

Mech 2711

Chapter 2711: Cat Tricks

A spiritual cat materialized into view and flew onto Ves' lap. Goldie was actually quite a powerful spiritual entity these days. She not only possessed more spiritual energy, but she had also learned or developed more methods to harness her growing powers.

Of course, Ves hadn't witnessed any of her new abilities. He just knew that she had become more versatile.

Despite her increase in powers, she still possessed a young and playful demeanor. It didn't seem to matter that she was mentally connected to the minds of tens of thousands of Larkinsons, many of whom were adults who possessed complex and profound thoughts.

Her overflowing cuteness was too much for Ves. He broke out into a smile and petted her back.

Nyaaa~ nyaaa~ nyaaa~

"Hehehe. I'd love to play with you further, but I still have work to do. Now, daddy Ves needs to know what you can do these days. Have you developed any remarkable powers that you can bestow to my mechs?"

Goldie looked confused. She tilted her head.

Nyaaa?

"Just demonstrate your powers, please."

Nyaaa.

Goldie reluctantly distanced herself from Ves and turned to face an empty bulkhead. She briefly inhaled before unleashing a small and sharp spiritual beam that didn't deal any material damage.

While the beam penetrated through the bulkhead without encountering any hindrance, Ves saw that it wouldn't do much damage to anyone even if it hit someone.

Obviously, she could have unleashed a stronger attack, but saw no need to expend too much energy and put someone at risk.

"How strong can you scale up this attack?" He asked.

Goldie spread out her forepaws until they became twice as wide as her head.

Nyaaaa nyaaa nyaaa!

Ves didn't know how strong that was supposed to be. This was one of the instances where he could really make use of a solid measurement of spiritual power or damage potential.

"Can you knock out a person with this beam attack?"

Nyaaa..?

"You don't even know?!"

Nyaa nyaaa nyaaa!

"Oh, I see. You lack test subjects." Ves understood. "It's good that you've restrained yourself. I don't want our clansmen to get hurt due to reckless experimentation. Anyway, even if your beam attack is able to threaten someone, I don't think it's very useful to pass it on to a mech design."

Even though Ves was still in the dark about the actual effect of her beam attack, he already figured out some shortcomings.

First, the attack was very simple. It directly discharged spiritual energy in the rawest possible form. This was an extremely wasteful method of utilizing its potential.

"It's as if a rifleman mech picks up a rifle only to throw it at the enemy."

While such an act might inflict a bit of damage to an enemy mech, it was a horrible way to utilize the rifle.

Ves felt that Goldie might be able to compress the energy or use some kind of other technique to increase the lethality and efficiency of her attack. However, this was not the time to explore these options.

He wasn't really interested in passing on this capability to his Bright Warriors. The range of mech combat in space potentially stretched across many kilometers. From what Ves had witnessed, Goldie's attack lost cohesion fairly quickly, which meant it didn't appear to be practical unless the enemy was right in front.

He already had more effective and efficient solutions at his disposal which could attack the mentality of enemy mech pilots. The death phase battle formation was the best example.

"What else can you do?"

Nyaaa.

Goldie subsequently formed a bubble around her glowing body. The golden barrier didn't look very substantial, but when Ves experimentally tried to pass a spiritual projection through it, he failed to pass the spiritual shield.

"This looks useful." Ves became a bit impressed. "Qilanxo must have taught you how to form a shield, right?"

The cat nodded her cute head.

Nyaaa!

"Can it block any material attacks?"

Nyaaa...

Ves decided to test it out. He picked up a data pad from his desk and threw it towards the glowing cat.

NYA!

The physical object passed right through her shield and impacted her body, causing it to pop!

Fortunately, Goldie didn't actually get hurt. She rematerialized her body and hissed at Ves.

Nyaaaaa!

"Oh, sorry about that, Goldie. I thought that if it failed, the data pad would go right through your body."

Nyaaaa~

She quickly forgave him as she rubbed her head against his hand.

Unlike Qilanxo, Goldie didn't appear to be capable of forming a barrier that could defend against material attacks. While it appeared to be somewhat effective against spiritual attacks, it wasn't as if they were about to square off against entities comparable to the dark gods anytime soon.

Goldie didn't specialize in defense, so her spiritual shield was fairly weak. The only noteworthy aspect about it was that it was fairly efficient, no doubt because of her excellent teacher.

"What else can you do?"

She began to show a bunch of other parlor tricks. She amplified her glow, demonstrated her multi-tasking ability, became almost unnoticeable and even managed to showcase her ability to extend her senses at a distance.

"Except for multi-tasking, I can already do these tricks myself." Ves crossed his arms. "You have to show me more if you want to impress me. I haven't seen anything that works great with my upcoming Bright Warrior design."

Seeing that he didn't take note of the abilities she displayed before, Goldie decided to become serious.

She looked at Ves with a determined expression that only made her look cuter.

As Ves wondered what she was trying to do, he sensed that the Larkinson Network was actually becoming more active.

Through his spiritual senses, he perceived that his bond received more input all of a sudden.

'Where is my underwear?'

'I hate this hoverchair! Why is it taking so long to regrow my legs?'

'This sword needs to be sharper!'

The surface thoughts of hundreds of different Larkinsons poured into his mind!

"Ahh!" Ves held his head in pain as he hastily put up a spiritual block. "Warn me before you do that!"

Nyaaaa...?

Goldie didn't understand why he couldn't handle all of the incoming thoughts.

"I can't multitask to the extent that you can. You can really knock someone out by flooding them with so many distracting and disparate thoughts!"

It was too bad that this unintentional 'attack method' only worked for those who were connected to the Larkinson Network to begin with. It couldn't be employed against an enemy.

Nyaa...

Goldie looked downcast as she lowered her tail.

"It's okay. Just be more mindful next time. Hmm... can you connect the minds of multiple people together like this? For example, can you connect the minds of a squad of mech pilots together?"

Nyaaaa.

She didn't sound too certain, but she thought it was theoretically possible.

This brought a lot of interesting possibilities to Ves. Wasn't this just the spiritual version of the most basic application of a symmetrical neural network?

If he was able to develop this method even further, he may be able to develop a mech unit within the LMC that could fight like the Bloody Herons!

Ves quickly dampened his enthusiasm. "It's too dangerous!"

He was not ignorant of all the risks involved. Even Master Huron had to work long and hard before he developed a viable framework that would allow mech pilots to link with each other without going crazy or incurring brain damage.

The possibility still tantalized him, though. He planned to revisit the idea once he gained a better understanding of spirituality and how it interacted with the human mind. At his current level, he didn't feel confident enough to attempt something like this without sufficient knowledge.

"It would have been handy if I managed to obtain Master Huron's research data." He briefly lamented.

He turned his attention back to Goldie. Under his encouragement, she began to display some other abilities.

He already knew about her ability to facilitate communication between Larkinsons through the network she maintained. She had become more efficient at this, but there still appeared to be a range limit.

Nyaaaa.

"So if I understand you correctly, you can pretty much allow me to communicate with any clansman as long as the Larkinson Mandate is in the same star system."

This was actually quite a useful feature. While the bandwidth of this connection wasn't high, it was a lot more secure.

Of course, it wasn't perfect. Anyone who was sensitive to spirituality such as Ves may be able to intercept the spiritual signals and figure out their meaning.

Goldie actually copied the core function of his upcoming Cherub mech design. The Hexer communication mech was designed to facilitate secure short-ranged and long-ranged communications through a sub-network of the Superior Mother.

The spiritual cat was able to do this without relying on a purpose-built mech as long as it was limited to Larkinsons. This was a considerable advantage, but Ves was reluctant to implement it because it was related to a lot of secrets that he didn't want to spread.

Still, it might come handy in an emergency.

"Look, I'm impressed at what you can do, but none of them fit the Bright Warrior design. I need you to showcase an ability that can truly fit the mech. It has to turn into a unique and iconic ability for the Larkinson Clan."

Nyaaa...

She thought for a moment while swaying her tail. While she developed a lot of new techniques, many of them were derivatives of her existing abilities or imitations of the abilities of other design spirits.

This was not what Ves was looking for. Just like the Bright Warrior design, Goldie appeared to be lacking an advantage that was distinct and unique enough to define her. She needed to develop a signature move that could become as iconic as Qilanxo's space barrier or the Illustrious One's synergy with luminar crystals.

The two brainstormed for a time. Both Ves and the spiritual cat swapped various ideas.

Despite all of the information that Goldie had access to, she didn't possess a lot of imagination. Part of that was due to her youth but another reason was because she was a very different kind of existence.

Ves was much better in this aspect than her. He considered the capabilities that she already showed and tried to generate ideas that Goldie was capable of implementing.

After half an hour of experimenting and delving into Goldie's powers, he gained a much deeper impression of her capabilities.

Her versatility was remarkable. This was a true strength as she was able to respond to many different situations.

Aside from that, Goldie only truly distinguished herself from other design spirits when she leveraged the Larkinson Network. Ves believed that this was the key to imbuing the Bright Warrior design with an iconic ability.

Ves somehow went back to his original idea.

For some reason, Ancestral Possession sounded perfect for this situation!

"It doesn't work, though!"

He found it ironic that his search to find a replacement for this failed implementation eventually brought him back to his starting point.

It was absurd!

"Maybe I need to revisit it and try and see if I can make it work." He muttered to himself.

If he wanted to make a serious effort, then he needed to perform an experiment. Yet that entailed using his Larkinsons as test subjects. Again.

"We're not in a crisis anymore. Is there really a need to put my own people at risk?"

Ah, who was he kidding? If he set his mind on an experiment, then he would definitely find a way to perform his studies!

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "I'll need to do it fast and discrete. The completion of the Bright Warrior Project can't be delayed, so I only need a couple of successful test results to prove that my implementation works."

"Who shall become my test subjects?"

Chapter 2712: Ves the Network Administrator

"Why do you think the patriarch called us over?" Imon Ingvar asked.

"I know as much as you do, sir. I still don't know why I've been summoned from my school. I'm years away from graduation."

Lanie Larkinson looked very out of place in Ves' personal workshop. She was still a teenager who hadn't piloted a second-class mech for real. While she tried out some virtual mechs, the gap was still too big for her to display any battle effectiveness with such a formidable machine.

At her current level, she was only reluctantly able to pilot third-class mechs. The Chiron had truly helped her in building up her fundamental piloting skills.

Yet that was far from enough from piloting a Bright Warrior mech like the pair that were standing idle a short distance away!

While Ves hadn't arrived yet to explain why they were here, Lanie already formed some guesses.

She threw a glance at the older mech pilot standing next to her. While Imon Ingvar was not as well-known as her sister, he was still an expert candidate in his own right.

Imon was currently one of the strongest and most skilled mech pilots in the Larkinson Clan! The only mech pilots who were able to beat him flat in simulation and live practice sessions were expert pilots.

The former noble noticed her stare. He smiled goodnaturedly at the mech cadet.

"How is your training progressing? Is the clan's mech academy to your liking?"

"I'm doing really well in my studies!" She grinned. "In fact, I'm close to the top of the rankings in my class. While I'm not the best in terms of marksmanship or swordsmanship, my combined scores are the highest of all of my fellow cadets. Maybe that's why the patriarch called me up. These mechs.. they're the next Bright Warriors, right?"

"That is unmistakably true. This newer version looks a bit different, but the relation to the older one is still clear. I've piloted the original Bright Warrior for an extensive amount of time. I even fought a number of battles with it. I still miss it in a sense. Its armor was really good so it didn't matter if I made a bunch of mistakes."

He was obviously disappointed by the decision to move away from Breyer alloy. The new Bright Warrior was stronger in every aspect, yet the feature that Imon loved the most was reduced!

While he no longer needed a huge buffer to keep himself alive in a battle, he still missed what he could do with the old one. He wasn't the only mech pilot who felt this way.

Yet what could they do? None of them controlled the supply of Breyer alloy. They didn't know where it came from, how much it cost and what they needed to do to buy this fantastic material.

Mech pilots didn't understand anything about the logistical aspects of mechs. They just created wish lists and tried to see which mech ticked most of the boxes.

"How do you pilot the Bright Warrior effectively?" The young lady asked.

It was very rare for mech cadets like Lanie to get close to an expert candidate. How could she not ask for some tips?

"I can only speak about the original version." He replied and jerked his head towards the two late-stage prototypes. "I haven't had the pleasure of piloting this new version yet. If the replacement is close enough to the older model, then it won't be that difficult to pilot. It's kind of a vanilla mech."

"Vanilla mech?"

"It's a good mech, but it's not a mech that decides how you should fight. It's an open-ended mech that stands at the middle of what mechs can do. This makes it difficult to steer it into becoming strong in any single area."

Lanie looked fascinated as she listened to the experienced expert candidate. "What do you mean by that, sir?"

Imon smiled. "The Swordmaidens dislike the Bright Warrior. Even if it comes in a swordsman mech configuration, those sword-mad women feel like the mech holds them back from performing their favorite and more extreme moves. It's the same for rifleman mech specialists. They would rather pilot a Crystal Lord than a Bright Warrior because the former is much more compatible with their fighting style."

"I see. The Bright Warrior can do everything, but that's also the reason why it doesn't excel at anything."

"That's just what is obvious from the surface. If your thinking only stops at this point, then you won't perform as well as you should." Imon gestured his arm towards the pair of Bright Warriors. "The mech doesn't push you into fighting in a specific or preferred way. I told you before that it's an open-ended mech. What I mean by that is that the mech is as strong as you make it. You need to find your own way to make the Bright Warrior work. The mech won't do this on your behalf like other mechs. For example, when you pilot a Valkyrie Redeemer, you're pretty much stuck with performing flanking and charging attacks. You can't employ it as a rifleman mech or a traditional spearman mech."

Lanie gleefully absorbed Imon's insights. While his advice wasn't too specific, he presented an approach to mechs that she had never considered before.

Instead of allowing the mech to define her performance, she should instead seek to impose her own mark on the mech!

Of course, this insight only applied to versatile mechs like the Bright Warrior.

Eventually, Ves entered his workshop. Both Lanie and Imon fell silent as they watched their leader approach.

The patriarch held the Larkinson Mandate in his hands. He looked at it with a smile before directing his attention to the mech pilots he invited for this occasion.

"Imon Ingvar, Lanie Larkinson, thank you for answering my summons. I'm sure you are wondering why I brought the two of you here. Let me begin by stating that I have not made a mistake. I truly need you both in order to prove something that I have been

developing for some time. Due to the sensitivity of this new invention, I can only ask for help from those who I can trust and can keep a secret."

Both Lanie and Imon felt flattered from his words. Obviously, the fact that he selected them both meant that he trusted the two out of thousands of other Larkinson mech pilots. That was a great honor!

Still, there was something fishy about this situation. Lanie slightly narrowed her eyes.

"Sir, does this test of yours involve putting me in the cockpit of your new Bright Warrior?"

"Correct. You're quite astute." Ves generously praised. "The two prototypes you see before you are pretty much the final version of this new mech design. The problem is that the Bright Warrior design lacks a final element that can truly make it special. You are here today in order to help me see whether my attempts to put an extra touch to the design actually works out. While I can't promise you that this little test is safe, the implications for our clan are massive if every Bright Warrior can exhibit the same function!"

Lanie looked increasingly more skeptical.

"Uhm, sir, I can understand why you would want Mr. Ingvar to help you out, but I don't think I belong here. I'm just a mech cadet."

"I know." Ves grinned at her. His enthusiastic stare disturbed the aspiring mech pilot. "It's exactly because you're not a full mech pilot that you're a suitable te—ahem, volunteer for this little operation. The more immature the mech pilot, the greater the contrast to an expert candidate such as Mr. Ingvar over here. If I invited someone older and more capable, then the gap wouldn't be as big. That makes it harder for me to see whether my new invention has made a difference."

He didn't babble on for too long. Time was tight and his schedule was already packed. There was no need for him to explain every detail of his experiment.

Once the mech pilots changed into their piloting suits, Ves commanded them to fly up to the cockpits of their assigned Bright Warriors.

While Imon did so without hesitation, Lanie still looked reluctant.

"It's okay." Ves softly said. "I would never hurt you. This will be good for you. I promise. Please get into the cockpit so you can get this over with and return to your academy."

Even though she felt some misgivings, Lanie did what she was told. After all, she couldn't say no to the leader of the entire Larkinson Clan.

As the mech pilots strapped themselves into their piloting seats, Ves set up his workstation in order to record and display the readings he cared about.

Several minutes passed before he completed his setup and checked whether his mech pilots were in good condition.

Once those steps were out of the way, he formally initiated his test.

"Imon, you go first. Activate your mech and interface with it. Don't do anything else once you're done."

"Will do, sir."

No problems occurred as the mech booted up. Imon was an experienced mech pilot who quickly adjusted to the experience of piloting an updated Bright Warrior.

"Alright, Lanie, it's your turn now." He transmitted. "I know this must be an intimidating experience for you, but it's not that bad as long as you don't try to do anything. I've already locked the controls of the mech so that you won't be able to move and damage something by accident."

Lanie reluctantly activated her mech.

Every time a mech pilot interfaced with a new mech, they first went through an adjustment session.

The first time was always the most magical for this reason. Lanie became mesmerized as she felt as if her mind was wrapping around a mech that was much stronger and deeper than the Chiron.

The latter was deliberately designed to be as light and accommodating to pilot as possible.

The Bright Warrior IB was different. It was designed with well-trained mech pilots in mind. While it was supposed to be easier to pilot than Ves' more advanced mechs, Lanie soon discovered how much strain the grownups had to endure in order to pilot the Bright Warrior!

"Gnn.."

Ves noted her increased strain but saw she was reluctantly able to hold her own. Once the lengthy adjustment session finished, the Bright Warrior no longer pressed on her mind as much.

"I'm okay, sir."

"I know. Please take some time to center yourself. I need you to be in your best possible condition before I start my test."

Several minutes passed by as Ves performed various checks. Once he was sure that everything was okay. He brought forward the Larkinson Mandate.

"I need your help, Goldie."

Nyaaa!

The Golden Cat began to do something with the Larkinson Network. As Ves switched to his spiritual vision, he noticed that she was attempting to form a new bond.

Usually, every bond in the network passed through Goldie. She functioned as the server and gateway of the network. While there was nothing wrong with this, it did not allow any Larkinson to connect directly to another Larkinson.

This was different. By forming a direct bond between Lanie and Imon, the two would soon be able to exchange thoughts and other mental signals with each other.

This was very dangerous, but also very promising!

Ves theorized that this was the best way to enable a demanding ability like Ancestral Possession.

According to his guess, the reason why this ability never worked in the original Bright Warrior was because the channel was too limited.

The answer therefore was simple. He needed to forge a direct connection between the source and the recipient of all of the piloting skills. There were less barriers in the way and the bandwidth was also considerably higher.

Of course, this also meant that the damage would be much worse if anything awful happened!

"I feel something!" Imon stated. "Why do I feel.. Lanie, is that you?"

"Ahh!" Lanie immediately tried to grasp her head. "My head is pounding! It's as if it's about to burst apart!"

"Keep concentrating!" Ves quickly said. "Don't lose your focus. You need to stay in control. I know you can do it, Lanie!"

"I.. will.. try!"

Chapter 2713: Regulating Input

The mood in the workshop became more tense as a critical moment took place.

When Ves conceived of this experiment, he knew there was an element of risk involved. Each time he performed experiments that tied spirituality and the human mind together, the latter always had an annoying tendency to explode.

Right now, the signs looked concerning. While Imon Ingvar's life signs were only slightly elevated, poor Lanie Larkinson's head must be enduring a great amount of pressure!

Still, Ves wouldn't have selected her as his test subject without some assurances that he'd be able to keep her safe.

Even though he could have put another random kid or mech pilot, she was the ideal recipient of this new technique for several reasons.

First, she was young. Her mind was more malleable and could bend under stress to a slightly greater degree.

Of course, her lack of mental development and piloting conditioning also meant her mentality wasn't as strong from the outset, so she experienced strain at a considerably lower threshold than mature pilots.

Second, she was talented. Lanie's genetic aptitude was B-, which didn't sound high but ranked in the top out of all of the potentates in the Larkinson Clan!

It wasn't easy to encounter someone with a genetic aptitude of A- or higher. The Hafner Duchy wouldn't have invested so much in Venerable Relia Foster if mech pilots of her talent were common in human space.

Genetic aptitude was not the sole factor used to judge mech pilots. Anyone who did would be making a very serious mistake that could prove fatal in battle.

This talent indicator merely denoted the maximum load a mech pilot was able to endure and how easy it was for them to pilot mechs as extensions of their bodies.

They needed to invest less time in order to master piloting skills, allowing the hard-working ones to become a lot better than those with lower genetic aptitude grades.

That didn't mean they were assured of victory all the time. There were plenty of stories where those with less talent prevailed due to a combination of hard work, luck, calculation and circumstance.

All the talent in the cosmos wouldn't save a mech pilot with great talent from getting defeated by ten poorly talented mech pilots if all else was equal!

Another factor that gave average mech pilots hope was that talent no longer became as relevant at the expert pilot level. While a good genetic aptitude still made it easier to advance up the ranks, the gulf between the top and the bottom narrowed.

This was mostly because those with limited genetic aptitude always gained a huge boost in every piloting attribute. Large and complex mechs they couldn't pilot before suddenly became easy as their stronger minds and will were much more able to bear the strain.

Ves personally paid a lot more attention to spiritual potential than genetic aptitude. As long as the latter was higher than a D-grade, then a mech pilot was already good enough to pilot his mechs!

Lanie happened to be one of the few mech cadets who possessed spiritual potential at a very young age. From what Ves observed from many different mech pilots and other people, it was much more common for the lucky ones to develop spiritual potential in their twenties.

The young woman was an abnormality in this case. Ves believed that she could one day bloom into a great mech pilot. If he helped her along when she was still in her academy days, then she would get a head start in becoming an even greater mech pilot!

"Whether the knowledge transfer is permanent or temporary, I hope she's able to take something away from this experience." Ves muttered.

He had become more obsessed with the possibilities of Ancestral Possession now that he revisited the idea with a fresh perspective and greater insight into spirituality.

As Ves kept his attention on Lanie's various body and health parameters, he made sure to keep his finger on the abort button.

While he had already programmed the prototype Bright Warrior to shut down on its own accord once its mech pilot underwent too much strain, it might be too late at that time.

Ves witnessed plenty of head explosions throughout his experiments. Even though they happened rather abruptly, he believed he developed an intuitive sense of when something catastrophically wrong was about to occur.

Whether his judgement was reliable or not remained to be seen. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to put his assumption to the test.

"NNGG! It hurts!" Lanie cried out.

Though Lanie currently experienced a greater amount of mental strain than she had ever experienced in her life, Ves judged that she was still able to endure the pain.

Her life signs were growing more volatile but it had not yet reached any of the safety thresholds. Still, they were getting closer, so Ves might be forced to shut down this attempt before long if nothing changed.

He frowned a bit. "The bond is formed and the spiritual constructs of the two mechs have become active. Why hasn't the next phase commenced?"

The spiritual construct he rebuilt from the ground up was built by relying on his incomplete spiritual framework, his strong intuition and a heavy dose of intent. This construct was responsible for performing the various steps he conceived to enable Ancestral Possession.

With Goldie's help, his two test subjects successfully established a direct spiritual bond with each other. This new channel was not completely open. Otherwise, Lanie would get overwhelmed straight away by Imon's considerably more powerful spirit.

Instead, Goldie continued to pay close attention to the new bond and carefully limited the signal transfer so that Lanie would only receive the input that was necessary for her to improve her mech handling ability.

Yet nothing seemed to change. Lanie only became more and more pained as the new bond wasn't doing its job.

Ves figured out a possible reason. He neglected the role of the source. He quickly turned his attention to the other mech pilot.

"Mr. Ingvar!" He shouted. "I need you to help Lanie out. Don't just sit there in your cockpit while doing nothing. Concentrate your mind and set aside as many distractions as possible. Put yourself in a state of focus with as little fluctuations as possible. Your only thoughts should center around piloting the Bright Warrior in a calm and controlled fashion. Do this while at the same time imagining as if you are teaching someone."

The expert candidate reacted with surprise, but quickly did as instructed. He was worried about Lanie's distress, so he wanted to do everything possible to relieve her burden.

His active involvement immediately changed the equation. Even though he wasn't able to clear his mind and concentrate as well as Ves, his mind became a lot less cluttered than before.

This change altered the kind of signals he transferred through the direct bond. With the cooperation of her Bright Warrior mech, Lanie became much more able to process the foreign input she received.

"Hmmm, I miscalculated." He frowned.

He already figured out a couple of factors that put undue strain on Lanie's mind. Piloting the Bright Warrior was already a burden to her, so adding even a modest amount of input on top of that brought her much closer to the edge.

On top of that, the spiritual construct that was supposed to filter and regulate the input did not work as anticipated.

If he used a normal mech pilot as the source, then the spiritual construct should have been able to process the input properly.

Yet Ves didn't pick a normal mech pilot for a good reason. According to one of his theories, the strength of the source had to fit within a certain range.

A mech pilot without spiritual potential was completely unsuitable to act as a source. Their weak spirits were almost fully tucked inward. It was impossible for Ves to draw any of them out and transmit signals through the direct bond.

He needed to employ someone with at least some spiritual potential. Yet Ves didn't consider this option to be ideal because potential alone was not useful. Only when a mech pilot's potential had bloomed to an extent would they be able to do something with their spiritual energy.

This was why Ves settled on expert candidates as the ideal source. With someone like Imon Ingvar acting as Lanie's teacher, he would be able to transfer enough skills over the direct bond.

To be honest, Imon was not his first choice. He considered opting for expert pilots such as Venerable Joshua instead, but quickly realized that the strength disparity was too great.

An expert pilot was directly capable of overpowering a direct bond, thereby smashing through any limiters that Ves had set and potentially flood Lanie's mind with an excess of input that would surely have devastating consequences on her mind!

As the experiment quickly stabilized, Ves became relieved that most of his guesses and assumptions turned out to be accurate. Now that he handled some the unexpected variables, the bond had stabilized and Lanie received a steady amount of mental signals that no longer pushed her close to the edge.

"It's better sir, but.. nghh.. I still can't hold on too long."

Ves contemplated moving on to the next step of his plan, but he hesitated.

Lanie may have gained a reprieve, but she already went through a difficult ordeal. She didn't seem to be in the right state to put her enhanced abilities to the test.

If Ves was working with a more disposable test subject such as a pirate or some other person he didn't care about, then he wouldn't have hesitated to proceed with his original experiment.

Yet this wasn't the case. Lanie was someone who possessed a lot of promise and might go on to become one of the most powerful Larkinson mech pilots of her generation. He had already pushed his luck to a great extent. Just one bad occurrence could cause everything to tumble down.

He suppressed his curiosity and urge to gather more data and made the prudent decision.

"I am ending this session. Please stay calm."

He told Goldie to dissolve the direct bond while he shut down various systems that enabled the current state. The two mech pilots shut down their mechs in a controlled fashion.

Soon enough, Lanie breathed in relief as she no longer endured any pressure.

When Lanie and Imon finally emerged out of the cockpits and lowered themselves to the deck, Ves left his workstation and approached his two test subjects.

He quickly scanned Imon with his spiritual senses and did not detect anything amiss. That was to be expected.

Lanie did not look so great. From a mental perspective, she looked like she had run a day-long marathon or something. Her mind had become shaky and she looked as if she was unable to regain her center.

"Take the rest of the day off and go to sleep. You'll feel better after you've enjoyed a good night's sleep." Ves suggested based on his own experiences with excessive mental strain. "If that doesn't work, keep resting until you're back to normal."

The young woman cradled her head as if Ves had whacked it with a stick. "I briefly felt as if I was a much stronger mech pilot than before. What exactly.. is this all about?"

Ves smiled and nudged his head to Imon. "I'm sure you have already guessed the answer. What you have just tried out is a new and hidden feature of my Bright Warrior mechs. It's still a bit rough so I have to tinker with it some more. While it's a shame that we haven't been able to see you in action, what you have just told me is highly encouraging. Did you really feel as if you became a lot better than before?"

She nodded while glancing speculatively at Imon. "For a moment, I felt like I completely mastered the Bright Warrior despite the fact this was the first time I piloted it for real. All kinds of thoughts, considerations and even reflexes filled my consciousness."

"Has any of it stuck?" Ves asked an important question.

She shook her head. "No, sir. It's all gone now. However... I still remember a portion of the stuff that spoke to me the most. Even though I only grasped just 1 or 0.1 percent of what I became exposed to, I think I can become a much better mech pilot after I've processed what I've learned!"

Ves and Imon reacted with interest. If this was true, then Lanie definitely benefited from this brief experience!

Chapter 2714: Lanie's Good Day

Ves frowned as he finished going over all of the logs and other data of his previous experiment.

Clearly, a couple of aspects didn't go according to plan. He had already made some small tweaks to the spiritual construct embedded in the spiritual foundation of the Bright Warrior design, but that wouldn't do much against the faults he had just ascertained.

His original intention for Ancestral Possession was to establish a mechanism where a much more skilled mech pilot was able to transfer his or her considerable piloting skill to a weaker recipient.

While Ves ended the initial session too soon before it came to that point, Lanie's feedback suggested that she might have truly been able to exert more strength than her normal self.

If Ves fixed some of the problems he ascertained before, Lanie would definitely be in a good enough state to make use of her temporary boost.

He should feel happy about this result. Even if it was only a preliminary indication, the signs were all hopeful. He finally managed to improve an ability he conceived before into a workable state.

"It's just that the conditions of activating it are too harsh." He sighed.

It needed the active and conscious cooperation of Goldie. If she was indisposed or unable to respond to the requests of the mech pilots, then who would be able to form a direct bond?

This wasn't something that Ves could automate with his current skillset. If he attempted to tamper with the Larkinson Network to this degree, it could easily warp and turn into a mess.

Another difficult condition was that the mech pilots had to be very specific. Not everyone could act as a suitable source and recipient.

The former had to be a mech pilot with spiritual potential or an expert candidate.

The number of clansmen who fit in these two boxes probably didn't surpass a hundred at this time.

As for the recipient, they should be capable of handling the input. This meant that they needed at least some favorable combination of genetic aptitude, spiritual potential and other talent factors.

If Imon's considerable piloting skill suddenly poured into a mech pilot who was unable to match Lanie's mental resilience, then an explosive result might easily occur!

All of these limitations substantially reduced the practicality and usability of Ancestral Possession.

Ves rubbed his smooth-shaven chin in thought. "The good news is that this is just an initial result. As long as I progress my design philosophy further, I will gradually gain new insights, formulate new theories and develop new techniques which can substantially improve the combat application of this ability."

That would probably take years or decades to come to fruition. While that did not sound ideal to Ves, he found it to be an acceptable tradeoff considering the incredible potential of this invention.

It was very easy for a mech designer to improve the performance of a mech, but it was a lot more difficult to improve the performance of a mech pilot!

"This may prove useful in the long run." He concluded. "It may even become a key feature of the Larkinson Clan and the Bright Warrior mechs in particular. This is something that only a Larkinson can do.

Ves cared a lot about that. Ever since he established his Larkinson Clan, he constantly sought ways to make it more exceptional.

Just like mech designers and mech companies, those who did not excel at something quickly got lost in the crowd. The competitors who merely settled for average wouldn't be able to leverage any unique advantages when it truly mattered.

For example, the Larkinson Clan would have undoubtedly lost the Battle of Reckoning without the various innovations he introduced. If he could introduce one more unexpected variable to the equation, then his enemies would make even bigger miscalculations!

Above all else, Ves wanted to fulfill his desire to make the Larkinsons good at something. They needed a recognizable advantage that defined them as a strong force.

"I'm not sure whether Ancestral Possession is the right answer, but it's certainly a candidate."

The development of mech pilots was crucial to his future plans. One of the ways in which the Larkinson Clan fell short compared to more mature groups like the Cross Clan was the lack of truly skilled and experienced mech pilots.

While Ves had no doubt that his mech pilots would do great in battles involving third-class mechs, they were simply too inadequate in the previous battle.

Therefore, a solution that could elevate his mech pilots quickly would be very useful even if it was only applicable in some cases.

As Ves began to finalize the spiritual design of the new Bright Warrior based on his initial experiment, one of his test subjects experienced a very different day after she took a good rest.

When Lanie woke up and had breakfast with her parents, she left her family's quarters and moved to the mech academy that was housed on another deck of the Spirit of Bentheim.

"Hey, Lanie!" A fellow cadet called her as she stepped onto the grounds. "Where did you go yesterday? You look more tired than usual."

"I can't say. I'm supposed to keep my mouth shut."

"Ohhh. How mysterious."

Despite her classmate's interest, the other girl knew better than to pry any further. Confidentiality was taken seriously in the Larkinson Clan.

Since their first class started soon, they quickly moved into the academy building and attended their first theoretical lessons.

"...the reason why we have taught you math and basic physics in your previous courses is because they are necessary prerequisites to study mechanics. Now, I'm not talking about learning to fiddle with machines or being able to design your own mech. I know you kids hate being put through these lessons, but the understanding you gain from here will save your life one day..."

Usually, Lanie listened attentively to the lecturers. The Larkinson veterans the academy employed as instructors all possessed rich experience and a lot of insight in what truly mattered in the field of battle.

"...we know you aren't nerds, so we don't expect you to achieve the same results as those who are raring to become an engineer or mech designer. In this course, we will build on Newton's laws of motion and delve into astrodynamics..."

They always had something interesting to say everyday. The only issue was that not every veteran was cut out to be a teacher. Fortunately, the mech cadets could supplement their knowledge by reading their textbooks or attending an optional virtual class.

"...why astrodynamics? Well, anyone who fought a battle in space will be able to tell you why. Simply put, movement in space is different from movement on land. I'm sure you've experienced that when you've piloted virtual mechs and when you took your cute little training mechs out for a space walk. Now, you may have been able to learn how to control a mech in space through trial and error, but this is not a systematic approach..."

As Lanie listened to one of the instructors trying to teach a principle by drawing upon his experiences in one of the Bright-Vesia Wars, she slowly began to frown.

"...turning around and flying in another direction is not as simple as pointing your mech where you want to go. You need to orient your mech at a steeper angle in order to counteract your existing momentum if you want to be able to turn more efficiently. Also, when you fight in the vicinity of a planet, you need to keep an eye on orbits. Everything has a tendency to curve around and that is counter-intuitive to humans like us who prefer to visualize everything in straight lines..."

Usually, the lessons taught by this particular trueblood Larkinson instructor was rather obtuse to her and her fellow classmates.

"...oh, and you ground pounders shouldn't be snoozing during this class either. Any projectile fired in the air will get subjected by gravity and get pulled down. While artillery mechs and the like can precisely calculate the trajectory of a shell, your decision-making process will constantly be delayed because you are being held back by your mechs. If you can develop a good enough understanding of how projectiles arc at different gravities, you'll be able to make sound combat decisions several more steps in advance..."

As the instructor began to show numerous formulas and calculations on a projected screen, Lanie didn't have as much trouble in understanding the theory as she thought.

Her old self would have struggled to stay on top of all of the numbers. She may be a fast learner when it came to piloting mechs, but she wasn't as good in all of these science lessons.

Yet now, Lanie could follow the instructor without failing to catch up. While that didn't mean she could make use of the formulas like a pro, she possessed an odd sense of

familiarity and understanding when she viewed them. It was.. as if she already knew how to perform complex maneuvers in space.

Instances like these took place in her subsequent classes as well. When she and her fellow cadets donned protective suits and held rods that were supposed to simulate swords, she began to spar against another girl.

Nicky also ranked high in their class. Lanie frequently squared off against her as she was one of the few sparrers who could give her a challenging experience.

Yet as soon as Nicky lunged in, Lanie already adjusted her body and parried the incoming stab with relatively little wasted motion.

Her body was already moving forward at this time. When Nicky hastily tried to recover and pull back her rod for a block, Lanie had already outpaced her and thumped her weapon against her opponent's chest at close range.

"I slipped up." Nicky grumbled. "Again."

Once they launched their second bout, Nicky approached the spar more carefully. She circled around a bit and tried to find an opening to attack.

Lanie didn't let Nicky have her way. Somehow, she knew that it was better to take the initiative and disrupt her opponent's rhythm.

For this reason, she moved forward and launched a flurry of strikes. Nicky quickly had to throw away all of her considerations and became fully preoccupied with defending against the storm of attacks.

At a critical moment, Lanie overextended herself a bit.

This caused Nicky to launch a counterattack. She swept her rod to strike at Lanie's side!

Yet before her weapon could hit the mark, Lanie's body swung backwards just enough to evade the incoming weapon.

"What?!"

Lanie moved in a way she never thought possible. She quickly stopped her backwards motion and leaned forward again in order to stab out and strike Nicky straight in her sternum!

The other cadet's protective suit briefly hardened in order to bleed off the force from the attack.

Nicky wasn't hurt, but her pride simply couldn't accept the result!

"What's going on, Lanie? Did you receive some private tutoring or something?"

"Something like that." Lanie briefly frowned before she schooled her face.

This was odd! As they fought further bouts, Lanie always managed to find a way to solve Nicky in less than ten exchanges of blows.

Normally, Nicky put up a much greater fight! Part of that was because of their relatively high skill, but another part of it was because they both knew each other's moves and capabilities.

Now that Lanie began to perform her old moves more efficiently and pull out maneuvers that her classes had never taught, Nicky completely became outclassed!

Nicky let out a grunt in frustration. "This is infuriating! How the hell did you become so good, Lanie?! Who did you bribe to get tutored by an expert pilot?"

The woman in question could only twitch her mouth in response. She could hardly explain the changes herself. Even though she felt uncomfortable whenever she pulled off a brand-new move, it was strange that she always felt assured that it would work!

This was not normal!

Chapter 2715: The New Standard

Ves leaned back on his chair and waved his hand. The projection showing Lanie's latest results and performance indicators in her classes disappeared.

The comparison between her old self and her new self revealed a lot of remarkable differences.

"She's gotten better. A lot better."

Lanie's performance improved in almost every aspect compared to before. In some cases, the difference was only slight, but in other cases, it was as if she had become a different person.

While she didn't instantly turn into a mech pilot who was as good as Imon Ingvar, the gap between the two had narrowed by a significant margin.

What Ves was particularly impressed with was that her scores in sparring sessions and simulated battles shot up drastically. She could never have improved so much if she merely gained a lot of knowledge.

"Whatever carried over after the experiment has integrated deeply into her mind." Ves concluded.

Why was this the case? Ves came up with various explanations.

Perhaps a piece of Imon was left behind.

Perhaps the brief connection caused Imon to make a strong imprint in Lanie's mind.

Perhaps Lanie's mind unconsciously sought to return to its highest state.

No matter which possibility was accurate, the results did not lie.

That didn't mean he considered his experiment to be a solid success. Far from it. Aside from the practicality problems that he had already identified, he also grew concerned about another consequence.

"How much contamination did she receive?"

Even though Ves and Goldie tried their best to limit the spiritual transmission to signals related to mech piloting, who knew what actually went through.

What Imon transferred to Lanie back then was not pure piloting theory. Instead, he conveyed his own piloting style, his own interpretation of mech combat and his self-developed arsenal of techniques.

A high degree of bias was inevitable. There was no standard approach to mech piloting. Different schools of thought all advocated different philosophies and outlooks on how to pilot a mech, and individual mech pilots all developed their own interpretations from the lessons they learned.

Ves wasn't able to judge whether Lanie had been affected by these personal interpretations and to what extent she leaned towards Imon's style of fighting.

"It's fine as long as it doesn't happen too often."

Indoctrination was inevitable. Every mech cadet received their learning from a given source. This source was inevitably biased one way or another.

Even without the experiment, Lanie and the other young Larkinson cadets would have been subject to the opinions, interpretations and other forms of subjective knowledge from their mech instructors.

From what Ves picked up from one of the reports he read, the Larkinson Mech Academy was already split up in different factions divided by their origin state. Each group of mech instructors wanted to push a different set of mech doctrines and piloting styles.

For example, the former Brighters showed a preference for asymmetrical warfare. They disliked straightforward clashes and preferred to fight more conservatively if they didn't enjoy a solid advantage.

The former citizens of the Sentinel Kingdom adopted a more aggressive approach. Their long history of fighting against Nyxian pirates called for a more proactive and aggressive approach.

The Sentinel instructors disliked delays and showed a high preference for taking the initiative and abiding by the principles of momentum-based warfare.

Which approach was right? Which approach was wrong? The mech pilot community couldn't come to a consensus. Everyone had already picked their favorite horse and couldn't be persuaded to change their minds.

Ves knew that it wasn't good for the Larkinson Mech Academy to remain split and divided in its teaching direction.

"It's not my problem." He shook his head.

He eagerly left this headache to Principal Ronsel Larkinson. One way or another, the mech instructors had to come together and figure out a specific teaching direction that fit the Larkinson Clan best.

Ves turned his thoughts back on his experiment.

"If Lanie gets contaminated by anyone, then it's not bad to get contaminated by Imon."

One of the reasons why he picked Imon Ingvar out of all of the alternatives was because he was the best and most solid option.

Even though Imon possessed a brash personality, his piloting foundation was extremely solid.

These were distinct traits of his that were both recognizable.

Since Lanie was not a reckless mech cadet by nature, Ves would easily be able to spot whether his test subject underwent an extensive personality change.

For now, the results were too early to tell. Lanie's first day back in the academy didn't reveal too much when it came to her personality. She was too confused about her changes to feel confident and good about herself.

That might change in the following week, but Ves had a feeling that the contamination wasn't too severe. Lanie would have acted more proactively in her classes if that was the case.

This was a good sign, though Ves wondered whether he'd be able to 'control' the degree of contamination.

"The strength of the source and the mental resilience of the recipient probably affects this as well, but I should be able to raise or lower it by changing some settings."

Usually, Ves was adverse to mental contamination because it posed a threat to him or the people he cared about. Yet he could think of several scenarios where he might actually wish to make use of contamination.

He grinned. "For example, if I quickly need to set up a uniform group of mech pilots in order to establish a new battle network or something, I can make use of contamination to get everyone on the same page."

So far, Ves only created battle networks for his Swordmaidens, Penitent Sisters, Battle Criers and Ylvainans.

There weren't any further sub-groups within his Larkinson Clan who were uniform and cohesive enough to qualify for a battle network.

The Flagrant Vandals came close, but they had never been too keen on making every mech pilot identical from each other. They prized individuality to a high degree. This allowed them to develop many interesting personalities such as Venerable Rosa Orfan.

As for his other mech forces such as the Avatars of Myth, their identity wasn't distinct enough yet. Just like the Bright Warrior IB design, they needed to move away from their vanilla starting point and develop some unique flavors.

Subjecting the Avatar mech pilots to some contamination with the help of his Bright Warrior mechs might be an effective way to empower Commander Melkor's troops.

Ves furrowed his brows.

"It sounds crazy, though. This solution is too drastic. The side effects and unintended consequences will likely be severe."

He would never adopt this radical solution unless he was pushed into a corner. If he had conducted this experiment before the Battle of Reckoning, then he probably would have applied to his Avatars so that his clan would be able to deploy an additional battle formation.

For now, there was no need to take this dangerous shortcut when the proper route was safer. He was willing to let the Avatars develop their identity in an organic fashion.

Once Ves wrapped up all of his notes and conclusions, he decided to finalize the Bright Warrior IB.

The mech could keep its Ancestral Possession ability now that Ves had found a way to make it work. It didn't matter whether the ability was still in a crude and rudimentary state. Since the Bright Warrior was exclusive to the Larkinson Clan, he didn't need to pay any attention to customer expectations.

He could change or tweak the spiritual configuration of his new Bright Warrior model without needing to account to an authority figure.

"I'm the ultimate authority when it comes to mechs in the Larkinson Clan. I can rubber stamp all of my own decisions!"

When Ves eventually returned to the design lab, he worked with Gloriana and Juliet to put the finishing touches on the mech model.

"This mech represents the future of the Larkinson Clan." Ves proudly spoke as he formally ended work on the project. "While the role of the Bright Warrior Mark I Version B is not as flashy as that of the Version C at the time of its introduction, it is still an indispensable mech model for our clan. Every new Larkinson mech pilot will likely spend their initial years in our mech forces by piloting this mech. Some may move on while others will stick to their Bright Warriors on a permanent basis. Whatever the case, our troops will make good use of our latest work."

The Bright Warrior may not be as unique as the Valkyrie Redeemer or the Transcendent Punisher, but it was definitely the mech with the highest degree of compatibility.

Just like Goldie and the clan itself, the mech was designed to unify different mech pilots who came from different backgrounds.

Gloriana dramatically released a breath. "Finally, I'm done with your pet project. I can finally get back to working on the Cherub, Blinding Mech and Devious designs."

Even though she contributed a lot to the final phases of the Bright Warrior Project, she did not hide her lack of passion. As far as she was concerned, Ves had hijacked her time.

"The defense of the new Bright Warrior is not comparable to the older one, but it's considerably faster and more agile." Juliet noted, highlighting her own contribution to the finished design. "It fights best in space, but it can still perform well in the air. The only snag is that its locomotion systems are still below average even if you detach the flight system."

This was one of the downsides of both the old and new Bright Warriors. They were designed with flight systems in mind so the mech wasn't optimized for walking on land.

It would make for a less-than-average landbound mech if forced to fight under such conditions, but this was an acceptable tradeoff as far as Ves was concerned.

In any case, the Larkinson Clan was first and foremost a spaceborn clan, so it was essential to flesh out a mech roster that excelled in space combat.

As for landbound combat, Ves figured he might design some flightless mechs when he was done with all of the mechs on his waiting list.

Ves proceeded to transfer the design schematics and all of the relevant documentation to the Production Department of the Spirit of Bentheim. While the production halls had been preoccupied with fabricating replacement parts and replacement mechs, he quickly wanted them to switch over to producing as many Bright Warrior IB's as possible.

"It's not enough, though." He frowned.

With twenty production halls, Ves estimated it would take at least a year to produce the thousands of Bright Warrior IB's needed to meet the needs of all of his mech forces.

Even if every production line was able to produce a Bright Warrior IB in two days, that meant it would take at least three months to churn out a thousand units.

Could the Larkinson Clan afford to wait that long?

"Absolutely not!"

Therefore, aside from employing the production capacity of his other ships, Ves already planned to rent some additional production facilities at his upcoming destination.

He had already issued instructions in advance. While it was not easy to reserve so much production capacity as a foreigner, money was able to solve many problems.

"Besides, we also have a local guide."

He still needed to earn Dr. Frederico Navarro's approval, but it wasn't a big issue to request his help in brokering a deal with the local mech industry.

The expeditionary fleet had been badly savaged, so the Golden Skull Alliance urgently needed to rebuild its forces.

As Ves fleshed out his plans for the duration of his stay in the Life Research Association, Ketis requested to enter his office.

"What's up, Ketis?" Ves looked up from his terminal.

The younger mech designer put up a serious expression. "I'd like to make a request on behalf of myself and the Swordmaidens. It's a rather big one, but I think it's necessary for us to do this. Please don't refuse."

Ves frowned. What was this about?

"Tell me. What do you want?"

"We'd like to separate from the main fleet in order to visit the Heavensword Association for a time. We intend to go on an exchange. Once we gain what we need, we'll return, but only if we are successful. If we fail.. I'm not sure if we'll be able to get back."

This sounded serious!

Chapter 2716: Great Omanderie Festival

Ves never expected that just as the expeditionary fleet arrived at its first resting point, the Swordmaidens already wanted to leave.

He immediately grew worried.

Splitting up his clan was the last thing he wanted to see! What if the Swordmaidens encountered trouble? It was impossible for the main fleet to come to the aid of his protégé and the women he appreciated the most.

With at least hundreds of light-years separating him from the former pirates, he wouldn't be able to do anything but fret in his seat if they fell into some sort of ambush!

Ketis already anticipated what Ves was worried about.

"It's fine, Ves." She stepped closer to his desk and smiled in reassurance. "Venerable Dise and Commander Sendra have already spoken to Colonel Pendulum's staff. The Infinity Guards still have some squadrons at their disposal that can be assigned to escort us for the duration of our trip. The travel time between the Life Research Association and the Heavensword Association isn't too long as long as we use the established trade routes. It's not a dangerous journey."

He knew that, but that didn't ease his worries.

"Let's take a step back and start from the beginning. Why do you want to separate from the main fleet and visit a different state?"

His former student transmitted a virtual brochure to him. Ves quickly manipulated his comm in order to project what he received.

[WELCOME TO THE GREATER OMANDERIE FESTIVAL, THE MOST EXHUBERANT CELEBRATION IN THE HEAVENSWORD ASSOCIATION!]

"You Swordmaidens want to go through all of this trouble just to join a party?"

Ketis impatiently shook her head. "The Great Omanderie Festival is more than just a party. We're not heading out here just to go on a holiday and have fun. We have greater goals in mind. As long as our trip succeeds, we'll be revived!"

That was an ambitious claim! Ves couldn't help but grow skeptical.

"How?"

"By taking part in the open competitions that are held as part of the Great Omanderie Festival. The Heavensword Association holds many competitions, but none are as large as this one while at the same time allowing entry to foreigners. The timing is just right for us. As long as we depart next week, we'll make it in time to take part in the preliminaries. There are a lot of people arriving from all across Majestic Teal, so the competition organizers have to cut down a lot of participants before the main event begins."

"I see. So it's that kind of contest." Ves murmured.

He understood Ketis and her fellow sisters better now. He himself initially shot to prominence when he participated in the Leemar Open Competition back when he was just a Novice who looked up to the Friday Coalition as a blessed land.

That was a long time ago. Ves briefly indulged in his memories. He remembered the kindness shown by Master Carmin Olson and also appreciated the time he spent with Oleg Vorn.

It was too bad that greater events forced them to become enemies. Ves still respected Master Olson, but that did not stop him from wanting to tear down her state!

His life-changing experience with the Leemar Open Competition allowed him to understand the context of the Great Omanderie Festival a little better.

Perhaps other participants merely wanted to join the fun, but the Swordmaidens were never the vain type. If they wanted to join a public spectacle, then they likely had greater considerations in mind.

She quickly confirmed his suspicions.

"A core attraction of the festival is the contests it holds. In truth, it holds dozens of different contests, each of them challenging the participants in different ways. For now, we've decided to apply to four different contests. There is the duelist swordsmanship

competition, the group swordsmanship competition, the duelist swordsman mech competition and the group swordsman mech competition."

They were basically contests that pitted individuals or small groups in either personal combat or mech combat.

Ves grew a bit worried.

"How dangerous are these contests? If their format entails using real swords and real mechs, then accidents can easily occur."

"It's true that the competition mandates the use of real equipment rather than practice tools, but it's not as dangerous as you think. A true swordsman or swordswoman won't acknowledge any contest that is held with using fake weapons. That said, the contests are primarily meant to showcase skill, so good equipment alone won't be able to carry anyone to victory."

She briefly explained the individual formats of the aforementioned competitions.

For the personal combat contests, participants were allowed to use their own swords as long as they were 'pure'. They couldn't incorporate any active tech that allowed them to heat up, transform or perform other weird tricks. The organizers were more than willing to provide standard-issue swords if necessary, though it was better to commission one of the many swordsmiths in the Heavensword Association for a custom piece.

"So you and your fellow Swordmaidens are allowed to use your own greatswords?" Ves eyed the weapon floating behind her back.

A while ago, Ves issued Breyer alloy greatswords to every Swordmaiden. While it wasn't the best second-class material to forge swords from, they were leagues better than anything that Ves had access to at the time.

Of course, Ketis received something better. She already possessed a sophisticated CFA greatsword. Ves had modified it for her multiple times in order to obfuscate its origin and strengthen some of its attributes.

Most notably, Ves incorporated a portion of Unending alloy to her personal weapon so that it became even more potent!

"We can indeed employ our own swords." Ketis happily smiled. "Still, we shouldn't underestimate the weapons that other participants can bring. The seeded participants who come from Heavensword all have heirlooms or custom-forged masterpieces."

"I see. If the personal combat contests all mandate the use of real swords, how will you be able to stave off death and injury?"

"A true warrior should never quake from the threat of death. We Swordmaidens have conquered our fears." She stated seriously before lightening up a bit. "Don't worry, though. The festival is supposed to be a pleasant occasion, so not a lot of blood will be spilled. There are multiple special shield generators active in every arena and venue. With the help of special protective suits that are highly resistant to cuts, these shield generators are constantly on the lookout for any threatening incidents. As soon as a blade begins to cut any suit, the shield generators will erect a protective energy barrier around the victim in question to stop any wounds from going further."

"I see. Nothing bad will happen as long as the relevant systems are working properly. Have there been any accidents in the history of these competitions?"

"There have been a couple of nasty accidents in the early history of the festival, but the Heavensworders learned from them and increased the number of redundancies. The personal combat contests are perfectly safe these days."

The reputation of the Heavensword Association was at stake, so he didn't doubt her assertion.

"Who will participate in these single and group contests?"

"Everyone Swordmaiden who can pick up a weapon." She grinned. "Aside from Venerable Dise, Commander Sendra and the other veteran Swordmaidens will all take part as individuals or in groups. We'll even be bringing our trainees. They probably won't get past the preliminaries, but this is a great learning experience for them. I think Sendra will score the highest."

"Are expert pilots allowed to take part?"

"Of course not. Both expert candidates and expert pilots are on a whole other level. There are too many problems related to their participation so they are just left out entirely."

There were both practical and philosophical reasons to leave high-ranking mech pilots out of the equation. As humans who attained a higher life phase, they became comprehensively stronger through mysterious transformations. This was not something that involved pure skill anymore.

Ves asked a few more questions about the personal combat competitions. He learned that the quality of swords actually mattered quite a lot.

A stronger and sharper sword could cut through or overpower a weaker and more fragile blade!

If this was the case, then Ves didn't possess full confidence in the weapons of the Swordmaidens. Aside from Ketis, the rest would be wielding weapons that could still be chipped or cracked during each serious bout against a seeded contestant.

"This is part of combat as well." She shrugged. "There are many ways to prevent your blade from getting damaged. You just have to work harder than those who wield better weapons."

Ves wasn't sure why the contest organizers simply restricted the format so that every participant could only make use of standardized swords. It seemed that the competitions didn't revolve around pure skill after all. The native participants probably enjoyed a greater advantage in this aspect.

"Let's move on to the mech competitions. Will you be utilizing your own mechs as well?"

"No." The female mech designer replied. "The variety and capabilities of mechs diverge so much from each other that it's too chaotic to let them all in. The single and group mech combat competitions will all mandate the use of a single landbound swordsman mech model. Let me show you so you can see for yourself."

She projected a white-coated machine that looked a bit boring in his eyes. While it possessed a good range of motion and decent mechanical strength, the model was bland and neutral in other aspects.

The good part about this was that the overall design was very stable. It offered good protection to the mech pilot, both because the cockpit was well-protected and because the mech did not possess the strength to pierce through the frontal armor and sink in deep with a sudden blow.

Of course, it was an entirely different matter if one of the mechs jumped in the air and drove the tip of its sword down the chest of another mech that had been toppled onto its back.

There were plenty of ways that a duel could end in tragedy!

"How will the mech pilots escape death or injury?"

"There are stronger safety precautions in place." She told him. "Not only are their stronger shield generators in place, the cockpit ejection system is extremely fast. It only takes a tenth of the time for the cockpit to launch from the rear compared to other ejection systems."

"That's not a guarantee for safety."

She looked a bit downcast. "You're not wrong. Mechs are big, dangerous and incredibly powerful in the right circumstances. While the safety precautions work well enough in

one-on-one duels, they sometimes have trouble with coping with situations that can arise from the five-on-five group matches. That's where most of the accidents take place these days."

Despite acknowledging these risks, Ketis left no doubt in her tone that the Swordmaiden mech pilots would not miss out on this risky event!

"What are your goals for all of this?" Ves probed. "I can understand it if you feel the need to test or prove your martial prowess, but this sounds like it's about more. Are you hoping to win the contests?"

"Not particularly. We'll be doing our best, but the competition is too good. We just need to put up a good showing in order to help us achieve our real aim. We want to attract a lot of recruits."

"You can recruit qualified personnel while remaining in the main fleet. There are plenty of people to pick up at our next destination. Port systems are never short of job seekers looking to join a good crew."

"It's not the same, Ves. The kind of women we need for our Swordmaidens are very rare in civilized space. While we are in the process of raising a batch of trainees, it takes far too long for them to mature. We don't want our combat strength to be limited to a single mech company. We'll only become less relevant as the other mech forces expand their mech piloting ranks by the thousands in the coming years."

"I would never neglect the Swordmaidens."

Ketis lowered her head. "I know Ves, but not everyone shares your high regard for us. If we want to hold our own in the clan, we need to raise our strength in the most direct way possible. We need to acquire strong swordman mech specialists whose fighting styles and outlooks are compatible with ours. In our opinion, there should be plenty of them among the Heavensworders and sword enthusiasts flocking to the Great Omanderie Festival. This is our only chance to revitalize the Swordmaidens!"

Ves faced a difficult choice. He had a lot of misgivings about this trip, yet as his eyes fell on his student's nervous and downcast expression, he didn't have the heart to reject her proposal. She was looking forward to this trip so much that it would crush her and her fellow Swordmaidens if he played spoilsport.

"Very well." He reluctantly decided. "The Swordmaidens can go if they want."

"Yes! Thank you, Ves!"

Chapter 2717: Plain Mech

The Great Omanderie Festival indeed sounded like a great opportunity to the Swordmaidens.

Back when they were known as Lydia's Swordmaidens, they used to number hundreds of mech pilots. They had grown into a formidable outfit in their own right in the Faris Star Region.

Sadly, numerous battles caused their ranks of active mech pilots to dwindle to a single mech company. The catastrophe that took place on Aeon Corona VII was the most devastating moment in their history.

They should have laid low for a few years in order to restore their lost strength. Yet what happened to them afterwards only led to further losses.

Their lack of external recruitment made it so that they had never been able to gain enough time to replenish their ranks before they were thrown into yet another dangerous battle.

Ever since they joined the Larkinson Clan, Ves treated them with care. He never wished to throw them against his enemies head-on, because frontal clashes always led to a lot of attrition.

Instead, he had gotten used to keeping the Swordmaidens in reserve. This not only preserved the lives of their mech pilots, but also allowed him to employ their strength in the most favorable circumstances during a battle.

While this still allowed the Swordmaidens to prove their worth in battle, he was not blind to the fact that they thought this was less than ideal.

Swordmaidens loved to get in the fray! They should be fighting in the front alongside the Avatars and other elite mech forces. Instead, Ves' unwillingness to lose any of the elite veterans that had survived every disaster their group caused them to feel as if they were being coddled.

Their pride and honor did not allow them to accept their new circumstances.

"Our blades will dull from lack of use. We need to contribute more comprehensively in battle to keep our edge." Ketis emphatically stated.

The Swordmaidens truly saw a lot of hope in a possible trip to the Heavensword Association. However, Ves wasn't really sure it would work out the way they expected.

"How difficult will it be for you to pick up the recruits you want? Your requirements are rather strict and the people who meet them will likely be considering better opportunities."

His student didn't show any concern. "It's not going to be a problem. We are strong and proven warriors and we have the records to back it up. The recent battles we've fought are excellent showcases of what prospective members will become a part of as long as they join our ranks. Besides, the fact that we have an expert pilot who is willing to provide tutoring in both swordsmanship and mech piloting is already an irresistible draw to many swordswomen."

That was true. Expert pilots were mythical and distant figures to many mech pilots. Who wouldn't want to come under the tutelage of one of these superhuman heroes? Just a half hour's worth of tutoring was enough for any mech pilot to become clear on what they needed to do to improve!

The Swordmaidens hadn't chosen to take part in the Great Omanderie Festival on an impulse. They planned ahead and accounted for many variables. Despite their gruff exteriors, not every Swordmaiden was a muscled brute. Their leaders were shrewd and thoughtful enough to approach this opportunity with a solid gameplan.

"Are you really not aiming for the top?" Ves asked again. "I didn't take you Swordmaidens for settling with less than the best."

"We know our limits." Ketis crossed her arms and sighed. "If we took part a decade later, then it would probably be a different story, but we are still in a moment of weakness. We really can't compare to the champions prepared and nurtured by the various groups of the Heavensword Association and elsewhere. They have been preparing to win the various competitions for many years."

While Ketis sounded rather accepting of these facts, Ves was still sensitive enough to sense an undercurrent of dissatisfaction in her mind.

Just because she acknowledged the current reality didn't mean she was willing to embrace it! If the circumstances enabled it, she truly wanted her and her Swordmaidens to reach the finals!

Ves hesitated for a time. A lot of considerations swept through his mind. He recalled his debt of gratitude for everything the Swordmaidens had done to help him out. They didn't owe him their service, but they fought and died for him anyway. While they didn't fight solely for him, it was undeniable that there would have been a lot more Swordmaidens alive today if they didn't commit to the Larkinson Clan.

He valued their unflinching loyalty. While it was not the kind of dedication that was engraved in their very bones like the Battle Criers, that only made their deeds more praiseworthy.

While he had already accommodated them plenty of times, it didn't hurt to prepare more favors for them. He could think of several ways to increase their chances to perform well in the Grand Omanderie Festival.

"When will you leave?"

"It will take some time to complete our preparations." She answered. "Not only do we need to wait for the Star Striders to prepare a separate escort, we also have to purchase a lot of training equipment and supplies for our next step. We'll probably be ready to depart in a week."

Ves thoughtfully nodded. "I can help you in various ways. We can work together to improve the gear of your Swordmaidens. I can also help you in another way that you're already familiar with. While I can't make you all as strong as I wish, I can still give some of you a powerful physical boost."

"Are you talking about implants and genetic modification? They can definitely help, but I've already spoken to Dr. Ranya about this. It takes months to complete all of the steps necessary for us to augment our physical capabilities. It's too late to begin now."

"I'm aware of that, but I have more ways to augment your bodies." Ves smiled coyly at her. "Did you remember the time when I fed you a bunch of candy that caused you to improve by leaps and bounds?"

She adopted a strange expression. "I do. Back then, I was awfully confused, but now that I think about it, you did something to me, right? Those candies are a lot more valuable than any augment I'm familiar with. Do you have.. more?"

"I do. Not as much as you think, but I still have plenty to transform your strength and the strength of many of your fellow Swordmaidens. I'll need to make some preparations beforehand. Your strongest group of Swordmaidens must come to my workshop in person once we emerge out of FTL travel. We can work on some other preparations in the meantime."

"Such as?"

"What if we can prepare Unending alloy greatswords for all of your Swordmaiden mech pilots? You won't have to worry about your blades succumbing to any enemy weapon."

"I thought you had already used up all of the Unending alloy at your disposal." Ketis said. "Where would we get the materials?"

Ves shrugged. "We'll just take it from one of our existing mechs. I'm sure the Shield of Samar won't mind if we slim it down a little bit. We don't even need to shave too much material from her shield and frame. The difference in scale means that fashioning 40 extra human-sized greatswords will only lose a trivial amount of mass."

Perhaps Venerable Jannzi wouldn't like it, but what could she do? Her mech was still under his control.

His offers came as a pleasant surprise to Ketis. As they discussed various other ways he could help the Swordmaidens out, she became a lot more hopeful about the success of this trip.

Naturally, there were concerns as well. While Ketis did not reject the offer to supply Unending alloy swords to her fellow Swordmaidens, she was afraid it might attract the greed of others.

Ves frowned as well. "How safe is the competition?"

"It's very safe. The Heavensword Association takes the festival and the contests seriously. If incidents of foul play took place, then the contest would be a lot less attractive to foreigners. That would seriously affect the universal appeal of the event, which is detrimental to the state."

That didn't mean that everything was fine and dandy. Ketis didn't have enough information to know for sure.

"Your Swordmaidens should keep their Breyer alloy swords just in case." Ves advised. "In the meantime, I'll be making some inquiries myself."

"Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me. This is what you all deserve."

Even though he had many design obligations, Ves decided to spare some time to help the Swordmaidens prepare.

Still, in order to supply more Attribute Candies, Ves urgently needed to acquire more Design Points. After he splurged most of his savings on the Odineye, he only had around 50,000 DP left.

This was not enough!

At most, he'd be able to boost every Swordmaiden mech pilot with only a single candy. This was a very inefficient way to improve their chances of winning.

Ves already decided it was better to limit the candies to just five individuals. This was enough to augment their best performing duelists while at the same time transform the combat strength of an entire group.

In fact, aside from augmenting 5 strong Swordmaiden mech pilots, he also wanted to boost Ketis and Venerable Dise while he was at it. Even though it would dilute the

amount of Candies reserved for the champion team, it would prevent the two most influential Swordmaidens from feeling left out.

Ves became quite busy now that he took on this added responsibility. Not only did he assist Ketis with the preparations of her trip, he also had to fabricate the first production copy of the Bright Warrior IB straight away.

When Gloriana entered his workshop with Clixie, she looked rather irked.

"I would rather spend our time on completing our remaining five mech design projects before we do this." She began. "Why are you so impatient?"

He couldn't tell her that he needed to fabricate a Bright Warrior IB in order to satisfy the System's requirements for evaluating his design and awarding him with a lot of DP.

"The Spirit of Bentheim will soon begin to mass produce our new Bright Warriors. You don't want the first copy to be a rough first attempt that was made by a team of ordinary mech technicians, do you? Our design deserves better. Let's do our best and provide our new mech model with a good start."

Though she didn't entirely agree with him, she didn't object any further. She partially agreed with his sentiment.

The issue was that their mindsets weren't optimal for this task.

When the pair began to fabricate the first new Bright Warrior that wasn't a prototype, neither of them entered into any special state of mind. They just approached their work as a necessary chore. While this did not detract too much from the quality of their work, their relatively lack of passion and commitment in their work prevented them from achieving exceptional results.

After three-and-a-half days of careful and meticulous work, they completed the Bright Warrior IB without any fanfare.

The couple looked at the first production copy with evident disappointment in their faces.

"It's nowhere near the Quint." Gloriana flatly said.

The first complete Bright Warrior IB complete with the components of all four of its configurations paled in comparison to one of their great successes.

"That's true, but the relation between the Quint and the Bright Warrior product line means we can finally upgrade our older masterwork to a proper second-class mech."

That was something to consider for later, as the Quint had morphed into a substantially different mech.

As for the newest mech that they had made by hand, neither of the two were in the mood to bestow a unique name to it. Its quality and workmanship simply hadn't reached the level where it deserved such treatment.

The mech was too plain, just like the design it was based upon.

Ves wasn't too upset by this failure. He would have five more chances to make another masterwork mech very soon.

At least he should be getting his DP.

Chapter 2718: Prosperous Hill System

Shortly after Ves and Gloriana created a rather disappointing first production copy of the Bright Warrior Mark I Version B, the expeditionary fleet finally reached its first true stop!

Hundreds of combat carriers, support ships and capital ships emerged out of FTL in rapid succession.

Their appearance alone represented a considerable show of force!

Even if the overall condition of the fleet was far beyond its peak, the Golden Skull Alliance was still one of the strongest fleets to visit this major port system.

If that wasn't enough, then the emergence of the Infinity Guard fleet a short distance away only furthered the forceful impression.

The vast majority of visitors and local powers couldn't fight against their combined might!

While their obvious strength ensured that no one in the star system would pick a fight with them anytime soon, they also attracted immediate attention from the authorities!

"Welcome to the Prosperous Hill System." Grand Captain Daria-Maria Vraken introduced to Ves. "This is the second-largest port system of the Life Research Association. The Lifers don't take kindly to letting any threatening fleet approach their settlements or space stations. We'll have to wait until traffic control assigns a track to us. They'll want to park us in an empty grid in the outer system to minimize our threat."

"I don't blame the authorities for being so careful. The destructive potential we possess can easily wipe out a city if we go rogue."

The Prosperous Hill System boasted four highly-developed planets and several settled moons. The former boasted populations numbering in the billions.

While that didn't make the planets too crowded, it was far too easy for a ship in orbit to drop something that could easily wipe out an entire city district!

Naturally, it wasn't that easy to perform a terrorist attack of this nature. Second-rate states possessed plenty of tech that could defend against incidental attacks from above.

It was best not to test them, though. The best way to prevent incidents was to deny any ship from entering the inner system in the first place.

Of course, that left the expeditionary fleet and every other visitor with the question of how they would be able to bring themselves and their goods inside.

Authorities in charge of Prosperous Hill had to establish an expansive transit and transportation network in the star system.

Every single starship, transport and shuttle was under their complete control. Only vetted Lifers who came from Prosperous Hill were allowed to design, produce, maintain and crew these vessels.

Prosperous Hill wasn't the only commerce-oriented star system that adopted such a strict traffic policy.

In fact, regimes like these would become a very common sight as Ves continued his travels.

Perhaps looser governments might allow visitors to approach their settled planets with a small number of vessels, but it was out of the question to allow an entire fleet approach for no reason!

Though Ves detested the lack of control, it was useless to lodge a protest. This was a common standard throughout the galaxy. Those who intended to pay a visit to any of the settled planets had to abide by the rules set by the local authorities.

If they did anything wrong, there was no escape! The local government monopolized every possible transportation channel in the inner system.

Soon enough, traffic control formally contacted the allied fleet. The Golden Skull Alliance easily navigated the intricacies of negotiating with traffic control by relying on the assistance of the Infinity Guards.

This wasn't the first time the 14th Fleet visited Prosperous Hill. They actually visited regularly enough for their ships to be a known entity to the local authorities.

With the help of the mercenaries, the Golden Skull Alliance managed to gain a favorable parking spot that was right at the edge of what the locals defined as the border to the inner system.

Not only that, but the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers received priority access to local transportation. This and various other conveniences would make their stay much more pleasant in this highly-populated port system.

"There is never enough inner system transit to go around." Captain Vraken told Ves once the brief negotiations concluded. "The Hegemony's busiest port systems are a lot slower, but that is because we don't get too many foreign visitors in the first place. Most foreign traffic consists of trade vessels and trade convoys looking to get a good bargain from our local economy."

Ves twitched a smile. "I can't imagine why foreigners are so eager to shun your welcoming star systems."

"You don't need to joke around. We don't exactly present a good impression to outsiders. The Komodo Star Sector is also very out of the way compared to Majestic Teal. The regional economy is more developed so a port system such as Prosperous Hill naturally attracts greater traffic."

"It also helps that the Lifers have developed a lot of good expert products." Ves noted. "Their famed biotech industries allow them to maintain a strong competitive advantage in this aspect throughout Majestic Teal and the rest of the star cluster."

The great emphasis on biotechnology may have turned the Life Research Association into an attractive business destination, but it also made the Lifers weird. Ves had no doubt that he would be encountering that in person in the coming months.

The captain mentioned another disadvantage.

"There is another downside to visiting Prosperous Hill. Unless you are a prominent citizen or organization of the LRA, you are not allowed to bring even a single mech to the inner system. You're only allowed to bring guards on foot."

Ves frowned even deeper. This was a severe limitation. Any mech would easily be able to squash him if its mech pilot decided to do so. Ves would have scant few means to prevent any hostile mech from taking his life with the power it had at its disposal.

"At least Lucky is small enough to be disarming." He muttered under his breath.

Perhaps it was a bit ridiculous to be afraid of rogue attackers in a highly-regulated port system with a good record of safety, but Ves could not rule out the potential risks. The ambush he recently lived through had taught him how foolish it was to let his guard down.

The older woman reassured him. "It's not that bad. While we aren't allowed to bring our own mechs, the same is not the case for the Infinity Guards. They have told us that they possess a quota of two mechs. While their mechs aren't allowed to enter into many zones on the surface of the settled planets, they still pose enough of a threat to deter most potential threats. If some Fridaymen lurking in this star system ever wants to take your life, they probably won't succeed because they can't overcome the power of mechs."

That was only true if the threat came from the Friday Coalition.

Unlike the Hexers, the Fridaymen were avid traders. Many of them took on careers that brought them to other star sectors in order to foster better relationships, negotiate new trade deals and find other ways to benefit their state.

Since Majestic Teal was close to Komodo, there were bound to be Fridaymen trading and diplomatic delegations in Prosperous Hill, so the threat that Captain Vraken considered was very real.

Yet Ves didn't think the local Fridaymen would be able to do anything. They had to abide by the same restrictions as other visitors, so the total amount of firepower they could bring to bear against him was ultimately limited.

What he truly worried about was the threat he might face from locals. Ves had already been betrayed by governments before.

Still, that didn't stop him from wanting to visit one of the settled planets in person. As the clan patriarch, he needed to represent the Larkinsons in various official meetings. If he didn't show up and handle these high-level meetings in person, his clan would encounter a lot of restrictions that would make it hard for it to rebuild its forces.

For example, renting a couple of mech production facilities to produce his Bright Warrior IB's was not something that any random stranger could accomplish!

Not only did Ves have to meet with various bureaucrats, he also had to accept Dr. Frederico Navarro's challenge.

As long as Ves was able to win over an established Journeyman Mech Designer from LRA, his clan would be able to gain access to a lot more channels and services!

Locals faced much fewer restrictions than foreigners. Prosperous Hill may be known as a relatively friendly trade destination, but it was not a free market.

As Ves learned more about the local circumstances, he became even more determined to lay low. He absolutely couldn't afford to stir any trouble with any powerful Lifers. He and his clan should strictly act like any other trading partner and no more.

"Maybe I should cut short my planned sightseeing tour on Prosperous Hill VI." He muttered.

The star system featured five highly-developed planets in total. Prosperous Hill I hosted most of the local heavy industry. This was also the planet where a lot of classical mechs were being produced.

Foreigners were not allowed to visit Prosperous I by default. They had to gain a measure of trust or familiarity from the local authorities first.

If the Larkinson Clan wanted to rent enough production capacity to produce Bright Warrior IB and other crucial LMC mechs, then Ves had to convince someone powerful enough in the local power structure!

Prosperous Hill III was the administrative center of the star system. It also hosted a lot of locals who mostly kept to themselves. Foreigners were not allowed to step onto the planet at all. Only a handful of exceptions occurred in the past couple of centuries.

Prosperous Hill IV was one of the more exotic destinations of the local star system. It was the regional capital of biotechnology in the surrounding star systems. The planet was a font of green as wildernesses blended together with highly-unusual biological cities where humans lived alongside lots of biotech applications.

Entry to this star system was open to foreigners as the locals there didn't feel threatened at all. Lifers reigned supreme in this weird and exciting place.

Ves eagerly wanted to visit it if only to experience the local biomech industry firsthand!

Finally, there was Prosperous Hill VI. It was the typical tourist trap and trading planet and the favored destination of many foreigners. The planet was famed for offering a lot of shops where many LRA specialties could be bought as long as the purchaser owned the right permissions.

This was also a destination where the Larkinson Clan would be hanging around a lot. This was the best place to recruit talented personnel to replenish and expand its ranks.

He even considered hiring another batch of assistant mech designers on this planet.

In addition, now that the expeditionary fleet arrived in the LRA, the small group of surviving Xona Stalkers were also eager to contact their families again.

Ves wasn't sure how well that would go. The Xona Stalkers had originally been exiled from this state. The only reason why they were allowed to go in again was because they were registered as Larkinsons now, thereby causing them to shed all of their prior ties to the LRA, both good and bad.

When he contacted Captain Reina Ember, the highest-ranking member of the surviving Xona Stalkers did not look optimistic.

"We've tried to contact all of our families and invited them over to Prosperous Hill VI in order to reunite with us. Many of them.. have declined."

That certainly didn't sound good.

"What will you do?"

"What else? We'll meet with the family who hasn't forgotten us and see from there." She replied. "We've been out of touch with the LRA for too long, so it will be good to catch up. Once we are up to date on the local circumstances that aren't known to the public, we can help you navigate the local environment."

Ves nodded in satisfaction. "That sounds good. Take your time and make the most out of your time with the family that cares about you and your fellow survivors."

Chapter 2719: Trade and Commerce

Every new major star system offered a wealth of options to visitors like Ves. While he felt irked by the sheer amount of 'house rules' set by the local authorities, the Prosperous Hill System was nonetheless a paradise to anyone looking to purchase a lot of goods and services.

While the expeditional fleet slowly settled into its assigned parking grid in the outer system, the crews of every starship became busy.

The vessels had to be cleaned up and checked for anything that the authorities might take fault with. Radioactive materials, explosive payloads, unstable power reactors and any other risky element had to be properly secured and stowed away. The ship's manifests had to be in order. The new arrivals also had to submit a summary of the goods and services they expected to buy or sell.

All in all, traffic control and many other official institutions demanded a lot of paperwork in order to make sure that every visitor had honest intentions in mind.

"Some of the information we've submitted are shrouded in uncertainty." Ves skeptically remarked to Gavin during a status report. "For example, there is no guarantee that we'll actually be able to recruit at least 5,000 mech pilots and 50 Apprentice Mech Designers in Prosperous Hill."

"The authorities won't quibble over that, boss. What they truly care about is our intentions. As long as we go through the motions by setting up a recruitment center and interview a lot of applicants, the Planetary Guard won't look nervously at us. If we don't

do what we've stated and instead decide to visit some of the seeder places of Prosperous Hill VI, then their inspectors will soon knock on our doors."

"I see. Is it hard to maintain order in this star system?"

His assistant shook his head. "It's not that bad according to our sources. The potential for problems is always great when a star system becomes host to millions of visitors who come from all kinds of places. Many of them are average people but there are also those who are used to making their own rules rather than obeying them. Local security has to show a forceful stance in order to curb any excess behavior."

It was not easy to maintain law and order in such an open star system. The rulers of Prosperous Hill wanted to attract a lot of trade and commerce, but did not want the living environment to sink to a low point. They had to balance the demands of both locals and visitors in order to maintain an acceptable equilibrium.

"All I'm hearing is a lot of nuance." Ves frowned. "That makes it difficult for me to determine the actual circumstances. Just give me a verdict. Is this place safer than Bentheim in its prime?"

"...I would say it is safer." Gavin reluctantly answered. "Don't take my word for it though, boss. My information is based on secondary and tertiary sources. If you want to know the real score, you need to ask someone who is rooted in this star system. Still, the amount of incidents that have actually taken place is low unless you venture off the beaten path. Trouble is bad for business and Prosperous Hill doesn't have a history of open gang warfare like what Bentheimers took for granted."

"Yet there are still gangs in Prosperous Hill VI, right?"

He had seen too much of the galaxy. There were always groups of malcontents in every large concentration of humans.

"There are, but they're not as crude or ugly as those who can be found in third-rate states."

"What do you mean by that, Benny?"

"Well, they're smarter. They don't style themselves as gangs and even their lowest-ranking members don't dress up like literal street thugs. They wear discrete suits or uniforms and they act as if they are part of a gentleman's club or an employee union or something. They mostly earn their living from honest business with a bit of grey market activities on the side. There is always a veneer of legality to these disguised gangs, but deep down they aren't above pulling off bombings or assassinations to expand their turf."

That sounded just like his former as far as Ves was concerned.

"What about the black market?"

"That... is more complicated." Gavin looked doubtful. "There is very scant word about the shadier side of business in this star system. All I can tell you is that it definitely exists, but it is kept well under wraps. That's unusual considering the sheer amount of control and surveillance that takes place. While the black market organizations may just be that good, I think there's another explanation at hand."

"The official institutions are colluding with the black market organizations." Ves guessed.

"That's my guess as well, though I won't go as far to say that the highest officials are in on it. You have to know that the greater the control, the greater the need for release. As long as a small group of key officials are swayed, an entire portion of the security structure becomes compromised."

That was true. When it came to these kinds of structures, a chain was only as strong as its weakest link. No matter how much a security structure tried to control everything, the people in charge of specific responsibilities could easily tamper with important system."

"Well, this has nothing to do with us." Ves frowned. "I don't even know why we're delving into this matter. There is absolutely no need for us to engage with the murkier side of Prosperous Hill. We only have honest business in mind."

"You're correct, boss, but you shouldn't dismiss the black market so easily. While I don't have any indicators that describe the local situation, from what I have learned, busy port systems like these actually offer a lot of exclusive goods. It's just that the buyers and sellers of these goods have to be competent enough to seek out contacts, forge connections, gain approval and conduct business while remaining completely innocent on the surface. Those who get caught don't deserve to enter a black market in the first place."

"So it's that kind of arrangement."

This reminded Ves of something. He pulled back one of the drawers of his office desk and pulled out a secure comm that he normally didn't use. He activated it and navigated its file structure until he projected the item he sought.

A virtual bronze member card spun into view. The prominent logo of a white wing adorned its front.

"What is that, boss?" Gavin curiously asked.

"This.. is an invitation card that I've received a long time ago." Ves smiled. "I have a feeling that Prosperous Hill is exactly the kind of place where a huge black market organization that spans the entire galactic may be present."

"Does the card convey any directions or coordinates where you can find one of their branches?"

Ves looked closely at the virtual card. "I'm not sure. I think I need to activate it or something. I haven't really explored it before. We'll have to be careful on how we utilize it lest we attract the wrong kind of attention."

"Earlier, you said you just wanted to conduct honest business. Have you changed your mind all of a sudden?"

"It's not what you think. I'm merely keeping my options open." Ves quickly defended himself.

After all, what was a resource for if it wasn't being used? He hated letting potentially-valuable assets go to waste.

Of course, that didn't mean he would just head to the nearest branch of the Angel's Wing Foundation straight away. The providence and background of the member card was highly problematic.

He recalled that a cultist awarded him with the virtual card after doing his best in some kind of contest back in the frontier. The Church of Haatumak turned out to be a lot more dangerous than he thought. The crazed cultists were not only affiliated with the Five Scrolls Compact, but also tried to ambush the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

It stood to reason that the Angel's Wing Foundation was also suspect. Ves guessed with great confidence that this black market organization was also operated by the Five Scrolls Compact in secret!

Yet the more dangerous it sounded, the more Ves felt intrigued by the products it offered. The organization was famed for selling rare and prohibited biological goods. Illegal bioimplants, experimental gene mod templates, loyalty organs and many other items that he couldn't even begin to imagine were on sale.

Since these goods had to be worthwhile enough for customers to go through all of the trouble to buy, they had to be extremely interesting to people like Ves!

It was too bad that it was far too irresponsible for Ves to visit any location connected to the foundation in person. He shut down the comm and put it back into his drawer. He intended to explore this option later. He may decide to pass it on to the Black Cats and let them visit the foundation as his surrogate. That was the most prudent course of action.

"Let's talk about something else." Ves changed the topic. "Has there been any progress with regards to exchanging our Auralis for another capital ship?"

Gavin brightened up. "Interest in the Auralis is higher than expected!"

"Oh? Others want to get their hands on our golden prize that bad?"

"Yes! While it may seem normal to us, not everyone has access to ships built according to military standards. The Hexers treated you quite well when they filled up the Spirit of Bentheim with military-grade systems and components. Not every power player is as chummy with the government of a powerful second-rate state like you. While anyone who obtains the Auralis must doubtlessly invest a lot of time and money in removing as many hidden dangers as possible, this is still a worthwhile tradeoff considering they can get powerful features that can't be bought on the open market."

His personal assistant's meaning was very clear. The Auralis was a very scarce commodity that was normally in the hands of military organizations. Now that one of them suddenly became available to purchase, dozens of interested buyers had already approached the Larkinson Clan with an offer.

Ves smirked. He enjoyed this situation. As long as he managed the bidding process well, he could milk a lot of benefits out of this exchange.

"Are there any concerns or issues?"

Gavin nodded. "There's one important matter that needs your input. You need to tell our engineers whether they should leave the most valuable systems in place or if we should rip them out and take them for ourselves."

"Wouldn't that diminish the Auralis' value?"

"You're right. It will. Still, our engineers are already drooling over the long-range FTL drives and the AI core of the Fridayman capital ship. If you are confident that we'll be able to strip them down, inspect all of the parts, and assemble them back together, it may be worthwhile to use them ourselves."

Ves could already imagine expanding the FTL range of the Spirit of Bentheim. It would become a lot more difficult to catch up to her with upgraded drives!

Yet.. could he really trust Fridayman hardware? No matter how thoroughly the engineers combed over every single part, there was no guarantee that they would be able to catch every single anomaly. Ves could think of at least a hundred subtle ways to sabotage the operation of any machine without leaving any obvious traces behind!

He became plagued with doubt. Without enough confidence, he would never dare to implement the valuable long-range FTL drives in any of his capital ships.

"Let's keep this question open for now." He eventually decided. "Try and find out how much the bidders are willing to pay for an Auralis with or without her powerful FTL drives."

"Will do, sir, but the total valuation of our prize will drop by at least a third I think."

That sounded harsh but fair. A deep strike fleet carrier couldn't really be called that way anymore without the drives that enabled her distinct role.

Chapter 2720: Superwomen

When Ves entered the workshop of his flagship, he met a collection of Swordmaidens.

The women all flourished their new greatswords with relish. While the mass, balance and design of their weapon had changed, they actually took to them better than their older Breyer alloy blades!

"How are you enjoying your new gifts?"

Commander Sendra grinned as she repeatedly chopped the air with her recently-made weapon. "It's great! Ever since the Battle of Reckoning, I always dreamt of wielding the same type of blade as the Bright Sword Prime. Now, my wish has come true!"

"Look at how easily it tears into the deck!"

"Wait, stop! Don't damage the ship!"

The enthusiastic Swordmaidens couldn't be stopped. Ves already noted to his distress that the ecstatic warriors had already left more than a hundred different holes and cut marks into the deck of his workshop.

While this damage was rather light and could be fixed by bots with ease, Ves didn't want the women to trash his personal workspace any further!

"Please, sheathe your blades! You can play around with them when you've returned to your own ship."

Fortunately, the Swordmaidens respected him enough to obey these instructions. They dampened their eagerness and calmly sheathed them in scabbards specially prepared to contain the deathly weapons.

Ves turned to Ketis, who looked proud of her work.

He left the actual job of fabricating the Unending alloy greatswords to her. She not only knew more about swords than him, but also knew every recipient in person.

Instead of fabricating forty copies of the exact same blade, she listened to the demands of the recipients and made various measurements. She then used her own design skills to tweak the standard greatsword design in order to come up with individualized variants that fit the hands of their new owners a lot better than the alternative.

Some swords were a little longer. Some of them were shorter. Others were thicker while a handful were slightly curved.

Venerable Dise received a grander-looking weapon than the rest. Even though she was no longer the commander of the Swordmaidens, she was still their greatest hero and authority figure.

As an expert pilot with several major victories under her belt, she deserved to wield a sword that matched her glory and prestige.

The grip and guard looked more elegant in the way it entwined silvery metal with dark Unending alloy. The pommel had been machined to look like the head of Qilanxo back when she was alive. The eyes of these decorative elements were embedded with lustrous jewels that reflected incoming light.

"What's the name of this weapon?" Ves gestured towards the greatsword that Venerable Dise just sheathed in an engraved metal sheathe.

The sheathe was another work of art from Ketis. Its two broad surfaces depicted some of the most tragic and heroic moments of the history of the Swordmaidens. The final scene where the Bright Sword Prime stabbed through the chest of the Jeanne D'Arc looked especially prominent!

"I call it the Maiden Protector." Ketis answered with a tired voice. "I put in all my effort and accumulated knowledge to design and make this sword. It's the best sword that I have made so far. While I made it for Venerable Dise, I hope my work will continue to compel its future wielders to protect the Swordmaidens to come."

Ves indulgently smiled. "I hope so as well."

He was very glad with her approach to her work. It seemed he passed on his preferences to create legacy products and works that lasted. While there was no guarantee that they would be able to gain access to better materials and techniques in the future, Ves believed that the Maiden Protector would not be worse off in comparison.

Not only was it made out of Unending alloy, which was by far the most powerful and potent material that Ves had ever gotten his hands on, it also had the potential to become alive.

As Ves inspected the weapon from a spiritual perspective, he noted that it was not a living totem like the other products he made by hand.

This was natural as Ves didn't involve himself in this job aside from setting Ketis up. He briefly instructed Ketis how to use the relevant machines of the ELKINE production line and supplied her with the necessary materials that he secretly lifted from the frame of the Shield of Samar.

Yet what Ves found interesting was that Ketis added her own touch to the weapon. He could somehow sense that its blade had been imbued with an element of sharpness that shouldn't normally be present.

In fact, all of the swords she made bore the same traits, but to a lesser degree. She invested significantly more in the Maiden Protector to make sure it was by far the most potent weapon out of the entire batch.

Whether the swords had the potential to grow into totems or transform into something else, Ves didn't know. What he did know was that the spiritual properties of Unending alloy would undoubtedly make a huge difference over time!

"Now that I've finished making all of the weapons, what's next, Ves? Can we.. finally receive our candy?"

The other Swordmaidens looked confused at Ketis. Why did she sound so eager to receive candy of all things? Was this a euphemism of a secret drug of sorts?

Ves looked amused. "You'll get your candy, and so will some of your sisters. Ketis, please bring Venerable Dise and the five strongest Swordmaidens that will comprise your best team in the group personal combat contests to my secure compartment over there."

"Okay."

It turned out that the main combat team included Ketis, Commander Sendra as well as three other notable sisters.

Ves wasn't entirely sure about this arrangement. Both Ketis and Commander Sendra played key roles in their mech force. If any accident befell either of them, the Swordmaidens would definitely become disarrayed!

It didn't seem like the Swordmaidens were hesitant about their selection. They always thought that their leaders should be fighting women who could overpower any other sister. They were much like Vicious Mountainers in that regard. Not even Ketis could be persuaded to reconsider.

Since that was the case, he better make them as strong as possible. He guided them all into a secure chamber that was meant to perform covert experiments and briefly studied the six women with his System vision.

It turned out that their physical attributes were already high. This relieved him a bit, but it still meant he would have to spend big in order to upgrade all of their attributes to a high level.

Ves briefly debated to himself whether it was worth it to invest this much DP into so little people. If he acquired a lot of Attribute Candies, that meant it would take even longer for him to redeem other offerings from the System.

Eventually, he felt like going through with his plan. It might not make logical sense, but his feelings steered him towards bestowing this favor to the Swordmaidens. Making them stronger than ever before might even pay off in the long run. Not only would he receive their gratitude, he also acquired a strong team of champions who could fight in many possible challenges on his behalf!

"Wait in this testing chamber while some of my scanning equipment quickly inspects your physical conditions. We need to make sure that each of you are healthy enough to undergo your upcoming treatment."

Ves stood in an observation room and indeed activated some scanners that inspected their bodies.

He wasn't interested in the data that the scanning equipment spat out. He just used it as a smokescreen for his actual measures.

[Dise]

Strength: 1.4

Dexterity: 1.2

Endurance: 1.5

"That's pretty good if she's a third-rater."

It fell a bit short of second-raters who dedicated themselves to physical combat, though. Ves had researched some of the top competitors that took part in the contests held during the Greater Omanderie Festival and was very impressed by their strength and vigor.

While a stronger physique was not a guarantee for victory, it helped a lot. Together with great skill, the Swordmaidens had the potential to defeat a large succession of opponents, thereby improving their attractiveness to the recruits they sought!

Helping the Swordmaidens ultimately benefited him as well, so Ves no longer quibbled with the cost of boosting these attributes.

"Let's see how many DP I can spend."

He summoned his System comm and activated it. Just as he expected, he first gained an infusion of DP on account of finishing one of his works.

[Design Evaluation: Bright Warrior Mark I Version B BW-A-01-B]

Model name: Bright Warrior Mark I Version B BW-A-01-B

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson, Gloriana Wodin

Weight Classification: Medium

Recommended Role: Modular Mech Platform

Armor: C+

Carrying Capacity: C+

Aesthetics: B+

Endurance: C

Energy Efficiency: B-

Flexibility: C

Firepower: C+

Integrity: B-

Mobility: C

Spotting: C

X-Factor: A-

Cost efficiency: D

Project involvement: 58%

Original component composition: 24%

Overall evaluation: The Bright Warrior Mark I Version B is a second-class conversion of the first version of the Bright Warrior design. The design has been re-envisioned to perform a more fundamental role as a starter modular mech platform to the Larkinson Clan. Despite its new role, the mech's base performance is considerable in relation to mechs designed with similar purposes in mind. The Bright Warrior Mark I Version B also contains remarkable properties that can change the lives of its mech pilots under the right circumstances. The growth potential of this mech is significantly greater.

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for completing an adequate original design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 50,000 Design Points for designing a mech with a high presence of X-Factor.]

The System's evaluation matched his expectations, even though he still wasn't sure about its standards. It disappointed him a bit that none of the criteria attained an A-grade except for the usual X-Factor. It matched his own impression of the Bright Warrior IB as a balanced but plain design.

He didn't waste much time in going over the implications of his scores. Instead, he went into the Store and browsed the interface until he reached the section where he was able to purchase candy for other people.

This was actually one of the most potent and useful features the System bestowed upon him. He long wondered why it sold its candies at relatively low prices.

Now he understood that it wasn't undercharging its products at all. While it was relatively affordable for him to boost the attributes of a single person, it was a different story when he wanted to augment an entire group of people!

"Spending my DP on six people will already make me broke!"

He made some quick calculations as he noted down their physical scores. Fully raising Venerable Dise's strength, dexterity and endurance to 2.0 would cost Ves a whopping 30,800 DP!

And this was just a single person!

Since the other Swordmaidens in the chamber were somewhat comparable to Dise when it came to their physiques, that meant that Ves would have to spend a total of 180,000 DP to raise their physical attributes to the limit that they could bear!

"They might as well be superwomen at that stage."

It was unfortunate that he didn't have the points to support this spending. Also, it might not be necessary to boost them all the way to 2.0.

He briefly considered his strategy and decided to skimp a bit on dexterity. While he could guess that it might be useful in combat, the Swordmaiden fighting style largely revolved around power rather than finesse. Improving their fine control would not benefit them too much. Only Ketis might find it handy whenever she needed to do some precision work.

"Well, I'll do the best I can."

Attribute Candies became more expensive the higher the score, so Ves could save a significant amount of DP if he skipped dexterity to a degree.

With his latest gains, he currently possessed 157,342. Properly speaking, he should keep it all in reserve, but he didn't worry about spending it all because his other mech design projects were close to completion.

Therefore, he felt free to spend as much as it took to turn the strongest Swordmaidens into even scarier killing machines!