

Mech 4351

THE MECH TOUCH

Chapter 4351 Decision Dilemma

"Do we need to rethink the concept of the Riot or the First Sword?" Ves asked.

Silence fell into the conference room. Everyone knew that the Larkinson expert mechs had taken on a lot of significance among the clansmen. They had become the standard bearers of the Larkinsons and represented the face of the clan.

To admit that the designers of the two mechs overlooked crucial flaws or made mistakes was a controversial action. Tempers could easily flare if the competence and diligence of the mech designers came into question.

Even so, Ves did not shy away from this matter. Pride and satisfaction would not protect him and his clansmen from defeat. The only way he could keep himself safe and guarantee his own survival was by making certain that the mechs at his disposal were as strong as possible.

Gloriana, who cared a lot about the quality, fit and relevance of every expert mech, decided to speak up first.

"Over half of our expert mechs are products from an earlier era and in a galaxy that is weighed down by legacy. They all emerged during a time when the current mech generation had only just begun. We formulated their configurations and designed their overall structure according to the tech and standards that we were exposed to at the time."

"We weren't as big or as wealthy at the time." Ketis agreed with the other woman. "We only just heard about phasewater, but we all thought that it was too distant from us. We never thought it would take a few years to obtain hundreds of kilograms of phasewater at a time."

Ves could hardly remember what it was like in those days. Too much had changed in so few years that he was more preoccupied with moving forward than looking back.

"The absence of phasewater in the Yeina Star Cluster prevented us from gaining access and getting exposed to phasewater early." Gloriana continued. "That severely limited our vision and our options and essentially cornered us into designing expert mechs that are more at home in the last mech generation rather than the present one. Never did we dream that we would be in a position where we could make use of transphasic mech parts so early. We also underestimated the speed in which our competitors were able to do the same as well."

As much as Gloriana tended to talk nonsense at times, she could be incredibly astute when it came to mechs. Her description clearly pointed out the root cause and the key variables that explained why the Riot and the First Sword underperformed.

Granted, it was still amazing for the two of them to be able to put up a good fight against the Shockshell under the circumstances. If not for the untimely breakthrough of Rebecca Andus, Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise might have been able to defeat their high-tier opponent while only being low-tier expert pilots themselves!

Yet given how much money and resources the Larkinson Clan funneled into the continued development of the two Larkinson expert mechs, it was not unreasonable to expect a greater return on investment.

As the mech designer who had developed the First Sword from the start, Ketis had to give a response to this inquiry.

Her willpower already grew sharper as her personal interests came under threat. She clearly did not wish to give in on her stance!

"I don't think the Riot and the First Sword have fallen behind the times." She began. "I won't say much about the Riot, but the First Sword is still a sound expert mech even if it came out back when we were still traveling through the old galaxy. A swordsman mech is a swordsman mech, and there is nothing wrong with keeping its configuration clean and simple. It worked for Jeremiah Gauge back when he was an expert pilot and it will work for Venerable Dise as well."

"Jeremiah Gauge grew up in an older era of mech design." Ves noted.

"Things aren't that much different nowadays." Ketis retorted. "Mechs are still mechs and even the possibility of fighting alien warships doesn't make expert swordsman mechs irrelevant. Conceptually, the First Sword contains everything that Venerable Dise needs to unleash her swordsmanship's full potential. Just because it doesn't have a gun doesn't mean it is bad. The only improvements needed to enhance her combat effectiveness is to replace lower-performing components with higher-performing ones. I agree with the stance that upgrading the First Sword's mobility and defense should be enough to ensure that it will be able to keep up in future battles."

The Swordmaster's message was clear. She did not oppose the notion of modernizing the First Sword, but she clearly didn't want to reinvent it just because it had experienced difficulties in the last battle.

"Are you open to the possibility of arming it with a transphasic pistol or a transphasic grenade?" Ves tentatively asked. "They can be extremely handy in the right situations. A gun, even if it is fairly weak, can allow Venerable Dise to be productive when her expert mech can't get close to her enemy. A grenade can be a lifesaver that can bail her out just like how Tusa managed to get out of a difficult situation by employing one at the right time."

The offer sounded incredibly attractive. The two expensive weapons could add a lot of versatility to the First Sword without encumbering it with too much gear.

His former student looked conflicted as she thought about the pros and cons, but she eventually shook her head.

"I don't need to talk to Venerable Dise to know that she will not allow herself to develop a dependence on other weapons. She may have failed to do well in the fight against the Shockshell, but she managed to make enormous strides in advancing her swordsmanship, her resonance strength and her combat experience, all while wielding a single sword. If she had access to the weapons that you have mentioned, she might have given in to the temptation of using them, which would not only cut her learning process short, but also cause her future development to become impure."

Many people thought that expert mechs ought to be powerful enough that they could all carry multiple different weapons.

In fact, the current level of technology of humanity could easily make this happen. Hybrid mechs wouldn't be able to exist if this was not the case.

The reason why many expert pilots opted against carrying a lot of additional weapons was because their ability to defeat strong opponents was dependent on their future progression in their strongest fighting method.

As long as Venerable Dise was able to improve her swordsmanship at a rapid speed, many limitations would no longer bother her that much.

Saint Jeremiah Gauge happened to serve as a great example of what this purist approach might yield. The man had always stuck to wielding a single sword throughout his career as an expert pilot, and once he broke through to the rank of ace pilot, his Neo Amadeus became so powerful in his hands that it could fight at range if necessary!

Of course, there were also examples that showed that other approaches might work as well.

People like Patriarch Reginald Cross and Saint Rebecca Andus never dedicated themselves to mastering a single weapon system. Instead, they regarded their armaments as tools and weren't picky in mixing and matching them to suit their circumstances. The fact that they successfully broke through meant that it was not necessary for expert pilots to limit themselves to a single weapon type.

"Everyone is ultimately different." Gloriana spoke. "There are expert pilots like Venerable Joshua that are comfortable with using both melee and ranged weapons, but there are also those that grew up specializing in fighting with a single weapon like Venerable Dise. The choice should ultimately be left to them instead of us. We have no right to dictate or even pressure them into using guns that can adversely affect their progression."

Ves could understand this sentiment, but that didn't mean this approach was without issue.

"The choices that these expert pilots make not only affect themselves, but also the people that they are responsible for protecting." He said. "Don't forget that Venerable Dise is fighting on our behalf. There was a possibility that she and her First Sword might have fallen completely if the Amaranto didn't neutralize the Shockshell at a critical moment. The situation might not have become so dire if the First Sword was better equipped. Venerable Stark and the Amaranto would have been able to save up their strongest shot for another emergency such as the one that engulfed the Shield of Samar. Venerable Jannzi probably would have been able to keep her mech alive if the Riot and the First Sword succeeded in defeating the Shockshell in a cleaner manner."

Many expressions turned heavy as Ves painted a picture where the choices of an expert pilot directly or indirectly caused the rest of the clan to pay the price.

Though he didn't want to bring up this argument, he knew it was necessary to have this discussion.

Ketis frowned. This was indeed a difficult argument for her to refute.

"It comes down to trust." She eventually spoke in a measured tone.

"Venerable Dise is asking you all to trust in her decisions and her chosen development strategy. If you are willing to do so, then she will do her best to repay the faith that you have placed on her shoulders."

"What if we don't?" Ves asked while he continued to play devil's advocate.

Ketis shrugged. "She will become disappointed with us all, but she will still do her best to discharge her responsibilities, with or without her ideal expert mech."

"Hmmm, I see." Ves said before he turned to Dulo Voiken. "What about the Riot? You're in charge of its development nowadays, and I am sure that you have spoken with Venerable Orfan plenty of times. What is her stance on the possibility of equipping additional weapons?"

Dulo adopted a different tone. "Venerable Rosa Orfan is not as obsessed in mastering her weapon of choice as her colleague. Her philosophy towards combat is probably a bit more pragmatic. The reason why she stuck to spears in the past was because she was previously limited to piloting specialized standard mechs that did not have much capacity for other armaments. Now that this limitation no longer applies as much, she may be open to carrying additional weapons, including ranged ones."

That sounded intriguing. The Journeymen continued to share their opinions with each other and eventually came to a consensus.

Ves stood up. "I think we need to find a balance between personal development and collective interest. On one hand, we are mech designers who have been taught to serve expert pilots as best as possible. It is important to let them decide on the configurations of their own expert mechs. On the other hand, we are the leaders and members of a clan that encompasses over half a million people. Many of their lives are at risk if we miss out on clear and obvious opportunities to strengthen our machines further."

"You haven't given us a solid answer, Ves." Ketis complained. "What's your verdict? Will you leave it up to the expert pilot or will you pressure them into 'optimizing' their expert mech configurations?"

Ves sighed as he locked in his stance on this issue. "The incident that took place between Patriarch Reginald and the Mars has taught me that there is always a price to forcing high-ranking mech pilots to pilot mechs that they do not agree with. Expert pilots are stubborn and narrow-minded people by nature, and trying to fix these traits is a futile endeavor. I think it is ultimately better to give them the benefit of the doubt and continue to put our trust in them unless proven otherwise."

"What does that mean for Venerable Orfan and Venerable Dise?"

"They pretty much performed as best as they could under the circumstances. The two expert pilots and their expert mechs are not to blame for their failures. Their opponent was simply too strong."

Chapter 4352 The Power Of A Relic Weapon

Ultimately, Ves issued a verdict that fell in line with Ketis' demands.

This decision might end up backfiring on the Larkinson Clan, but that was a risk that he accepted.

Just as Ketis had said, it was all about trust. When Ves thought about how much his expert pilots had grown and how earnestly they fought on behalf of his clan, he felt they earned the right to make decisions on how their mechs should be configured.

That didn't mean that mech designers were forbidden from providing their own input, but the overall wishes of the expert pilot should be respected first.

After talking to Ketis and Dulo, it became clear that there may be a possibility for the Riot to follow a more varied development strategy than the First Sword. This was because they judged that Venerable Orfan should be a lot more open to equipping her expert mech with additional weapon systems.

Now that they completed their discussion on the Riot and the First Sword, the Journeymen proceeded to go over the other expert mechs.

There was not much to say about the Amaranto as it performed up to expectations and no further.

Though it was disappointing that Venerable Stark could not put her incredible firepower to better use during the Battle of Pima Prime, she had little opportunity to do more when the Star of Liberation constantly forced the Amaranto to duck its head.

The discussion regarding the Minerva and the Blade Chaser Mark II became a little more interesting.

"I think the Ingvar siblings acquitted themselves well." Gloriana spoke.

"Commander Casella and Venerable Imon are not the best at duels, but they succeeded in fending off the famous Tensars."

Ves hadn't paid that much attention to this particular bout because a lot more interesting duels took place. The most notable one was the confrontation between the Mars and the Neo Amadeus.

Nevertheless, he still recognized that the Minerva and the Blade Chaser Mark II did okay considering that the Arma Tensar and the Fila Tensar exerted a huge amount of pressure with their iconic Slipdream rifles.

Ves remained silent and let the others talk while he observed the footage of the fight.

The Minerva had caught the attention of the Sundered Phalanx early on due to Commander Casella Ingvar's characteristic ability to boost the performance of thousands of friendly mechs.

In order to prevent the Commandeered mechs from tearing apart their opponents on the battlefield, the Minerva quickly came under siege by numerous dangerous opponents.

The Tensars were the most prominent among them. The two powerful expert rifleman mechs mostly stuck to medium range and tried their best to wear down the Minerva by firing a continuous barrage of combination laser-positron beams.

The Minerva was not a tough mech by nature, and its resonance shield quickly drained under the powerful precision strikes launched by the Tensars.

This forced Commander Casella to stop Commandeering her fellow Larkinsons and concentrate all of the power she could lend to her brother instead.

The Blade Chaser Mark II became a lot more powerful from this boost, but that didn't necessarily solve the crisis because Venerable Imon's expert mech still needed to close in on his opponents.

Though the Blade Chaser Mark II was fast, the Arma Tensar and the Fila Tensar were faster!

The two Sundered Phalanx expert mechs continually maintained their distance while constantly firing their rifles at their pursuer.

If this went on, the dual-wielding swordsman mech would eventually get shot to pieces by all of the powerful energy beams!

The situation changed when Venerable Imon eventually recalled that the clan gifted his expert mech with a brand-new weapon.

From the moment the Blade Chaser Mark II put away one of its swords and unholstered the Gray Lotus, the situation changed.

Though Venerable Imon did not specialize in marksmanship, his ability to wield firearms was still good due to his strength as an expert pilot.

When the Blade Chaser Mark II started firing its new pistol at the Arma Tensar, the latter's resonance shield suffered a surprising amount of damage!

Imon and everyone else who paid attention to this fight reacted with surprise as they saw how an expert swordsman mech was able to inflict just as much if not more damage than a dedicated expert rifleman mech!

Subsequent shots proved that the initial hit was not a fluke. The Gray Lotus was much smaller than the Slipstream rifles wielded by the Tensars, but continually showed its incredible might in the hand of an expert mech that was never designed to fight at range in the first place!

"What is that gun?" Cormaunt Hempkamp asked. "I am still new to the clan and its unique technologies, but I am certain that I have never seen this sort of energy weapon before. How has it allowed Venerable Imon to successfully constrain the Tensars until the Sundered Phalanx initiated a general retreat?"

Ves smirked with pride. "There are several reasons why the Gray Lotus has proven to be so effective under those circumstances. First, the Gray Lotus is a new type of luminar crystal weapon of mine that is designed to deal death-

based damage. You can think of it as a smaller and more controlled version of the death energy battle formations that have made the Penitent Sisters and the Glory Seekers so feared. Though it is best employed against mundane targets, death energy can be highly damaging towards true resonance for reasons that I can't explain in a short amount of time."

Several Journeymen became a lot more interested in the Gray Lotus when they learned that it was a brand-new luminar crystal weapon.

"Second, while I did not explicitly design the Gray Lotus with true resonance in mind, Venerable Imon can still resonate with it to an extent because it is a living weapon that I have crafted by myself. Imon's distinctive traits have empowered the death beam and granted it with additional properties that have made it more explosive."

"Third, Commander Casella applied her Single Empowerment resonating ability to the Blade Chaser Mark II." Ves continued. "This means that the pistol already gained another boost in power due to addition of the Minerva's true resonance. This is probably the deciding factor why the Gray Lotus was able to pack enough of a punch to pressure the Tensars."

As far as experiments went, the Gray Lotus already became a success. Venerable Imon had also been able to test out the new weapon based on the Death Lotus on more mundane targets such as mechs, bunkers and other fortifications.

It turned out that the gray beams fired by this new relic weapon did not deal a lot of material damage. An ordinary laser beam could easily inflict more damage onto an armor plate or a solid structure.

However, that wasn't important. Similar to transphasic energy weapons, a part of the energy beam phased through solid obstacles without encountering any

hindrances and proceeded to directly snuff out the spiritualities of any people in its way.

The result of that was that the Gray Lotus could essentially kill mech pilots directly in their cockpits without needing to break it open first!

The handy pistol achieved even more ridiculous results when the Blade Chaser Mark II fired at enemy starships and fortifications. Meters of thick protective layers failed to block the most damaging component of the gray beams, thereby causing all of the vulnerable Fridaymen personnel to become braindead in an instant!

Numerous mech designers became increasingly more attracted by the power and capabilities of this new weapon.

Gloriana became particularly optimistic about its value proposition. "I never thought you would be able to channel Helena's power in this practical manner so soon, Ves. Can you produce more of them or whatever new luminar crystal that is responsible for making it so deadly?"

Ves shook his head in regret. "I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you. The Gray Lotus is one of a kind, and I don't foresee the possibility of equipping other mechs and people with comparable weapons. The reason why I can't make more is because I was about to make its attack phase crystal with the help of a rare material. Unless I can get more of it, there is no way to make more weapons like this mech pistol."

He only obtained Black Demon Steel by coincidence. Ves had already looked up whether he could find a source of this special alloy, but he failed to find a single mention of it on the galactic net.

"That is disappointing news." Juliet sighed. "My fellow Penitent Sisters would have loved it if their Valkyrie Redeemer Mark II's were able to wield luminar crystal rifles that could produce the same effects."

There was nothing much to talk about after that. The Gray Lotus was powerful, but it largely remained a curiosity unless Ves found a way to invent comparable weapons that could be mass produced.

The discussion went back on track. Ultimately, nobody thought there was anything wrong with the Minerva and the Blade Chaser Mark II. They just got targeted by a powerful enemy duo and managed to keep themselves intact.

The topic shifted towards a number of other expert mechs such as the Promethea and the C-Men, both of which showed excellence under certain circumstances.

When the Everchanger finally came up, numerous Journeymen brought up its powerful mounted wargear.

"The City Breaker was powerful in some ways, but disappointing in other ways." Miles Tovar carefully said. "It is large and is mounted with numerous powerful cannons. However, I think it lasted shorter than it should. A 'mech' of this size should have been able to hit harder, withstand more damage and last longer."

Gloriana did not entirely agree with this assessment. "You can't blame this mounted wargear loadout for that, Mr. Tovar. This sort of mountable equipment is inherently more inefficient than a cohesive mech that is just as large and heavy. The Everchanger was never designed for siege warfare, so it is still an impressive technical accomplishment for it to be able to imitate an artillery mech with all of this gear."

"I think Miles makes a good point." Ves said. "The City Breaker only barely did its job, but that was mostly because the Sundered Phalanx feared its firepower so much that they concentrated a lot of fire on the combination. The inability for Venerable Joshua to cover everything with a resonance shield meant that it was impossible for him to match a true expert artillery mech."

It was easy to point out the various shortcomings of the City Breaker, but it was a lot harder to suggest improvements. The only way to increase its performance was to upgrade it with more expensive and powerful parts, which was not really a groundbreaking solution.

Compared to the City Breaker, the Titan-5 Project sparked a lot more interest and controversy.

"Let me begin by stating the obvious to you." Gloriana began as she directly addressed her husband. "You went too far with the Titan-5 Project."

Ves already expected to hear an admonishment with regards to the meat suit, so he did not take his wife's remarks too hard.

"In what way, exactly?"

Gloriana looked disapproving. "There are too many to count. I know you poured an unreasonable amount of funding and biological resources to its ongoing development project. The City Breaker is practically a bargain compared to the excessive amount of attention that you have devoted to the Titan-5 Project."

"You can't deny that the meat suit added a lot of power to the Everchanger. Considering that its performance effectively matched that of a high-tier expert mech while it remained effective, I do not consider it a waste to work on it for so long."

"The Titan-5 Project is a living monstrosity that we can barely control! Have you seen how violent it is? It was able to devour and crush the Point Break on its own. I have never seen a living mech go on the attack like this! What prevents it from turning against our own? All I see is a disaster in the making!"

Gloriana hated mechs and products that couldn't be controlled! It didn't matter to her whether the Titan-5 Project was the most powerful mounted wargear

loadout by far. Its monstrous appearance and behavior introduced a lot of hidden dangers to the Larkinson Clan!

Chapter 4353 L'm In Charge

"Is this what you guys think as well?" Ves asked the other mech designers in the conference room.

"I think your wife has a good point." Ketis immediately replied. "A weapon can only protect us when it is under our control. If there is any possibility that this can no longer be maintained, we should seriously think about whether it is wise to continue to play with fire."

"We have all kinds of tech at our disposal. Is there a pressing need why we should resort to something as dangerous as this self-aware biological construct?" Dulo asked.

"The Titan-5 Project reminds me of the horror stories of the biotech industry that I have read in the past." Merrill O'Brian spoke up. "Many bio researchers and biomech designers have attempted to develop more powerful weapons by creating organisms that are highly autonomous and able to regulate their own systems. So many of these cases produced deadly accidents that the biotech industry ultimately had to impose stricter rules and standards on itself. The Larkinson Biotech Institute is clearly in violation of those rules and standards by the fact that they have continued to work on the Titan-5 Project without taking any measures to limit its uncontrollable nature."

Ves didn't take those nitpicking moral and ethical standards too seriously. The Mech Trade Association was the only industry organization he respected, and that was mainly because the mechers were able to enforce its own rules with the help of lots of warships and first-class multipurpose mechs.

As for any other biotech industry associations, why should the Larkinsons care about their silly regulations?

He didn't even care if those disapproving organizations tried to ban or ruin the Larkinson Biotech Institute's commercial ventures.

The Larkinson Clan derived the vast majority of its income from the Living Mech Corporation. Its biotechnology arm was more of a breeding place for experiments related to his design philosophy.

In other words, he was its biggest customer.

Aside from that, he believed that the LBI would eventually be able to develop so many groundbreaking innovations that enough customers would come regardless of any rules violations.

In any case, the Larkinson Biotech Institute did not operate in the Life Research Association or any other state. It operated under the auspices of the Larkinson Clan which Ves always viewed as a sovereign state.

If he said that the Titan-5 Project was legal, then no one except the Big Two could tell him otherwise!

"I understand that many of you have doubts and concerns about the safety of the Titan-5 Project." Ves spoke after most of the Journeymen voiced their opinions. "Given how... energetic the meat suit behaved during the last battle, you are all justified in questioning whether it is wise for us to continue its existing development."

Gloriana snorted and crossed her arms. "I know that tone of yours, Ves. Let me make a guess. Your next words will reveal that you intend to completely disregard our warnings and concerns so that you can continue to play with your latest toy. Am I right?"

"Pretty much." Ves admitted with a shrug. "Nothing you guys say to me will stop me from continuing to support the development of the Titan-5 Project. It is an incredibly interesting living weapon that is providing a wealth of new and original empirical data to me. I am able to learn much about my core specialty

from studying its behavior and performance when it is put into action. Though the Titan-5 Project does not represent the ideal that I am striving for in my work, its existence will help me design better living mechs that are less dangerous to their own pilots. Does that satisfy your concerns?"

The dubious looks on the faces of the other Journeymen showed that Ves had not been convincing enough, but that was okay.

Ves was in charge of the Larkinson Clan so he could do what he wanted, more or less.

Not even the MTA had come to tell him to stop working on the Titan-5 Project despite the fact that its autonomous nature went against the powerful organization's own principles.

He figured that the mechers were just as eager to collect novel research data as him! There just weren't any bioconstructs comparable to the meat suit in human space, and that was what Ves counted upon to implicitly bribe the MTA.

Though his wife tried to convince him to stop going overboard with the Titan-5 Project, Ves continued to stick to his guns.

"Alright, that's enough." Ves swept his hand. "This meeting has gone long enough. Let's move on to addressing the last expert mech before we return to our own work. What do you think about what has happened to the Shield of Samar?"

Silence descended in the conference room again as Ves finally brought up the only expert mech that suffered a total defeat in the last battle.

Sara Voiken had to speak up first. She had become the latest project leader of the Shield of Samar's development project by virtue of her competence in defensive systems.

"Venerable Jannzi and the Shield of Samar performed admirably given the strength of their opposition." She began. "Our expert space knight only succumbed against the Skorpion Kommando under exceptional circumstances and only after resisting many other attacks. The Shield of Samar may have failed in preserving frame, but it had succeeded in stalling a dangerous high-tier expert mech that was just as powerful as the Shockshell if not more."

That was a rather positive way to describe the Shield of Samar's performance in the last battle, but nobody objected to it. The Journeymen knew enough about mechs to know that it had overperformed in the last battle.

Ketis shook her head in regret. "We didn't have the right mechs to help the Shield of Samar defend against the Skorpion Kommando. The Promethea was not a good match despite its ability to inflict damage on the enemy expert space knight. An offensive melee mech such as the First Sword would have reduced the burden on Venerable Jannzi."

"I'm not so sure about that." Ves disagreed. "The First Sword would have just gotten hit by the Skorpion Tail each time it moved in to launch an attack. The Skorpion Kommando is just too deadly against any mech that enters its range. Its Skorpion Tail makes it so that it is even more effective at attacking enemies from behind than the front. At least the Promethea was able to damage the enemy expert mech while maintaining its distance."

"You admire the Skorpion Kommando, don't you, Ves?" Gloriana asked.

"That's why you want to redesign and rebuild the Shield of Samar into a more mobile and offensive space knight."

Ves hadn't shared his plans on what he intended to do with Venerable Jannzi's future expert mech with everyone, so the others became interested in the details.

He smiled. "You're right again. I do admire its design and configuration a lot. It is a close range powerhouse that scores well in many areas aside from utility and ranged firepower. Although I don't intend to reinvent the Shield of Samar into a close copy of the Skorpion Kommando, I do think that our old work can at least shift in this direction."

"Do you intend to add a scorpion tail-like appendage to the Shield of Samar while you are at it, Ves?"

"Hehe, I'm not that shameless, Gloriana. I am confident that we can implement our own distinctive measures that can give the next version of the Shield of Samar a powerful attack method that fit the mech and its pilot."

Ves began to elaborate a bit on his vision for the Shield of Samar, though he did not go into too much detail about the more esoteric aspects of the Dullahan Project.

It was enough to make everyone aware that he was working on a special project to make Venerable Jannzi useful again. The clan sorely needed her defensive capabilities.

"Did Jannzi agree with your new vision?"

"She did." Ves smiled. "I'm not stupid, you know. I gained her buy-in shortly after I came up with the idea to make sure that I am not presenting her with a mech that she will come to hate. My goal is to satisfy her needs, and that is what I will be focusing on when I am working on the Dullahan Project."

"What about me?" Sara Voiken frowned. "I thought I was supposed to be in charge of the Shield of Samar."

Even though Ves had the greatest say in the Design Department, it was rude of him to make decisions on this matter by himself without bothering to consult the person who should actually be handling this work.

Ves already prepared an answer.

"What Jannzi is asking from us is more than an attempt to bring back the physical form of her old expert mech." He said. "She wants to regain her Shield of Samar in both body and spirit. Are you able to fulfill her wishes on the latter, Sara?"

The female mech designer reluctantly shook her head. "I can't. That is your area of expertise."

"That is why I intend to take charge of the Dullahan Project. It is absolutely crucial for me to be in control over the overall process. This is the only way I can ensure that Venerable Jannzi will be able to receive a new expert space mech that can literally and figuratively be considered as the spiritual successor of the Shield of Samar."

"I see."

"Don't worry, Sara. You will still be able to make a lot of design choices in this project. In fact, since the Battle of Pima Prime has almost completely wiped the slate clean, you can start designing the Shield of Samar's physical configuration from scratch. You no longer have to abide by old design choices that previously limited your options. The new expert mech will fit your vision of an expert space knight much closer than if you continued to build upon the previous version of the Shield of Samar."

The woman's expression lifted a bit after hearing that. Ves indeed made an excellent point. It might not be as good as having the final word on the project, but Sara was still the main authority when it came to designing the majority of the physical elements of the new expert mech.

"I look forward to cooperating with you on this project, then."

"You can start by looking into a powerful transphasic armor system that we can implement in the Dullahan Project. We are no longer going to rely on

Unending alloy as the main source of physical defense for Jannzi's new machine. While we can't adopt something as extravagantly powerful and expensive as the Abasis Armor, our new expert mech should at least be able to stand out in terms of defense. That should never be changed."

Ves and Sara talked a bit more about what the next expert space knight should look like. Gloriana occasionally chimed in as her input would also play an important role in defining the new Shield of Samar.

The meeting soon came to an end. Though Ves and the others still had to discuss the Dullahan Project in greater detail, they could do that another time.

Every mech designer stood up and said goodbye before they went back to their own workplaces.

Only Ketis remained behind.

"I heard that the Cross Clan gifted you the plasma sword that once belonged to the Neo Amadeus."

Ves grinned. "That's right. The Crossers had no desire to keep it to themselves, so they offered it up to our clan. I graciously accepted the gift, most particularly because it is the most insane attempt to replicate my living products that I have ever seen up until this point."

"Can you take me where you have it stored? I want to study its design in person. Plasma swords are still new to me. I prefer to work with solid blades myself, but I need to understand how other sword types work in order to prepare my mechs to fight against them in the future. I don't want the swords of my mechs to snap in half because I failed to prepare them to resist the thermal damage produced by these high-tech weapons."

"Hm, that is indeed important. Come with me. You can study the plasma sword as much as you want as long as you don't break it. I still want to leave the weapon intact. I might have a use for it in the future."

Chapter 4354 New School

"So how are you doing as of late, Ketis?"

"I am doing well enough. I settled down a lot in Davute." Ketis calmly replied as she strode alongside Ves as they walked down the corridor. "I never imagined that I would start a family with a man like Joshua when I was younger, especially not in a place as far away as the Red Ocean. Everything has been a dream to me in the last 5 years. In hindsight, I truly needed this for myself. While I haven't been able to improve my swordsmanship as much, I had a lot of time to stabilize my foundation and teach other Swordmaidens. Aside from that, I also fixed my biggest shortcomings in my mech design career. My knowledge base is no longer as shallow and my design experience is finally catching up to yours."

Ves smiled. "Hmm, it sounds like you have made good use of the time we stayed in Davute. It's the same for me. While I haven't been able to come up with too many paradigm-breaking inventions, I'm a lot better equipped to design mechs at my current level."

Ketis turned her head towards him. Her lips slowly curled into a grin.

"It's not enough anymore, isn't it? The calm and peaceful life we had before sounds like paradise to so many people. Even the people around us think that there is nothing wrong with staying in Davute forever. It's different for us. We are people who are born for the wild. The more things remain quiet, the more we become restless. Those of us who live for the thrill can never become satisfied with the status quo. Even our families can't hold us back."

"Hehe, I can't hide it from you, Ketis. At certain times, I thought about cutting our recuperation period short. Davute is a great place to start a family, but it's not that conducive to accelerating my progress. It's no wonder that so many Apprentices, Journeymen and Seniors need decades to make substantial progress. They have all become stuck in their own little comfort zones that are

many light-years away from the conflicts where their products get embroiled in life-and-death struggles. It becomes frustrating to talk to those soft mech designers who have never spilled blood or witnessed death up close."

Perhaps other people might consider Ves and Ketis to be mentally ill or damaged in their heads for harboring this mindset, but neither of them thought that there was anything wrong.

Not even having kids could tame their restless hearts. Their desire to protect their children and raise them in a safe and comfortable environment could not beat their ambition to grasp greater opportunities.

Nothing as exciting and rewarding as the Purgatory Campaign had occurred during the time they resided in the middle of a booming and increasingly more prosperous port system.

Attaining more market share and earning the respect of their colleagues in the local mech industry was nice, but both Ves and Ketis had always understood that their true worth lay in the power of their mech designs.

Seeing their progress slow down year after year due to lack of inspiration and pressure was intolerable to them. Becoming a father or a mother did not change the fact that both of them had evolved into transcendent humans whose lives became intertwined with mechs.

Their urge to design better and more useful mechs was grafted into their spirits. It was an addiction that they could never cure because it had become the center of their lives.

Though both of them were fine so far, as long as their design work stagnated for too long, they would undoubtedly become lesser beings. Their passion and love for mech design literally kept them alive in their truest sense.

Both of them shared an understanding glance. Operation Saturday Market had successfully stoked the flames in their hearts. It only took a single major battle for Ves and Ketis to get fired up again!

The resuscitation of their passion along with the immense amount of gains they harvested from the previous battle fully vindicated the decision to move away from a peaceful environment like Davute.

"Are you working on any big plans now that you've gained a lot of insights from the last battle?"

"I do have a number of ambitious projects on the agenda, but I am not certain they are viable yet. I still need to flesh out my ideas and find out whether they are worth my time before I go through with any of them. I don't intend to stay still, though." Ketis replied.

"Can you share the most interesting idea that you are entertaining at the moment?"

The powerful swordmaster and Journeyman paused for a moment. She had built up plenty of interesting proposals over the years, but it was not easy for her to determine which one would excite Ves the most.

"I've been making preparations to found a new swordsmanship school in the Red Ocean." She finally decided to share.

"Huh?" Ves directed a confused look at her. "Aren't you already in charge of the Annihilator Sword School?"

"The Annihilator Sword Style is strong, but it has never fit my own personal brand of swordsmanship." Ketis replied while shaking her head. "Don't get me wrong. It is highly destructive and I am certain that I can advance it further if I spend more time on deepening its sword techniques. I just don't think I am the right person to do so. I plan to resign as the head of the Annihilator Sword School so that there is nothing holding me back from starting my own sword

school. It won't be limited to our clan either. I plan to set up branches in Davute and more places so that many more people can learn how to fight without relying on mechs and guns."

This sounded a lot more serious to Ves than founding an online tutoring class. Sword schools were serious businesses and organizations if they were set up according to the traditions of the Heavensword Association.

From what Ves knew about them, sword schools were the equivalent of clans and families in the swordsmanship-obsessed state. Every member's status and decision-making power was based on their mastery of swordsmanship rather than their bloodlines, which turned sword schools into surprisingly effective meritocratic organizations.

Talents were much less likely to get buried as long as they had hope of advancing to swordmaster and beyond!

Of course, the flaws of valuing an individual's swordsmanship ability above any other qualifiers came with its own set of flaws. Scientists, engineers, mech designers and other intellectuals simply didn't gain the respect they deserved.

This was also what made Ketis so special in this highly martial community. She was both a powerful swordmaster and a clever Journeyman Mech Designer. She was a completely unprecedented existence that had a higher chance of accomplishing even more impossible feats in the future!

Ves already guessed that this new sword school of hers might be of great significance to her future growth.

"I can understand it if you want to start a formal sword school so that you can teach our Swordmaidens and Heavensworders how to cut through solid metal, but why go further than that, Ketis? Is there any special reason why you want to set up branches throughout the Red Ocean?"

"It's a complicated story."

"I can handle complicated stories."

"Well, to keep it short, I have always been thinking about passing on my responsibilities as the director of the Annihilator Sword School back to Fred Walinski. He has worked almost his entire life to catch up to his late brother, but never managed to become a swordmaster due to his lower talent and lack of help. This is why I have tutored him in the past few years. I've taught him and guided his efforts in deepening his mastery of the Annihilator Sword Style at least once every week."

"Oh? Has your efforts yielded any fruit?" Ves curiously asked.

In his impression, Interim Director Fred Walinski was an old man who had already exhausted all of his potential and busied himself with administrative affairs. He served as a competent manager who could exert a semblance of control over the rowdy Heavensworders in the clan.

"It took more time than I initially thought, but Fred has finally come close enough that he is able to figure out how to complete the final steps himself." Ketis swelled with pride. "At this point, any further teachings from me are counterproductive. He needs to step out of my system and be able to stand firm on his own. He won't be able to transform his willpower if he keeps looking up to me and his late brother."

Certain people could easily break through this barrier while other people found it a lot more difficult to stop relying on others. Fred Walinski's problem sounded similar to that of Legion Commander Taon Melin. Both of them were too accustomed to relying on the help of others.

Ves politely smiled. "Well, I wish him good luck. So what will happen when he finally overcomes this hurdle?"

"I will place the mantle of the Annihilator Sword School back to its rightful owner where it belongs in the first place. After that, I will work together with the Heavensword Association to formally found my own sword school and register it at all of the appropriate institutions. Once that is done, I will work closely with the Heavensworders to train new sword initiates that can serve as instructors before sending them off to the new planetary branches."

Those were big moves, but Ves grew skeptical whether those schools had any appeal.

"You're not operating in the Heavensword Association here, Ketis. The culture is completely different in the Red Ocean. In fact, there is no unified culture here because everyone comes from many different places of the old galaxy, but I'm pretty sure that not a lot of people are interested in traditional swordsmanship."

"I don't expect our branch schools to become instant hits. It is enough for them to attract those with discerning tastes and wish to learn deeper swordsmanship than the ones that are taught in mech academies. Don't forget that every serious sword style can display a lot of power in mech combat. This is why I initially plan to market my new school to mech cadets and mech pilots who specialize in swordsman mechs. Once they catch on to how my sword style can truly help them increase their ability to cut through tough and resilient mechs, I think that will be the point where my sword school will truly become a popular institution in the Red Ocean!"

Ves finally understood what Ketis was going for to an extent.

The motivations that drove her to start this new initiative were similar to the ones that prompted Ves to start the First Star Mech Academy and get into the educational sector.

There were many advantages to teaching future mech pilots! Ketis could not only market her distinctive commercial swordsman mechs to her own 'students', but she could also spread her influence in this frontier-wide subcommunity and slowly grow into one of its leaders!

Of course, Ketis wasn't the only one who benefited from this development.

"It sounds like the Heavensword Association is doing a lot to help you realize all of these plans." Ves spoke.

"That's correct." His former student frankly admitted. "We agreed to work together in order to advance our common cause of spreading traditional swordsmanship to the masses. You might not know this, but the Heavensword Association attaches a great degree of importance to reverse the decline of traditional swordsmanship. The Red Ocean is still a fresh environment and everything is still in flux. It is much easier to revitalize traditional swordsmanship in the new frontier than back in a stuffy place like the old galaxy."

"If that's the case, then why aren't the Heavensworders doing this already? They have plenty of Swordmasters."

"They have already done that, but the new sword schools they have founded in the Red Ocean have failed to attract enough interest. This is why the Heavensword Saint himself is so eager to cooperate with me. I am a part of the mech community and my products are already being used by many mech pilots. That will help a lot in making my new sword school popular."

"I see. So you're playing the role of a celebrity spokesperson, am I right?"

Ketis smirked at him. "Don't compare me to those useless influencers who can't do anything but act cute in front of a recording device. I can cut through solid armor with my Bloodsinger. My martial strength is enough to earn the respect of my target audience."

Chapter 4355 Ruined Weapon

As Ves listened to Ketis explain a portion of her plans and ambitions, he felt a profound sense of satisfaction and regret in his heart.

He felt satisfied because the young mech designer that he used to tutor in the past had fully grown her own wings and started to start her own initiatives.

He felt regret because Ketis was undoubtedly beginning to expand beyond the Larkinson Clan.

The new sword school with its upcoming planetary branches were an extension of her own power base.

If necessary, Ketis could even cut off her relations to the Larkinson Clan and rely on her own organization to develop independently from Ves and the Larkinsons.

Of course, the chances that Ketis would seek to divorce herself from the Larkinsons was too small. The Swordmaidens had fully integrated into the clan and Ketis owed too much to Ves to turn her back on her benefactor. She wasn't the sort of person who engaged in treachery.

She was also married to Joshua and still needed to raise a couple of children. There was no way she would want to leave before Kirian and Mayra grew up and started to settle into their own careers.

What about afterwards?

Ves might be willing to let Ketis go if she requested it one day. The Larkinson Clan had grown to a point where it didn't need the help of Ketis, the Swordmaidens and the Heavensworders to grow stronger and more prosperous.

Therefore, if there truly came a time where a split was mutually beneficial, then he had no objections to allowing Ketis to develop herself and her organization on her own terms.

Ketis and her people would still have strong ties to Ves and the Larkinson Clan. The stronger she became, the more help she could offer to the Larkinsons.

This was similar to how Masters raised their disciples.

The students eventually needed to find their own footing in the mech industry, but even if they no longer worked directly for their old teachers, they still formed a close-knit relationship that essentially amounted to a permanent alliance.

Older Masters were extremely formidable and possessed a lot of clout for this reason.

They taught so many talented disciples and students that eventually went on to become successful in their own endeavors that the collective power of them all was incredibly strong!

Of course, it was way too soon for Ves to be able to rely on his own network. Aside from Ketis, he only had a pair of trueblood relatives who were still stuck at the Apprentice stage. They were hardly in a position to provide him with any meaningful support.

"We're here." He spoke as they arrived in front of a secure checkpoint.

Ves and Ketis calmly passed the security checks before they could finally enter the guarded compartment.

The crew had dumped a lot of salvage and plunder from Pima Prime in this hall. The seemingly random bits of mech wrecks, cargo containers and debris caused the place to look like a junkyard, though it was at least a well-organized one as the clansmen neatly sorted all of the objects.

This specific compartment happened to store a lot of the more valuable battle loot. Fragments and remains from notable enemy expert mechs such as the

Quadknife, the Point Break, the Shockshell and so on were laying haphazardly on the deck as if they were worthless.

They were not. Each of them could provide valuable lessons, insights and inspiration to the Larkinson mech designers. Ves intended to study each of the remains at a later date.

Once everyone was done with studying the wrecks, he would probably recycle them so that the clan could at least squeeze a bit of valuable materials out of them. There was no reason to keep them whole unless he wanted to turn them into trophies, but none of them were impressive enough to earn this status.

The plasma sword was a different story. If nothing else, turning the weapon of a defeated ace mech into a trophy would definitely impress a lot of people!

Ves sighed in regret. "I wish our clan managed to defeat the Neo Amadeus through our own merits. This way, we would have no shame in turning this plasma sword into a trophy and a mark of pride for our clansmen."

"You don't need to feel sorry about missing out this time. I am convinced we will become strong enough to earn an ace mech trophy ourselves one day." Ketis reassured him. "We can let Patriarch Reginald Cross hog all of the glory for the time being."

Though the Larkinsons played an indispensable role in making the Mars possible and giving Reginald the breakthrough opportunity he yearned for, it would be too presumptuous for the Larkinsons to claim a significant amount of credit for the defeat of the Neo Amadeus.

Ves wasn't shameless enough to steal the Cross Clan's thunder. He agreed with Ketis that the time of the Larkinson Clan would come soon enough. He just needed to wait until the Larkinson expert pilots progressed far enough to reach a new stage in their evolution.

The two mech designers turned their attention to the massive weapon that was resting upright on a large weapon rack.

Ves had already spent enough time to familiarize himself with the plasma sword during his last visit to the Cross Clan, so nothing about the weapon was new to him. Once his awe towards anything related to ace mechs had worn off, he realized that this piece of gear wasn't worth obsessing over.

Ketis reacted a lot stronger than him towards the giant weapon. This was the first time she could get close to the plasma sword. Her expression displayed a mixture of awe, respect and interest as her eyes scanned across the blade and studied all of the technological elements that were visible on the surface.

"Do you have any scanning data?" She asked.

"Here you go." He replied and transferred the files to her comm.

The female Journeymen did not rush her examination but calmly observed the high-tech weapon at different heights and angles.

She also studied the scanning data and other information that the Larkinsons had collected about the weapon.

It was only after she had fully studied the exterior of the plasma sword that she began to use her powerful senses to examine the intangible properties of the sword.

As a swordmaster, her ability to connect to swords was impressive and could not be replicated through technological means.

Ketis was even more special among other swordmasters due to the fact that her extraordinary attainments in this field was based on her companion spirit.

This granted her a convenient way to familiarize herself with the heart of the plasma sword.

She reached out her hand. A floating scabbard hovered in her grasp. Once it came close enough, Ketis respectfully unsheathed her Bloodsinger.

"Sharpie, there's a new sword for you to explore."

"Sharp! Sharp! Sharp!"

A miniature spiritual version of Ketis quickly jumped out of the Bloodsinger and looked up at the plasma sword with a look of anticipation.

Ves looked dubious when he compared the scale between Sharpie and the plasma sword. The disparity in size was too big!

"Are you sure that Sharpie can handle such a huge sword?"

"Don't worry, Ves. If Sharpie can inhabit the Decapitator that I have made for the First Sword, then she can definitely do the same for this weapon."

"The plasma sword is different from the swords you are familiar with. Saint Jeremiah Gauge has baptized it with his willpower for an extended amount of time. The weapon is also 'alive' in a sense. I don't think it will appreciate the intrusion of an enemy of the Gauge Dynasty."

Though Ketis did not believe the plasma sword could pose a serious threat to Sharpie, she nonetheless agreed that it didn't hurt to be cautious.

"Sharpie will only come in touch with the surface of the plasma sword for the time being."

The little companion spirit slowly approached the exterior of the dormant blade and slowly sank into the metal surface.

A sense of excitement spread from the giant weapon as Ves had the illusion that Sharpie was waking up the plasma sword.

However, only a dozen or so seconds passed before the plasma sword released a painful shockwave that repelled Sharpie and caused Ves and Ketis to take a few steps back!

"What was that?!" Ves grew confused even as he raised his guard.

Meanwhile, Sharpie returned to her progenitor while looking hurt and offended.

"Sharp! Sharp! Sharp!"

Ketis frowned before allowing Sharpie to dive back into her Bloodsinger.

"What's wrong?"

"This sword... is ruined." She stated.

"Ruined?"

"In my eyes, this plasma sword could have become great." She elaborated.

"Almost everything about its design and construction is great in my professional judgment. Whoever developed the weapon understood the essence of swords and tried to make this technological marvel as true to the nature of swords as possible. Though the inclusion of plasma technology has forced the designer to make a lot of deviations, a sword is still a sword no matter whether its edge can burn or cut through solid matter."

Ves nodded in understanding. "And all of that became ruined when Master Huron integrated that weird expert pilot head inside the body of the weapon, am I correct?"

Ketis actually snarled this time. The mere mention of this added feature was enough to boil her blood!

"The man responsible for this late addition may be an impressive mech designer, but he has no love for swords! His approach to make the plasma sword is a travesty compared to ours. Whereas we are able to draw out the

life that is inherent in our weapons, Master Huron desecrated the plasma sword by inserting it with a foreign life. The expert pilot who is still kept alive in this blade even now doesn't even function as a design spirit. The intruder has directly corrupted the weapon and denied it any opportunity to spawn a life that truly represents the weapon."

Even Ves became disgusted when he heard her description. Master Huron's methods were not only crude, but also violated the intrinsic rights of the product itself.

"I also formed some of those thoughts when I was able to study the plasma sword up close myself." He admitted. "This attempt to imitate my living products is too exploitative. Any weapon that requires an expert pilot to volunteer for this punishing duty is a product that is too harmful to exist. Perhaps Master Huron managed to get away with creating a set of three 'living' swords for the Neo Amadeus, but there is no way a method like this could ever be implemented in mass production models."

Ketis was glad that Ves also harbored disgust towards the plasma sword, but a part of her grew suspicious at him. Did he truly disapprove of the weapon?

"Given what we know about this sword, are you thinking about converting it for our use? No matter what, it is definitely a powerful weapon that can give its wielders a massive boost in attack power."

Ves immediately shook his head. "I would never do so! First, this plasma sword is locked with security features that prevent us from controlling it. Second, the living consciousness within the weapon is extremely hostile towards our clan. Third, the plasma sword was developed with an ace mech in mind, which means its energy consumption is a lot more horrible than you can imagine. None of our mechs can keep it active for more than two or so minutes. In practice, this interval is even shorter as our expert mechs have to use up their energy for many other purposes such as moving around."

Though Ves listed several strong reasons why the Larkinson Clan shouldn't wield this weapon in battle, Ketis did not buy his message.

"I'm not so sure the plasma sword is as difficult to make use of as you say. You can address your first and third points by tinkering with the weapon. You can overcome the second problem by manipulating the living consciousness or assigning the blade to my husband. If Joshua is charming enough to tame a hostile creation like the Titan-5 Project, I don't think it is impossible for him to win over this exceedingly strange sword."

That... was actually an interesting idea!

Ves spontaneously came up with a potential new design project based on his former student's words!

Chapter 4356 Easy Weapon

When Ves shared his latest design concept to Ketis, the female swordmaster did not become as excited as he hoped.

Instead, her expression became more doubtful and dubious towards the ideas that he had just raised.

"You... don't think it's a good idea?"

"It's a stupid idea." Ketis ruthlessly replied. "No offense Ves, but Joshua absolutely doesn't need a mounted wargear loadout that turns his Everchanger into a super version of a swordsman mech."

"Why don't you think it's a good idea?"

"Because it goes against the essence of what swordsman mechs should be! You've designed numerous swordsman mechs before. You should know that chasing after raw power is hardly sufficient to design a good melee mech. What you have just proposed is a scaled up power mech. I have no doubt that it is able to strike with enough power to break through a lot of defenses, but its agility, range of motion and control will suffer so badly that it can no longer

exert the full power of swordsmanship anymore. Everything will become far too clunky for Joshua to be able to display any significant skill or finesse."

Ves glanced up at the plasma sword. "With a weapon as powerful as this, I don't think it is essential for Joshua to control his mech with that much finesse. The active blade of an ace mech-grade weapon should already be strong enough to power through every obstacle. Besides, if you are so concerned about this issue, we can design a mounted wargear loadout that tries to preserve the agility of the base mech as much as possible."

The swordmaster still didn't look convinced. "Give it up, Ves. I am not going to allow my husband to entrust his life to a clunky mess and a weapon that uses the head of a hostile expert pilot to give it life. Both ideas are antithetical to the sort of swords and swordsman mechs that I want to create. They are as bad as Patriarch Reginald killing off his living mech."

Ves understood that there was no way for him to persuade Ketis to go along with his idea after she brought up this example.

Perhaps his suggestion went too far. Even if he did not cooperate with Ketis, it still wouldn't have been wise for him to go through with his idea.

He lowered his head in defeat. "Fine. I'll give up on it. What else can we do with the plasma sword, then? We haven't earned the right to turn it into a trophy and it would be too wasteful for us to leave it in storage or break it down so that we can recycle its materials. I still want to find a way to make use of its incredible power. I have a feeling that we might need it against the opponents we will be facing in the future."

Ketis did not rush to reply to Ves. She remained silent for half a minute before she settled on her proposal.

"I don't disagree with you, Ves. I am not entirely opposed to the idea of making use of it. My suggestion is to rehabilitate this weapon."

Ves raised his eyebrow after hearing this. "Rehabilitate the weapon?"

"That's correct." Ketis confirmed as she stared up at the weapon again. "This plasma sword used to be a proper weapon for swordsman mech before Master Huron came along and ruined it with his 'upgrade'. Since he can change the original design of this impressive sword, there is no reason why I can't change it back to its original form or close to it. I don't intend to do so, though. I think it is better if I alter it so that it is more practical. I can tune down the power of the weapon so that it doesn't burn through as much energy."

This was an intriguing idea, and one that Ketis could take care of by herself. It might be difficult for her to design a plasma sword of this standard from scratch, but it was a lot easier to modify an existing one. She didn't need to know how everything worked. She just needed to be aware of the repercussions of every change she introduced to the existing weapon.

"What are your intentions?" Ves asked. "Do you have a specific mech in mind for this plasma sword, and how will you change it to suit its new purpose?"

"That's a difficult question to answer." She replied. "A weapon as powerful as this should traditionally be paired with the strongest swordsman mech pilot in our clan. I know that Venerable Dise should be able to wield it and make good use of its high-tech properties. However... the weapon doesn't fit her at all. I know she will reject the option of using it even if the plasma sword is capable of inflicting more damage than her Decapitator."

This was rather understandable to Ves. He was not ignorant of how an expert pilot and Swordmaiden like Venerable Dise developed a relationship and a dependence on their own weapons.

The Decapitator was a masterwork mech sword that Ketis had lovingly developed for Venerable Dise. It was a weapon that was precisely designed

and configured for the Swordmaiden expert pilot's fighting style and had already been used for quite a few years.

There was not that much value to adding the plasma sword in the mix. Dise not only had to start building up a relationship with the new weapon from scratch, but would also never be able to wield it to its fullest potential since it was originally developed for Saint Jeremiah Gauge.

"Okay, I can understand this sentiment, Ketis. Who do you want to give it to, then? We don't have a lot of sword-wielders among our expert pilots. The only other alternatives are Venerable Joshua and Venerable Imon."

"I know. Both of them are adequate choices since neither of them are true swordsmen according to my standards. Since they aren't that passionate about swordsmanship, it is okay to make use of this flawed weapon. They don't have that much swordsmanship to begin with that could get ruined by making use of the plasma sword."

That sounded rather harsh, but Ves could understand her logic. It was rather ironic that a weapon originally designed to be wielded by a powerful ace pilot would ultimately fall into the hands of a much weaker expert pilot who did not appreciate swords to the same extent.

"So who do you pick?" Ves asked.

"My husband." Ketis no longer withheld her answer. "I've tried to make Joshua more enthusiastic about taking swordsmanship more seriously, but... his progress is glacial. No matter how many times I instructed him and sparred against him, he just doesn't get it. I've realized that my attempts to turn him into a qualified swordsman is futile. Since that is the case, there is little to no harm in giving him custody of the plasma sword after I have reformed it. Besides, I think it would be good for this weapon to spend time with Joshua. His warm and gentle nature can heal the weapon's invisible scars."

Ves was impressed with her arguments. She did not pick Joshua just because she wanted to favor her husband or anything. He truly became convinced that the plasma sword would offer the greatest value if it became a part of the Everchanger's standard loadout.

"What about the Heartsword? You designed the weapon for Venerable Joshua and he has already utilized it for more than half a decade. Won't it get hurt if Venerable Joshua begins to spend time with the new plasma sword?"

"It will be fine, I think. My Heartsword shouldn't be that weak or brittle. Joshua can choose which sword he wants to equip his Everchanger with before he deploys into battle. The plasma sword is highly effective against specific enemies but consumes a lot of energy, so it is best in short-lasting engagements against strong opponents. The Heartsword is decent and reliable in most situations, and the Everchanger can remain in the field for a longer period of time."

In other words, Ketis wanted to expand the Everchanger's arsenal instead of replacing one weapon for another.

This was indeed a good approach for Joshua and the Everchanger. It was why the Neo Amadeus originally came equipped with three unique swords with different properties. Having the right tool for the job at hand could make it a lot easier to overcome a powerful enemy.

The two went into further detail as they discussed the specific changes that should be made.

"The secret chamber that is keeping the decapitated head of the Fridayman expert pilot alive must go." Ketis immediately determined. "It is a disgusting invention that continually stains this weapon the longer it exists."

A part of Ves found it to be a shame to rid the plasma sword of this unique feature. No matter what he thought about Master Huron's crazy attempt to

imitate a living product, the existence of this unconventional feature presented Ves with the option to collect a lot of interesting data.

However, Ketis' feelings about this topic were so strong that Ves didn't think he could get away with trying to retain this feature.

"If you decide to pull out the head, try and preserve it as best as possible." He told her. "You should inform Director Ranya about your plans and ask for her help in keeping the head alive."

Ketis narrowed her eyes. "What do you intend to do with it once it is out of the plasma sword?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I'm not about to let a valuable ingredient go to waste."

"You do know that the expert pilot, who is presumably from the Gauge Dynasty, is still alive, right? Doesn't the MTA prohibit experimentation on demigods?"

Ves couldn't help but chuckle. He waved his arm towards the plasma sword.

"What do you call this, then? Besides, the Gaugers treated their expert pilot as experimental material first. I don't intend to do anything different. From the moment the head ceased to be treated as a person, it has become an object. The individual is already dead as far as I'm concerned. If the mechers somehow disagree with my stance, they are free to come and take it away."

In truth, he needed to determine how much of the expert pilot was left alive, but he seriously doubted that much was left. According to the inferences that he had made, the expert pilots who went on to donate their heads were already declining beforehand.

The two mech designers moved on from this topic and talked about the other changes that should be made. The power of this ace mech-level weapon was too much for an expert mech like the Everchanger. It was already certain that

the power level had to be reduced in order to prevent it from burning too much energy at once.

"How much do you want to reduce its power?" Ves curiously asked. "If you take too much away, there is hardly any reason to make use of the weapon anymore. Its damage potential must be significantly higher than the Heartsword to justify its use, but then you will have to worry about too much energy consumption."

"I will have to determine this when I obtain a better understanding on how this weapon works." Ketis replied. "I am in favor of trying my best to preserve its power. I absolutely agree that it needs to retain its power to pose enough of a threat against powerful enemies. This is also closer to how it is meant to be used. According to my analysis of the Neo Amadeus, the plasma sword was originally meant to be used as the ultimate solution to a damaged opponent. Its purpose is to quickly melt through whatever armor that is left and kill an ace pilot or other key target before the opposition has any time to retreat."

"That makes sense."

Chapter 4357 Attention And Care

No serious incidents took place as Task Force Fury and the Golden Skull Alliance successfully departed from the Friday Coalition's sphere of influence.

Just as the intelligence indicated, none of the coalition partners mustered up any forces to pursue the powerful attackers that had devastated Pima Prime.

The surprise attack and the resulting devastation still provoked a lot of arguments, accusations, recriminations and grief among many people.

The rivalry between the Fridaymen and the Hexers became stoked once again. The latter might have lost the Komodo War, but their overall strength in the Red Ocean was not weak!

The Larkinson Clan hardly took notice of the rising tension between the two archenemies.

As the fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance finally split away from the ships of the Hex Army, everything slowly appeared to go back to normal.

The clansmen were already beginning to move beyond the previous operation and started to prepare for the Trailblazer Expedition that should have started months ago according to the original schedule.

The biggest priorities of the Larkinsons were to digest the huge amount of plunder and other gains from Operation Saturday Market while doing their best to recover their strength in the short term.

Many different people and institutions in the clan were already doing their part to make up for the losses.

The Diligent Ovenbird became preoccupied with conducting emergency repairs on the broken combat carriers, most of which had to be towed by the capital ships in order to keep up with the fleet.

The Larkinson Navy along with other relevant departments were contacting a slew of shipbrokers, ship wholesalers and shipbuilding companies to acquire as many carrier vessels as possible.

The Larkinson Clan's vastly improved reputation and recognition helped to open a lot of doors.

The chances that the Larkinsons could obtain even more combat carriers than they originally started with became a lot higher due to their impressive performance in the previous battle!

The repair work on damaged mechs and the production of replacement units proceeded without any issue. The clan excelled at working with mechs so

something had to go seriously wrong if it couldn't even replenish its mech casualties.

The main fleet already stocked enough parts and materials to quickly produce enough mechs in-house.

The Hammerworks Manufacturing Complex situated inside the Cat Nest had also been tasked with producing a lot of mechs, ship parts and other goods to facilitate the clan's restoration effort.

Even the Larkinson Clan's external partners such as Melmen Advanced Systems had agreed to produce high-quality replacement parts to repair the Larkinson expert mechs that had incurred serious damage.

It wasn't just the mechs and starships that were being fixed or replaced. The clan also put a lot of effort into meeting the needs of its own people.

The soldiers and their families organized funerals and memorial services for the dead.

"Our journey through human space and beyond is a struggle." General Verle solemnly spoke as he stood in front of a row of coffins. "Our clan never had it easy since it came into being. Each of us have joined it with the hope and expectation of reaching the top of human society, but society does not want us to rise above our station."

The uniformed servicemen all stood still as their thoughts about their fallen comrades began to make way for thoughts about their future trajectory.

"Whether they are pirates, Fridaymen, Garleners, Vulcanites or aliens, anyone might emerge one day and stand in our way. The only way for us to break this blockade is to fight the enemies that wish to drag us down. Many times we have succeeded, and many times we have paid the price for our defiance. This time is no different. We have bled. We have suffered. We have persevered. Let us honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice by

remembering them. Each of them are heroes for contributing to the survival and prosperity of the rest of us. REMEMBER THEIR NAMES!"

"REMEMBER!"

"REMEMBER!"

"REMEMBER!"

The mourning period was intense but short. As far as the clan was concerned, the living deserved a lot more attention than the dead. Funerals had become somewhat of a semi-regular routine to many clansmen, so the overall mood soon lightened up after the most immediate scars of the battle had begun to fade.

The survivors also required a lot of attention. Those who sustained injuries in the previous battle all received the care they needed from the Larkinson Biotech Institute.

People who received significant mental trauma began to step on the road of recovery. The Larkinson Clan had inherited the belief of the old family that showering traumatized individuals with love and attention was the best way to make everything right.

While this wasn't completely true, there were dedicated departments in the clan that closely monitored and controlled the interactions of potential problem cases.

Jannzi naturally fell under their gaze. It was extremely unhealthy for her to spend over half of her waking hours inside a secure storage compartment while pressing her body against the remnant head of the Shield of Samar.

The Larkinsons pretty much dragged her listless body away from this dreary place and forced her to spend time with her husband Adenau and her son Mercer.

She also had to attend therapy sessions in order to make sure she received professional help and guidance.

"I love you, mommy." A cute little boy sat on Jannzi's lap and hugged his mother.

"I love you too, Mercer." A brittle smile appeared on Jannzi's face as the overflowing love from her baby boy caused her to set aside her depressing thoughts.

As the expeditionary fleet steadily left the Magair Middle Zone and returned to the Krakatoa Middle Zone, many other ships and fleets always made sure to keep their distance from the dangerous alliance.

Different from last time, the Golden Skull Alliance were no longer considered to be one among many pioneering groups.

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and especially the Crossers had shown that they could threaten entire colonies and potentially cause the downfall of entire colonial states!

The colorful history of the Golden Skull Alliance only added to its intimidation factor. Its inexplicable involvement with the Vulcan Empire was particularly concerning as the once-famous dwarven state collapsed shortly afterwards!

The Larkinsons gained a lot of confidence from these reactions. Their self-esteem and belief in their own strength and values rose significantly in the past few weeks.

All of the mech pilots that had participated in the battle also experienced a lot of growth. So many of them had been rookies a month ago, but now that they had gone through a baptism of fire, they finally received the recognition they craved from the seasoned veterans of the Larkinson Army.

"Venerable Imon!" Lanie Larkinson stood up and saluted the new arrival. "I didn't expect you to pay a visit to me. Please forgive the mess."

The pilot ready room was anything but a mess, but Lanie had become flustered as one of the heroes of the Larkinson Clan stepped inside while she was completely unprepared.

Venerable Imon casually waved her hand. "Relax. This isn't a formal meeting or anything. I was in the neighborhood, so I just decided to stop by and find out how you are doing. You learned a lot from me, and I still recognize many echoes of my skills in your previous battle performance. That makes you my apprentice or student I suppose. Anyway, what did you think of your first battle?"

"It... was exciting." Lanie honestly said. "A few of the rookies among the Avatars have lost their nerve due to the Battle of Pima Prime, but I'm not one of them. I only felt as if my time had finally come. I spent so much time growing up among the Larkinsons and hearing about different battles that I yearned to fight myself. From the moment I began to challenge different Fridaymen mechs, my blood pumped faster. I even had to hold back at times in order to prevent myself from getting too far ahead."

Venerable Imon nodded in understanding. "That is similar to how I felt during my first battles. We have trained for this for much of our lives. From our teenage years onwards, both of us spent many days training our skills and learning everything we needed to know about mechs and tactics to become useful on the battlefield. Now that you are finally able to fulfill your purpose, you probably look forward to the next battle, right?"

Lanie smiled. "I guess so. I know it isn't entirely right for me to wish that our clan can get into a fight. People have died in the previous battle. Though I sympathize for those losses, that hasn't stopped me from looking forward to the next engagement. Am I a bad person for feeling this way?"

The expert pilot did not look surprised after he heard her admission.

"You are doing nothing wrong as far as I am concerned. We are both mech pilots and soldiers. Our main purpose is to fight and protect our people when needed. As long as your thoughts don't hinder you from doing so, then it is okay to look forward to battle. In my opinion, we need people who are eager to prove themselves like you in our ranks. If our Larkinson Army has lost its drive, then our clan's future will come into doubt."

The Red Ocean was rife with danger and turmoil. There was no way the Larkinson Clan could make it as an independent power if it didn't possess the force and the willingness to use it to defeat its adversaries.

The two mech pilots continued to talk for a while. Lanie asked numerous questions about how she should handle specific situations in battle and Venerable Imon obliged by giving her answers or at least a few hints so she could figure out her own fighting style.

Lanie also shared her thoughts about the battle and her place in the clan. No matter what silly matter she brought up, Imon spoke with utmost consideration for her wellbeing.

"Thank you for clarifying all of this to me." She said at the end of their fruitful session. "I don't feel like I deserve all of this personal attention from an expert pilot like yourself. I'm already doing okay and there are many more mech pilots who could use your help."

"I know, but you are different, Lanie. Aside from the reasons that I mentioned at the start, I'm guiding you because I think you have potential to fight at my side one day."

"Huh? Aren't you being too premature, Imon? No one can ever predict a breakthrough."

"You're normally right, but when I look at you, I see the makings of a great Larkinson mech pilot." Imon unabashedly said. "I'm not even afraid of revealing my expectations to you for fear of ruining your mentality because I know you are strong enough to overcome such trivial matters. You bear a part of my power, so you should have also gained a portion of my potential."

"I... am honored, sir. I will do my best to live up to your expectations." The girl solemnly spoke.

Imon patted her shoulder in a friendly manner. "Don't be in a hurry. You have only gone through a single real battle. You still have much to learn or experience before you know who you truly are on the battlefield. Make sure you survive the dangerous battles to come, but don't go too far and turn into a turtle. Fear never helps. The only way for you to surpass your limits is if you overcome hesitation and display true courage and valor on the battlefield. Only those who are willing to put your life on the line for your cause have the qualification to become larger than life."

The young woman grew more eager to prove herself once again. Her fighting spirit rose as Imon's belief in her combat ability fueled her confidence!

Chapter 4358 Starting From Scratch

As the expeditionary fleet continued to advance towards Davute, the mech designers of the Larkinson Clan engaged in plenty of work.

The assistant mech designers who normally worked in the design labs had all been sent to the production halls and workshop to gain a lot of much-needed practical experience.

The Apprentice Mech Designers were the primary people responsible for drafting and executing the individual repair plans for each damaged mech.

The Journeymen Mech Designers mostly spent their time on repairing the damaged expert mechs as best as possible.

Mechs such as the Dark Zephyr, the Riot, the First Sword, the Everchanger and the Promethea all spent a lot of time in the workshops.

The Larkinson Journeymen not only focused on restoring their battle effectiveness, but also improving it whenever possible.

They had all studied the footage and data from the previous battle and came up with many small suggestions that could slightly make the expert mechs handle similar situations smoother next time.

Though people such as Gloriana also developed more ambitious upgrades, all of this had to wait for later.

Ves himself spent a moderate amount of time in the workshops as well.

Though his contributions weren't impressive, his close contact with the expert mechs allowed them to assess their physical and spiritual states in great detail.

He was especially interested in observing how much the living mechs had grown.

The Battle of Pima Prime had sparked a lot of growth for both the expert pilots and their expert mechs.

For example, the Dark Zephyr gained a more aggressive character while the Riot and the First Sword became more tightly integrated with Qilanxo.

To Ves, these were all signs that the living mechs learned from their previous experiences. They were actively evolving in directions that should allow them to perform better if used in the same ways as last time.

Aside from studying his existing expert mechs, Ves also spent a lot of time on preparing for the Dullahan Project.

Though he was still obliged to spend time on numerous other design projects, the significance of this new expert mech design project was much greater to him as far as he was concerned.

Ves diligently worked alongside Gloriana and Sara Voiken to lay the groundwork for this crucial design project.

They looked for new and powerful technologies to add to the reborn expert mech.

They contacted Professor Benedict in order to borrow his expertise on expert mechs and energy transmission systems.

They consulted with numerous development companies such as Melmen Advanced Systems to help the Larkinsons develop custom transphasic parts and systems needed to ensure that the Dullahan Project could keep up with the rapid advances in the mech industry.

Ves even had a talk with Gloriana about how they became increasingly more dependent on external help.

"Why are we still forced to approach companies like Melmen Advanced Systems and Morton Tech to obtain decent transphasic products?" She confronted him while he had just settled down in the design lab.

"Because we don't have the expertise to design all of this stuff ourselves." He replied to her. "Many of us have studied phasewater technology for multiple years, but all that allows us to do is serve as interns in these high tech development companies. It will probably take at least a decade before any of us can reluctantly catch up to the lead developers of these powerful institutions, but by then the phasewater experts have already made even greater progress. In short, our clan simply isn't strong in this area. It is not a mistake to turn to outsiders for help."

Gloriana crossed her arms. "It's been years since we started doing this, but we have come no closer to including this competence into our clan. Why haven't we bought out Melmen Advanced Systems as of yet? We have lots of money and phasewater at our disposal! Years ago, our clan was only able to enter into a trade agreement that allowed our clan to gain 7.75 percent ownership of Melmen. Today, the LMC is not only earning record sums of profit, but our recent victory in Pima Prime has also tripled our reputation and prestige. Don't you think it is time we finish what we started and become the majority owner of Melmen?"

"It's not that simple, honey." Ves let out a tired breath. "I've been wanting to take over Melmen as well, but Professor Neihy Almar isn't stupid. She's an independent entrepreneur just like us and never wants to work under a boss. She cleverly tied multiple different large organizations and power blocs into her company by trading minority stakes to them as well. Melmen has therefore become something akin to a semi-public institution that exists to serve the leading powers of Davute. Do you think that the rival shareholders will agree to let one of their own call all of the shots?"

The Larkinson Clan initially managed to enter this exclusive club due to its willingness to offer a lot of phasewater.

Though the situation in the Krakatoa Middle Zone changed significantly in the years that followed, the Larkinson Clan was always able to hang onto that 7.75 percent stake without issue.

However, expanding it any further was out of the question! None of the shareholders of the successful and productive development company was stupid enough to trade short-term financial gain for a long-term loss in access to cutting-edge research and technological development!

"How do you propose to fix our situation, then?" His wife pressed. "Don't tell me we have no solution in the works. I don't want to end up in a situation

where I have to approach you and ask the same question thirty years later. I swear I will divorce you and force our children to disown you if you still haven't done anything to remedy this problem!"

Ves quickly raised his palm. "Don't be so hasty, Gloriana! We are working on it! The thing is that it will still take a lot of time for our plans to bear fruit."

"Tell me your supposed plan."

"Our clan has tried to approach and offer to buy out high tech development companies for years. None of our attempts have succeeded, and it is foreseeable that nothing will change in the coming years and decades. This is why a few people including me came together and decided that it is better to start our own R&D institution from scratch. By building our own version of Melmen Advanced Systems or Morton Tech, we can put our people in charge from the beginning while ensuring that we maintain absolute control over it. We don't have to argue with powerful owners and arrogant researchers who aren't inclined to give us the best possible service."

His wife looked thoughtful after this. "I like what you have just said. The only problem is that I have seen no sign of this company as of yet. Where is our new development company?"

Ves raised his comm and projected a document that detailed an ambitious new proposal. "It doesn't exist yet. The reason for that is because we are still in the buildup stage. An important component to the plan is that we raise our own phasewater specialists. With the help of the advanced textbooks and other knowledge on phasewater and the technologies that can be derived from this substance, we have been able to set up advanced courses at our universities. Hundreds of clever young men and women have already overcome the initial hurdles and are on track to become our go-to people concerning our phasewater needs."

Gloriana did not look impressed. "This will take forever. You know how difficult it is to master phasewater technology. The two of us are already struggling with it. How can these students do any better? It will likely take twenty, forty or even sixty years before they become somewhat competent!"

"I know that. I never intend for these kids to do more than performing assisting work. The key to activating our future Larkinson Advanced Research and Development Institute is to lure over senior researchers and developers that can lead its major projects. This is currently the most difficult part of the plan, but as long as our reputation and prestige continues to rise, I am confident enough that we will eventually gain the people that we need."

Though the plan still sounded dubious to Gloriana, it at least had a higher chance of working out than the futile effort to take over a major development company outright.

"If it is people that we need, I can call up my contacts in the Hex Federation and—"

"Stop. No Hexers. We need people who are fully prepared to commit to our clan. Too many Hexers can't let go of their loyalties to their own people and state. I have no problem with treating them as our allies, but it is a bit of a stretch to call them Larkinsons."

His wife was already aware of this problem, so she did not persist any further.

The Larkinson Clan did not attract that much people despite its rising popularity because of one key reason.

The clan demanded permanent loyalty and commitment from all of its recruits. Once they got in, they could forget about getting out unless they received an exception to the rules.

The Larkinsons were quite upfront about this, but this was exactly the reason why they were struggling to recruit enough senior personnel.

Those who accumulated a lot of knowledge, experience and awards were able to join a lot of companies. Few organizations were willing to turn away high-level specialists.

Given that the Larkinson Clan offered rich benefits but even stricter demands, it did not surprise Ves that not a single senior phasewater expert had come.

"Just give it time." He told her. "We expect that we will be able to recruit our first senior phasewater expert in five to ten years. The amount of people who possess the right skills is constantly growing with each passing month and year. Supply will eventually catch up to demand."

Though his wife did not know whether this 5 to 10-year time frame was enough to allow this new R&D institute to take off, at least Ves was being proactive about this issue.

"I hope your plans work out, Ves." She eventually told him. "If you still haven't been able to solve this problem all this time, then I will solve it in your stead regardless of your dislike of receiving help from Hexers."

Perhaps Ves should direct a little more time on this issue to keep his wife at bay. He did not want her to mess up this elaborate arrangement!

"Let's get back to planning our Dullahan Project. There are still a lot of areas that we need to define."

The married couple went back to fleshing out the draft design for the ambitious design project. Sourcing the advanced tech needed to develop a transphasic expert space knight was only one of many challenges.

They also had to make sure that it functioned like an expert mech, which meant they needed the help of a Senior or Master in order to enable it to resonate with Venerable Jannzi.

Fortunately, Master Benedict was willing to cooperate in this project.

"Your project sounds to me. I am curious to see whether you can succeed in creating a true successor to the Shield of Samar." The older man answered over the comm. "By the way, I heard you pulled out the head of the expert pilot that was integrated in the plasma sword. Do you have an existing use for it yet? If not, I can use it to implement the original version of an energy bridge into your new design."

Ves slowly shook his head as he thought over this proposal. "That... won't be necessary, Master. Venerable Jannzi would be horrified if she is piloting a mech that has literally integrated a human skull. The regular Endex System should be enough to give the Dullahan Project an adequate boost."

The former Skull Architect smirked. "Are you sure about that? My Endex System may be the reason why I have succeeded in realizing my design philosophy, but at its heart it is nothing more than a pale imitation of what I initially accomplished with the Mars. The skull of an expert pilot is several times more effective than the artificial substitute that I have formulated out of many different exotics. Are you truly willing to forgo a 100 to 200 percent increase in effectiveness because you are squeamish about a single skull?"

"Wait. Did you say 200 percent increase in effectiveness?"

Chapter 4359 Cut To Size

"Thank you for the offer, Master Benedict, but it isn't necessary for you to build an energy bridge out of the skull of an expert pilot." Ves eventually told the man over the comm. "Venerable Jannzi won't be able to fully embrace an expert mech that is partially made out of human remains."

The head designer of the Cross Clan looked disappointed. "That is your prerogative. It is your mech and your skull, after all. Are you open to using it in another project, or does your clan have a more general objection to my special design solution?"

Ves briefly thought about the expert mech design projects that were about to go into the pipeline and found a suitable choice.

"One of our Black Cats has managed to advance to the rank of expert pilot in the last battle. Our clan intends to design an expert stealth mech in order to take full advantage of Venerable Zimro Belson's back ops background."

Master Benedict looked intrigued again. "Hmm. Good choice. Stealth systems are troublesome due to their high energy consumption. It takes a great amount of power to hide a mech from most forms of detection. This problem is magnified when it comes to expert mechs because they also have to hide from the powerful intuition and other unique detection methods of expert pilots. The technical challenges to designing an effective expert stealth mech are so great that I am surprised that you are even thinking about starting this design project."

Normally, the older man was right, but Ves just happened to gain a lot of knowledge related to stealth and cloaking technology recently.

Combined with the fact that it wasn't necessary for him to develop a stealth system from the ground up, Ves was confident that his current competences should already be sufficient to design an expert stealth mech.

"We can take care of it." Ves told the Master. "We will be in touch with you. We still need to do a lot of prep work for all of our upcoming expert mech design projects."

"Understood. My assistance is always available, but you should take into account that I will likely employ different experimental variations of my Endex System and other design solutions in order to collect more varied data."

The Endex System was so high-end and expensive that Master Benedict could only justify its use in high-ranking mechs. Every expert mech design project was a precious opportunity for him to develop his latest and most

impressive innovation further. This was also why he easily agreed to help the Larkinsons design their next expert mechs.

With that taken care of, the Larkinson Journeymen involved in the Dullahan Project continued to flesh out the draft design.

The work wasn't that exciting to be honest. It involved a lot of reading, a lot of talking to different people and a lot of difficult puzzles.

They also had to check in with Venerable Jannzi from time to time in order to ensure that she still agreed with the direction of the Dullahan Project. Ves had to be quite diplomatic at times in order to convince her to back the more radical design choices.

Though Ves wanted to progress the Dullahan Project faster, he knew that such an important and significant endeavor couldn't be rushed.

The more thorough he and his fellow Journeymen prepared for the project, the smoother it would proceed after its formal start.

Compared to the relative calm of the Dullahan Project, Ketis was having a lot more fun tinkering with the plasma sword.

The high-tech weapon contained many different marvels of human technology. As it was the first true melee plasma weapon that the swordmaster came in touch with, she eagerly studied its design and its many technological solutions in case she needed to design her own plasma weapon one day.

When Ves entered the workshop where Ketis was doing her work, she happily hummed as she carefully replaced one set of circuitry for another set in an attempt to reduce the power of the weapon.

"Have you made a lot of progress, Ketis?"

"I did." She said as she continued to go about her work. "I removed that skull and everything that was supporting it a few days ago. I've tried my best to keep the ensemble intact so that the guy is still alive, but I would prefer it if you can take that horror show away as soon as possible. While I have seen my fair share of disgusting sights, this one is truly awful. I still can't understand why a mech designer from a proper state like the Friday Coalition can bring himself to engage in human experimentation of this nature."

Ves nonchalantly shrugged. "The mech industry isn't as clean and proper as we all wish. Normally, it's the biotech industry that is known for engaging in a lot of illegal and dangerous experimentation, but in my personal experience the mech industry isn't that far behind. Whenever there is a temptation to break the rules, someone will most certainly cross the line for one reason or another. It's human nature. We all have the desire to progress faster, push greater limits and bet on a big payoff that might not even exist."

His former student briefly paused her work in order to give him a deep glance.

"I'm sure you know all about this temptation."

"I do." Ves plainly admitted. There was no need for him to hide his true nature in front of one of his most trusted comrades. "What makes me different is that most of my bets pay off, if not always in the way I intended. Much of my research and design work is based on bold conjectures and radical ideas. There is no getting around the fact that I need to rely on my judgment in order to ensure that I am continuing to progress my design philosophy. The Dullahan Project is a good example of that. If I don't force myself to be more proactive, Gloriana will most definitely surpass me and advance to Senior first."

"And that is a bad development in your eyes?"

"It will be doomsday for me, my pride and my status in the clan."

Ketis chuckled after she heard this. "Of course you would say that. Could you explain to me again why you decided to marry Gloriana?"

He coughed. "ANYWAY, I'm interested in your plan for the plasma sword. What kind of weapon are you turning it into? I have the impression that you intend to do more to it than removing its controversial element and reducing its power level."

"That's correct. I've uploaded a version of this weapon to the MSTS and asked my man to wield the simulated version in various battle scenarios. I've made detailed observations on how Joshua and the Everchanger has handled the sword and concluded that it needs to be shortened in order to work."

"Oh?"

Ketis waved at the length of the giant blade. "The plasma sword was originally designed to be the primary armament of an ace mech. The Neo Amadeus is a dedicated melee mech that possesses much greater physical might than the Everchanger. Saint Jeremiah Gauge is also an impressive swordmaster who can truly harness the potential of many different blades. This plasma sword may be on the larger side, but Jeremiah can wield it as smooth and easy as if it was a combat knife. Joshua on the other hand..."

"He's not good enough to maintain control over such a long weapon, is that what you are trying to say?"

"It will be difficult for him to master the weapon if its mass and dimensions remain the same." Ketis admitted. "The Everchanger is slightly smaller and possesses a lot less physical strength than the Neo Amadeus. Even though you might think that a weapon that relies on the power of plasma to cut through obstacles shouldn't be heavy, the truth is quite different. It needs to be even denser and tougher than normal in order to protect its more delicate internal components."

Ves wanted to scratch his head. "Okay, I can understand the need to downsize the sword. Do you need any help with this or can you complete this modification yourself?"

"I can take care of it. There aren't a lot of electronic components on the upper half of the blade. Most of the tech is concentrated towards the hilt. It should only take a few days for me to cut the appropriate length. After that, it won't take much longer for me to complete my initial work. While I prefer to overhaul this powerful weapon more extensively, I want to respect the intentions of the original designer as closely as possible."

"That is a noble sentiment. How powerful will the weapon be after you have made all of the changes?"

"In Joshua's hands, I expect it to be able to exceed the Heartsword by at least three or four times." Ketis claimed. "Of course, that only applies as long as the plasma sword is fed with power and isn't being used against an enemy that is resistant against energy damage."

That was better than Ves expected. The Everchanger could already deal a decent amount of damage with its current mech sword. Once it had access to the altered plasma sword, the expert hero mech should be able to become a considerably stronger combat asset. It might even be able to overtake the likes of the Dark Zephyr and the Amaranto in terms of kill count!

His only regret was that Ketis clearly did not intend to allow the plasma sword to be wielded by any mounted wargear loadout, but it wasn't as if the Titan-5 Project urgently needed its power.

The meat suit was already dangerous enough in its current configuration.

"So what do you think of the use of plasma swords in general? Are you open to equipping a part of your swordsman mechs with this weapon type in the future?"

Ketis pressed her lips. "I don't know. I am genuinely conflicted. Let's say that I am more open to the idea than before. Personally, I still prefer to design swordsman mechs that are armed with good old-fashioned metal blades, but if I want to master swordsman mechs to the fullest, I need to be more open-minded towards alternatives. I don't think I will work with plasmas swords anytime soon, though. They are way out of the typical design budget of a standard mech."

Ves nodded. He understood the cost of such a weapon just as well. The increased lethality of the current plasma sword compared to the Everchanger's current melee weapon was a good example of why the difference in cost was so massive. Performance always had a price.

"What about your next design projects?" He asked. "I'm sure the previous battle must have inspired you a lot. I certainly gained a lot of new ideas. Do you have any promising new ideas that you want to turn into reality?"

Ketis smiled. "I do. I did get a lot of inspiration from the last battle. Seeing the swordsman mech of our clan as well as the Sundered Phalanx in action has made me more aware of all of their strengths and limitations. I'm actually interested in designing a swordsman mech that employs an energy weapon of sorts."

"You mean a plasma sword or similar?"

"Not exactly." Ketis shook her head. "I have my eyes on a mech that wields a sword that is less advanced but can still produce a similar effect. There are lots of different technologies available to us. I am convinced that there is suitable tech out there that can allow me to design a more practical version of a swordsman mech that is armed with an energy weapon. I believe such a mech will definitely have a place in our clan."

"Keep me informed. I'm interested to learn what sort of weapon you choose to pair your new mech design with. Just make sure it is powerful enough that destructive potential can be raised in the future."

Chapter 4360 Scarlet Ember

"Papa~"

Auralia ran up to Ves, who subsequently lifted up his playful little girl.

"Who's a good girl? Who has been a good girl today?"

"Meeeee!" His first daughter giggled and insisted!

The proud father showered his daughter with kisses and continued to cuddle with her for a while.

Work eventually took priority though, so he reluctantly put her down and sent her off to the other kids who were playing with animated beast dolls.

"Wooosh! Raawrr! My dragon is the strongest!" Marvaine exclaimed as he lifted up a cute and squishy cartoon dragon.

The toy flapped its wings and released harmless vapor from its maw in a failed attempt to look ferocious.

"Nuh uh, my phase whale is stronger!" Kirian Larkinson insisted!

Joshua and Ketis' son threw up a baby blue whale toy in the air. The chubby and adorable phase whale proceeded to fly and flip around before ending back in its owner's hands.

The girls were having a good time as well. They brought their own animated plushies and proceeded to hold a tea party for them at a little table.

Mayra Larkinson, Kirian's younger sister, hosted the tea party and commanded her astral beast toy to grab the pot with its massive mouth and pour a bit of tea in everyone's tiny cup.

"This is for you, this is for you and this is for you, hihi!"

Meanwhile, Lucky was lying on the deck while groaning in pain. Weeks had gone by as the gem cat still hadn't been able to digest everything he had eaten during his trip to the surface of Pima Prime V.

"Meooww... meooow... meoowww..."

Though his pain had toned down to an extent, the cat's internals still needed to work overtime to process a huge amount of raw and refined materials!

"Miaow~"

Clixie laid by Lucky's side and kept watch over him while swishing her slender tail. The Rubarthan Sentinel Cat occasionally leaned forward to lick Lucky's face, but otherwise did nothing at all to help the mechanical cat cope with his ordeal.

The surroundings briefly lit up as Goldie suddenly materialized above Lucky. The ancestral spirit curiously sniffed and poked her 'father', only to find out once again that she could do nothing to soften the pain.

Nyaaaaaaa.

"Miaow!"

Goldie soon became preoccupied with other matters as Clixie exerted her small but growing spirituality before pouncing on her 'daughter'!

Soon, the two cats began to play and wrestle against each other while completely disregarding the suffering compatriot!

Ves swept his glance across the entire compartment. The entire observation center seemingly turned into a daycare center today. Ketis originally wanted to conduct an initial test of the reformed plasma sword.

She had worked long hours to undo certain additions, reduce the length of the blade, rework a lot of complicated electrical components and modify the shape of the grip to better accommodate the hands of the Everchanger.

However, she hadn't been spending enough time with her kids as of late, so she decided to bring them along so that she could keep a closer eye on them. Ves happened to bring his own kids along, which gave them an opportunity to play with each other.

"Are you excited today?" Ves asked the woman who was fiddling with a control panel.

"I am." Ketis replied with a smile. "I made sure to preserve as much of the power of the Scarlet Ember while toning down its excessive energy consumption. I am certain that I have struck a good balance with the weapon. This test should make it clear that the Everchanger doesn't have to resort to an oversized mounted wargear loadout in order to slay other expert mechs."

The swordmaster had registered a new name for the plasma sword, thereby marking it as a weapon of the Larkinson Clan as opposed to the Gauge Dynasty.

It took a few more minutes for the focal point of this testing session to emerge in space. The Everchanger piloted by Venerable Joshua easily flew into space while wielding its rifle as well as its new high-tech sword in its hands.

While the Larkinsons had no intentions of testing the Vitalus rifle today, the Everchanger still held it in one of its hands to see how well the expert mech was able to handle its weapon under realistic conditions.

Ketis had paid great attention to trying to match the mass, dimensions and balance of the plasma sword as closely to the Heartsword as she could. Though she didn't always succeed in her aim, she had done just enough for Joshua to quickly adjust to the characteristics of his new weapon.

Currently, the plasma sword was in its deactivated state, which meant that it currently looked like a dull metal rod. The weapon hardly exuded any threat in its inactive state.

That soon changed as Venerable Joshua activated the sword. The Everchanger soon experienced an additional power draw as a dangerous red plasma edge appeared along the length of the metal rod.

The Scarlet Ember was finally ready for business.

"How is your mech doing, Joshua?" Ketis asked her husband over the communication channel.

"The Everchanger is doing fine so far. It can handle the load. It's not much different from firing my luminar crystal rifle."

"That is good to hear. Please keep in mind that the Scarlet Ember might demand more out of your expert mech over the course of this testing session."

"I know, Ketis."

"Let's start by putting you and your mech up against a series of practice targets."

Dozens of target dummies appeared into space.

Most practice targets were made out of salvaged remains of mechs, and this time was no different. The Larkinsons had specifically used up a lot of debris from the previous battle to create target dummies that featured comparable defensive properties to actual mechs.

Of course, the mixed material composition of the dummies also caused them to look like trash. No one bothered to homogenize their exteriors or apply a coating to their surfaces because they were all destined to perish anyway.

Venerable Joshua first tried to resonate with the Scarlet Ember, and found that it was a bit difficult for him to establish a good connection with the reformed plasma sword.

"I can't resonate that well with my new weapon yet." He told the observing mech designers. "It's like having switched from a close partner to a complete stranger. What is worse is that the Scarlet Ember still feels like it originally belonged to another pilot. A part of it is still rejecting my presence."

Ves did not look surprised after hearing this remark.

"The Scarlet Ember used to be one of the three primary weapons of the Neo Amadeus. It has spent months if not years in the company of an ace pilot. Saint Jeremiah Gauge has baptized it with his incredible willpower for an unknown amount of time. While his influence on the weapon has definitely improved all of its properties and most notably its hardness, it has also made the weapon more exclusionary towards other high-ranking mech pilots."

"I can definitely feel that from this weapon." Joshua said. "I'm trying my best to get along with it, but it's like I'm trying to befriend a Fridayman who's fellow soldiers I've just slaughtered. It is actively resisting my efforts to resonate with it. The only reason why I am able to produce a result at all is because I'm stronger, but the longer I do this, the sooner I'll exhaust my willpower."

Ves and Ketis shared a brief glance. They already accounted for this possibility.

They also knew that it would have been worse if the plasma sword was still in its original form. The presence of the head of the expert pilot alone would have produced an intense backlash if Joshua forcefully resonated with the twisted 'living weapon'!

This was also why Ketis insisted on removing this troublesome element from the start. It was a necessary condition to allow an enemy of the Gauge Dynasty to make use of the plasma sword.

"I'm sure you can find a way to get along with your new sword." Ves spoke without concern. "For now, we just want to record the baseline data of the Scarlet Ember. It doesn't matter too much if you can't channel a lot of true resonance into the weapon. Its technological capabilities more than make up for this temporary shortcoming."

"I think you are vastly overestimating my ability to get along with others! This sword hates my guts!"

The Everchanger quickly approached the nearest dummies and slashed at it with the plasma sword.

Nothing much seemed to have happened, but that was what made the power of the weapon so incredible.

The Scarlet Ember managed to burn and melt through all of the solid metal without too much hindrance in a single swing!

The Everchanger didn't even have to exert that much mechanical power to run the blade through the practice dummy!

"Excellent! Let's repeat that a few more times, Joshua. Make sure to employ different sword attacks at each target dummy."

The Everchanger proceeded to demolish a dozen more dummies with ease. Each of them were made out of broken pieces of armor plating and other parts taken from hardy mechs like the Modal Firmament or the Favored Sons.

While the First Sword should have been able to cut through regular mechs with similar ease, the Everchanger would have struggled to sustain this pace

due to its weaker strength. All of that no longer applied now that the Scarlet Ember came into the picture.

"Okay, that's enough. Let's see how well your new weapon is able to handle a more serious weapon. We have invited the perfect practice partner to see how well you can leverage its power against an expert mech."

Much to Joshua's surprise, a powerful machine emerged from the Cross Clan's fleet and quickly blazed its way to the testing area!

Soon enough, it arrived in front of the Everchanger. The powerful Saint Kingdom surrounding the ace mech had already begun to suppress Joshua's weaker force of will!

"That's not an expert mech!"

"Oh. I forget. Let me rein myself in." Patriarch Reginald spoke.

The Mars soon became a lot less intimidating as Reginald did his best to reduce his resonance with the ace mech.

This was a difficult task considering that the two shared a close and permanent connection with each other.

In the end, the Mars maintained a state where the next test could finally proceed.

"Hit me all you want." Reginald plainly told Joshua. "My Mars can take it all. It is one thing if Jeremiah Gauge was using that sword of yours, but now that it has ended up in your hands, I don't feel any threat anymore."

Though his words were harsh, they still rang true.

That didn't stop Joshua from getting a little angry.

"Are you sure about that, sir? Your Mars is still not in a healthy shape."

The Cross Clan had performed a lot of emergency repairs on the ace mech, allowing it to restore a lot more battle effectiveness.

However, it was clear that the Mars still needed to undergo more extensive repairs to bring it back to its peak condition.

"Don't worry about it, Joshua. My Mars can still rush your puny machine in its current state. Just hit me already!"

"If you say so, sir! Don't complain if you can't take my attacks!"

His expert mech boldly approached the Mars while swinging the Scarler Ember!

The shrunken but much more concentrated domain field of the Mars easily resisted the attack, but the release of so much heat and light indicated that the blow could have dealt serious damage to a weaker target!

"Hahaha! That's the spirit!" Patriarch Reginald reacted with a bit of excitement.

"Your Everchanger looks like a baby version of the Neo Amadeus right now. You hit harder than all of the other expert mechs in our fleet aside from the Amaranto."

That was a genuine compliment even if it did not sound so flattering to Joshua.

"How would you rate the damage of the previous attack, Reginald?" Ves asked.

"The Everchanger probably needs to attack a few more times before the resonance shield of a low-tier expert mech can't take it anymore. A mid-tier expert mech can probably resist eight to twelve attacks of this kind before it loses its resonance shield as well. I think that it can go through their armor a lot easier."

That was an excellent result!

The raw power of the ace mech-grade weapon was still formidable. Even an ordinary mech could threaten an expert mech with its hot blade as long as it was able to supply enough energy!