its attack, it approached the plate while lifting the empowered Decapitator over its head.

"CHOP!"

A flash cut through the solid plate and much of the space beyond!

Less than a second later, the thick capital ship-grade hull plate neatly separated into halves.

Ves and many others in the control room fell silent as they looked on with awe.

This was just a single attack, yet already told them many things.

"She can slice through any ship of our fleet."

The performance of the First Sword and its remarkable blade did not disappoint!

#### *Chapter 3220: Commonalities*

Venerable Orfan had a lot of egg on her face. Her failure to get along with her new expert mech contrasted sharply with Venerable Dise's smooth integration with her own powerful machine.

Though the former Vandal officer finally managed to acquit herself in subsequent test runs after she recovered, her pride incurred a substantial hit.

"Hahaha! The Vandal expert pilot is just as sloppy as the rest of her hounds!"

"Even the youngest mech cadets haven't fumbled as badly as Orfan in piloting a mech."

"She's the weakest expert pilot of our clan. Why do we need a spearman mech anyway? Venerable Stark can shoot everyone down with her masterwork mech!"

Though Venerable Orfan wanted to bite back, she knew she had to be better than that. She was a tough woman and had endured plenty of adversity.

"You'll regret saying that once we enter battle. There's no one in the Larkinson Clan who can do what I can do." She growled as she sat in the cockpit of her tentative new partner. "We'll definitely show them all, will we Riot?"

The former Vanguard Project and now aptly-named Riot flashed its orange third eye. The ferocious expert mech was eager to show its prowess and prove that it didn't need a masterwork weapon to outdo every other expert mech.

With the addition of the Riot and the First Sword to the mech roster, the Larkinson Clan was now able to field more expert mechs than the Cross Clan and the Glory Seekers put together. This increased the weight of the Larkinsons even further.

This was important as Ves showed no sign of turning away from the border to the Smiling Samuel Star Sector. As several days went by, the combined fleet passed through one of the few stable gravitic corridors and formally exited the Bertrand Obsidian Star Sector.

As soon as the entire fleet emerged in the new star sector, tensions across the fleet had risen.

"We're in dwarf country now."

Everyone had heard about the famed hostility that the dwarven population held against the tall folk. Any apologists for the heavy gravity variant humans that occupied this star sector had little ground to stand on as soon as people pointed out the atrocities committed by the dwarves during their successful revolution.

The vengeful rebels slaughtered billions of people, treated many more as chattel and displaced an untold number of refugees from their homes.

Though many people were abhorred by the cruelty displayed by the Vulcanites, the victorious dwarves were merely getting their payback as far as they were concerned.

The dwarves did not do anything worse than what the humans had already done to their kind. If the tall folk wanted to receive better treatment, then they should have provided better treatment to their dwarven brothers.

This sense of grievance and urge to punish normal humans for the misdeeds of their kind ran deep in the Vulcan Empire's culture. The Vulcanites continued to employ this argument to justify their ongoing repression of their human captives.

When Ves learned about all of this, he felt this was rather messed up. It would have been much more PR friendly if they at least tried to be the better man. A bit of lip service could go very far even if everyone knew that the dwarves were lying through their teeth.

Instead, the Vulcanites still engaged in hateful rhetoric against the tall folk to this day. While this was helpful in whipping up the domestic population, it did not endear the Vulcan Empire to any foreign state or organization.

It was no surprise that everyone in the expeditionary fleet became a lot more vigilant towards threats. The alertness of the Larkinsons was permanently raised and the Larkinson Army no longer provided as much leave to the servicemen anymore.

Everyone treated this trip as an excursion into a hazardous region. It was as if the Smiling Samuel Star Sector was just as dangerous as the Nyxian Gap!

Though Ves sometimes felt that everyone was taking the potential threat way too seriously, he did not object to their prudence. It was better to be overprepared than underprepared.

Despite the perceived risks, the Golden Skull Alliance decided to keep the fleet together.

The various leaders briefly considered the possibility of splitting the fleet in two. Ves only needed to reach a single star system in the Vulcan Empire before he was done with his mission. Given these low demands, it was best for the alliance to split off a lot of combat assets and form a tight and coordinated task force to escort Ves to his mission objective.

"We can't split the fleet." Ves stated during a high-level meeting. "A small escort force is too vulnerable, but if we make it any bigger, our main fleet will be stripped of most of its protection. That makes it a lot more vulnerable to attack. Before you argue that it's unlikely for that to happen, consider how close we are to the lesser beyonder gate at Tarnished Crown. A lot of aspiring pioneers from the surrounding star clusters are converging on it, but many of them don't have enough capital ships. When they see strategic assets like the Andrenidae, the Vivacious Wal and so on floating around without a lot of fleet carriers and combat carriers in sight, will they be able to resist the temptation?"

No one could guarantee that these powerful pioneering fleets would not pass over the opportunity to expand their ranks further. Due to the constant outflow of capital ships from the Milky Way to the Red Ocean, the shortage of large-sized vessels in places like the galactic rim grew worse over time.

Though a lot of shipbuilding companies were already investing their windfalls on constructing more shipyards in order to meet the overwhelming demand, it took years and even decades for them to come online. Capital ships were so immense and complicated that a lot more trained and experienced shipwrights were needed as well.

Aside from needing to guard against rival pioneers, the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers also had to protect themselves against other threats, most notably the crown terrorists. The amount of incidents related to the Crown Uprising may have abated a bit, but the terror spread by the indiscriminate attacks still left human space in a more precarious state than before.

"We need to find a better solution."

After an intense discussion, the three alliance partners eventually agreed to keep the entire fleet together. The downside was that they would be bringing a lot of non-combat vessels and personnel into a danger zone. The upside was that they did not leave anything vulnerable behind for other parties to prey upon.

As a result, a major foreign presence cleaved straight into dwarven territory. Ves had no doubt that the local dwarves had already noticed their presence. He never thought about hiding his forces and sneaking right into the interior of the Vulcan Empire. The locals already gained a lot of notoriety for hunting down and butchering any foreign tourists, smugglers, anthropologists and other idiots who decided to stray into Smiling Samuel for one reason or another.

The only reason why the expeditionary fleet wasn't beset by a swarm of dwarven mechs was because Ves managed to obtain official sanction from the MTA. His pass granted him safe passage into Smiling Samuel for a duration of five years from the date of its issue. This was plenty of time for him to complete his business.

It was way too questionable for the Golden Skull Alliance to barge into the Vulcan Empire by itself though. The deeper they traveled, the more dwarves they would meet, and not all of them might be able to maintain their cordiality in the presence of the tall folk.

In order to decrease the chances of unwanted incidents and help smooth over any communication attempts, the Larkinsons decided to hire a local guide.

Fixers existed in any state and any location. Even the Vulcan Empire had dwarves who didn't hate the tall folk as much as the rest of their kind. Minister Shederin Purnesse had already contacted a number of suitable candidates a few months ago. He slowly whittled down the selection until he ended up with a single choice that ticked the most boxes.

When the expeditionary fleet transitioned out of FTL travel in a rather quiet star system on the outskirts of Smiling Samuel, the Larkinsons finally got to meet the guide they hired.

After performing a bunch of initial scans, the expeditionary fleet soon detected a single trade ship floating somewhere else in the outer system. After establishing contact through the galactic net, the dwarven trading ship engaged her thrusters and moved to rendez-vous with the foreigners.

"Tell me about the guides we've hired." Ves asked Minister Shederin Purnesse as they both stood in the hangar bay of the Vivacious Wal while wearing their dress uniforms.

His honor guard and plenty of other guards had already cleared the entire compartment and taken up positions. Some of their protectors stood in rows and looked ceremonial while other soldiers kitted out in full gear but largely remained out of sight.

No one was taking any chances when it came to these potentially-hostile folk. Even Lucky hovered close to Ves, ready to claw out the throats of any hostile dwarves should the meeting unfold into disaster.

"The Persham Chamber of Commerce is a third-class trading company that is based in the Paramount Province. The dwarves that make up this chamber of commerce are all underdogs with strong roots to their local community. Although the chamber is a profit-seeking organization on the surface, the Pershams actually invest most of their profits back to the planets they are based in. They have been responsible for a lot of economic aid and development in the past."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "They're all third-raters?"

"Correct." Shederin nodded. "Everyone looks down on them, even the Vulcanites themselves. The same division that has divided star sectors like your own Komodo between rich and poor is also in effect here. The second-class Vulcanites don't want to spend any of their hard-earned money on uplifting their third-class counterparts, especially when there is no way for the dwarves who live in barren provinces such as Paramount to pay for elevated living standards by themselves."

It was the same kind of disdain and apathy that Fridaymen and Hexers showed towards the third-raters in their own star sector. Even when the Sand War annihilated entire states filled with innocent people, the two second-rate states in the Komodo Star Sector never offered any meaningful aid.

Ves shrugged. "If regular humans can look down on other regular humans, then dwarves should be no different."

"Correct. This is why I favor the Pershams over other choices. The second-class Vulcanites I've contacted are considerably more arrogant and difficult to deal with. They

possess greater access and command much more power in the Vulcan Empire, but I deem the risk too great to enter into a contract with them. If my initial conversations with them have already produced a considerable amount of friction, then it is difficult to forge a friendly relationship with them in a short amount of time."

"You're a diplomat." Ves flatly said. "You're supposed to be good at making friends."

Shederin at least had the decency to look ashamed. "I am not a miracle worker, patriarch. The Vulcanites are inherently biased against tall folk like us and that already sets us back by a fair amount. Considering our purpose and the short duration of our visit, I found it better to approach a more pliable guide in the form of the Persham Chamber of Commerce. As third-raters who are focused on helping their communities, the Pershams badly need capital. If there is one resource that we have in abundance, it is funding. Throw enough cash at these dwarves and they will sing to our tune."

"That sounds convenient."

The value of money was also universal. Both dwarf and tall folk needed money to survive!