

Mech 2871

Chapter 2871: Four Conditions

Ves went through hundreds of test subjects before he succeeded in developing a method that ensured that some would survive his test runs.

It wasn't easy to get to this point. He tried various methods to stop his transcended specimens from resonating themselves to death. The solution had to take effect instantly and at the right time.

If the prisoner got purged too early, then his spirituality failed to evolve into spiritual potential. This was a total failure as the violent resonance dealt considerable damage to the structure of the mind. Not only that, but the pressure exerted onto the barriers of the mind by the amplified obsession produced a lot of damage as well!

What the Aspect of Transcendence induced in people was not a trivial transformation. Ves had a feeling that it would always be a one-way trip. Either an average person would be able to step onto the path of transcendence, or he would die as his very mind had broken from the process!

When Ves examined the seven survivors with a cursory spiritual sweep, his expression dropped.

He could already tell that the results were just as bad as before.

"Damn."

He approached the first test subject. This person has been the first to unlock his spiritual potential.

That usually meant he was weakest of the batch of 'surviving' specimens.

"It's not good to be first in this case."

Those with stronger and more developed minds were usually able to accommodate more mental activity.

In contrast, those who were not as intellectual reached saturation too quickly. The difference was like filling up a mug as opposed to filling up an entire barrel.

Ves theorized that those with smaller minds would generate less destructive resonance. This actually came true, but the damage they suffered was actually significantly greater because their mental fortitude was too low, which meant their minds easily broke!

The test subject he faced was a typical case of that. The bearded thug turned completely unresponsive as his weak mind had been torn into pieces due to its inability to contain its violent fluctuations.

Ves performed some basic examinations, but he already confirmed that the weak-minded test subject had turned braindead.

"These guys fold over way too easily."

There was no future in trying to elevate weak-minded people. These encompassed people like cowards, followers, useless bums and so on. Each of them were weak and risk-averse. Even if they managed to attain spiritual potential, there was no point to it! Their pathetic personalities formed a significant hindrance in developing their newfound potential!

"It's actually good that people like you are excluded from the path of transcendence. My Larkinsons aren't weak, and the best and most deserving ones are most certainly opposite to you guys. It makes a lot more sense to invest in their development than dummies like you. I should probably kill invalid test subjects right away instead of letting you go through this song and dance."

In fact, the best use of weak-minded test subjects was to subject them to a different experiment, but he wasn't working on any other active projects at the moment.

"Waste." Ves shook his head before stepping away.

He examined a number of other test subjects, going by order of mental strength in order to track the differences.

While every individual test subject possessed some uniqueness, in general those who were mentally stronger fared a bit better.

Their minds were still torn, their spirits were still broken and their bodies would have blown up if Ves hadn't utilized the Aspect of Tranquility to douse them at the end.

Yet he could clearly perceive a pattern where those with greater minds and stronger wills managed to preserve a greater part of themselves. Their mental fortitude allowed them to withstand a lot more pressure, thereby reducing the damage done to themselves.

Even after he examined the seventh braindead survivor, he could still perceive plenty of damage. There was no way to heal this kind of damage. He had already tried. Even if he fumbled around and tried to merge the broken pieces back together, what he managed to form at the end was but an echo.

Of course, that could also be because he was still too weak. Perhaps he needed to develop his Spirituality further or develop a better technique before he could restore broken minds and spirits.

Yet even if this was possible, the risks were too great for him to attempt such a procedure on the people he cared about.

"Putting someone on the path of transcendence shouldn't be fatal in the first place! There has to be a better solution."

He wasn't able to come up with one, sadly. He lacked the means to implement his ideas.

Even though he failed to work out a viable solution, all of the bodies he exploded and all of the test subjects he turned braindead still yielded plenty of insights.

For one, he believed he managed to grasp some of the variables that were necessary to ensure success.

"The ideal person to undergo this trial should be young, strong, stable and driven."

Each of these factors were essential. He had gone through hundreds of test subjects, so each of his assumptions were backed by solid data.

First, younger test subjects tended to fare better than older ones. Someone in his twenties possessed a vigorous, flexible mind that was much more 'stretchable'.

They were able to accommodate violent shocks to a greater degree than someone older whose minds had grown firmer but also more rigid.

The younger the person, the more they were open to change, both in mind and spirit!

"It's kind of a bummer that older folk are less likely to succeed."

While Ves didn't think it was impossible to grant spiritual potential to someone in his sixties or older, he guessed that the odds of success were so low that it wasn't worth it to make the attempt.

Perhaps he might be able to find a way to mitigate the factor of age, but that was too far away.

The second variable was mental strength. Both the size and firmness of the mind played a role. Those with bigger heads among his test subjects tended to be biomech technicians. They had the smarts, but that didn't mean their minds were firmer. If they were cowards, then their oversized minds and spirits still broke easily enough!

"Fortunately, mental strength can be trained."

Ves was most confident about this. His mech pilots regularly went through mental resilience training by exposing themselves to the disorienting glows of his Doom Guard and Ferocious Piranha models.

Even without this method, his mech pilots were capable of firming up their minds in other ways, such as fighting actual battles or embracing discipline.

Now that Ves thought about it, these solutions were already correlated to advancing in rank. In order to generate a strong will, these mech pilots must never be feeble!

In situations where others quaked in fear, those with the potential for greatness never turned their backs to the threat!

"It's not easy to train a mech pilot to this point." Ves muttered.

The old family worked hard to make every Larkinson get to this point. The famed Larkinson courage led to the deaths of plenty of relatives, but those who managed to survive would often find success in some way!

The third variable that affected the success rate was stability.

In this context, stability referred to a person's strongest obsession or conviction. Whatever they cared about most definitely influenced many important factors.

Someone who wasn't stable might possess multiple strong interests. The Aspect of Transcendence only amplified one of them, but this selection might not always be correct.

If someone indecisive or unstable became affected, then the mental fluctuations that took place were much more violent and shaky! Ves wasn't able to explain completely why this happened, but he noticed that those who already knew their purpose fared a lot better!

"Uncertainty is bad. Anyone who wants to obtain a chance to become extraordinary can't be indecisive."

The last trait that was essential was being driven. Someone who wanted to become great not only had to be decisive, but also be willing to pursue this journey. Motivation and passion were powerful forces, and as long as someone channeled them, this person should be able to exert more control over his obsession.

"As long as you are willing to do your best to achieve your ambition, then you will be able maintain focus!"

In short, as long as someone ticked all four boxes, the chance of success should be the greatest!

"The best way to meet these requirements is to throw a Larkinson in the room."

Ves felt tempted to do so multiple times, but he always restrained himself in the end. He could not afford to cross this line. As long as his clansmen weren't irredeemable traitors like Dr. Redmont, there was no way he could risk the life of any honest Larkinson."

"Well... maybe Vincent doesn't count, but even that is a step too far for me. The chances of success are too low!"

The biggest problem he faced was that his effective success rate was 0 percent. It didn't matter that he managed to make many useful observations out of his failed attempts. The fact that he failed to imbue spiritual potential to anyone without killing them in mind or body was undesirable!

What Ves needed was a single success! Just a single success was enough for him to draw a multitude of conclusions and know what he needed to work on to replicate the outcome.

He scratched his head. Average thugs and criminals no longer satisfied him anymore. While he was grateful for the contributions they made, they simply failed to score high on the four criteria he set. Only higher-quality test subjects were able to satisfy him, but there was no way he could get his hands on elites!

"Ah, how frustrating!"

He began to suspect that this would be a long-term research project. He might not be able to find a solution in the short term, but as long as he worked on it, he might be able to achieve a breakthrough one day.

It might take years. It might take decades. As long as he succeeded, everything he put into this project would be worth it! Even the MTA would go mad if it got wind of his new solution.

Ves stayed in the testing chamber a bit longer in order to try and gather more clues. Once he was done, he ordered the chamber to be cleansed in order to await the next batch of test subjects.

No traces of the bodies ever left the premises. Every scrap of blood, flesh and even bone would be subjected to an immense amount of heat.

As Ves supervised the burning of the remains of his test subject, Nitaa suddenly passed on an urgent message.

"Your cat is in pain."

"What?" Ves looked puzzled. "Did he get into a fight or something?"

"No, he's uninjured as far as we know. However, he has been meowing loudly and contorting his body for over five minutes. None of the guards and staff over there know how to handle this situation."

Ves grew more and more concerned.

Then, an odd thought entered his mind.

"Wait a second... does he happen to look like he needs to use the kitty litter box real bad?"

"He has holed himself up in the bathroom, if that is what you are asking."

"Hahahaha!" Ves laughed, completely uncaring whether Lucky was undergoing great physical pain at the moment. "I knew it! After all these months, it's finally payday for me! He's been withholding his payment long enough. It's good that he is having a lot of trouble right now. The greater his suffering, the greater the yield! Let's go! I need to make sure that Lucky doesn't ruin my reward!"

He left the workshop as quickly as possible. His gem pouch was awfully empty these days. Hopefully, he could finally fill it up again!

Chapter 2872: The Gem Cat Project

"MEEEEOOOOW!"

When Ves entered a storeroom, he immediately noticed the frenetic activity that took place.

He noticed that Lucky had been gorging himself on lots of exotics prior to his current predicament. The evidence was plain to see as Lucky ate his way through some reinforced lockers and took a bite out of every exotic within reach.

This was not normal!

While Ves knew about Lucky's penchant of phasing into storage areas in order to take a bite or two, the cat usually left no traces behind.

Frequent practice along with focused instruction from Calabast allowed Lucky to become the best infiltrator of the Larkinson Clan! He not only excelled at infiltrating enemy strongholds, but also excelled at sneaking into friendly areas as well!

Only Ves and possibly other spiritual entities were able to track Lucky's movements. No matter how well the mechanical cat could fool ordinary senses, he wasn't capable of dampening his spiritual signature.

These days, Lucky was allowed to do as he pleased. The Larkinson Clan had long reached a scale where many resources were no longer scarce in its eyes.

Certain strategic materials such as Breyer alloy, Unending alloy and resonating exotics were too precious to squander, but Lucky was smart enough to leave them alone. He instead gorged himself on more common materials used in the fabrication of expensive mechs.

Even though these meals didn't hold as much attraction as rarer exotics to Lucky, Ves and the rest of the clan didn't mind if some spillage occurred. They still had lots of materials left in their stores!

Ves suddenly realized that Lucky wasn't able to eat his usual snacks anymore.

Ever since they traveled to the surface and got stuck here, the gluttonous cat no longer had access to his usual buffet aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. While the Larkinsons still brought a large batch of raw materials to the surface, they were quite scarce to the ground forces.

Without these materials, it would become a lot harder to service the metallic mechs in the airfleet, including the incredibly powerful Piranha Prime!

Although the prime mech was clad in nigh-indestructible Unending alloy, much of the internals underneath the surface were still delicate. Indirect shocks, strong physical impacts and heat damage could still degrade the performance of Venerable Tusa's mech.

In short, Lucky's usual menu was off-limits this time!

Fortunately, there was still the local cuisine.

The biomech production facility that the Larkinsons took over was massive. Even though biomechs were grown rather than fabricated, the input materials were still similar enough to the materials used to fabricate regular mechs. In fact, there was significant overlap.

However, it appeared that Lucky hadn't limited himself to familiar materials. Ves could clearly see that the stores containing exotics that were exclusive to biomechs also featured prominent bite marks!

"Are you having a stomach ache because you ate the wrong kind of food?" Ves questioned.

"MEEEEOOOOW!"

He knew it! Whatever affliction Lucky suffered now was probably directly prompted by eating exotics that were mainly used in organic products. Some of the weirder exotics were actually organic in themselves!

"If you kept your hunger in check, you wouldn't have ended up in this situation, you know."

He had no sympathy for his cat. Even though Lucky was curling on the table like he was suffering from the biggest bellyache in the galaxy, Ves only thought that his naughty cat got what he deserved!

"Meeeeoow! Meeeeoow! MEEEEOOOOW!"

In fact, rather than feeling sorry about the current circumstances, Ves grew happy instead. As Lucky started to scratch his lower body, it slowly became apparent that the gem cat would finally be ending his months-long production hiatus!

After stalling for such a long time, Lucky finally couldn't hold it in anymore. The suffering he must be going through was probably a sign that his output would definitely be bigger and stronger than anything that appeared out of his backside!

Ves strolled closer. "Do you need some assistance, buddy? I still have some B-stone shards. I saved them for just these kinds of occasions."

"MEOWWWW!"

"Okay, okay, I'll give you a chance to do it yourself. Don't take too long, though. If nothing happens after the day is over, Doctor Ves will treat your condition."

"MEOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Just the mention of 'Doctor Ves' sent a shiver through Lucky's spine. After witnessing so many depraved experiments and being subjected to some of them himself, there was no way that he wanted to end up on the operating table yet again!

His pain, desperation and urgency caused him to focus on clearing his digestion as strongly as possible. The mere thought of becoming Ves' patient was enough to motivate him to work his hardest.

Ves continued to smile as he looked down on his mewling pet. The gem cat truly looked serious about ending his current state.

"Come on. You can do it. Just push!"

"Meeeeooww... meeeeeeoow.... MEEOOOOW!"

Several minutes passed by as Lucky continued to mewl in agony. Ves had no idea how a cat made out of mechanical components could even experience pain, but that was just one of many mysteries about his nature and his origins.

As Lucky struggled to fulfill his job as a gem cat, Ves wondered where products like Lucky even came from. He strongly suspected that there must be more gem cats in existence.

As a mech designer, Ves became good at judging whether he was looking at a product formed by nature or by a deliberate intelligence. In his judgement, there was no way that Lucky belonged to a naturally-evolved species.

The more he witnessed Lucky's wonders, the more he became convinced that someone designed the gem cat. This person was not only incredibly good at imagining a nigh-impossible product, but actually managed to realize it despite the tough requirements.

Even the MTA would find it difficult to make something analogous to a gem cat despite all of their extremely advanced technology!

"What's more, can they even make mechanical products alive?"

There were several aspects about Lucky's existence that were more mysterious in nature. His sentience and the esoteric effects of his gems were so far outside the boundaries of conventional science that his creator may possibly be a spiritual engineer!

He wasn't too sure about this conclusion, though. Multiple people may have worked on creating Lucky. A galaxy-class engineer may have designed and realized the gem cat's physical components while a spiritual engineer subsequently infused a copy with life.

Now that he thought about it, such a collaborative relationship sounded awfully familiar to his own collaborative relationship with Gloriana!

Could it be... that his pairing with his wife was not the first iteration of this kind of productive relationship?

"That is.. quite plausible, actually."

There was another possibility, though. The scarier outcome was that the entire gem cat project was the brainchild of one incredibly capable engineer!

The sheer amount of proficiencies such a person had to master to an insanely high degree was almost unimaginable to Ves. Even though he had progressed far from the beginning of his mech design career, he still wasn't able to do more than scratch the surface of Lucky's inner workings.

"MEEEEOOOOW! MEEEEOOOOW!"

Even as Lucky continued to act as if some kind of alien organism was rampaging through his internal organs, Ves no longer paid any mind to what his pet was going through.

Instead, he became more intrigued at trying to imagine what kind of person would be able to create someone like Lucky from scratch.

Such a person must not only be well-versed in the production of extraordinary gems, but also be capable of miniaturizing the entire process to fit inside the belly of a cat-shaped construct.

On top of that, the developer of the gem cat project must also be able to integrate highly sophisticated self-evolving mechanisms that could adaptively improve every aspect depending on variable input of materials as well as other factors.

Along with being able to bestow a gem cat with sentience, there were very few possibilities left on his list.

Ves came up with three somewhat likely but still improbable guesses.

"The first option is... that I'm the creator!"

While this theory sounded incredibly ludicrous, it was still plausible from what he knew was possible with time travel!

Perhaps a future version of himself traveled back in time to develop a magical gem cat in order to give a past version of himself a lot of help during his early years.

It sounded incredibly dumb and extremely implausible, but even if there was only a 0.0001 percent chance that this was true, Ves could not rule it out!

When he looked at Lucky, he tried to imagine whether the gem cat conformed his design style.

"It doesn't look like it." Ves muttered. "Then again, the future me who designed him might be a very different version of myself who followed a different path."

He could easily imagine how Lucky's absence would cause him to pursue a different life.

His future self could have also disguised his characteristic design style. That was also possible.

Therefore, Ves could not say for certain whether Lucky was actually his product or not. His intuition did not lean in either direction.

The second and probably the most likeliest possibility was that multiple people worked on the gem cat project. The reason why Ves favored this theory was that products like Lucky were simply too good.

If several different top specialists in human space came together to pool their strengths, they could create many different wonders, not just gem cats!

Hundreds if not thousands could be involved in the project. While gem cats were incredibly unfathomable, as long as the project was chopped up into many chunks, a huge team of developers and researchers could systematically tackle every individual problem. This would allow them to complete a sophisticated project despite not being the most brilliant scientists in human space.

"Such a project would be unimaginably huge, expensive and cumbersome. It's not worth it to mobilize so many top engineers for such a trivial-sounding project."

This was why he did not discount the third possibility.

There was only one kind of engineer that might have the skills, knowledge, tools and resources to make a gem cat.

"A Star Designer."

If Ves regarded Lucky as a product of a Star Designer, many uncertainties about the gem cat suddenly made sense.

He found it extremely difficult to believe that one person could be so proficient in so many different areas.

Yet if it was true, then it had to be a Star Designer! No one else came close to qualifying!

The Star Designer might not even have any serious intentions in mind when he or she conceived of gem cats.

Perhaps this incredibly smart and successful individual felt lonely and wanted some companionship. Maybe this was why gem cats were originally created.

The gem synthesis function wouldn't even be their main function, but just something that the creator tacked on to fill up some available capacity and make them more useful.

Without meeting a Star Designer or examining their grand designs in person, Ves had no idea whether Lucky was made by one of these exalted individuals.

"If this is true... then I bet the Star Designer is still around somewhere. Would he be able to recognize his own work when he catches a glimpse of Lucky?"

Ves grew concerned.

Though Lucky's appearance changed substantially from the beginning, many of his current characteristics were still identical to his initial self!

If Lucky got recognized, the attention of the Star Designer would quickly shift to Ves himself.

"This is bad."

There was no point in disguising his pet at this point. There was so much public archival footage out there that it was impossible to disassociate Ves from Lucky!

The important question was whether this hypothetical Star Designer was a friend or foe.

If the Star Designer was purely affiliated with the MTA, then Ves might be able to cling to his current life.

If the Star Designer was affiliated with the Five Scrolls Compact, then Ves may need to get ready to bolt at any time!

"Damn it. I don't know which theory is true. What I do know is that there is definitely a story behind Lucky!"

Chapter 2873: Dazzling Output

As Ves let his imagination run wild with possibilities, his perspective on Lucky started to shift.

He never thought too deeply about Lucky's origins before. He lacked the information to make any certain judgements and Lucky didn't know anything either.

Should he continue to treat Lucky as his cute little mechanical pet? Or should he regard the gem cat as a suspicious object with a complicated relationship with some very powerful figures?

Though Ves became a bit entangled by this dilemma, he soon let out a deep breath.

"There is no need for me to consider so much."

If Lucky was truly related to his mother, then everything was probably fine.

Ves already spent years with Lucky. His pet wasn't just a mechanical creation to him, but a close companion.

"He's family."

The times they went through, the relationship they forged as well as what he was able to sense from Lucky's spirituality were all signs that Ves could trust his feline friend.

As for whether a high-and-mighty Star Designer or some other eminent figures were behind the gem cat project, Ves did not have the power to do anything.

He might as well forget about this problem and continue about his day. There was a good chance that whoever created Lucky was not malicious towards him. Lucky's creator might even be an ally!

"Meooooow... meooooowww..."

Meanwhile, Lucky's mewling cries had dropped a bit. While the gem cat was still in distress, his agony became a bit more bearable for the moment.

"Are you close to finishing?"

"Meow!...."

"Hey, I'm just asking!"

"Meeeeeoowww.... meeeeeeoowwwww..."

Since it appeared that Lucky's episode was more of a marathon than a sprint, Ves sat down and began to imagine something even bolder.

Would he be able to create something comparable to Lucky?

This was not the first time he considered this question.

Ves knew quite well that Lucky provided him with invaluable help. Throughout many moments of his career, he would have never been able to survive certain dangerous moments if not for Lucky's combat and infiltration abilities.

Ever since he started a relationship with Gloriana, he already started planning for the long-term. Now that he had married her, it was only a matter of time before they would have kids.

Ves wanted what was best for his children. With the wealth and resources he had at hand, he could invest a lot into designing some great designer babies.

Yet that was not enough for his liking. If he could pair each of his offspring with pets comparable to Lucky, then he would have a lot more confidence that they would be able to survive difficult situations!

While it was impossible for Ves to create anything comparable to Lucky, he might be able to create another kind of pet with unlimited growth potential!

Considering his specialties and proficiencies, the most obvious solution was to create new spirits that could accompany his children throughout their lifetimes.

These guardian spirits could exist entirely in a spiritual form. His design spirits as well as entities like Sharpie proved that they did not need to possess a physical form in order to provide a lot of help.

Purely spiritual companions were easy to make. They were also very hard to detect and would always be able to accompany his children without making anyone suspect that his brats were never alone!

Ketis already proved that hiding such a trump card could prove useful during critical moments!

Yet the shortcomings of spiritual companions were also clear. They needed to exert themselves a lot more to interact with the material realm. This process always tired them out quickly, so they could not provide sustained help.

"A physical companion is better in most cases."

Ves had a lot of options to choose from. He could design a mechanical pet and infuse it with life, but he could also task a beast designer to develop one according to his specifications.

If he happened to encounter an existing exobeast that had already broken through the extraordinary threshold by itself, Ves might be able to negotiate with it and turn it into a contract beast for one of his children.

He did not favor this solution, though. Biological pets had a finite lifespan. While Ves might be able to extend their lives in some way, he figured it was better to start with a mechanical pet right away.

Mechanical constructs were familiar territory to him. As long as there wasn't anything biological to them, he could refine their designs to a fantastic degree and maintain control over every single aspect.

"Gloriana can also help. In fact, she'll probably insist on taking part in this project!"

The only worry that plagued Ves was that he did not know whether he and his wife were skilled enough to develop a satisfactory pet.

It wasn't necessary for these derivative pets to create gems. That was beyond him. He just wanted to pair his kids with strong and friendly companions.

While he was very confident in his ability to make his products sentient and alive, it was a lot harder to design something that could grow stronger over time.

This was one of Lucky's defining traits. Not even his gem producing capabilities were comparable to how he was able to assimilate many different materials and technology.

How could Ves ever create something comparable?

His thought inadvertently strayed to his Devil Tiger design.

"ASMAS might be a viable alternative."

Ves did not have access to the higher-level principles and technology that enabled Lucky to evolve in such a sophisticated fashion. The way he seamlessly integrated so many different devices and materials made it seem as if a hidden Master Mech Designer came up with all of the upgrades!

His Devil Tiger did not even come close to matching this degree of sophistication. ASMAS was not capable of integrating new functions by themselves, so Ves would have to manually program this functionality in his work.

Not only that, but ASMAS-based creations were more fragile and prone to hacking than regular mechanical creations. Still, these problems weren't insurmountable, or else he wouldn't have conceived of the Devil Tiger design in the first place.

"Meeeeeeooww! Meeeeeeooww! MEEEEOOOOW!"

Lucky's abdominal pains began to spike again! His distress rose and his body exhibited some worrisome convulsions.

Ves had a feeling that Lucky's episode was finally about to reach its peak.

This was especially when he began to perceive strange activity from Lucky.

A small vortex appeared. The remarkable part about it was that this vortex wasn't physical in nature. Instead, to Ves' considerable astonishment, the spinning vortex instead drew in unknown spiritual energy from an unknown source!

"What is happening?"

"MEOOOOW! MEOOOOW! MEEEEOW!"

Ever since the spiritual vortex emerged, Lucky's distress had doubled. His back arched and his limbs shook helplessly as the gem cat had to endure a lot more pain than before!

As the vortex spun faster, the amount of spiritual energy sucked into Lucky's stomach increased considerably!

Ves had no idea why this vortex came into existence. What was its purpose. What kind of spiritual energy was it trying to absorb?

Due to the intense fluctuations of the vortex, Ves wasn't able to perceive any details. This was highly unusual. It was rare for his spiritual senses to get stymied. The only times this happened was if he was dealing with something that was a lot more powerful, advanced or ancient than he could handle!

Even though he failed to probe the nature of the vortex, Ves could make a number of guesses.

The vortex must be supercharging whatever gem or gems that Lucky was about to pop out. The more energy it absorbed, the greater the end product!

Ves developed an interesting idea. If the output was related to the input, what if he threw in an extra ingredient?

A devious smile appeared on his face. Despite all of the uncertainties surrounding this event, Ves was in the mood to conduct another experiment!

"Do living gems exist?"

The sandmen arguably qualified, but they were actually energy-based lifeforms that attached their existences to physical substances. This was why their physical bodies could come in the form of any kind of materials. Most of them merely bonded to sand because that was the most ubiquitous substance available on terrestrial planets.

Ves had no intentions to create a new sandman. He just wanted to see what kind of benefits he might obtain if he added his secret sauce.

"Oh well. Whatever. Let's just try!"

He concentrated his mind and began to spit out a decent quantity of his own spiritual energy. He did not process it in any way, but directly hurled it into the spiritual vortex.

Slurp.

The moment the vortex directed his spiritual energy into Lucky's stomach, a drastic shift took place.

The vortex grew bigger! It attracted eight times more spiritual energy than before! This drastic increase was not something that Lucky was equipped to handle!

"MEEEEEEEEEOOOOOOOOWWWW!"

"Uh oh."

Ves had a feeling that he might have done something reckless. He cautiously stepped back as Lucky's body started floating in the air.

Not only that, a strange grey corona surrounded his body!

Ves began to sense so much spiritual activity inside Lucky that he was afraid his cat might explode like the hundreds of test subjects he had gone through!

"MEEOOOOW! MEEOOOOW! MEEEEEEEEEOOOOOOOOOOOOW!"

After Lucky unleashed his final cry, a bright flash of light exploded from his body!

BOOM!

"AAHHH!"

It was as if the sun had gone supernova! Ves momentarily lost both his vision and his spiritual senses from the powerful outburst of energy!

Fortunately, Ves didn't perceive any danger. He calmly waited and rubbed his eyes as his senses slowly recovered.

Once his vision became less bright, he ignored Nitaa's distress and directed his eyes towards Lucky.

His cat looked like he had emptied everything inside his body. Lucky's physical exterior looked duller and flatter from before. His eyes blinked out, which was a sign that he had lost consciousness.

Lucky definitely overdrafted himself this time! He would have to take a long rest before he could recover.

Ves no longer paid any mind to his pet. Lucky had served his purpose.

"Now where is my prize?"

"Sir! Over there!" Nita pointed her gun at something.

When Ves turned to the side, he noticed something peculiar that wasn't there before. A small, glowing red object was hovering in the air. It swayed back and forth for a bit before trying to float away.

Yet before it could even leave the room, it collided against a wall. The red lustrous red object didn't seem to know what happened, but it began to push itself against the wall with greater force this time!

Thunk!

Thunk!

Thunk!

It gradually dawned upon Ves that this stupid object was Lucky's newest gem!

Different from the others, it was bigger and more active. It also happened to be alive in a way that Ves had never seen from any other gem!

It didn't take much thought to conclude that Ves was to blame for this. If he didn't donate his own spiritual energy, the red gem might not have been so odd!

When Ves approached, the gem tried to get away, but its speed was far too slow.

"Hold still!" He said as he easily snatched the rebellious gem out of the air. "Now let's see what kind of benefits you can bring to a mech."

[Supreme Comprehension]

A small portion of the accumulated yearnings, regrets and understanding of an acclaimed, boundary-pushing scientist is locked within this gem. Fulfilling the wish of this brilliant remnant will unlock the true power of this gem.

"..."

His System vision didn't change. The red gem was shaped like a crystallized version of a realistic heart. It pulsed with inner light and made it seem as if the heart was beating.

Ves had a hunch that the imposing red gem was somehow related to biomechs. While this was not ideal, Ves could still work with it, especially considering he was surrounded by them at the moment.

The reality was worse. Just like Lucky's other weirder gems, the description didn't describe any solid benefits.

After all of these months of holding it in, that was it? Ves was anything but impressed!

"LUCKY! WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS?!"

Chapter 2874: Remarkable Implications

"DAMN YOU, LUCKY!" Ves grabbed Lucky's dormant body and lifted it into the air before shaking it a few times. "After so many months of lazing about and eating billions of hex credits worth of exotics, is this the best you can do?! Where are the gems that can double a mech's attack power? Where are the gems that can triple the speed of my mechs? Where are they, Lucky!?"

He was just venting his frustration now as his gem cat was hardly in a position to talk at the moment. Lucky expended so much effort to produce this gem that he was pretty much spent for the day.

Ves shook his head and dropped Lucky's body back onto the tabletop. He wouldn't find any answers here.

He examined the gem once again. He had to pinch it tight enough to prevent it from floating away. For some reason, the gem not only possessed a consciousness, but was able to move on its own. Ves had never seen anything like it before!

"Is this because of my intervention?"

That sounded far too simple. He did not believe that throwing in his own spiritual energy would lead to such drastic changes.

The gem was probably abnormal to begin with, but whatever Ves had done caused it to become more livelier than usual.

Whatever the case, Supreme Comprehension was by far the strangest and most unusual gem that Ves obtained.

He reread its description several times and probed it with his eyes and spiritual senses.

Just like his other gems, Ves was unable to perceive any spiritual activity from it. The gem's exterior tightly isolated whatever it contained.

Ves wanted to rub his chin. "There is definitely something unusual inside."

Thinking back on what happened, the vortex was definitely related to the final form of the gem. The unknown spiritual energy that the vortex absorbed might have come from the Supreme Sage, but this was an absurd conclusion!

According to the rebels, the Supreme Sage had already died more than a year ago. Even if he was a spiritually-developed researcher who was comparable to Master Mech Designer in mental strength, there was no way for the Supreme Sage's spiritual remnants to be sticking around for so long... right?

"Wait a minute."

Ves knew that certain strong individuals were able to keep their spirits together longer than usual.

While the spiritualities of ordinary people quickly faded into the imaginary realm where they would subsequently get eroded away, those who enjoyed much greater development might be able to resist the corrosive spiritual winds a lot longer!

Ves was reminded of the origin of the Illustrious One. When his mother plucked a spiritual fragment from the imaginary realm, the remnant was almost completely worn out. Yet despite floating in the imaginary realm for eons, it still managed to retain a portion of itself!

Perhaps some individuals had become so strong that it was hard for them to completely die out in a spiritual sense!

As long as at least one remnant of them survived, they could always resurrect back to life, if with a lot of missing parts.

If this was the case, then it became a lot more plausible that the red gem managed to absorb a remnant of the Supreme Sage.

There were a few oddities, though. Ves wasn't sure about the range of the vortex, but even if distances and dimensions were a bit whacky in the imaginary realm, it was extremely unlikely for him to believe that some portion of the deceased Supreme Sage just happened to be floating around nearby.

His eyes narrowed. "If it's not a coincidence, then..."

There were a couple of possible explanations why Lucky's vortex easily managed to absorb the Supreme Sage's remnant.

First, the founder of the LRA might have been so powerful back when he was alive that even his broken remnants were capable of moving and acting on their own!

Perhaps they might have found something interesting about Ves. Perhaps they saw something special in Lucky. Whatever the case, the active spiritual remnants may have foreseen that they would be able to find a way out of their predicament by entering Lucky's stomach!

"This sounds very unlikely, though."

Spiritual remnants of strong individuals were capable of acting on their own. However, without any support or guidance, it was difficult for him to believe that the great scientist chose to latch on to Ves of all people!

There were much more suitable candidates for the Supreme Sage to work with. The only shortcoming of these other candidates was that they lacked spiritual sensitivity.

Maybe the Supreme Sage possessed enough wits to reject this option and instead stay close to a foreigner.

However, Ves never recalled getting stalked by the spiritual remains of a great scientist. Such an impressive figure would have definitely made waves where he got close enough.

"I didn't sense anything during those times! My intuition didn't sound any alarms either!"

He trusted in his senses. He would have definitely felt it if a creepy, centuries-old geezer was stalking him all this time.

Compared to assuming that he was special enough to attract the Supreme Sage's attention, Ves was much more inclined to believe in his other theory.

"The Supreme Sage... may have perished somewhere close to this site."

Lucky's vortex easily managed to capture this legendary figure's spiritual remnants because they might not be that far away from one of the LRA's secret pinnacle labs!

Alternatively, this location might also be close to where his comatose body was being treated!

Ves quickly recalled what Master Brixton claimed about the Supreme Sage.

According to the opposition leader, the Supreme Sage engaged in a taboo experiment that was designed to extend his lifespan as he had exhausted all conventional options of prolonging it the regular way.

Unfortunately, Master Brixton was too short on details. Ves had very scant details of the experiment in question.

"He might not even be telling the truth."

Ves had too little information to go on, but in absence of anything better, his current theory sounded more plausible than other possible explanations.

Two important assumptions supported this theory.

"First, there must be a pinnacle lab nearby."

Ves didn't think there was one directly underground this biomech production facility. Too many people worked here and there was way too much traffic. However, the range should not be large.

He recalled the strange storage depot that Venerable Tusa once encountered during his scouting runs.

That place was a bit far away but not unreachable from his current location. The placement of this storage depot was odd because there weren't that many production facilities in the surrounding districts to merit such an elaborate facility.

Yet if this storage depot happened to service the voracious needs of one of the best laboratories of the Life Research Association, then it was a lot more explainable why it had to be so large.

"Still, the clues are too obvious if that's the case."

In fact, Ves didn't think that placing something as sensitive and valuable as a pinnacle lab underneath the outskirts of Veoline made sense.

These secret labs should be placed in much more secure locations!

"If I had a choice, I would have set these labs up underneath military bases, inside desolate moons or in the middle of an obscure asteroid belt. Who thought it was a good idea to bury such a sensitive facility underneath a residential district?!"

Perhaps that was the point. The locations that Ves just considered were sites that everyone thought of if they wanted to set up a secret base.

Hardly anyone would think of burying a pinnacle lab underneath the homes of simple Lifers!

"If this is true.. does it have anything to do with me?" He critically asked.

He was not a biotech expert. The Supreme Sage's pinnacle labs might hold an unlimited degree of attraction onwards to other biotech researchers, but Ves was a mech designer!

"I don't belong in such a place!"

The most he could obtain from a pinnacle lab was raiding their supplies and stealing some precious lab equipment. Other than that, Ves seriously doubted that he would encounter something that was worth his time.

In addition, these pinnacle labs were the crown jewels of the LRA. There was no way that they would be unguarded! These secret facilities must be under constant observation by the different factions!

"Even if the guarding forces of the pinnacle labs have split into different sides, there's no way they'll come to blows and risk the integrity of these precious facilities."

Ves eventually decided not to think about it anymore. Whether there was truly a pinnacle lab in the vicinity or not, he was more inclined to go away than to take any step closer.

Ever since this civil war broke out, Ves had always been aware that there were some places that he and his Larkinsons couldn't touch!

He even thought about relocating. His airfleet had already spent enough time in this region.

"In fact, I've also gathered enough biomechs to pursue other options."

He did not forget about his original goal, which was to escape the planet and return to his expeditionary fleet.

If he only had fifty mechs at his disposal, then Ves didn't have the guts to pursue any ambitious goals!

It was different now. He already accumulated close to 500 mechs, and this was a formidable fighting force.

While it would have been even better if he was able to accrue an entire mech regiment's worth of machines, this was too unrealistic.

"The time to accumulate power is drawing to an end." He murmured. "It's time to spend it in order to fulfill my other goals."

Ves no longer thought about Lucky's latest gem and all of the implications it brought. As much as he wanted to explore its mysteries, he had more important priorities to worry about.

He put the unruly gem inside his pouch and buried it inside his Unending Regalia. While the stupid heart-like gem wanted to fly away, there was no way it could break through premium synthetic fabric, let alone a solid barrier of Unending alloy.

"Just sit still and await your turn to be used!"

That was another headache that Ves was glad to avoid. Due to the System's vague and unhelpful description, there was no way to predict how Supreme Comprehension altered a mech.

"Maybe it won't even affect a mech at all!" Ves guessed.

That would be the worst outcome. To Ves, the best gems were always those that bestowed a clear and useful boost to his mechs.

Vague ones like Supreme Comprehension were the worst because Ves had to form his own guesses!

For now, he assumed that the sentient gem was best paired with a biomech. The Supreme Sage probably knew more about biomechs than any Master in the LRA, so combining the two might yield interesting effects!

Despite all of the biomechs around him, he had no intentions of squandering this unique gem right away.

That would be a waste."

Ves would rather reserve this gem on a biomech that Ves designed in collaboration with a specialized biomech designer.

In fact, even if the effects of Supreme Comprehension were unclear, he guessed that they would not be weak.

"If this is the case, it's best to reserve it for an expert biomech or cyborg mech!"

Ves developed a lot of ideas about biomechs while he was working with them. One of his most promising ones was to design at least one expert mech with organic components.

Organic mechs reacted so well to his design philosophy that he wanted to try to design something that was better than anything else he developed.

He knew that his upcoming expert mechs would definitely be his strongest and most prestigious works for quite some time. Of the six he planned to design, one of them happened to be exceptionally suitable for the purpose he had in mind.

"Since Venerable Joshua already has the same domain as mine, what kind of improvement will he achieve if he pilots an expert cyborg mech?"

Ves shivered with excitement at the thought!

Chapter 2875: Clashing Swords

Clang!

A taller and thicker sword collided against a saber. The larger blade bounced back but quickly swung in only to be blocked yet again!

Despite the lack of success, Ketis fully immersed herself in the duel. She constantly shifted her position, trying her best not to let her protective equipment hinder her sharp movements.

Around her, a modest crowd of a couple of thousand spectators became engrossed in the spectacle!

Ever since she and her fellow Swordmaidens fought their way through the virtual preliminaries, she was finally able to flex her muscles for real!

Although she enjoyed pitting her battle instincts in all-out matches to the death, none of the virtual blood she spilled warmed her up in any way.

The tactile feedback, no matter how realistic, posed no threat to her at all. It didn't matter if she gained the opportunity to compare herself against hundreds of other hopefuls who each brought a different sword style to the table.

The Greater Omanderie Festival was a massive draw for foreign swordsmen and swordswomen.

The Heavensword Association was the only state in the star cluster that dedicated itself to the way of the sword.

Just like how the Life Research Association became the holy land of biotech research, the Heavensword Association invested much in order to become the foremost authority of swordsmanship.

Just the first week alone had been enough to open up the eyes of the Swordmaidens!

Every single Swordmaiden that was a part of the delegation to the festival became exposed to radically different approaches to wielding blades.

Fortunately, people like Ketis and Commander Sendra were too accustomed to the Swordmaiden approach to sword combat to adopt a different style. Their techniques and repertoire of moves may not be as extensive as that of other styles, but they were all combat tested against deadly opponents.

Simple! Calculated! Brutal!

That was what the Heavensworders thought about the Swordmaiden fighting style.

Unlike most other competitors, the Swordmaidens stood out for their emphasis on power. Their sword style, which was geared towards defeating both exobeasts and armored mechs, intimidated many opponents who had to face the brunt of the former pirates!

Clang!

Ketis' greatsword was blocked yet again, but she already anticipated this reaction. After exchanging blows for quite some time, she already figured out her opponent's strategy.

Since Ketis wielded a larger and more cumbersome weapon, her stamina took a substantial hit with each attack.

While there was an inherent risk in allowing an opponent to go on the offensive, the man who wielded a thick saber evidently felt confident enough in his defense to forgo attacking.

As long as the male competitor concentrated on nothing else but blocking, he would eventually be able to turn the tables once the aggressive woman lost her steam.

Ketis huffed behind her transparent helmet.

How naive. She couldn't count how many opponents she overcame who tried to rely on the exact same strategy.

"Crack his turtle shell, Ketis!"

"Beat him up, girl!"

A smile briefly appeared on her face even as she tried to sweep her opponent's abdomen, only for the alert man to swing his saber down and block her attack in time.

She lashed out with a snap kick, only to get stopped by a counter-kick.

Her experienced opponent had already kept a close eye on her lower limbs, correctly predicting that the athletic and muscular woman was proficient with using her entire body.

Though none of her attacks went through the man's excellent guard, Ketis felt less and less pressured against her opponent.

A true swordsman wouldn't have adopted such a passive approach. It might be a fine strategy in the dueling arena, but it only introduced more variables on the battlefield.

Ketis already smelled an absence of blood from her opponent. How could someone who never put his life on the line in an actual battle ever be able to best her in personal combat?

An eager impulse nudged in her mind.

Swish. Swish.

"I know, Sharpie. I shouldn't play with my food."

She had been taking it easy since this was her first real sword duel. She wanted to shake off all of the bad habits she acquired during her virtual duels and get used to reacclimating herself with using her actual body to fight.

Now that she finished her 'calibrations', there was no point in letting her human practice target keep up the illusion that he had a chance.

When she was about to wind up for an obvious chop, her opponent reflexively adopted a blocking stance.

Wrong choice. He should have tried to evade.

"HAAAAAA!"

Her greatsword swung down with great force as she put nearly all of her strength and weight in the blow!

While Ketis still remained on guard for any abrupt changes, her opponent had become so accustomed to blocking and guarding that he didn't make any other mental preparations.

He could only commit to blocking the incoming blow!

Seeing how much force Ketis was putting into the chop, the male competitor quickly raised his swords while putting his free arm on the flat of the upper end of his saber.

CLANG!

When the heavy blow finally came, the man bent his knees and folded his body inwards. The soles of his boots skidded backwards against the floor from the force pushing him backwards.

He succeeded in blocking the attack!

Not only that, he recognized a golden opportunity. After launching such a heavy attack, the woman he faced should be taking longer than usual to pull herself back and recover her stance.

In contrast, the man was bent and coiled like a spring. If he took the opportunity to push himself forward, he could launch a vicious counterattack!

However, he suspected that this was a trap. The woman he faced had already displayed enough skill and physical prowess to be a formidable swordswoman.

There was no way she would be unaware of such an obvious opening!

"Let's play it safe."

In the end, he decided to uncoil himself while standing his ground. Rather than make a risky move, he preferred to stick to a more steady strategy that entailed fewer uncertainties.

Once the woman tired herself out, he could easily outmaneuver her and her oversized sword.

Ketis smiled contemptuously at her opponent. "Wrong choice, buddy!"

Her augmented body strained a little bit more as she forced herself to recover a lot faster than she was supposed to. Her boots dug into the hard arena ground as she performed a quick and hasty swipe that her opponent managed to block with ease.

Unlike last time, the greatsword did not bounce back from the saber. Instead, Ketis kept pressing on it while she continued to pivot her body forward.

Bang!

The helmet of her protective suit bashed against the helmet of her opponent!

"Ahh!" He cried out from the unexpected attack.

Although his head remained unharmed, his head and upper body briefly tilted backwards from the force.

At the same time, Ketis released the grip on her weapon and used her freed-up hand to grasp the saber of her opponent.

Due to her grasp, her opponent temporarily couldn't move his weapon. Even though he would definitely be able to free his weapon if he exerted his strength, all of this took time!

"It's over!"

The tip of Ketis' greatsword easily pushed against the flexible chest padding of her opponent. The protective suit automatically registered the strike while at the same time firming up to prevent the blade from sinking deeper.

At the same time, the remote shield generators built underneath the arena reacted in an instant. Several layers of energy shield covered the male competitor's entire body, preventing Ketis from launching any further blows that might threaten his life!

[The duel has ended! The winner is Ketis Larkinson of the Swordmaidens!]

Once the match was over, Ketis no longer regarded her opponent as an obstacle. She lowered her blade while the man did the same.

They both shook hands.

"Good bout." The older man said. "I didn't expect the headbutt. You taught me a valuable lesson. This trick won't fool me twice."

Ketis shrugged. "I have more tricks in my arsenal. If you stick to a passive approach, you will just leave yourself open to another attack vector. You would have stood a better chance if you went on the attack. At least then I wouldn't have as many opportunities to break your guard."

"I'll stick to my training. My failure just then is a sign that I still need to work on making my defenses more airtight."

"Suit yourself."

Every tournament participant was a true swordsman. The virtual preliminaries already eliminated every amateur and dabbler in the sword arts. Only true specialists in swordfighting were qualified to fight under the public eye.

Once Ketis left the arena ground, she returned to the Swordmaidens that had come to cheer her up. Many of them were distinctly shorter and younger than her. The teenagers swarmed up against her suited form.

"I knew you would win!"

"Everyone could tell that her opponent was just asking to get beat."

"Why are there so many timid swordsmen here?"

"They're not timid." Another woman spoke as she approached. The Swordmaiden trainees moved back in order to give the Heavensworder enough room. "The real issue

is that you women are too aggressive. The caliber of opponents that your contestants have met so far is still low. Wait until Ketis and your other sisters square off against seeded participants. Your Swordmaidens will only squander their stamina in vain."

Ketis smirked but refrained from rebutting the other woman.

She and the rest of her fellow Swordmaiden contestants had yet to show their full might during the duelist and group swordsmanship competitions.

The Unending greatswords that Ves had issued to them were too strong and eye-catching to employ in the early phases of the main tournaments.

In order to sharpen their battle instincts and give them all a proper workout, Venerable Dise temporarily deprived them of their Unending greatswords and issued regular weapons to them instead.

The Swordmaiden expert pilot also told them to hold back their physical strength.

"Each of you has received a boon from the patriarch. I know it is tempting to utilize your new strength against the cannon fodder we'll be up against, but you'll be wasting valuable training opportunities if you overpower your opponents. I suggest you take it easier and match the strength and speed of your foes. Rely on your skill and wits to win a bout. If you can't even do that, then you won't stand a chance against the top contestants."

Though Ketis and the other augmented Swordmaidens didn't like it, they recognized the value of doing so, if only reluctantly.

Sometimes, she yearned to unleash her true strength!

If Ketis held her main weapon, then her opponent would never have been able to last such a long time!

In fact, even with an ordinary weapon, her superior physical attributes were more than enough to overpower most weaker opponents!

"When is my next match?" She asked.

"According to the schedule, you're due to perform in half an hour."

"Tch. I won't be able to visit the other arenas to watch my sisters."

"If your battle sisters are at least as skilled as you, the outcome won't be in suspense. It will take at least a few days before you climb high enough to encounter actual challengers."

Angelique Harcourt may look down on the brutish fighting style of the Swordmaidens, but she never underestimated the women she took under her wing.

The Journeyman Mech Designer from the Heavensword Association initially thought that these uncouth women with irregular backgrounds would not even make it past the preliminaries.

She was wrong. The performance of the Swordmaidens, whether they fought in person or with mechs, exceeded her expectations.

Angelique initially accepted this chore in order to obtain a valuable collaboration opportunity with the famed Devil Tongue, but as she spent more time with her guest, she became more interested with the Swordmaidens themselves.

She already had a hunch that they would be able to go far in the tournaments. After all, a group of swordswomen who enjoyed the tutelage of an expert pilot should never be pushovers!

Chapter 2876: Angelique Harcourt

Just as Angelique Harcourt guessed, many of the Swordmaiden contestants managed to get past the first days of the tournaments.

The performance of most Swordmaidens were still within a reasonably competitive range.

In personal combat, the women exhibited both solid dueling capabilities and teamwork when fighting as a group of five.

In mech combat, the Swordmaiden mech pilots possessed less of an edge in skills, but their raw ferocity and abundant combat experience was usually enough for them to push out competitors who were unaccustomed to facing all-out attackers.

Even though this approach backfired on some of the Swordmaidens, the strongest ones all made it through!

A select few Swordmaidens obviously stood out from the rest. Aside from Venerable Dise who wasn't allowed to compete, certain individuals such as Commander Sendra and Ketis exhibited much greater strength and confidence in the personal combat tournaments.

No matter what kind of opponent they faced, they rarely if ever let their opponents push them to the brink!

Whenever a tricky swordsman managed to surprise or gain an advantage, the top Swordmaidens always managed to regain the rhythm in some way.

While Angelique wasn't good enough to take part in the Great Omanderie Festival, she possessed enough vision to tell that these suspicious women were holding back, and not by a little!

Though she was curious to uncover their true strength, it was rude for her to probe. She knew she merely had to wait long enough before these handful of standout elites encountered their real opponents.

As optimistic as she was about the chances of the best-performing Swordmaidens, the seeded competitors from her state were all monsters in their own right!

While the Great Omanderie Festival was one of the few opportunities for foreigners to compete against Heavensworders, it was extremely rare for the latter to reach the finals!

Though there were times when the visitors from another state or star sector gave the seeded competitors a run for their money, these brilliant performances never lasted.

A strong enough foreigner might be able to overcome one seeded contestant. If the chance of victory was only 5 percent, then there were times when the improbable still took place.

The real challenge was doing it all over. The further a foreign contestant progressed in a tournament, the more times they had to win against swordsmen that possessed some of the finest swordsmanship in the star sector!

Therefore, even if Angelique suspected that Commander Sendra may be able to squeeze out a win against the right opponent, there was no way that this would happen over and over!

That said, if any of the Swordmaidens were able to make it this far, they already did better than almost every other foreign participant.

Such a glorious accomplishment always came paired with a huge amount of publicity!

"That's what we're aiming for." Ketis said as she munched on a meat drum. She didn't even bother to swallow her bite while she talked! "Don't get me wrong. I'd love it if I could reach the finals and fight against the best of what your state has to offer, but we came here to accomplish a single goal. Our Swordmaidens are heavily depleted, and we urgently need to replenish our ranks with skilled and dedicated swordswomen."

"Do you think you won't stand a chance against the top 100?"

"I'm trying to do what is best for the Swordmaidens, not my own vanity. While our Swordmaidens would undoubtedly attract more hopefuls if any of us breaks into the top 100, we'll already meet our goal if we can enter the top 1000."

Winning the finals of any tournament was firmly out of right for both foreigners and unseeded contestants. Since the foremost Heavensworders always occupied the top, many spectators became accustomed to using the top 100 and top 1000 as measuring sticks for dark horses and rising stars.

Anyone who made it this far was already good enough to earn respect from the Heavensworders!

Ketis happily gorged herself upon a savory pie as she tried to calculate how many matches she needed to win before she could get to this point.

Ever since the Swordmaidens arrived at the Omanderie System, the guide arranged by Ves took good care of them. Angelique Harcourt not only took care of their schedule, transportation and administration, but also hosted the women in her own villa while providing enough assistance to maintain their competitive edge.

Every contestant had access to doctors, masseurs, consultants, practice partners and other professionals. The Swordmaidens were so unused to working with these people that Angelique had to guide them in person!

As it was, the Swordmaidens were so accustomed to dealing with their issues by themselves that at least half of the hired professionals remained idle!

"I still can't believe that an outfit like yours can stand out from the competition." Angelique shook her head at the total lack of table manners from the only mech designer among the Swordmaidens. "You know what is even more ludicrous to me? The fact that you are one of the strongest Swordmaidens of your group despite being a mech designer!"

Ketis raised her eyebrow as she picked her teeth with her nail. "What's so odd about that? Back where I grew up, if you couldn't fight, you would get beat up until you could finally get in your own punches. Isn't that the case here as well?"

"No! Of course not! Look, I know my way with a épée, but I lack the time to practice my skills further. The best I can do is to maintain them at a decent level so I know what to look out for when I design my fencer mechs. I don't come close enough to being able to overcome contestants in the main tournaments."

"If you aren't happy with your current level of skill, I can give you a few pointers if you like."

"It's not a matter of effort!" Angelique slammed her palm against the table. "While your mech design capabilities are not as good as mine, you are still at the front of the pack given your age. I've never met an Apprentice like you who absorbed so much knowledge yet managed to free up enough time to polish your swordsmanship to duelist level. How do you do it?! What is your secret?!"

Ketis sighed. "There is no easy way to answer this. I guess I'm just too good in both mech design and swordsmanship."

There was no way she could tell the truth to Angelique. This line of questioning was already pushing the line as far as she was concerned.

If not for the fact that she and her fellow Swordmaidens depended on the goodwill of their current host, she would have already given the Journeyman a piece of her mind!

Angelique belatedly realized the impropriety of her questioning. She leaned back in her chair and tried to regain her composure. She stared at the carefully-manicured garden of the backyard of her villa before she opened her mouth again.

"I'm sorry. That was rude of me. You Swordmaidens clearly have a rich history. I can tell that much. I just feel a bit envious of you for being so good in multiple disciplines. You are the only swordsman mech designer I've met who succeeded in having it both ways."

Ketis adopted a modest expression. "I'm not that impressive. While I am proud of what I've managed to achieve, I am nothing compared to the likes of Venerable Dise when it comes to swordsmanship and my mentor when it comes to mech design. They have become so strong in their respective fields that my hopes of catching up to them are slim."

"Then why don't you follow their example?"

"I'm not like them. I'm a Swordmaiden and a mech designer. Holding these two identities at once has already doomed me on this path. As difficult as it is to improve in multiple aspects, I've already received a lot of help. Besides, the design philosophy I'm developing is unmistakably tied to my personal swordsmanship. They complement each other so that strengthening one will also strengthen the other."

This was not entirely unheard of. Lots of mech designers in the Heavensword Association pursued the same balance. Most of them were never able to put this mutual reinforcement theory to good use because they were just too mediocre in any single field.

The mech market's priorities were clear! The customers would rather pilot from an excellent mech designer with no combat skill than someone who was good with the sword but not as good at mech design!

Mechs had to meet many technical requirements. Second-class mechs were also distinctly more complex than their third-class counterparts, so it became even more important that the mech designers knew how to work with many different mech components.

Gaining all of these proficiencies took time. Lots of time.

Therefore, when mech designers specialized in swordsman mechs faced this dilemma, they decisively chose to abandon their fanciful dream of becoming a swordmaster in order to attain mastery in a much more intellectual pursuit.

Angelique was no different. This was why she almost couldn't accept that a foreigner managed to achieve a successful balance.

Her desire to replicate Ketis' success exceeded her desire to design a collaborative work with Ves!

Ketis could sense her counterpart's continued interest in her. She knew that she wouldn't be able to dampen Angelique's curiosity until she supplied a better answer.

"Look, all I can say is that our Larkinson Clan is stronger and more impressive than you think. My mentor is one of the most amazing mech designers I've ever met. It's not a coincidence that his products are present in any third-rate state. The help he provided to me is unimaginable. In fact, it's so much that I am constantly worried about my ability to pay him back for what he's done."

"I see." Angelique furrowed her brows. "Mr. Larkinson isn't a regular Journeyman, that I know. Maybe I should take my upcoming collaboration with him seriously. I still don't know how to approach this opportunity. Do you have any tips?"

"I've worked with him and under him a number of times, but I don't know how much leeway he'll give you. I think he's open to anything as long as your suggestions don't conflict with his design philosophy. Try and aim to design a more valuable mech that is more sustainable. He loves that. Just design something that lasts."

"Will he.. will he go all out to design our collaborative work? Or do I have to be prepared for him to hold back his best features?"

Ketis crossed her arms. "I can't tell you that. I think it depends on your relationship with him. I think he's pretty sincere though. As long as you aren't rude, I think he will be more than willing to put in his full effort."

"Does that include adding one of his unique glows to our collaborative mechs?" Angelique pressed. "So far, Mr. Larkinson has already designed a number of impressive second-class mechs for specific clients and for internal use, but I can't help but notice that he has yet to bring a second-class product to market. If I insist on a commercial mech design, will he be fine with my choice?"

"A deal is a deal. Ves can be rather.. difficult.. to pin down sometimes. However, as long as he makes a promise, he will uphold his end of the agreement. I think it will help if you make the project interesting to him, though. It will also help if the collaborative project is useful to the Larkinsons as well. Just come up with a mech concept that is compatible

with our clan and I bet that Ves will put in his full effort. After all, when it comes to mechs that his own clansmen will be relying on, he will never be stingy."

Angelique frowned. "That means I'll have to design a spaceborn mech, right? That's not my homeground. I'm much more familiar with designing landbound mechs."

"Then you better start preparing. Spaceborn or not, you won't regret collaborating with my mentor."

Chapter 2877: Diligent Mark XXIV

When the Swordmaidens woke up the next day, they prepared themselves for another round of competition.

Today, the Greater Omanderie Festival centered around mech battles. Since Ketis and several other Swordmaidens who competed in the personal combat tournaments weren't mech pilots, this was a day of rest for them. All they could do to help out their organization was to cheer the Swordmaiden mech pilots who entered the field today.

Before the Swordmaidens departed for the mech arenas, the most prominent among them gathered for a private meeting. They entered one of the rooms and activated some jammers and other countermeasures in order to prevent their host from listening in. It would have been better if Lucky was there to sweep the room, but their standard equipment was already enough to address most situations.

While the Swordmaidens weren't planning to do anything drastic during their stay on this planet, they were still accustomed to maintaining their privacy. Some of their talks dealt with the strategies they chose to employ during their matches. It would not be good if these details were leaked to other competitors.

"How are you dealing with Miss Harcourt?" Venerable Dise asked.

"She's still friendly enough." Ketis dutifully responded. "I can't say we're friends, but I don't think she's a threat. I've successfully led her to think about what kind of mech she can design in collaboration with Ves. As long as she is fixated on this idea, she won't have much reason to stab us in the back. Still..."

"What is it, Ketis?"

"I don't think Angelique warrants this much caution. She clearly respects you and our battle prowess. The Heavensworders are the most upright and honest people I've met. It's simply not in their nature to turn their back on a deal."

Commander Sendra snorted. "We've gone through so many ordeals with the Larkinson Clan that we can't afford to lower our guard. Our patriarch is a trouble magnet. His current predicament makes us even more vulnerable. I just don't feel at ease here. The

Heavensworders may have dispatched a lot of security to this planet, but what happened back in the LRA already proves that only the mechs we control ourselves can be counted upon."

The reminder that Ves and many Larkinsons were stuck in one of the most contested planets of the LRA did not sit well with the Swordmaidens.

Though they still retained a strong attachment to their old identity, they also saw themselves as Larkinsons. They didn't care too much about the average clansmen, but they still developed a number of strong personal bonds with individual Larkinsons.

If nothing else, the fall of the patriarch and the collapse of the clan would cause the Swordmaidens to lose all of their material support!

The Swordmaidens had changed too much to be able to survive on their own. They needed a patron to take care of their ships, their finances, their logistical support and so on. If they were asked to go back to relying on themselves, then they would likely find it difficult to maintain a second-class standard!

Therefore, it was in their best interest if Ves and the rest of the Larkinsons made it out of the LRA alive and intact.

"You are worrying too much if you ask me." Ketis calmly said. "Ves can take care of himself. Even if he falls short, he still has Lucky. There is no way that he will get cornered as long as he has his cat by his side."

Venerable Dise remained firm. "The fact of the matter is that we cannot provide any assistance to the Larkinsons stuck in Prosperous Hill over here. We are light-years away from the planet where Ves is stranded. Rather than waste our time and worrying ourselves seriously, we should focus our efforts on making it as far into the tournaments as possible. We must not let adverse news affect our chances of fulfilling our main goal. Whether the Larkinson Clan is able to survive at the end, we still will still be in a better situation than before if we have a couple of thousand extra Swordmaiden trainees in our ranks."

This was the correct choice to make in their situation.

Sure, there had been talks of pulling out of the tournament and heading back to the LRA, but what could they do? The allied fleet of the Golden Skull Alliance were still prohibited from venturing into the inner system. Until the Lifers lifted this blockade, the Swordmaidens would just get stuck outside like the rest!

If the blockade ever crumbled, then the expeditionary fleet already possessed sufficient strength to evacuate Ves and the other stranded people from the surface.

General Verle had already transmitted enough messages to make it clear that the situation had yet to deteriorate to the point where the Swordmaidens could make a difference.

After the gathered Swordmaidens finished commiserating over their inability to affect the situation in Prosperous Hill, they turned back to their more immediate concerns.

Commander Sendra activated a projection that displayed a fairly basic-looking swordsman mech. "Our competing mech pilots will pilot the same landbound swordsman mech model they piloted in the virtual preliminaries."

The competing mech pilots had to compete on skill, not mechs. This was why the duelist and group swordsman mech tournaments all adopted the same mech model.

Almost no competitor had anything good to say about the Diligent Mark XXIV. The budget swordsman mech model was very basic and barebones compared to the premium mechs that the Swordmaidens had become accustomed to. The Diligent mechs were designed to accommodate many different sword styles, so its specs were very balanced.

The only noteworthy aspect about the Diligent was its flexibility and range of motion. The amount of movements it could make were so large that it could even fight with its back facing the enemy!

"I'm sure you have all formed your own feel for this mech during the virtual preliminaries." Ketis spoke. "Since the Diligent line of mechs has always been used for competitions in the Heavensword Association, I've found a lot of articles, comments, analyses and opinions about the model, including its latest iteration. Two different aspects stand out when I compare the Diligents to other swordsman mechs."

"Tell us, Ketis."

She pointed at the cockpit area of the projected mech. "Look at how thick these layers are. Look at how much chest armor is surrounding the cockpit. The Diligent scores high on mech pilot protection due to these features and more. These safeguards are meant to minimize the chance of fatalities, but they also cause the Diligent design to be a lot better at resisting attacks to the upper torso."

"So that is why my attempts to drive the tip of my blade through the chest of my opponents failed so many times. I thought I wasn't exerting enough control over my mech."

Ketis smiled. "While the chest armor of the Diligent is not unreasonably strong, it is still at least twenty to forty percent harder to breach it, which is enough to prevent many attacks directed at the cockpit. Even if a powerful blow gets through, the thick layers of armor can bleed enough force to spare the cockpit."

In short, attacks to the chest of the Diligent model was like fighting an uphill battle. While targeting its chest could still lead to victory, it was inefficient.

"Then how should we handle this mech?"

Ketis shifted her finger to the lower portion of the mech. "The lower torso is not as protected. In order to retain the mobility of the mech, all of that extra armor that the designers added has to be subtracted from somewhere else. This means that the lower body is significantly more vulnerable. I think the Heavensworders are fine with this because attacks below the chest usually don't threaten the cockpit."

Everyone nodded. Some of them had already figured this out by looking at the armor scheme. While it was still possible to damage a cockpit by launching an attack from below, the angles required to do so were very awkward.

"There is another aspect you need to be careful about." Ketis switched the projection so that it depicted a diagram that showed the localized mass of the Diligent model. Certain sections were heavier than others. "Due to the uneven armor distribution, the Diligent is a top-heavy mech. Its center of mass is considerably higher than that of other mechs. This means that you need to pay more attention to your movements and make sure not to tip your mechs over."

"It's clear that the designers of this mech deliberately retained this vulnerability." Venerable Dize supplied her own analysis. "Many mechs these days possess a fairly low center of gravity in order to maximize their stability and minimize the chance of accidents. That has made it easy for mech pilots to keep their mechs upright even if they perform extreme maneuvers. What the Diligent does is expose the mech pilots who barely pay attention to the balance and footing of their mechs."

Commander Sendra nodded in agreement. "It also cuts down on the number of idiots who developed extreme mech sword styles that are dependent on eccentric swordsman mech models. Anyone who tries something flamboyant will either trip their mechs or leave them open to doing so. If you see any mech that has overreached and is struggling to maintain its balance, just give them a solid physical whack and they'll fall."

Once any mech fell, the battle was pretty much over! A mech that still remained on its feet had a hundred different ways to finish off a machine that was lying on the ground!

Ketis began to point out some other notable points before wrapping up her small presentation. "All in all, the Diligent model succeeds in ensuring that every participating mech pilot must rely on their piloting skills to win. The mech is deceptively simple but the difficulty of maximizing its potential is quite large. The only other remark I can make is that our sword style is not a great fit for this model."

This was inevitable. Mech pilots who trained in sword styles that emphasized balance would always enjoy an advantage.

It would have been better if the Heavensworders offered many different variants of the same base model. The Swordmaidens would be able to pilot mechs that were optimized to wield large weapons.

Unfortunately, the tournament format didn't allow for that for the Great Omanderie Festival. Everyone had to make use of the exact same mech model, thereby making it easy for laypeople to make comparisons.

"How are our recruitment efforts so far?" Venerable Dise switched to a different topic.

"We haven't attracted too many skilled swordswomen yet." Commander Sendra replied. "Due to your presence, we managed to attract the interest of a decent amount of mech pilots, but that is far from enough. We need to show off our battle prowess on the bigger stages in order to achieve the effect we want."

The Swordmaidens could definitely attract a lot of skilled and suitable personnel if Venerable Dise fought a duel.

However, this would never happen.

Expert pilots were soldiers, not gladiators. As heroes, it was beneath them to fight for sport.

There were also practical reasons why expert pilots stayed away from competitions.

Piloting expert mechs was too expensive. Any damage they incurred could easily cost a fortune to repair! Unless it was absolutely necessary, it was best to keep the precious expert mechs in the hangar.

While it was cheaper for expert pilots to make use of regular mechs instead, their fighting capabilities were too constrained in them. There was hardly any point in putting the two together.

An even more important reason why expert pilots were left out of the dueling ring was that there was always a chance of fatalities!

Expert pilots fought harder than anyone else. No matter how much restraint they exercised, there was always a risk of death, and this was completely unacceptable!

Due to these reasons and more, Venerable Dise had been unable to do very much. Aside from acting as a mascot for the Swordmaidens, she also socialized with other powerful expert pilots, but that was all. Without a chance to prove her worth in battle, she failed to accrue any fame.

"My sword grows blunt with disuse."

Chapter 2878: Tiny Swords

Five black-coated Diligent Mark XXIV's thundered forward and clashed against five identical mechs, only this time coated in dark yellow!

The arena grounds shook as the combined tonnage of ten second-class swordsman mechs maneuvered around each other in order to find the right angle to strike.

Every mech pilot that had managed to make it through the grueling virtual preliminaries possessed skill that was already above average.

Those who seriously aimed to compete in the main phases of the tournaments made thorough preparations in order to compete.

Not only did they invest a lot of practice time in piloting mechs that were similar to the Diligent Mark XXIV, they also specifically formulated a set of tactics that made the most out of what everyone considered to be a fairly limited mech model.

The key to making it to the finals mech combat tournaments was to draw out the full potential of the Diligent mechs!

Every contender aspiring to reach the top 1000 or top 100 possessed an undeniable advantage against mech pilots like the Swordmaidens.

"Tch!" Commander Sendra gritted her teeth as a dual-wielding mech utilized its maneuverability to the utmost.

Her black-coated Diligent mech was unable to block every poisonous strike that approached from different angles. The armor of her mech sparked as some of the bee sting-like stabs managed to get past her guard.

Although Sendra attempted to punish her opponent's daring moves by making wide, powerful sweeps with the greatsword of her mech, the damn Diligent mech took too long to perform the move, giving the opposing mech enough time to dash backwards and avoid the blow!

Although every Swordmaiden mech pilot had already practiced with the Diligent models beforehand, it was still difficult to shake off their old habits.

"Not even the Bright Warrior is this sluggish."

The Swordmaidens had gotten spoiled with living mechs. While Ves had yet to design a dedicated swordsman mech, flexible models such as the the Bright Warrior Mark I and II were still better than anything they piloted before.

As premium mech models of their respective mech classes, the old and new Bright Warriors performed far above regular mechs. Ves was quite generous to his own mech pilots in that regard.

Therefore, even if the latest Bright Warrior only incorporated minor accommodations to the Swordmaiden fight style, its responsiveness, force exertion and maneuverability were significantly ahead of the Diligent she was piloting at the moment!

Not only that, but the mechs supplied by the Heavensworders were absolutely dull and devoid of any life.

While the benefits of piloting a living mech were rather subtle and difficult to explain, the Swordmaidens keenly missed the intimacy they had with their previous machines.

The Bright Warriors fought with their mech pilots. The Diligent fought against their users.

At least, this was how Commander Sendra experienced it. She constantly struggled to make her mech move the way she wanted. Time and time again, the Diligents proved to be too weak, too slow and too reluctant to express her fighting style.

The rest of the Swordmaidens were in a similar predicament!

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang!

Their opponents keenly noticed this. It was highly unusual for competitors to opt for greatswords to begin with. Though the Swordmaidens did their best to compensate for the limitations of their Diligents, they could not disguise every single sign of discomfort!

"Up the pressure!" The enemy leader shouted. "Don't let these women breathe! Try and gang up on them if possible. With their unwieldy blades, they can't possibly defend their rears."

The dark yellow mechs changed their approach. Now that they had gained their opponent's measure, there was no point in turning this group match into five separate one-on-one duels.

The whole point of allowing multiple mechs to compete against each other was to give full play to their teamwork!

Even as the mechs that wielded single or dual light blades began to converge and circle around, the Swordmaiden mechs chose to converge in the center of the arena ground. They formed a loose circle with every machine facing outwards.

The dark yellow mechs grew a bit more reluctant to go in after witnessing this change. No matter what angle they approached from, at least three Swordmaiden mechs would always be able to strike at the front!

While the opponents did not fear the Swordmaidens, that was only because it was fairly easy to evade or deflect the attacks by jumping back.

This was a lot harder to do if the competitors were forced to approach the menacing Swordmaiden mechs. The extended reach of the latter's greatswords meant that the dark yellow mechs would all have to block the incoming attacks first before launching their own attacks!

Even so, the commander of the opposing mechs did not lose confidence. "The shortcomings of their formation are obvious. Their mechs are too packed for them to swing their greatswords at abandon. As long as we get past their reach and press our mechs up close, we can focus our attacks on just two of their mechs while using them as our shields at the same time. The remaining greatsword-wielding mechs won't dare to make any drastic moves!"

Shorter weapons may lack reach, but they fared much better at very close ranges. They were quite favored in team matches because it allowed friendly mechs to fight close together without worrying too much about hindering each other's attacks or even hitting their own side!

After a brief pause, the dark yellow Diligents simultaneously surged forward!

They did not sprint forward at their greatest possible speed. The competitors aimed to overwhelm the Swordmaiden mechs with a multitude of rapid strikes rather than gamble on performing a risky charge that could easily backfire.

By holding back their speed, the dark yellow mechs still retained plenty of maneuverability. They needed it as each of them had to form a response against the greatswords that were bound to strike them first.

The Swordmaidens knew exactly what their opponents were doing. They knew how bad it would be if the enemy mechs all pressed close against their own. Yet despite this, they still kept their machines close together in order to prevent any of their units from getting isolated.

The Swordmaidens did not communicate with each other. The veteran mech pilots were all close sisters who fought alongside each other for many years. Their abundant experience along with the huge amount they lived with each other had caused them to form a high degree of tacit cooperation.

Off to the side, Ketis and the rest of the Swordmaidens each held their breaths.

"These mech pilots are way better than I thought. Will the opponents that come afterwards be even stronger?"

"I don't think so. We just got unlucky and squared off against one of the stronger teams right away."

"We can't afford to fold too easily. If our best team can't get past this phase, then we won't impress anyone!"

"The mechs are at fault. I don't know what the Heavensword Association is thinking by forcing everyone to pilot just one standard configuration of a mech. They should have given the competitors the option to pilot more suitable variants!"

Not even Ketis knew whether the Swordmaiden mech pilots would be able to overcome their current opponents.

Every tournament of the Great Omanderie Festival adopted a single-elimination format. Due to the sheer number of competitors as well as the great cost of allowing them to duel against each other with real mechs, no one received a second chance.

As long as anyone, even a promising seed, suffered a defeat, they were out of that specific tournament!

Not even seeded competitors who were expected to reach the top 100 were guaranteed to go far. If some unknown dark horse bumped into one of them and achieved an upset, then the journey of the loser ended regardless of that person's identity!

This was what made tournaments fun. Every match counted and unexpected surprises happened every year. Even if the top seeds from the Heavensword Association inevitably reached the finals, the events preceding these predictable matchups already generated enough excitement to keep people talking for weeks!

"They're getting close!"

The entire audience clung to the edge of their seats as they witnessed the two sides getting closer.

Once the dark yellow mechs were about to get into range, they each clung their shorter blades closer in anticipation of blocking the heavy strikes that were bound to come.

Each of the mechs wielding lighter weapons had to focus their full efforts on blocking this time as they didn't have as much room to dodge this time.

"Here it comes! Resist with all your might!"

Yet even as the jogging mechs entered the range of the Swordmaiden mechs, the latter declined to swing their greatswords!

"What?!"

"Why aren't they attacking? Don't they realize they're giving away their greatest advantage?!"

"Careful! They're up to something!"

The Swordmaidens declined to perform the most optimal course of action. If the mechs at the front all swung their greatswords against the approaching opposition, then they had a decent chance of inflicting crippling damage!

Due to the need to approach from the front, the dark yellow mechs were unable to dodge this time.

Not only that, but the mechs were actively pushing themselves into the blades of the Swordmaiden mechs.

The damage the dark yellow mechs would incur if their guards were broken was much greater than if they just stood still!

Yet by refusing to do so, the Swordmaiden mechs instead kept their massive weapons close to their frames.

The three Swordmaidens mechs facing the charging opponents all braced themselves against the ground while holding their swords in a blocking grip as well!

With one arm grasping the hilt while the other pressing up against the flat of the blade, the three Swordmaiden mechs formed a solid wall which the unprepared dark yellow mechs crashed against!

Crunch!

Due to the latter's restrained speed, the collisions that ensued weren't powerful enough to knock down any machine. Instead, an awkward moment ensued as the collided mechs were both pressed up against each other while suffering from the aftereffects of the debilitating impacts.

The Swordmaidens acted faster than their opponents.

While the mech pilots of the dark yellow mechs were just starting to respond by trying to stab their shorter swords, two greatswords lunged forward and threaded the gaps between the friendly mechs at the front!

Two dark yellow mechs incurred severe damage!

Even though some of the other opposing mechs managed to take advantage of the close range to unleash some stabs, the damage they inflicted was limited due to lack of space. There wasn't any opportunity for the Diligents to wind up their attacks!

While the dark yellow mechs were all preoccupied with launching stabs, their targets did something that was beyond their expectation.

The three Swordmaiden mechs directly facing the opposition all let go of their greatswords!

Even as the heavy weapons clattered onto the ground, the weaponless machines began to wrestle against their opposition!

Although the opposing mech pilots had taken this possibility into account, the Swordmaiden mechs were so close that it was easy for them to grapple their opponents.

Surprisingly enough, the Swordmaiden mechs only focused on hugging the opposing mech while neutralizing the weapon arm.

While they held their opponents in place, the two Swordmaiden mechs that were still standing behind them took the opportunity to launch precise stabs that tore right into the frames of the immobilized mechs!

"Yes!"

Even if the devastating attacks failed to knock out the affected mechs right away, they suffered so much internal damage that they hardly posed a threat anymore.

The hugging Swordmaiden mechs quickly pushed away their crippled dancing partners.

Throughout all of this time, the two dark yellow mechs that hadn't been caught in a hug had launched numerous attacks from the flanks. Even though two Swordmaiden mechs exhibited serious damage, the flankers failed to finish off their opponents!

Commander Sendra's mech picked up the greatsword it dropped. She grinned as the numbers had turned in the favor of the Swordmaidens.

"Those tiny swords of yours are too feeble. Let me show you what a real sword can do!
FOR LYDIA!"

"FOR LYDIA!"

Chapter 2879: Commander Sendra's Style

After achieving their first victory in the main phase of the group swordsman mech competition, the Swordmaidens gained a crucial boost in confidence.

During subsequent group matches, their mech pilots placed less emphasis on relying on their skill and instead leveraged their teamwork.

Since each of the veteran Swordmaiden mech pilots trained so often together and fought so many pitched battles together, their mutual understanding and trust had reached a degree that their opponents had yet to match!

The fights rarely ended quickly. Their opponents always managed to inflict heavy damage onto the Swordmaiden mechs. In terms of pure skill, the Heavensworders exhibited considerably greater refinement.

It didn't help that the Swordmaidens stubbornly stuck to wielding greatswords despite their lack of fit with the Diligent model.

Yet despite these adverse factors, the ferocity and incredible cooperation of the Swordmaiden mech pilots eventually allowed them to find their groove.

"We did it! We managed to get past the first few days!"

While one of the Swordmaiden groups got crushed after getting matched against a team of seeded competitors, the other ones managed to make it through.

The top team led by Commander Sendra performed the most brilliantly. While every Swordmaiden was a skilled swordsman mech pilot in her own right, Sendra had already moved beyond their level after receiving much more instruction from Venerable Dise.

"When I took over from Commander Lydia, I managed to earn everyone's respect due to my strength as an expert candidate back then." The expert pilot explained to Ketis during a match. "Commander Sendra doesn't enjoy this privilege. The distance between her and the rest of our veterans is much closer, so her position is still unstable. Even with my support, I can't keep propping her up. This is why I gave her special treatment. It helps that she is already good enough, though I am not entirely in favor of her combat approach."

"She's a lot more... tricky than you." Ketis agreed. "Compared to her performance in her initial matches, Commander Sendra isn't going for the attack anymore. Instead, she's waiting for the enemy to come to her. Once her opponent shows any opening, she pounces like a venomous snake!"

The three commanders of the Swordmaidens could each be summed up with a single word.

Commander Lydia was the mother. She founded the outfit that once carried her name. With her suspected Hexer background, she erected an entire organization from scratch.

Not only did Lydia give the women of the frontier a chance to rise above their lowly station, she also put them through grueling training programs that produced genuine elites!

This was an amazing accomplishment. These days, each and every Swordmaiden revered the late Commander Lydia as their mother and greatest benefactor.

Though she had already been dead for a couple of years, her influence upon the organization she founded remained ironclad!

When Dise took over, she had to keep a damaged and deflated organization together. While her leadership was not comparable to that of her predecessor, her personal strength along with the high cohesion of her fellow sisters allowed her to succeed.

As the hunter, she was keenly aware of her strengths and weaknesses as well as that of the rest of the Swordmaidens.

The changing environment left no space for the Swordmaidens to exist independently. While Dise was good at fighting, mindless combat was no longer sufficient to allow the Swordmaidens to survive.

One of the best decisions she ever made was to bring the Swordmaidens into the Larkinson Clan via Calabast.

Although the women lost a lot of autonomy, they still retained almost everything they cared about while being able to pass off the rest to their new parent organization.

While the Swordmaidens had lost several more sisters in the service of the Larkinson Clan, they had fully proven their battle prowess with Dise as their standout warrior!

Now that Sendra took over as the third-generation leader of the Swordmaidens, many sisters had yet to figure out their future direction.

Commander Sendra took over not too long ago and had yet to make too many major decisions. There weren't many opportunities yet to make her mark on the organization she grew up in and loved with all her heart.

However, her behavior and actions prior to her promotion already gave the Swordmaidens a few clues on where she would take them. Her performance in the mech arena was another indicator.

"Come on, you old man!" The black-coated Diligent extended its greatsword at the opposing mech. "Are you going to attack yet or will you just stay put until the match ends?"

"If you want to fight so badly, then come after me!" The male mech pilot shouted back.

"Heh, why should I? According to the dueling rules, the lightest mech has to take the initiative to fight. Look at how much this greatsword weighs down my mech. I'll never be able to catch up to your mech and you know it. You've got ten minutes left to make a move."

She was right. Even though both of them piloted the same Diligent mechs, their weapon loadouts were different. The slender dueling sword wielded by the opposing mech weighed substantially less than a greatsword.

This meant that every Swordmaiden mech that appeared on the arena were always treated as the equivalent of a heavy mech. They were slower but incredibly deadly if they succeeded in leveraging their prodigious offensive power.

After a bit of dancing around, the challenger gave up on provoking Commander Sendra to launch an attack.

In fact, most Swordmaidens eschewed the advantage they gained due to their heavier weapon loadout and just charged at their opponents straight away!

This had always been the Swordmaiden creed. Attack was better than defense. There was no point in delaying an inevitable confrontation. Surrendering the initiative to the opponent was always a sign of weakness.

While Sendra often acted proactively in the past, she had become more restrained as of late. Part of it was because she couldn't afford to make so many reckless decisions as a leader. Another part of it was because of an evolution in her mindset.

"She's become more fond of laying traps." Ketis commented.

Venerable Dise did not look very pleased. "Sendra has always been more independent than our other sisters. Her willingness to think outside the box is what makes her suitable to command. Our other sisters are too rigid. Rather than think for themselves, they will just base their choices on past patterns regardless of whether they suit current conditions. That won't avail us in the long-term. We need someone who can adapt with the times."

"Well, she's doing more than that at the moment."

Commander Sendra kept her mech as still as possible as the opposing machine drew closer. A typical Swordmaiden mech pilot would have moved forward long ago, but the black-coated mech stood as solid as a knight mech!

The enemy mech pilot felt ill at ease with the situation. Commander Sendra and her mech did not do anything, but exerted considerable psychological pressure.

The Swordmaiden Commander and her mech seemed to be ready to launch a dozen different responses. Any opponent that got close would have to make some difficult choices on how to attack.

If the male mech pilot chose wrong, then he would definitely leave his mech open for a counterattack!

This was why he chose to take this mech as seriously as possible and take his time to close the distance. Two whole minutes passed until he came close to the opposing mech's attack range.

"The clock is ticking, old man." Sendra taunted. "Why are you even taking part in this tournament when you're so senile? Did you lose direction when you attempted to reach a retirement home or something?"

"I AM NOT OLD! I'M FORTY YEARS OLD! I'M IN THE PRIME OF MY CAREER!"

The man finally lost patience with the woman's incessant talking. Trap or not, he knew he wouldn't get anywhere if he kept trying to wait for opportunities.

This was the time for taking action!

Still, he did not lose his mind. He was too experienced for that. He commanded his Diligent mech to stride forward at a steady pace.

However, just as his mech was about to enter the range of the black-coated Diligent, the latter performed a powerful horizontal sweep!

Woosh!

The greatsword cut the air with such force that the opposing mech did not dare to block or get struck by the heavy attack!

The timing of the sweep was exquisite. Even accounting for the Diligent's slow reaction time and other delays, Commander Sendra's mech quickly managed to regain its stance just before the opposing mech was ready to pounce forward.

"Tch."

The man knew he missed an opportunity to punish the woman's risky move.

As his mech strode forward a second time, Sendra's mech performed an identical move.

However, this time the male mech pilot was ready!

His mech quickly stepped backwards just before he planned to push his mech forward straight away.

This time, the attacking mech had already raised its sword to impale its target!

Yet what happened next was completely outside the male competitor's expectation.

Sendra's mech had let go its greatsword!

"What?!" Ketis leaned forward as her jaw practically dropped to the floor. "She can't do that!"

Venerable Dise palmed her face. "She's showboating."

Weapons were sacred to swordsman mech pilots. Dropping or tossing their weapons was not only disrespectful towards the weapons they dedicated their lives to wielding, but also left the disarmed mechs with much less options.

During the first proper group match, Commander Sendra already encouraged her fellow Swordmaidens to drop their weapons and rely on grappling to turn a situation around.

This time, she pulled off a similar stunt!

As the hefty greatsword spun and cut into the unprepared Diligent mech, it left a large gash. While the tossed blade failed to penetrate the armor layer, the force it exerted was considerable enough to halt the opposing mech, at least for a small moment!

This was enough for Commander Sendra's mech to recover and dart forward. Even though the opposing mech recovered quickly enough to perform a warding blow, the weaponless mech easily performed a sidestep.

Without the greatsword weighing it down, Sendra's mech possessed superior maneuverability at the moment!

"Ha!"

Just as the opposing mech was about to perform a follow-up move, the Swordmaiden mech lunged forward and managed to grasp the enemy machine's sword arm just as it was about to swing its weapon again!

Even though Sendra's mech got hit by the blade, the lack of force behind it meant that it only damaged the armor.

This was enough for Commander Sendra!

After a brief bout of jostling that caused both mechs to press against each other, Commander Sendra succeeded in wrenching away the slender sword wielded by the opposing mech!

Her mech shoved the opposing mech away while gripping its newly-obtained weapon.

"She stole the old man's weapon!"

"What a daring move!"

"Who the hell is she? Swordmaidens? I never heard of them. Give me all the intel."

The entire crowd went wild at the successful attempt to rob an opposing mech of its weapon.

While tossing a weapon was highly improper, losing it to the enemy was much worse!

Right now, the male mech pilot couldn't afford to wallow in his shame. Even if he managed to turn the tables and win, the crowd would always remember this humiliation!

"I need a weapon. Where is the weapon she tossed?"

Clank.

Before the opposing mech could even think of picking up Sendra's discarded greatsword, a foot already stepped onto it. The Swordmaiden mech was effectively in control of both of their weapons!

"Are you thinking about stealing my weapon? Come get it, old man!"

While Commander Sendra enjoyed an absolute advantage right now, she declined to go on the offensive. Instead, she humiliated her opponent even further by keeping her mech in place while taunting her opponent's lack of weapons!

The worst part about all of this was that the rules were still in her favor! If the male mech pilot was not willing to launch an attack, then Commander Sendra would win the match by default!

"You horrendous witch!"

Chapter 2880: Rising Momentum

"That Commander Sendra of yours acted a bit too excessively this time." Angelique Harcourt spoke as she met with Ketis back at her villa at the end of the day. "The more traditional swordmasters frown upon showboating. Her conduct towards her opponent this afternoon is disrespectful. With their skills, she could have defeated her foe in an upright manner. There was no need for your superior to demean someone weaker. The poor man's career is pretty much over given how widely his humiliating defeat has spread."

Ketis sheepishly shrugged. "For what it's worth, I agree with you, but Commander Sendra has a mind of her own. None of us except Venerable Dise can rein her in, and even then it won't do much. She chose to win the match in the most attention-grabbing way possible, and she definitely succeeded in that. The amount of attention we've received is at least two orders of magnitude greater than before!"

Commander Sendra's stunts were very controversial to the more conservative and traditional swordmasters. There were plenty of snobby Heavensworders who thought that Sendra acted dishonorably by failing to treat her opponent with respect.

Good sportsmanship entailed fostering a circumstance where every participant benefited by taking part. A loss should only signify an end to someone's journey in the tournament. It should not be a punishment where the loser was humiliated in front of a crowd of billions if not trillions of spectators!

A lot of matches took place each day. The Greater Omanderie Festival was a truly massive event that offered something to every Heavensworder.

Initially, the number of people who paid attention to this specific match only numbered in the tens of thousands. Most of the broadcasts focused on the exploits of the seeded contestants and particularly interesting dark horses.

Yet the manner in which Sendra's mech defeated its opponent was so newsworthy that all of the domestic and foreign news portals that covered the event broadcasted the highlights of the match in front of a huge audience!

The publicity generated by this match exceeded the efforts of every other Swordmaiden by at least a hundred times!

As it turned out, there were plenty of people who loved the theatrics!

It took a lot of skill and cunning to steal an opposing swordsman mech's weapon. Sendra definitely proved that she was by no means weak.

As long as at least some of these people looked Commander Sendra up, they would eventually know about the Swordmaidens.

Once they found out that the Swordmaidens were accepting recruits, a small proportion of eligible swordswomen might be interested enough to apply!

While the number of applicants was still low in absolute terms, the trend was much more optimistic than before. The Swordmaidens came a lot closer to accomplishing its goal of recruiting at least a thousand battle-ready swordsman mech pilots than before!

Ketis admired Sendra's decision. The Swordmaiden Commander prioritized the greater needs of the Swordmaidens over her personal honor.

Angelique was right that Sendra could have won the match in a more normal fashion. Yet matches like these where two honorable swordsman mechs hacked their swords at each other until one side succumbed happened all the time.

The highlights of Sendra's match would have never reached such a massive audience if it depicted a fight that was indistinguishable from the thousands that had already occurred that day!

Angelique Harcourt crossed her arms as she leaned against a pillar. She observed Ketis with a critical eye as the latter tossed some stones into a fish pond.

"I really don't know what to make of your group of women." The Journeyman sighed. "On one hand, I sense a true warrior spirit in each of you. On the other hand, your conduct and your choices make it clear that you Swordmaidens are not as honorable as the rest of the Larkinson Clan."

"We're different. Honor is great and all, but surviving and succeeding are more important. We have fought against plenty of honorable soldiers who ultimately died at our hands."

"Does that mean you don't care about your honor at all?" Angelique looked puzzled.

"We care about our reputation."

"Is that not the same?"

Ketis shook her head as she tossed in her next stone. Different from the last ones, her latest rock didn't skip across the surface. Instead, it cut straight into the water and almost cut one of the placidly-swimming fishes!

"Honor is a luxury that we don't deserve. Sure, it's useful and all, but to Swordmaidens like us, it isn't necessary. You have never been in our position so you don't know what it is like to do what is necessary to stay alive."

"I don't understand. What does this have to do with reputation?"

"We are cruel to our enemies but kind to our friends." Ketis smiled. "There is no need to show any mercy to our opponents. That just makes things worse for us. Maybe it sounds selfish to you, but we really can't be bothered with all of the pretentious behavior that is associated with honorable conduct. When we want to achieve something, we'll accomplish it in the most effective way possible."

"And that has led Commander Sendra to turn herself into one of the more notorious competitors?"

"We don't care for our reputation in the Heavensword Association. We'll be leaving once this tournament is over, hopefully with lots of like-minded recruits in tow. We aren't looking to recruit any goody two shoes anyway. We like practical women who aren't afraid of getting their hands dirty when the situation calls for it. There's enough room for those types of soldiers in the rest of the Larkinson Clan."

The more time she spent with the Swordmaidens, the more Angelique learned about this peculiar group of women.

As a mech designer who grew up in the Heavensword Association for her entire life, Angelique became immersed in a very upright culture that prized honor and mutual respect.

Some aspects about their culture ran counter to the prevailing notions in the rest of Majestic Teal, but the Heavensworders didn't care about that. The founders of their state were old-school warriors who wanted to start a purer warrior society than the glory-obsessed Garlen Empire.

As much as she was interested in exploring an alternate mindset, Angelique was too attached to her state to adopt the Swordmaiden way.

Intriguing though they might be, the Swordmaidens were only guests. Just as Ketis had said, she and her fellow sisters would leave once their participation in the tournaments ended.

The next day, the personal combat tournaments began their next round of matches.

This time, the top team of Swordmaidens were preparing to fight a group match against a formidable opponent.

The stakes were higher now that Commander Sendra attracted so much attention to herself and the Swordmaidens. It became more important than ever to plan their approach and agree on their conduct.

"Each of you have studied the documents on our next opponents, I hope." Commander Sendra spoke as she stood in front of Ketis and three other veteran Swordmaidens. "The so-called Fortune Belters consist of locals who are not pushovers by any means."

While they are not a match against the teams of seeded competitors, they are still good in their own right."

"I've studied all of their prior matches." Another Swordmaiden said. "They're stronger than the riffraff we faced before. They are all skilled in individual combat but their teamwork isn't as good as ours."

Sendra shook her head. "That's what they want you to think."

"Are they trying to say they are faking it? That's... difficult to believe. The Fortune Belters have already fought a hard match."

"The Fortune Belters are too fishy for me to believe that they have shown their full strength already. I highly suspect that they are holding back. To what extent, I don't know, but I can just feel that they have let go of a lot of opportunities in order to draw less attention at the beginning."

A few Swordmaidens frowned. Now that Commander Sendra pointed this out, the others were also able to recall a few dubious elements.

"What do we do with this information? If it is in any way true, then we need to remain alert."

"That's true, but we should never let our opponents disrupt our rhythm, Ketis. We fight as usual. There is no need to restrain ourselves."

"If our opponents are really hiding a lot of strength, then we might want to pull out our Unending greatswords." Ketis suggestion.

"I tried to bring this up with Venerable Dise, but she refused yet again." Commander Sendra sighed. "Showing off the effectiveness of our Unending greatswords is a great way to draw more attention, but Venerable Dise feels we are more likely to attract trouble in this way. With the rest of the Larkinson Clan in trouble, we should do our best to keep our heads down."

It was for this reason that the Swordmaiden team entered the arena with conventional equipment. Aside from wearing their slim, padded protective suit, they also wielded regular Breyer alloy greatswords.

The Fortune Belters appeared as well. Five brown-suited men held their longswords with either one hand or two hands.

Different from the mech combat tournaments, the bodies of every swordsman and swordswoman differed.

It was not desirable for each of them to switch to different bodies that were completely standardized and identical to each other.

While it was technically possible to do so, either in a virtual or real setting, the shortcomings were too much.

While the Heavensworders celebrate pure skill, the personal combat tournaments also centered around good training and good equipment.

Commander Sendra, Ketis and the other three sisters at their side had ingested a copious amount of candy the previous month. Their physical attributes were leagues better than the average.

While there were a number of top seeds who possessed superhuman strength or other attributes, the augmentation they went through came paired with lots of side effects.

The same was not the case for the candy-addicted Swordmaidens! While many of them had already altered their genes in the past, the boosts provided by the candies were exceptionally gentle and harmless.

This allowed the Swordmaidens to exert good control over their bodies. While they hadn't fought enough matches yet to regain the control they had before, the sheer benefits they obtained from the candies were more than enough to compensate for any lingering adaptation issues!

"Swordmaidens!" The lead Fortune Belter shouted from the opposite side of the arena.

"What is it, Fortune Belter?" Sendra asked in response.

"Yesterday, you disgraced one of the swordsman mech pilots of our state. While I cannot pilot any mechs, I will do my best to restore the honor of our state by pressing you to your knees! We shall not rest until each and everyone of you shows remorse for your actions."

Oh boy. He did not just say that. Ketis could already smell trouble.

"Sisters." Commander Sendra whispered as she began to tighten the grip on her greatsword. "Let's ditch the wait-and-see approach. These Heavensworders think they are strong enough to force us to kneel. Let us cap their knees and teach them that they don't stand a chance against our full might?"

"Are you sure?"

"Don't worry. Just fight to your heart's content!"

When the match began, the five Swordmaidens charged straight towards the Fortune Belters.

While the latter did the same, once the two sides met, the crowd witnessed a completely unexpected sight.

As the swords of the two sides clashed, the men were forced to take numerous steps back. They failed to resist the force acting on their bodies!

"Wait a minute! These women!"

"It's too late!" Commander Sendra yelled as her greatsword hacked against the smaller weapon of her direct opponent. "You want us to kneel, right? Let me show you how I feel about that!"

The entire area around her whoosed as she utilized her entire augmented strength to bash her greatsword against the leader of the Fortune Belters.

Even though the latter managed to block every strike, the force of the collisions were so heavy that the man's footing became less and less stable.

After Sendra performed an exceptionally powerful chop, the swordsman finally couldn't take it any longer.

He collapsed to his knees!