

## Mech 2911

### *Chapter 2911: Without Direction*

The First Sword Arena had become a wellspring of excitement and exhilaration!

As Ketis of the Swordmaidens and Ivan of the Cloudstriders began to clash against each other with increasing intensity, the millions of spectators who had managed to secure an expensive seat in the vertically-stacked stands became engrossed by the spectacle taking place.

Both of them were evenly matched!

When two strong sword initiates clashed against each other without either side taking the upper hand, the match turned into a thrilling drawn-out engagement that was rare to see in the arena.

The crowd loved it! They paid a lot of money to witness the glory of higher-level swordsmanship.

Since swordmasters rarely showcased their powers in public, the only way for the general public to get in touch with battles like these was to attend fights like the one unfolding before their eyes.

Many swordsmen and swordswomen eagerly tried to capture anything that might help them advance their own sword fighting ability. Almost no one succeeded as the battles at this level were too high for them to comprehend.

For example, the Swordmaidens that had gathered at the backstage to cheer Ketis on all recognized the moves she made, but in her hands they seemed to reach an unfathomable level.

"I never knew you could do that!"

"Ketis is so brilliant!"

"She can cut everything!"

People like these were only able to observe the surface of a sword duel. There was only so much they could gain from perceiving the obvious.

Only the true swordmasters who had already found their direction were able to appreciate the struggle that happened beneath the surface.

To Venerable Dise, the entire First Sword Arena turned into a furnace of wills. The heated emotions from the crowd mingled together in a giant cloud of human energy.

Normally, this odd energy was very strange and undetectable, but expert pilots like Venerable Dise barely managed to sense it when it had concentrated and accumulated to this level.

This energy did not sit still!

Instead, as the two sword initiates clashed against each other in the center of the arena ground, their competing wills seemed to suck in the emotions of the collective. This indescribable reaction seemed to drive the two sword initiates forward.

Even swordsmen weren't immune to the power of human desire!

Venerable Dise looked thoughtful as she looked around the arena. The vertical architecture and the huge capacity of the venue did not seem so random anymore.

"Interesting."

"What's interesting?" Commander Sendra asked as she stood at Dise's side.

"Nothing important."

"Who do you think will win, Dise?"

"I can't say." The expert pilot honestly replied. "That brat Ivan hasn't entirely gotten used to his altered body yet, but he is still able to execute his sophisticated sword techniques to an extremely high degree. Ketis is the opposite. She is very comfortable in her own skin, but the execution of her techniques leaves much to be desired sometimes."

Sendra stared at Ketis in the distance with a playful expression. "She's innovating. The reason why Little Ketis looks sloppy at some points is because she's trying out new ideas!"

A proud expression appeared on Venerable Dise's face. "She has already grown up. While I don't particularly like Mr. Reid, I am grateful that he is managing to bring out the best of our sister. Ketis needed to experience a duel like this. She has butchered a lot of weaker opponents, but that will never get her ahead. We're lucky that the Heavensword Association is able to offer her a true challenge."

Both of the senior Swordmaidens exchanged knowing glances. They clearly recognized the value of holding tournaments. This was just one of many local customs they intended to bring back to the Larkinson Clan once they returned to the expeditionary fleet.

CLANG!

In the center of the arena, Ivan did not resist when a glowing greatsword collided against his luminant fencing sword. The wind seemed to assist him in pulling back and bleeding away the force acting on his body.

He did not relax, though. His instincts warned him of an acute threat.

"Hah!"

He spontaneously pushed his body to the side, borrowing the power of the surrounding wind in order to give him an extra boost.

SCHWING!

A sharp energy blade narrowly missed his body as it cut through the remaining wind before tearing into the solid floor.

Made of a special blend of exotics and materials that allowed those below a clear view of the battle above their heads, the floor was very resilient against attacks. Not even mechs were easily able to crush the material!

Yet the narrow sword energy blade that extended from Ketis' greatsword managed to leave a clear groove behind! If Ketis hadn't cut off the energy blade after she realized that she had missed, the cut in the floor would have been much deeper!

She gritted her teeth. Even though she managed to adapt the original form of the Sword of Lydia into a slender and less consuming version, she could not waste her energy willy-nilly.

Both of them had long realized that it was difficult for them to finish each other off with powerful finishing moves!

Ketis possessed the remarkable ability to cut insubstantial energy. This meant that she was always able to interrupt Ivan whenever he attempted to stoke up the surrounding winds!

On the other hand, Ivan still possessed an undeniable advantage in mobility. If Ketis invested in any big moves, then her adversary would simply become incredibly elusive, thereby preventing her from landing her potent attacks!

Due to these realities, the duel turned into a stalemate where both sides entered into a battle of attrition.

While Ketis and Ivan attempted to preserve their resources and minimize their expenditures, the struggle between the two rivals did not abate too much.

Ketis, who had become more in tune with her own swordsmanship, disdained passive defense.

She did not wish to repeat her performance in her first duel against Ivan! She was not cut out for defense. She excelled at making the edge of her blade sharper. Why should she use the flat of her greatsword to block Ivan's swift attacks?

Therefore, she decided to go on the attack and always move closer to Ivan regardless of the fact he was always able to outmaneuver her. In any case, she was considerably more difficult to pin down if she was in constant motion.

Even though she looked like a fool for constantly trying to catch up to someone who was able to outpace her, she didn't care. Her unyielding will kept propelling her forward even as she built up her momentum.

With each exchange of blows, her lethality increased a little!

Ketis constantly tried something new whenever she saw a possibility of landing a hit against Ivan.

The thin and narrow beam of sword energy that extended from the tip of her greatsword frequently altered in shape. She was steadily optimizing its properties so that it granted her the most optimal balance between sharpness, reach and power consumption.

Perhaps an average sword initiate would never be able to alter a sword technique to this degree, but Ketis was different!

Sharpie's assistance along with her considerable body of knowledge related to mech design granted her both the power and the knowledge to experiment freely with her power expression.

Whereas other sword initiates from the Heavensword Association rigidly tried to imitate the wonders of their swordmasters, Ketis had boldly moved beyond the initial teachings of Venerable Dise and Venerable Trey Walinski!

As a scientist and engineer, she was trained to absorb knowledge and apply them in creative ways. Mech design was all about combining and configuring a limited quantity of building blocks in order to yield an outcome that was greater than the sum of its parts.

This mentality allowed her to experiment boldly and without fear!

It didn't matter too much if anything went wrong. While her own control over her sword energy was actually quite rough due to lack of practice, Sharpie constantly babysit her. Anytime her experiments threatened to go out of control, her living sword intent actively intervened to suppress any dangerous outbursts.

"I'm getting closer to understanding how I should wield my power!"

Just a normal scientist, Ketis approached her current activity as an experimental study. With her enhanced intelligence, she was easily able to track everything that went right or wrong. She analyzed the results and drew conclusions from them which she tested in her subsequent experiments.

Slowly but surely, Ketis grew more adept at wielding her prodigious powers!

Woosh!

The wind blew onto her body even as Ivan's fencing sword lunged in her direction. Ketis had just launched an attack that failed to hit the mark, so she was not able to bring her greatsword up in time to fend off the poisonous strike.

"Hah!" Ketis roared as a small barrier of sword energy appeared in the path of the fencing sword.

Ivan already expected this response. He quickly diverted his fencing sword before its tip collided against the barrier.

If he persisted in his attack, he risked damaging his blade further!

Even though his fencing sword was forged out of high-quality exotics, Ketis had already succeeded in scratching it despite its toughness!

Without this trick, Ivan would have been able to take out or at least score points against Ketis right now. Still, he did not lose patience or grew annoyed that he had to abort his attack yet again.

"How long can you keep that up, Miss Ketis?"

"That's none of your business!" She snarled.

While she was able to apply some of the principles of shield generators to form a barrier made out of her own sword energy, it took a lot to maintain it, especially when it got struck.

Defense was not her forte!

She did not want to fend off an attack like that again. She sped up her pace and began to slash repeatedly in Ivan's direction.

The Blade Extension technique she used to extend the reach of her greatsword underwent some changes under her deliberate manipulation. Even as her attacks

missed against the elusive Cloudstrider disciple, her will flared just before the extended blade of sword energy broke off and curved in Ivan's direction like a homing missile!

"Hah!"

Ivan hastily deflected the sharp sword energy with his empowered fencing sword, frowning as he did so. In order to prevent his blade from getting cut, he had to leverage a lot more will and energy than he liked.

He decided to go on the offensive again. He swung his blade quickly in front of him. Even though he did not come close to hitting Ketis, his attacks whipped up the wind around him. Once the air around him had become sufficiently agitated, he rushed forward with light and airy steps.

Instead of attacking immediately, he kept circling around Ketis at a rather sedate pace. The pressure he exerted onto the Swordmaiden was considerable despite his lack of action.

"Why do you fight?"

"This question again! Why do you keep asking it? Are you so stupid that you failed to remember what I said a few minutes ago?"

Ivan's eyes became more intense as he gazed at his opponent. "Your will is abundant and exuberant. Of all of the sword initiates I have fought, you are the most inexhaustible that I have met."

"What does that have to do with your damned question?"

"Not everything about you is great, though. The more I fight against you, the more I become puzzled. Your will is massive, but you lack direction."

"Are you telling me that I'm confused?!"

"Answer my question and you will know! Why do you fight?"

Why did she fight?

"Didn't I tell you that already? I fight for my sisters! I fight to increase my understanding of sharpness. I fight so that I can design better swordsman mechs in the future!"

Ivan slowed down his steps a bit as his lips curled in a smirk. "While I am sure that those are your goals, I don't feel you have truly answered my question. You don't know the actual reason why you fight! This is your greatest weakness as a swordswoman!"

"What?!"

Although Ketis did not want to fall for Ivan's ploy, for some reason she could not dismiss his remark.

Ivan saw that Ketis had become slightly distracted. This was his chance! He turned inwards and surged towards her at great speed!

*Chapter 2912: Catharsis*

CLANG!

Though Ivan cleverly managed to disturb Ketis' thoughts, her battle instincts were not for show. She woke up just in time to fend off her opponent's charge.

The winds that assisted Ivan allowed him to evade her follow-up attack.

Ketis tried to come close enough in order to dispel his winds with a Conceptual Cut, but her opponent had learned from his previous attempts and kept his will contained.

She could not cut something that was out of her reach!

As Ivan cautiously circled around her in order to spot another opening, Ketis couldn't help but go think back on what he said.

Was she truly without direction?

From her understanding, sword initiates were equivalent to expert candidates. Both were excellent fighters who had gone above and beyond to unlock their hidden potential.

She was different from the rest. She was originally supposed to be a mech designer, but somehow managed to step onto the path of higher swordsmanship with the help of Sharpie.

Although she wielded her will like a blade, she was very well aware that she was remarkably different from more conventional sword initiates.

Her fights against Ivan Reid and Scipia Pepperin took place on both a physical and mental level.

While she was able to resist Ivan's will with her own, that mainly had to do with the quantity of her mental energy.

She sensed that she was able to expend considerably more energy than Ivan.

Yet her opponent did not lose out. Constant training and dedication in a single sword style honed his will to an exceptional degree. Even if Ivan was lacking in quantity, he had plenty of quality to make up for his shortcomings!

In other words, Ketis was like a lumbering giant who was barely able to control her great power. Her moves were wasteful and inefficient.

Ivan was like a precision instrument. His high control allowed him to achieve results with considerably less effort.

Even though he was constantly dashing and moving around, he had always rationed his will throughout the duel. He did not care too much about his physical exertion because of his body augmentations.

It was easy to upgrade a swordsman's body!

What truly mattered was whether a swordsman was able to develop their willpower. This was not an easy process and everyone had a different method to hone and condense their wills.

"What is your reason to fight, Miss Ketis?" Ivan asked as he fended off another strike from her. "What do you truly care about?"

"I care for my Swordmaidens! I care for my fellow sisters!" She snarled as she unleashed a quick Beheader energy attack.

"That's not good enough! While I'm sure you love your comrades, that's not a distinct enough goal for you. That's a sign that your vision stretches beyond your own circle. You have a greater ambition!"

She did?

"I want to become the best swordsman mech designer in the galaxy!" She insisted. "This is the best way to help the people I care about. My fellow Swordmaidens will pilot the strongest swordsman mechs that I can design! This is my ambition!"

"Is it truly the case?" Ivan smirked. "Look at yourself. Feel your heart. Do you truly believe this is the most important goal of your life?"

"I..."

She hastily raised her greatsword to block Ivan's unpredictable assault. The man had gained a lot of courage all of a sudden and continually lunged in order to poke a hole through her defense.

It took some time for Ketis to push him back.

She breathed deeply, and so did her opponent. While they were far from reaching the point of exhaustion due to their augmented bodies, their consumption was not light.

A sense of urgency drove her forward. She intuitively sensed that dragging out this match would not go well for her. She needed to find a way to pin down her opponent and exploit one of his weaknesses!

Yet that was easier said than done. She was becoming slightly more adept at dealing with swifter adversaries, but Ivan was no common opponent. His skill, physical capabilities and battle consciousness were all excellent now that he was fighting seriously.

He even had the time to torment Ketis by picking at her greatest mental weakness!

"What are you fighting for?" Ivan asked as he unleashed another flurry of blows before darting back in order to dodge Ketis' furious counterattack. "Why are you wasting your time on practicing swordsmanship? Do you really have to work so hard to get good at something you aren't serious about?"

Ketis grew furious. Ivan was constantly attacking her confidence and image as a swordswoman. He was essentially stating that properly-trained Heavensworders like him were much more superior than someone who learned swordsmanship in a much less systematic fashion.

Not only that, Ivan also accused her of lying to herself. This wouldn't have bothered her so much, but a part of her simply couldn't shrug off this possibility. No matter how much she tried to ignore this issue, it continued to hang over her like a cloud, which slightly affected her judgement and rhythm.

Even so, her unyielding will grew firmer. Each time she suffered a setback, she became more unwilling to let her opponent have his way!

"I WON'T LET YOU QUESTION MY DEDICATION!"

Something snapped inside her! Her will grew more furious around her as she imposed a greater influence on her immediate surroundings.

As Ivan dashed forward in order to launch another opportunistic strike, he yelped a bit as he felt as if his entire body bumped into a bed of needles.

Even though he rapidly dashed back, he found to his surprise that Ketis managed to attain a burst of speed. While it was not enough to match his pace, she was still able to get close enough to pose a serious threat!

"I have lost many sisters due to my lack of ability!"

Her CFA greatsword wooshed as it barely missed Ivan. The glowing blade was so sharp that it seemed it could even cut air molecules in half.

Having been on the receiving side of Ketis' unnatural cutting power, Ivan felt an awful itch from his shoulder area. His bionic arm quivered a bit in fright!

"I have felt lost and powerless in the face of overwhelming strength too many times to count!"

Ketis generated an unstoppable momentum as she constantly closed in on Ivan despite his best attempts at getting out of her reach.

Was she speeding up or was he slowing down? Neither explanation made sense, but Ivan somehow felt as if he had inadvertently stepped into a nightmare!

A large blade of sword energy extended straight from Ketis' greatsword. The length of the extended blade was considerably longer than she had exhibited earlier.

Wielding it caused Ketis to look as if she was carrying an oversized toy in her hands! The difference was that her radiant weapon was much more lethal than an ordinary toy sword!

The air around Ivan grew less restless as his opponent's lengthy weapon cut through a huge area in front of her. The wind forcefully calmed down in its wake as the sword energy blade cut through his influence!

"I have long grown upset at my inability to catch up to my mentor and sisters!"

As her unwillingness increased, so did her unyielding will. Sharpie activately changed as Ketis underwent a remarkable shift in mentality.

Her sword grew sharper and her energy became more unbound. She had repressed her desires and ambitions for so long that unleashing them felt as if she was liberating herself!

"I feel so powerless for my inability to save my first teacher and mentor!"

Her emotional catharsis drove her to fight harder despite her prior consideration of conserving her energy. Right now, fighting all-out was the only way for her to vent all of her unwillingness and frustration!

A strong field of sharpness appeared around her. It resembled that of a resonance shield but was undeniably shaped by her attributes.

This was odd!

Every swordmaster in the VIP areas looked on with surprise as they witnessed the birth of an unprecedented phenomena.

Even Venerable Dise was surprised at what was happening!

"I feel so disappointed at myself when I compare my mech designs to that of my mentor and his wife. They're so much better!"

As her thoughts strayed to her frustrations as a mech designer, her nascent design philosophy joined the party as well.

It resonated with her words and drew strength from her desire to become better!

The field of sharpness that surrounded Ketis turned her into a lethal hedgehog that Ivan did not wish to tangle with! His steps grew lighter, yet Ketis somehow managed to keep up with his pace!

It was as if Ketis was cutting the air resistance that should have constrained her pace!

"I AM NOT WILLING!" She roared as she raised her abnormally-long greatsword and chopped it down like she was an incarnation of a butcher!

Boom!

A long and narrow trench had formed in front of Ketis as her energy blade managed to cut deeply into the resilient floor material!

"I AM TIRED OF LACKING OPTIONS!"

A painful cutting sound echoed in the arena as Ketis unleashed a wide horizontal slash that briefly seemed to cut apart space itself!

"I WILL NOT REST UNTIL I HAVE BECOME STRONGER!"

The energy she released began to overflow. Her mind and spirit expanded beyond reason.

Two humongous changes occurred at the same time.

First, Sharpie grew enormously. Some kind of limit had been breached that caused her sentient sword intent to swell in size and strength.

Normally, such an explosive change would have broken the living spiritual construct, but somehow the quantitative change also came paired with a qualitative change as Ketis became more and more aware of why she struggled!

Second, Ketis finally experienced a long-awaited transformation of her design philosophy. Having been stimulated by all of the resonance and her strong emotions, the spirituality that was dedicated to her mech design specialization was finally beginning to grow and concentrate into a new seed!

These simultaneous changes caused Ketis to become unprecedentedly focused and aware at the same time!

Perhaps they should have conflicted under normal circumstances, but her mind and spirit did not show any signs of breaking.

Sharpie bore the brunt of her advancement to swordmaster. Even though it was an extension of her own spirit, it still counted as a separate entity in some fashion.

Meanwhile, the main part of her spirituality evolved in response to her desire to design better swordsman mechs. A large sample of the thoughts in her mind including a bit of her unyielding will got caught in the vortex that was currently in the process of condensing her design seed!

Even though Ketis began to imagine many fantastical swordsman mechs, she did not become distracted at all. In fact, she became more joyous as she realized that these possible mech designs were all strong enough to elevate the Swordmaidens!

This was what she wanted!

This was what she was chasing after!

"I WILL NO LONGER BE POWERLESS! I SHALL BECOME THE FIRST SWORD GOD AND STAR DESIGNER AT THE SAME TIME!"

"Impossible!"

No one had ever imagined that someone would make such an impossible goal. No one had become a sword god in modern history! As for becoming a Star Designer, the odds of achieving this exalted rank was much lower than winning the lottery!

Ketis did not acknowledge the impossibility of her immense ambitions. Instead, she drew strength from her unflinching desire to become stronger than anyone else!

As if in response, the energy blade that extended from her greatsword became even longer! She swung her weapon up and hacked it down in an unavoidable trajectory.

"I surrender!" Ivan yelled in panic. "Don't cut me down!"

Hidden shield generators came to life and projected multiple layers of shields that were strong enough to resist the force of mechs.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack!

Multiple energy shields broke in quick succession as they were unable to resist the sheer might and extraordinary cutting power of Ketis' fatal chop!

It was only at the final moment that Ketis gained a tiny bit of awareness. She minutely shifted the angle of her grip, causing the end of her enormous energy blade to slice right through the floor besides Ivan!

A trench that covered a third of the length of the arena surface had formed!

"I-I-I'm alive!"

As the sharpness field around Ketis seemed to reach a crescendo, she did not feel as if she had completed her unique and unprecedented transformation.

She looked at her trusty CFA greatsword. It sang to her as she resonated with it to an unprecedented degree. It had become more alive than ever as it actively fed from the force of will she exuded.

It was at this time that she finally understood.

She slowly lowered her stance and tilted her enormous blade back. She looked up above her head and focused on the narrow roof that was high above.

Her lips briefly moved as she uttered a whisper.

"From now on, your name is Bloodsinger."

As she finally named her greatsword, she cut into the sky, unleashing an enormous and destructive sword energy wave that broke through a couple of energy shields, passed between all of the vertical stands and broke right through the transparent roof material that enclosed the top of the narrow arena!

From the outside, the huge burst of sword energy continued to travel straight into the sky until it reached the heavens!

*Chapter 2913: Sovereign*

A small gathering of Swordmaidens and other people gathered outside the guarded entrance of a recovery room.

Commander Dise, Angelique Harcourt and Fred Walinski all looked concerned as they stood in the wide and sparse corridor.

Venerable Dise stood a bit away. Unlike the other three, she remained calm.

"You do not need to be concerned." She calmly spoke. "Ketis is a strong woman. Even though I can't entirely explain what has happened, I sensed who she could potentially become during that unforgettable moment."

"What was she like?" Angelique cautiously asked.

The Swordmaiden expert pilot did not immediately respond.

"Ketis... became grander than I could ever imagine. Even though she can't become an expert pilot or ace pilot, at that time I knew she could cut through mechs if she wanted."

"What?! Are you serious?"

"You just need to look at all of the energy shields she managed to break." Venerable Dise replied with a wry smile. "Even I felt powerless at her irresistibly sharp and powerful blade. It was as if... she had become an absolute authority of swords. In other words, a sword goddess."

The mention of that term almost caused Angelique and Fred to pop out their eyes!

While the Swordmaidens didn't have any strong associations with this phrase, it took on a much greater meaning to the Heavensworders!

The ultimate purpose of their state was to develop their swordsmanship tradition to an unprecedented height.

The best way to achieve this was to enable the emergence of a genuine sword god!

The two Heavensworders quickly regained their composure. Though Ketis had shown power beyond anything else they had witnessed, much of that ought to be a temporary outburst.

Just like expert pilots that had just completed their apotheosis, newly-advanced swordmasters also carried an excess of energy.

Once they unleashed all of their exaggerated reserves, swordmasters became a lot more reasonable. Their human nature and lack of strong and huge amplifiers such as expert pilots prevented them from posing a serious threat against mechs. They were merely deadly against infantry and light vehicles, and only within a range of around a hundred meters.

Although the Heavensworders didn't like to admit it, any sniper could end the life of a precious swordmaster!

Sure, the sharpshooter had to overcome the shield generator that every person of this stature wore, but as long as their attacks went through, a legendary figure might easily die unjustly!

Unlike expert pilots, swordmasters weren't a protected class. The MTA did not care whether someone unscrupulously assassinated these archaic sword wielders.

Angelique gently coughed as she faced the Swordmaidens. "Won't you reconsider my proposal?"

"Our answer remains the same. Ketis will not be staying here. The Heavensword Association is not her home."

"She can make our state her home! With the power that she has shown, no will deny that she is a swordmaster. We can offer an immense amount of assistance to her. With the Heavensword Saint presiding over our state, she will always have the opportunity to receive the best possible advice on her swordsmanship that she can obtain in her life. Perhaps... she might even take office as the next Heavensword Saint if she stays!"

"Miss Harcourt is not exaggerating." Fred Walinski added. "If Ketis stays, she will have a bright future ahead of her. Although she still needs to work hard in order to make greater attainments in her swordsmanship, she has as much chance as any swordmaster to ascend to the top in our society. Think of what she can do with the power of an entire state that is dedicated to the sword."

Commander Sendra crossed her arms. "I don't see what that has to do with Ketis and her wishes. We know her best. She never expressed any interest in staying in this state, let alone trying to attain a position of power. She only reluctantly accepted responsibility over the Annihilator Sword School because she felt obligated to. She can't handle anything more, so stop trying to turn her into something she doesn't want to become. The Heavensword Saint is worth fart in our eyes!"

"Ahem." Someone softly coughed behind her back.

The gathering of four all turned and faced a uniformed official. The garments of the man was both richly-decorated and refined in a way that made him completely stand out from the representatives of other organizations.

While the Swordmaidens did not recognize the new arrival, it was different for Angelique and Fred.

"Heavensword Commissioner!"

The two locals straightened their backs and saluted the well-groomed middle-aged man.

For his part, the man nodded back. "I am Commissioner Berthan Trumbull. I have been informed that Swordmaster Ketis Larkinson is still undergoing treatment at the moment. Who is her guardian?"

Seeing that the Swordmaidens didn't entirely comprehend who they were facing, Angelique couldn't help but supply a brief explanation.

"Commissioner Trumbull is part of an organization that directly answers to the Heavensword Saint. If he is here in an official capacity, then that means the Heavensword Saint himself has taken notice of Ketis! Think carefully on what you say to him. He will convey all of your words back to the head of our state."

The Swordmaidens did not have a habit of bending down to others. They became vigilant at the arrival of someone as important as Trumbull.

What did the Heavensword Saint want? Would he insist on keeping Ketis confined in this state? If so, then the Swordmaidens would have a very big problem with the commissioner!

"I am her superior." Commander Sendra stepped forward. "I can speak on her behalf."

The official only took a brief glance at Sendra before turning his gaze to Venerable Dise.

To the Heavensword Association, expert pilots and swordmasters had a much greater say than ordinary swordswomen!

Dise sighed and stepped forward as well. "What is it you want?"

Despite her rude tone, the commissioner did not appear offended at all. Instead, his face turned respectful as he grabbed a small suitcase from a nearby hovering bot. He slowly opened it up and presented its contents to the expert pilot.

"Venerable Dise Larkinson, please accept the will of the Heavensword Saint. My sovereign wishes to convey his sincere congratulations to Swordmaster Ketis Larkinson's impressive breakthrough. As one sword lover to another, my sovereign looks forward to seeing how far she can go. The Sword Goddess may not have been born here, but she shall forever be welcome in our ranks should she choose to reside in our ranks."

The Swordmaidens relaxed a bit. According to Trumbull, it appeared that the Heavensword Saint was well aware of where Ketis truly belonged. As a sword saint beyond compare, this legendary warrior was not the sort of person who would force a swordmaster to stay in her state against her will.

"Thank you, commissioner."

"It is my pleasure, Venerable. While it is a pity that Swordmaster Ketis will not be keeping us company for much longer, we wish to offer her good luck in her future journeys. The Heavensword Association will always be proud to call her one of its citizens. Please take a look at the gifts that she has earned."

The man gestured at the open briefcase.

Three different items rested inside.

First was a stack of documents along with an accompanying data chip that contained the texts in an electronic format.

Dise quickly went through the pages. She realized that they mainly consisted of certifications and other paperwork that officially declared that Ketis was a swordmaster of the Heavensword Association.

This acknowledgement was also valid in other states that recognized swordmasters across human space.

After confirming that the documents did not include any restrictive contracts or other traps, the expert pilot put them down before shifting her gaze to a sword-shaped badge.

There was something very unusual and exceptional about the exquisitely-crafted ornament.

"What is this?"

"That, Venerable, is your protege's Heavensword Badge. Consider it her badge of office. It not only symbolizes her identity as a swordmaster in our state, but also marks her as one of our own in foreign states."

"Pardon?"

"She need not fear about representing us in foreign territories. As a Swordmaster who has the right to leave her name in the Hall of Swords, she is always allowed to act as an unofficial diplomat and representative of our state."

"She... can do that?"

"Why not? Swordmaster Ketis is not only an honorable swordswoman who has found her own way, but she is also the head of one of our sword schools. These are two very distinguishing identities in our circle. She is comparable to a noble in a feudal state."

The Swordmaidens did not believe in this crap. No one was perfect. Not even swordmasters. It was much more likely that the Heavensword Association wanted to turn everyone who wore this badge into free mascots and spokespersons.

As long as Ketis did a fine job at putting the Heavensword Association in a good light, the state would have no qualms of backing her up. If she did the opposite, then the state would definitely disavow her or ignore her existence!

Ultimately, Dise concluded that the badge was worthless to a swordmaster outside the Heavensword Association. She soon turned to the final item in the briefcase.

The third item was a small transparent case that contained a very compact implant.

"Is this a cranial implant?"

"Correct, Venerable." The commissioner smiled. "The Heavensword Saint learnt that Swordmaster Ketis has yet to install an implant in her head. He has personally procured one from the MTA. Based on the intelligence that we have gathered, my sovereign carefully selected this implant model out of all of the options within his consideration. It may not be able to provide the most optimal boost to her swordsmanship and mech design pursuits, but it can assist her in both without distorting her future progress. This will become clear once you read the accompanying document."

"Uhm. Thanks."

"We do not insist that Swordmaster Ketis should install this implant in her brain. If she has a different choice in mind, then she may sell or gift the implant to someone else. Compared to her admirable swordsmanship, the fate of this material product is immaterial."

There was only one chance for humans to put a cranial implant in their heads. This was an extremely personal choice as there was no going back. The implant not only had to be suitable to the recipient, but also had to be free of any bugs, malware, backdoors and other vulnerabilities.

Even if the gifted implant came directly from the MTA, Venerable Dise did not assume it was sound! If Ketis wanted to make use of it, then the Swordmaidens would insist on combing over every single detail!

"I am sure that Ketis will appreciate this generous gift." Venerable Dise said as she accepted the briefcase. "Is there anything else?"

Commissioner Trumbull nodded. "We understand that your organization is currently engaging in recruitment."

"That is correct."

"We would like to offer some assistance to that purpose. While Swordmaster Ketis' dramatic breakthrough has undoubtedly directed a lot of attention to your Swordmaidens, we can help you achieve or even exceed your goals."

"You don't mind if we take away your strong swordsmen?"

"We are not short of skilled swordsmen and swordsman mech pilots." Commissioner Trumbull confidently smiled. "Granted, out of several considerations, you cannot take away an entire mech army from us. We do not mind if you wish to lead a more reasonable number of Heavensworders to the Red Ocean. Since Swordmaster Ketis is one of us, we shall entrust them to her. Please encourage her to do her best to spread our brand of swordsmanship to the stars."

"I... shall do that. Please keep in mind that she is also a Swordmaiden and a member of the Larkinson Clan. Those identities matter more to her. In comparison, we have only been guests here for a short amount of time."

"That is fine. We believe that all of the benefits we have given to Swordmaster Ketis will make her feel indebted to our state. We do not ask for much in return. As long as she can return a few favors to us when she has reached the Red Ocean, my sovereign will not complain."

Venerable Dise grimaced a bit. While everything he said sounded reasonable, why did she feel as if there was something fishy about this arrangement?

#### *Chapter 2914: Change of Mentality*

Ketis Larkinson underwent a complete metamorphosis after her incredibly stellar breakthrough at the First Sword Arena.

Most people thought that she had become a very talented swordmaster, but no one knew that she had also experienced a breakthrough as a mech designer.

It was difficult for other people to recognize a high-ranking mech designer due to their lack of spiritual sensitivity. Even Ketis was only a little better off in this regard due to her unique quirks.

When Ketis woke up a few days after releasing her excess energy, she immediately knew she had become a different human being.

The best way to describe it was that she had become greater than the average human. Whenever she was in the company of other people like her fellow Swordmaidens, a sense of superiority and alienation welled up inside her heart.

Deep within her bones, she recognized the truth that she had risen above them. Not even Commander Sendra, who she used to look up to as the third-generation leader of the Swordmaiden, held as much sway to her anymore!

In fact, as Ketis quickly recovered and became accustomed to her vastly-expanded capabilities, her behavior and thought patterns had undergone a drastic shift.

As a proud swordmaster and ambitious Journeyman, it was impossible for her to act like a follower again!

Her incredible strength introduced a sense of superiority in her. She became addicted to making other Swordmaidens look up to her as if she was an idol. Her will and intellect had grown so much that every action and word from her possessed a distinct charm that clearly marked her out as a demigod!

"I can accept the allegiance of other fallen sword schools, but their heritage must be of value to the Swordmaidens."

"The recruitment of mech designers is not our purview. The Larkinson Patriarch is in charge of the LMC's Design Department. Its staffing is under his arrangement."

"We won't accept any alliances. We'll be leaving soon, so the friendship of fellow swordmasters and established sword schools is irrelevant. We can take care of our own."

"We can use our own money to procure the extra mechs and starships we need to accommodate our new recruits. Don't accept any favors or discounts. Just buy what we need at market price. With my identity, the sellers won't dare to delay the transactions."

As Ketis began to exercise her authority, Venerable Dise carefully observed the new swordmaster for a few days.

Eventually, the expert pilot couldn't remain passive anymore. She invited Ketis to a small room and held a private discussion.

"Ketis."

"Yes, Dise?"

Although Ketis still respected the first expert pilot of the Swordmaidens, her demeanor had changed. She was finally able to face Dise as an equal!

The strong force of will that radiated from her body did not lose out that much against Dise's more restrained presence. Ketis' only shortcoming was that she had broken through later and was further behind the curve.

"Have you looked at yourself?"

"I have. What about it?" Ketis furrowed her brows.

Dise sighed. "I know it feels great for you to become the woman you have always wanted to be, but do you really need to throw away everything that defines the old you? Your past self wouldn't be able to recognize your current self!"

"Is there something wrong with that?" Ketis defensively replied while crossing her arms. "I have shed my weakness. I can finally stand on an equal basis in front of you and Ves. Isn't that great? I'm not the kid I used to be. I've grown up now. With my new capabilities, I can contribute much more to our fellow sisters."

Although she was right, Dise still felt uncomfortable about the sudden swing.

"I'm not suggesting that it is bad for you to change, but your shift is too extreme. I have observed you long enough to ascertain that you have lost something in the process of your evolution. If you continue to act this way, then I'm afraid that this quality will be forever out of your reach."

Ketis may have changed a lot, but she was also a clever woman. She did not think that Venerable Dise was messing with her. "What is the quality that you are talking about?"

"Compassion." Venerable Dise placed her palm on her heart. "Look, when I broke through, I experienced a rush quite like yours. However, I also had a lot of help who made sure I became more grounded. Look at yourself now. Are you treating your fellow Swordmaidens as sisters and comrades, or are you treating them like pawns and underlings?"

Ketis' force of will grew a bit unstable as she reflected on herself. Despite her stubbornness, she did recognize that her change in attitude was a bit drastic.

As she reflected on how she acted since she recovered, she realized that she was unconsciously modeling her behavior after Ves. To her, the mech designer she admired for several years had always served as a successful example.

Now that she finally managed to close the gap, she automatically assumed she was qualified to take charge in the same way!

Though she did not see any problem with this at first, now that Venerable Dise brought this matter to her attention, Ketis could not remain ignorant.

"Maybe I have changed a bit too much..."

Diagnosing the problem wasn't difficult, but fixing it was another thing. Ketis had fully awakened her unyielding spirit now. The inferiority complex that she had developed after being in the shadow of so many great figures had haunted her for a long time. She felt now that she was able to extinguish it from existence. How could she ever go back?

She talked frankly with Venerable Dise about this issue. The latter had already tempered her mentality to a large extent but there was only so much advice she could give.

"From my experience, every expert pilot is different." Venerable Dise said. "I am in frequent contact with the other expert pilots of the Larkinson Clan, and they all have their different quirks. Right now, I feel you are resembling Venerable Jannzi a little too much. Just like you, her personality swing was also on the extreme end. While I consider her a friend and battle comrade, she has become a bit too dedicated to her goal."

"Is that a bad thing?" Ketis sat down and asked. "Dedication is great. It keeps us on the right track."

"You're not wrong, but I don't want you to go too far to the point of forgetting about what you used to care about. There is more to life than designing mechs and improving your swordsmanship. During the past few days, how much time did you spend on thinking about your relationship with Venerable Joshua?"

"..."

Dise sighed. "Thought so. Just because you have become more than human doesn't mean you have to discard everything that isn't directly related to your pursuits. You need something to ground yourself and remind you what you are truly fighting for. The swordmasters that I've spoken to all agree on this. The Heavensword Association doesn't want to raise sword maniacs who have shed aside all of their morality, humanity and compassion in order to attain pure power. The result of this will only lead to uncontrollable weapons that can easily go astray."

Control was of paramount importance to the Swordmaidens. It was very easy to lose control of a long and heavy weapon like a greatsword. This was why each of them had to drill over and over again in order to minimize the occurrence of dangerous accidents.

Ketis felt as if she had become a young teenager again who finally received the chance to pick up a greatsword for the first time.

Back then, the weapon was so heavy that she barely managed to swing it a few times before having to put it down!

Was she having similar problems with her new strength as a swordmaster? Her will had become a lot more powerful, so much so that it clouded all of her thinking.

While she undoubtedly felt that she could continue to advance her swordsmanship by leaps and bounds if she channeled her highly-motivating will, it was not necessary for her to think like this all of the time!

When Venerable Dise left in order to give the newly-advanced swordmaster some space, Ketis frowned.

The source of her permanent new state came from Sharpie. Somehow, her living sword intent changed from a tiny companion into a formidable dragon in her mind. It not only intertwined with her mind and will to a greater degree, but also produced so much power that Ketis felt that she could easily defeat every sword initiate regardless of their tricks!

Yet did she need all of this power at this time? There was no opponent for her to beat. There was no threat for her to overcome.

Was there a way for her to repress or reduce her source of strength?

"Sharpie."

Swish swish?

"Can you tone it down a bit? I love that you have grown up so much, but you're affecting me a bit too much."

Swish...

It turned out that Sharpie couldn't repress itself. Any swordmaster's will was indomitable. They weren't meant to be hidden! This was especially the case with Ketis, who had broken through after recognizing her desire to stand out and become the best in her professions!

Several minutes passed as Ketis tried out several different solutions. Nothing worked. It wasn't until her eyes fell onto Bloodsinger that she started to have some ideas.

Bloodsinger was the definitive name for the CFA greatsword that had accompanied her throughout her adventures in recent times. Ketis wasn't sure why she settled on this name in particular, but just thinking about it increased her resonance with her blade.

The sword sang to her when she resonated with it, and the blade had already spilled a copious amount of blood. Therefore, the name Bloodsinger truly fit her trusty weapon.

At the moment, Bloodsinger rested in its floating sheath and followed her around like an obedient puppy.

"Hmm. Maybe you can become something more. Sharpie, can you move out of my mind and stay inside Bloodsinger for a while?"

Swish swish!

Sharpie had already left her mind in order to inhabit other swords in the past. This was not a new activity.

This time was different, though.

As soon as Sharpie left her mind with difficulty, his strong and radiant presence became very palpable to Ketis!

A large void emerged in her mind as she immediately felt as if she had lost a lot of intensity. As she tried to get accustomed to her weaker and less determined state, Sharpie effortlessly darted inside Bloodsinger and began to merge with the weapon.

Ves modeled Sharpie after the CFA greatsword to begin with, so the compatibility between the two was pretty much perfect!

Though Ketis did not observe any visual changes from her blade, her mind sensed as if her sword had come alive in a way that she had never experienced before!

A connection still existed between Ketis and Sharpie, but their separation had caused the feedback to become a lot weaker. She already felt more clear minded and subdued.

She carefully reached out and unsheathed her greatsword.

Familiar strength flowed back into her. The will that she had previously parted with flowed back into her body. There were no barriers in the way. The only difference was that the increased distance caused Ketis to become less affected by this influence.

"This... can work."

As she continued to hold her greatsword, she intuitively sensed that it had become a lot greater. She did not dare to swing her weapon in her office.

After she returned her weapon to her sheathe, she made up her mind to stuff Sharpie inside Bloodsinger most of the time.

"I'm much more personable now." She guessed. "I feel more free when I think about mech designs as well. Maybe it's not a good idea to be too narrow-minded."

#### *Chapter 2915: Departing Swordmaidens*

After a week of recovery, recruitment, procurement and preparation, the Swordmaidens were ready to depart the Heavensword Association.

Though the Swordmaidens desired to stay longer in the state, they could not remain separated from the Larkinson Clan too long.

Fortunately, Ketis and the Swordmaidens gained enough goodwill from the Heavensword Association to receive their full cooperation. Bureaucratic and legal

procedures that should have taken days or weeks to complete under normal circumstances no longer became an issue after a few minutes.

Ketis or her representatives only needed to make a few personal calls with some high-level contacts to solve their problems!

Swordmasters were at the top of the hierarchy in the Heavensword Association. Though Ketis had already heard about this when she initially arrived in the state, she never imagined that her new privileges were so massive!

A lot of Heavensworders went out of their way to please her! Whether she wanted to procure a batch of quality combat carriers or complete the emigration paperwork of every new member recruited from the Heavensword Association, no one stopped her from getting what she wanted.

The Swordmaidens didn't even get hindered by other swordmasters and sword schools. Ketis had defeated a lot of strong disciples in her tournament run. The Cloudstrider Sword School should have had a grudge against her, and the Brevis Sword School shouldn't be very happy with her either.

Yet as the preparations continued to go smoothly, the hindrances that she expected never arrived.

"Victory and defeat is normal in tournaments." Angelique Harcourt respectfully answered her doubts. "A single elimination tournament will always cause a lot of promising seeds to drop off early. There is little point in sulking over a loss. It is much better to sharpen your skills and make sure you're able to achieve a better result in the next tournament."

The Heavensword Association hosted lots of tournaments. The Greater Omanderie Festival was just one of many annual events. There were plenty of chances for young and promising swordsmen to secure their own moment of glory as long as they possessed sufficient strength!

"I see. I hope you're right."

After discussing some other matters related to the upcoming departure of the Swordmaidens, the conversation turned into a more personal direction.

"How do you do it? How can you become a swordmaster and Journeyman at the same time? Can you give me a hint? You are the only person I know who has managed to achieve this impossible feat."

Angelique's attitude towards Ketis changed drastically after the latter's breakthrough. Previously, the local Journeyman treated her guest as an equal. While Ketis was just an

Apprentice back then, her excellent attainments in swordsmanship made her worthy of respect.

Yet now that Ketis had broken through as both in both of her professions, she completely surpassed every other Journeyman! There was no way that Angelique could treat Ketis as an equal colleague anymore, especially since she had been taught to revere swordmasters above all else!

Ketis felt a bit sad about the unavoidable changes in their relationship. Though she wanted to earn everyone's respect and stand out from the rest, she never fully thought about the downsides of becoming a greater figure until now. It was impossible for her to be as casual and intimate with most anymore.

If she hadn't pushed Sharpie into Bloodsinger, then she wouldn't have even realized how much she missed her past interactions with people!

"As I've explained before, my situation is unique. I can't divulge the details because I will have to betray the trust of my benefactor. I'm sure you don't want me to break one of my promises. The only way you can potentially follow in my footsteps is if you leave the Heavensword Association and join the Larkinson Clan."

Though Ketis had made this offer several times, this time Angelique looked awfully tempted! She struggled between her competing desires.

"I... can't. I'm sorry. I truly wish I could go with you and meet this amazing mentor of yours in person, but... the Heavensword Association is where my heart is. Leaving it forever is like cutting it out. Perhaps I'm not making the best choice for my career, but some matters are more important."

"Hey, I understand. I don't think you have made the wrong choice at all." Ketis said as she softly patted Angelique's shoulder. "You can't give up everything you care about in order to pursue greater power. Even if you have all of my abilities, it isn't worth it if you have to leave all of your friends and family behind."

She repeated the same advice that Dise had given to her. Now that she had sobered a little, she fully understood the favor she received.

A few days later, the Swordmaidens and the Annihilator Sword School had completed their preparations. Both organizations had taken in thousands of eager new members. While sorting them out was bound to be a time-consuming process, for now they remained well-behaved as none of them wished to shame themselves in front of a swordmaster!

Ketis and the remaining cadre on the surface of Omanderie III were about to depart from the surface.

Hundreds of shuttles and passenger transports rose into the skies. The Swordmaidens had reserved an entire section of a spaceport in order to organize the transit of so many new people.

Ketis, Dise, Sendra, Fred and a couple of other leaders watched on as all of the vehicles flew up into orbit in an orderly fashion.

Since this was a formal occasion, Ketis dressed at her best. No longer did she wear the ordinary uniform of a Swordmaiden or a mech designer of the LMC.

Instead, she wore a resplendent martial dress uniform in white. Its sky blue embroidery along with the badges and medals representing her identity as a swordmaster, director of the Annihilator Sword School and so on caused her to look like a leader!

The white cape with the emblem of the Annihilator Sword School was a very nice touch to the ensemble. Ketis understood now why Ves liked to wear them during his speeches. It could make anyone who wore them appear larger than life!

As the final Swordmaidens were about to enter an armored shuttle that was surrounded by an honor guard of hundreds of military mechs, a surprising guest arrived to bid her farewell.

"Swordmaster Ketis! Can I have a moment of your time?"

The familiar voice caused the woman in question to freeze.

"Do you want us to send him away?" Commander Sendra already started to crackle her fists.

Ketis shook her head. "None of that, please. You go on ahead. I'll be with you later."

She fearlessly turned around and separated from her companions. She walked back the way she came until she arrived before a familiar sword initiate.

"Mister Ivan Reid. You shouldn't be here."

The man gave her a nervous smile as he felt her strong but tightly-controlled will.

"I'm not your enemy, swordmaster. I never was. Whether in our first bout or second bout, I only treated you as a competitor. There shouldn't be any animosity between us. We are simply swordsmen who happened to be matched against each other in the tournaments. Now that the last competition is over, our swords are back in our sheaths."

Ketis relaxed a bit after she sensed that Ivan was being sincere. "You have a point. That said, we don't have any ties to each other anymore. Why are you here?"

"I just want you to know that I am happy for your breakthrough." Ivan gained some confidence. "It doesn't matter to me whether you are a foreigner who is destined to leave our state. Humanity has gained one more swordmaster, and that is always a cause for celebration."

The Heavensworders were pretty broadminded people from what Ketis had experienced so far. Their swordsmen were particularly noble and honorable in character. Her impression of Ivan improved. She knew that not every defeated opponent would be able to accept his loss as well as the Cloudstrider disciple.

A question popped up in her mind. "During our rematch, did you question my purpose because you wanted to disturb my mental rhythm, or were you trying to do me a favor by pointing out the shortcoming that has kept me from breaking through?"

"I... suppose it's both." Ivan replied. "I never wanted to ruin you or take revenge for my previous loss. I just wanted to win and prove that I'm still a strong swordsman. I just saw an opportunity during our battle. Based on the research collected about you and the lack of direction I've sensed in your will, I tried to mess with your concentration by making you question yourself."

"And you did that knowing that you might achieve the opposite result instead?"

"Hey, it worked out for you, didn't it? I don't see why you should give me a hard time over that. Even if you fell for my scheme, you would have learned something about yourself from your defeat. This is what serious fights between swordsmen often yield. Either you overcome the challenge, or fall short. Either way, you can't enjoy a smooth ride all the time."

Ketis agreed with the sentiment, though she did not entirely like who was telling her this. "I thank you for giving me the opportunity to find my own way. For that, you have my thanks, Mr. Reid. Now if you will excuse me, I have a shuttle to catch up to. Our new fleet is on a tight schedule and any delays will mess up our timetable."

"Wait! Before you go, I have a gift I wish to pass on to your hands!"

Ivan turned around to accept a bouquet of flowers. He carefully presented it to Ketis. "For you."

Ketis slowly reached out and accepted the bouquet. The aromas from the specially-cultivated flowers soothed her mind and softened her attitude. Women always liked flowers, and she was no exception.

"What is this for?" She asked.

Ivan looked hopeful after she accepted his flowers. "I... am infatuated with you. I admire your strength and appreciate your personality. You are quite different and exotic

compared to the swordswomen of our state. Would you allow me to accompany you and enter into a relationship with you? I am willing to follow you into the Red Ocean if that is what it takes."

Ketis abruptly froze. She looked intently at the lovely bouquet of flowers.

"If you think my strength is not sufficient yet, then please give me more time!" The man hastily added. "You have already fought against me twice, so you should know how close I am to becoming your equal. In fact, I have already caught a glimpse of how I should proceed after our last match! The help you have given me is another reason why I appreciate you. I think we can continue to stimulate each other's growth if we are together. Think of all of the benefits we can gain from sparring against each other!"

The hand that gripped the bouquet shook. Ketis grew more and more intense until a dark energy escaped from her palm and ran through the delicate flowers!

Right in front of Ivan's face, the beautiful and aromatic flowers that he had spent a fortune to procure from a special boutique darkened and crumbled from existence in a matter of seconds.

Ketis raised her head and pinned Ivan with a stare that could kill a human!

"I already have a boyfriend. He is ten times more worthy than you. Besides, you're too old. Get lost."

She didn't bother to hear his response. She forcefully turned around and strode away, her cape whooshing as she moved.

As her strong form grew smaller in Ivan's eyes, the sword initiate lowered his head and felt utterly defeated.

"What a pity." He softly whispered to himself.

He had a feeling that he had failed the most difficult challenge of his life. If he succeeded, he would have been able to accompany someone who had the potential for greatness for the rest of his life.

His will was firm enough to accept this outcome. He soon regained his composure. He gazed at the shuttle rising upwards in the company of a large formation of mechs and saluted its departure!

*Chapter 2916: Total Blockade*

A fist slammed against a tabletop.

"These obstinate Lifers! Why are they so stubborn?!"

Professor Benedict Cortez had lost his temper yet again! A dark rage swept over him as his thoughts turned into a more bloody direction.

Yet soon, his rationality reasserted itself. When he thought about how many military biomechs and bioships were blocking any vessels from entering the inner half of the Prosperous Hill System, he felt helpless.

Patriarch Reginald Cross looked upset as well, but he was very clear that he didn't have the power to change the situation.

"The local military garrison already made their stance clear. As much as we want to rescue our stranded people, we cannot overcome over a hundred-thousand spaceborn biomechs."

The Life Research Association may have become engulfed in a civil war, but the professional military had remained steadfastly neutral.

It was one thing for the military to decide that they didn't want anything to do with the power struggle taking place in the upper echelons. It was another thing for them to actively block the advance of civilian ships that attempted to get close to Prosperous Hill VI to evacuate those who were trapped on the wartorn planet!

Over the span of an entire week, Professor Cortez managed to persuade the rest of the Golden Skull Alliance to adopt his plan on uniting every foreign and visiting fleet.

There were at least tens of thousands of formidable starships lingering in the outer system. If all of them ignored the instructions of the Lifers and advanced forward, there was no way that the military patrols would shoot them all down! The diplomatic outrage that would ensue should have been enough to turn the LRA into a regional pariah!

Yet just as the Golden Skull Alliance had just convinced a tenth of the visiting fleets to form a united front against the Lifers, a substantial collection of trading fleets had already made the first move!

Eight different trading convoys that encompassed hundreds of ships of different classes boldly crossed the border and ignored every warning from the nearby military biomachines to stop and turn around.

Not even warning shots deterred the traders from going forward in order to rescue their people and more importantly trade goods!

The Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers were just about to follow suit, but they quickly changed their minds when they saw what happened next!

The projection in front of Professor Cortez displayed the aftermath of a slaughter. An innumerable amount of chunks of debris drifted in space served as the only physical

proof that a large collection of ships had attempted to test the patience of the local armed forces!

Everyone on a ship that was orbiting the border between the inner and outer system had become absolutely terrified at what had happened!

The strong military patrols hadn't ignored the grave intrusion. Instead, they called in reinforcement and immediately opened fire when they had gathered enough mechs!

The tragedy that unfolded did not need to be described. Although trading fleets customarily traveled with strong escorts in order to deter pirates from raiding their valuable goods, how could these forces withstand the might of a large, organized military force?

Not every private fleet was as formidable as that of the Golden Skull Alliance!

In fact, even if the convoy guard mechs were on par with that of the Cross Clan, they still would have lost!

The Prosperous Hill System was a major commercial port system! The enormous concentration of trade, industry and other activities turned it into a vital strategic location.

It was easy for the military garrison to gather thrice as many mechs as the opposition!

Though the amount of mechs escorting the various visiting fleets were not trivial, their strength was mixed. Not only that, but every foreign force possessed their own thoughts. They weren't united at all and would never be able to match the cohesion of soldiers in the service of an entire state!

Ever since the Lifer military had ruthlessly slaughtered the offending trade fleets, the tentative allies that Professor Cortez secured had all backed off the plan.

No one wanted to test the resolve of the military!

"Are we supposed to sit around and do nothing out here?" Professor Cortez growled.

"It seems so. We are not in our home territory here. The most we can do is stay prepared and be ready to move out if anything changes."

While Patriarch Reginald was not the most conservative clan leader in existence, there were many instances where even a high-tier expert pilot like him was rendered helpless!

This was no fault of his own. He was not a god. In fact, even an ace pilot wouldn't be able to single-handedly bull through so many enemies!

Still, it felt very bad for Reginald Cross to surrender to the current reality.

"Why do you think these soldiers wiped out the intruding trade fleets without remorse?" He asked the guest designer of the Cross Clan. "If the Lifers merely wanted to halt an intrusion, then they could have made an example of just a couple of the offending ships. There was no need to go all the way and wipe the trespassers out to the last man! They were already turning back and fleeing from the military biomechs before the first ship succumbed!"

This was indeed an uncharacteristically forceful response. The military garrison was so powerful that it could have made its point without inflicting heavy losses to the powerful trade companies that operated the fleets.

The news of this massacre had already spread throughout the galactic net! Many people in the star sector gained a very bad impression of the Life Research Association. A lot of established business partners were also considering if they needed to pare down their trading activities with the state!

Professor Cortez hummed as he considered the current situation. "If the officers in charge haven't gone mad, then the military must be following a specific purpose. There has to be a logical reason why the brass would rather offend numerous trading partners and depress foreign trade for years to come."

"The leaders in charge of the military garrison aren't fools." Patriarch Benedict noted. "You can see that from their crisp maneuvers, smooth logistics and excellent discipline. Not a single military unit in space has gone rogue as far as I can tell. There is no way that the massacre that took place earlier is spontaneous."

If this was the case, then there must be an incredibly strong incentive to keep foreigners away from the heart of the Prosperous Hill System!

Professor Cortez glowered. "There has to be an enormous secret in the inner system. Among the settled planets, Prosperous Hill VI is the most dangerous one. Perhaps they are competing for something extremely vital to them and don't want any foreigners spoiling their party."

"What could be so valuable that the factions are going all-out to conquer the planet?"

"I have no clue."

The Crossers weren't the only ones to come to this conclusion. Calabast and Gloriana were also wondering what the local factions were truly fighting for. The collateral damage was already considerable, but the militant Lifers showed no signs of easing their conflict!

"Miaow?" Clixie jumped down from Gloriana's lap and approached the odd eight-legged mammal.

Arnold stopped sniffing and rubbing his side against Calabast's long and tight boots.

"Squeak?"

"Miaow miaow!"

"Squeak..."

"Miaow!" Clixie hissed and darted forward in order to press her paw on top of Arnold's head!

"Squeak!"

As Clixie showed the mutated arganid clisenta who were in charge aboard the Spirit of Bentheim, the two Hexers both looked troubled as they regarded their chances of rescuing Ves.

Though neither of them were particularly close despite their common origins, this time they were on the same side.

"Have you managed to communicate with Ves and the other stranded Larkinsons?" Gloriana asked.

Calabast shook her head. "There has been no change in the situation. While we know that some sporadic quantum communication nodes are still in working condition, their owners have already cut external access to them. The public is completely cut off from outside contact. We can't even broadcast long-ranged signals to the planet the old-fashioned way. The military garrison has put up a wall of interference over the entire planet. This is a very serious act."

This was yet another sign that something fishy was going on. Prosperous Hill VI was not only the starting location of the Supreme Revolution, but remained hotly contested despite the large number of biomechs that had already perished from the seemingly-pointless fighting!

"Ves..." Gloriana squirmed in her seat and rubbed the wedding band on her ring finger. "I can sense he's alive, but I don't know how he's doing. He could be stuck in a cell and getting tortured right now! We have to get him out of this rotten planet!"

"I want the same thing, Gloriana, but we truly don't have any options."

"Don't you have a stealth shuttle or something?!"

Calabast shook her head. "The chance of getting caught and subsequently losing this valuable asset is too large. I won't mention the difficulty of circumventing all of the mech patrols and security platforms in orbit. Reentry from orbit to surface always generates a lot of heat. If a shuttle dives down quickly, then it will light up like a meteoroid regardless of its active stealth systems. If it dives down slowly, then it has to expend a lot of energy to control its descent, which means that the shuttle's engines and other systems will be outputting too much heat."

"You don't need to tell me that. I'm a mech designer. I know my science." Gloriana grumbled.

"Then you shouldn't have asked this question in the first place."

"I just want you to do something!"

It didn't matter how many times Gloriana yelled at Calabast or other Larkinsons. The clan wasn't strong enough to challenge the might of an entire state!

Complaining was all the Journeyman could do. Without Ves, she felt as if she was missing an entire half of her life. She had entangled herself way too much to her current husband to be able to go without him! She loved him so much that she was even willing to smuggle herself onto the surface if it was possible!

As Gloriana imagined all kinds of suffering that Ves must be going through, the man in question was currently having the time of his life!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

"Hahaha!" Ves laughed as he observed the outcome of his latest test. "I'm making progress! Only three out of twelve test subjects failed to endure the pressure. This is better than yesterday!"

Over the past couple of days, he continued to experiment with the Aspect of Transcendence. The exploded heads and bodies of hundreds of captive and sentenced criminals already confirmed its potency. What Ves sought to do was to retain its useful effect but mitigate the lethal side effects as much as possible!

He constantly tweaked the spiritual foundations of the Aspect of Transcendence and the Aspect of Tranquility. Though he was far from eliminating the risk of death at the moment, he believed the chances of survival were much greater if he subjected this experimental procedure to a strong-willed Larkinson!

"Scum ultimately aren't representative of proper clansmen." Ves muttered.

He continued to perform some follow-up experiments on the surviving test subjects and only stopped when they all expired.

As soon as Ves emerged from his secret lab, someone was already waiting for him in his office.

"Patriarch Ves!" Commander Rivington saluted. "We have just come across a highly controversial piece of intelligence. It's mostly a rumor, I think, but there are enough signs for us to think it is plausible."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "What is it, commander?"

"If you remember, you ordered us to look into whether there is a pinnacle lab nearby. We did so and began to question a lot of locals for unusual signs. We not only succeeded in gathering some clues on the possible location of the Supreme Sage's lab, but also got word that it contains something explosive."

"What is it you're talking about?"

The Lifer-turned-Larkinson took a deep breath before spitting out the answer.

"There is a possibility that the pinnacle lab contains a dose of high-grade life-prolonging treatment, sir. In fact, there is a possibility that it may hold multiple doses!"

Ves completely froze.

#### *Chapter 2917: Gathering Clues*

What was a high-grade life-prolonging serum?

That was the magical cure for one of the most difficult to cure diseases for every form of life: aging!

Humans, like almost every other form of life, were natural products that came with an expiration date. The cost of growing them was substantial, but the cost of maintaining their operation rose exponentially as they continued to exceed their original expiration date.

It was not that difficult for a typical baseline human to live beyond 130 years old by receiving special treatment. While the price was not affordable to ordinary humans, the wealthy could probably secure a modest extension after paying a very significant price.

The real challenge came beyond this initial period. Trying to extend the life of a person who was already operating beyond his original parameters became at least ten times as hard.

Fortunately, a second round of life-prolonging treatment was not out of reach for the wealthiest citizens of a typical second-rate state.

What about after that, though? Though Ves did not comprehend the specifics, Ranya once told him that a third round of treatment was at least ten times more difficult than the preceding one. This pattern continued until not even the Big Two had the technology or resources to extend the life of an ancient geezer who should have died centuries ago!

Though Ves only possessed a very shallow understanding of life-prolonging treatment serum, he had his own unique insights on them after owning a vial once.

At his age, he had plenty of time to spare before he needed to worry about extending his life.

The true value of the serum rested in its incredibly potent universal life-attributed spiritual energy!

This mysterious quality, which Ves suspected to be the key to the efficacy of the serum, was one of the best spiritual ingredients that he had ever come across!

His own life attribute excelled at creating life where there was none. This was what he was working towards, so of course it had to excel in this aspect.

His mother apparently couldn't replicate this capability, but she was much better at draining and converting heterogenous spiritual energy.

Both of them utilized life energy in different applications. They worked better for some purposes and didn't work at all for other purposes.

What was remarkable about the life energy derived from life-prolonging treatment serum was that it was incredibly potent and universal!

It had a gentle, neutral quality that could basically merge with anything without generating any rejection. This turned it into a powerful amplifier that could provide an enormous qualitative and quantitative boost to his spiritual products!

So far, Ves utilized the energy derived from the serum to create some of his best spiritual products. The Superior Mother, Lufa and Sharpie all gained boundless potential due to the all-around improvement granted by the high-quality energy.

Unfortunately, Ves lost the potency of the serum in his possession to his mother before he could do more with what was left. If he knew that his voracious mother would suck his energy without any regard for propriety, he would have used up his universal life energy a long time ago! He could have created a lot more wonders if his vial still retained much of its potency!

This was one of his life-long regrets. He often thought back on the Battle of the Abyss and how much he sacrificed in order to secure victory. He always wanted to travel back

in time so that he could beat his younger self on the head for being stupid enough to venture so deep into the Nyxian Gap!

Ves thought this would stay as a dream for a very long time. The cheapest form of life-prolonging treatment serum was no longer inaccessible to him, but the MTA and CFA imposed multiple arduous requirements to those who wished to obtain the high-grade variants!

He gave up on obtaining them through regular channels after he learned how many barriers were in the way.

Yet this time was different.

The news provided by Commander Rivington sent a shudder through his body.

He did not fully appreciate the full value of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum until he had finally lost it all to his mother. He experienced many frustrating instances in the future where he felt he could have accomplished more if his serum was still intact!

Now that he had the chance to make up for it, Ves did not want to let go of this promising opportunity!

Still, his sense of prudence quickly reasserted itself. Though it normally didn't play a major role in his life, common sense dictated that something as supremely valuable as high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum should never be easy to obtain!

This was especially so if it was stored inside one of the Supreme Sage's mysterious pinnacle labs! These top-end research facilities were incredibly desirable by pretty much every faction in the LRA. Ves doubted that he and his mob could just barge past their biomechs, pass through all of the security measures and pull out a vial or two like he was shopping for groceries!

Though his greed for the serum threatened to overwhelm all of his good sense, Ves was still able to calm his raging emotions.

He did not forget about his current circumstances. Though he managed to gather an expanded mob of Lifers who he managed to convert to the Larkinson Clan, the hundreds of biomechs at his disposal could easily be crushed by any major organized force!

Ves needed to gather more details in order to make a more thorough consideration on whether he should go for it. A single vial of serum was not worth his life!

He turned his attention back to Commander Rivington. "Tell me what gives you the confidence to bring this up with me. If this is just a rumor, you wouldn't have bothered to waste my time."

The former competitive team leader had done a decent job at organizing all of the newly-induced clansmen. Even with the help of the Larkinson Network, it was not easy to get every single Lifer in line, especially when many of them were previously members of gangs, eccentric organizations and fringe groups.

"Well, it's like this, Mr. Larkinson. Do you remember Spiritus Sancti?"

Ves glowered. "Yes, I do. It's the cult that treats biotechnology as a faith rather than a science. Samandra Avikon used to be a part of this organization as well."

Though he had his apprehensions for the weirdos with the purple mechs, Samandra and her cultists had remained well-behaved so far. Aside from their insistence on maintaining their religious beliefs, they got along decently well with other Larkinsons.

The only caveat was that the vast majority of 'Larkinsons' in his airfleet consisted of other former citizens of the Life Research Association. It remained to be seen whether the cultists would be able to adjust to life in his main fleet where the majority of clansmen did not have much affection for biomechs.

"Well, sir, the primary source for this intelligence comes from the former members of Spiritus Sancti."

"What?! Are you sure?!"

"Perhaps it is best to hear from her yourself. I have already taken the liberty of summoning her. She'll be arriving soon enough."

In the meantime, Rivington explained the other clues they gathered about a possible pinnacle lab in the vicinity that may have relations with life-prolonging treatment.

"After an investigation, we have pinned down two possible locations for a pinnacle lab." He said as he projected a map of the greater metropolitan area. "Ruuzon Arena may be one of the most probable possibilities. The extreme defenses, the oversized underground complex and the constant fighting that still goes on in the area are all indicators that there is something of extreme value there. There is no other reason for the opposing factions to fight so hard over a simple arena."

Ves firmly nodded. He agreed with this logic. He didn't need to listen to any rumors to know that there was something fishy going on in that place. Perhaps the instance where its audience platforms turned into killer tree tentacles was not a random terrorist act!

Although the airfleet was currently far away from the arena, they could still perceive the intensive fighting going on to this day through their long-ranged sensors. The Larkinsons also came in touch with witnesses who had fled the city center after falling victim to the copious amount of collateral damage that the fighting forces were

producing every day. Practically every tree structure in the surrounding districts had already been trashed from all of the ordnance flying around!

"While I think you are definitely on to something, Ruuzon Arena is not a place where we should return. We almost lost our lives to the chaos in our efforts to get away from that warzone. Even if there are 100 vials of high-grade life-prolonging treatment serum in storage over there, there is no way I'll return!"

The risks were too high. Not even Ves could stomach the extremely high likelihood of getting targeted by powerful hostile forces.

These mech forces and their backers would never allow a random outsider to compete for the treasures of a pinnacle lab!

Commander Rivington looked a little more relieved. "I agree with you. The second possible location should not be as dangerous. You mentioned something about an unreasonably large warehouse depot. I've read through Venerable Tusa's reports on his scouting runs and tasked some of my men to dig up more information."

"Did your investigations yield anything?"

"We didn't manage to get access to solid records and other data, but we did find a few former workers of the warehouse complex. Despite the unusual location of the depot, the containers that pass through this place are always properly accounted for. They are sourced from normal biotech companies and they are shipped to various destinations on the planet, not just nearby biotech facilities. It seems as if the warehouse is merely situated in this poor region in order to take advantage of the low regional taxes and other preferential policies."

"That shouldn't be all if this is everything you've managed to gather." Ves replied while steeping his fingers.

"Correct, sir. One of my investigators thought to look up something different. He tracked the news of visits of prominent old guests to the planet. It is quite rare for centuries-old dignitaries to visit Prosperous Hill VI, so each time they come, the news inevitably mentions their names."

"What did you find?"

"For one, they rarely visit Prosperous Hill IV, which is considered to be a much more elite and high-class environment to entertain important dignitaries. Instead, most of them chose to stay in Prosperous Hill VI for weeks and months at a time. The news makes few to no mentions of their appearances during their stay, but they have to be somewhere. Doesn't this sound as if they are being treated?"

Ves furrowed his brows. "This is not a proven correlation. These important dignitaries could be engaged in many other activities during their stay. They don't need to publicize their entire itineraries."

"Ah, but we have another clue that makes their visits more notable. Those companies that are shipping containers to the warehouse depot? Several of them are owned in part or in full by those ancient dignitaries. It's rare, but there are enough instances for us to conclude that there is definitely something secret taking place!"

Now this was more suspicious! The amount of companies that operated in the LRA and the rest of the star sector was immense. Even the slice of companies that produced resources relevant to the biotech industry numbered into the millions or billions!

Ves became more and more convinced that Rivington was on to something. "This is compelling circumstantial proof, but it's not enough to conclude that the warehouse is tied to a pinnacle lab. Alternate explanations still exist."

"We are aware of that. That is why the testimony from the former members of Spiritus Sancti is important. On their own, their words are not convincing enough, but combined with the intelligence we've gathered, the picture grows stronger."

While Ves normally wasn't inclined to believe the words of a cultist, this time was different. If there was enough supporting evidence, then it might be worthwhile to take this person seriously!

#### *Chapter 2918: Superseding Oaths*

"Miss Avikon, please enter."

A woman garbed in remarkable purple robes entered the room. She nodded at Commander Rivington. As prominent leaders among the Lifer contingent of Larkinsons, they frequently worked alongside each other.

Ves was a bit taken aback by her appearance though. While he interacted with her every now and then, lately he had become too preoccupied with his experiments. Besides, his airfleet already developed a working hierarchy now. He did not have to waste as much time with solving various management issues.

It had actually been at least 6 days ago when he last met Samandra. Back then, the priestess possessed a familiar demeanor.

Now, she looked much more focused and intense. When her eyes rested on Ves, he felt as if she was trying her best to restrain herself!

She bowed deeply. "Patriarch Ves. It is good to see you again."

"You look... different."

"I have been praying a lot lately, and so have my fellow compatriots."

"That sounds okay."

"I have been praying in front of the Aspect of Healing. For a long time, I did not realize that I was bearing a burden. Reflecting on myself while in the presence of the divine angel has made me realize that

"Oh."

Of the four Aspects of Lufa, Ves reserved two of them for his experiments. The Aspect of Rationality was very dangerous, but also very useful in certain circumstances, so its use was heavily restricted.

This left the Aspect of Healing as the remaining statue open to the public. Every Larkinson who wanted to clear their minds and find some joy in their lives were allowed to have a session with the statue.

A short session.

As Ves and some of the leadership became more concerned about the potential long-term effects of constant exposure, they increasingly limited the amount of minutes someone was allowed to spend in the statue's presence.

Ves did not want to raise a bunch of spiritual drug addicts! The statue was solely there to help the traumatized and displaced citizens move on from their depression. It was not meant to turn Larkinsons into the next versions of Axelar Streon!

He thought that cutting down the session time to 10 minutes was already good enough. Yet seeing how Samandra had become a lot more fanatical than before made him feel he needed to pare down that time interval even further.

He coughed. "Madame Samandra, I hope you have kept in mind that the cure can sometimes be worse than the disease."

"I am aware that the grace of the Aspect of Healing should not be abused. However, it has helped me discover what is truly important. Now that I have pledged my loyalty to the Larkinson Clan, I should not let my old bonds hinder me from doing what is best. I think the reason why I am here is related to my enlightenment. If not for that, I would have been much more hesitant to divulge the information that I hold."

Ves narrowed his eyes. "Please explain."

"Priestess Samandra, please tell Ves about your ties to the Supreme Sage."

"Huh?!" Ves straightened his back as he stared at the woman in shock. "You know the Supreme Sage?!"

The priestess quickly shook her head. "Not directly, no. I am a small figure to this great researcher, though I do admit that my organization and I worshipped him as the greatest apostle that can realize the holy grandeur of biotechnology."

"What are your ties to him, then?"

"My prior organization, Spiritus Sancti, is an arm of his direct organization. We were essentially one of his agents, not that most of us were aware of this. I am one of the few who know the truth due to my rank."

Ves was stunned. For a moment, he couldn't believe what he was hearing. The Life Research Association maintained a strong secular tradition. Its people strongly valued science over baseless superstition and did not take cults like Spiritus Sancti seriously.

The Lifers were much like Brighters in that regard! The only difference was that the former adopted their stance based on science while the latter made the same decision based on ideology.

As someone who sat at the very top of a technocratic state, the Supreme Sage should be one of the most repellant towards religion!

There was no way that Ves could ever tie such a renowned and successful biotech research to a cult that plied illogical and unfalsifiable assumptions!

Commander Rivington saw his confusion and chuckled. "That's my reaction as well when Priestess Samandra first told me about this. I have to say that it makes good sense, though. Who would ever suspect that Spiritus Sancti actually served as the Supreme Sage's eyes and ears? No Lifer, especially the stuck-up biomech designers, would ever guess the truth!"

Ves became enlightened. If he disregarded his instinctual disgust towards cults, then he had to admit that the Supreme Sage erected a brilliant scheme!

Spiritus Sancti were treated as outcasts in the LRA. This made it difficult for them to get in touch with people and organizations that were aligned to the Supreme Sage, but that also meant they had an easier time befriending those who were opposed to the current order!

As the implications and possibilities of this arrangement became more clear to Ves, he was furiously taking notes. While he didn't think it was necessary to spread informants in his clan, he might need to implement this kind of plan when he became involved in other organizations in the future.

"So what was your purpose?"

"The leaders of Spiritus Sancti answered to an emissary of the Supreme Sage." Samandra clarified. "I do not know the name of the organization to which the emissary belongs, but we believe that it answers directly to the great leader. Personally, I have the impression that we were working on behalf of an intelligence agency that is directly under the control of the head of our state."

Ves thought about something interesting. "Wait a second. According to the rebels, the Supreme Sage who we all thought was alive until recently had actually turned braindead more than a year ago. Did Spiritus Sancti continue to receive instructions from this mysterious emissary in recent times?"

The priestess sighed. "We did, sir. We received more and more instructions to get in contact with other shunned organizations and understand their situation. Once we have supplied the intelligence we have gathered, we are no longer part of the process. I have kept an eye on these groups, though. I have noticed that some of them have started to undergo some changes."

"Do you believe the emissary and the group he is part of has gone rogue?"

"I cannot say, patriarch. It may be that the conservatives or the opposition has taken control of them instead. Whatever the case, I feel rather betrayed that we have been following the whims of lessers in the last one-and-a-half years. I pledged an oath to serve the Supreme Sage and his chosen agents who are loyal to his cause."

"You told us earlier that the Aspect of Healing caused you to rethink this oath."

"I did not break my sacred oaths!" Samandra stated in a fiery tone. "However, there are instances where oaths are no longer valid. For example, now that the Supreme Sage has perished and the agents we have answered to no longer execute his will, I believe that I am no longer bound by my previous promises. Besides, even if he was still alive, he is no longer the apostle who can make everyone acknowledge the greatness of holy biotechnology. As your living statues have already shown, you are a much better envoy of biotechnology!"

"Regardless of your reasons, you're a Larkinson now." Rivington added. "Your new loyalties supersede your old ones. If there is a conflict between the two, then you must always prioritize your current responsibilities."

"Well said, commander." Ves smiled and clapped. "Anything that served the interests of his clan above the interests of other organizations would always have his approval!"  
"Let's get back to the more immediate topic. Samandra, did Spiritual Sancti deal with life-prolonging treatment in any way?"

She shook her head. "I will have to disappoint you, sir. As far as I am aware, we have never gotten in touch with such a high-end matter. What I can disclose to you is that we may know where one of the pinnacle labs is located."

"Oh? How come? These labs are also high-end."

"I... believe that Spiritus Sancti has assisted in some of the Supreme Sage's experiments. In what way, I can't tell." She slowly said. "There were several instances where some of us traveled to the warehouse depot that we are investigating at the moment. While I cannot directly tie these incidents to the instructions given by the emissary, I believe there is definitely a connection. Spiritus Sancti ordinarily doesn't operate that much in this area."

If this was the case, then the depot was definitely remarkable!

Ves made up his mind. "I've decided. As soon as our airfleet is ready to move from this biomech production facility, we're heading straight to this place."

"Won't that be too obvious, sir? If a pinnacle lab is truly buried in the vicinity, we might alarm those who are also aware."

"I don't think it's a big issue if it is not as contested as Ruuzon Arena. While the odds of finding something good at that warehouse is low, we don't know until we examine the place. Just consider this a gamble. If our suspicions are wrong, then no harm is done. The only price we paid was the opportunity cost of venturing to a more productive location."

He didn't care too much about this. Enough time had passed for the Larkinsons to perform rudimentary repairs and maintenance on many of its biomechs. While not all of them were in good condition, they were still adequate as long as they could fight!

Ves faintly felt that time was running out. The anarchy on the planet could not last forever. Once the conservatives or whoever else managed to push out the opposition, it was only a matter of time before the effective rulers clamped down on all of the chaos!

While a part of Ves would feel relieved that common sense took hold again, another part of him would feel sad that the good times were over.

He had gained so much from the current situation!

Now that he had made up his mind, his subordinates received orders to prepare for another migration. They had lingered in this location long enough. Their strike companies had already ventured out and cleaned up all of the murderers and anarchists in the surrounding city district.

Though Ves did not completely assume that there was a hidden pinnacle lab at their next destination, he chose to divulge the possibility to a select few people.

"You're doing something stupid again, Ves." Venerable Jannzi crossed her arms. "When will you learn that you need to stop going after everything that looks shiny? We should just stay put and wait for the fighting to die down. Our primary goal has always been to return to our fleet! We should not jeopardize our survival by getting involved in this murky business!"

"I hate to say it, but she's right this time." Venerable Tusa concurred.

Ves remained stubborn, though. "This is different! The risks of exploring an abandoned warehouse isn't as great as heading right back to Ruuzon Arena! I just want to try and see if I can pick up some invaluable salvage on the cheap. If it doesn't work out, I'll back off. I promise."

"Do you know what you are saying, Ves?! You're thinking about barging into the most strategically important facilities in the LRA in order to steal something that doesn't belong to you! This is not honorable conduct!"

"Well, the way the Lifers have treated us isn't honorable either! I never asked to get caught up in their civil war, but they didn't give me any choice! I'm just heading out in order to collect some interest. I need compensation for all of the trauma the state has inflicted!"

#### *Chapter 2919: Paramilitaries*

Though Venerable Jannzi stubbornly opposed his decision to explore the suspicious warehouse complex, her disapproval didn't matter.

Ves was in charge. Not Jannzi. They were not Crossers who universally treated high-ranking mech pilots as their rightful leaders.

While a bit of hero worship was fine, Ves hated it when people ascribed competency to expert pilots that they did not possess!

Expert pilots were grunts with superpowers as far as Ves were concerned. They excelled on the battlefield but couldn't even solve a single differential equation.

This was why he deliberately structured his clan in a way to separate expert pilots from actual authority. The Cross Clan may have chosen to perpetuate the backward customs of the Garlen Empire, but the Larkinson Clan ought to be more enlightened!

The airfleet continued to prepare for departure regardless of the opinions of his expert pilots. He merely informed them of his intentions as a courtesy and to fill them in beforehand in case he needed their assistance inside the pinnacle lab.

Soon enough, the airfleet moved out in force. Over five-hundred biomechs rose into the air, followed by hundreds of organic transports and shuttles.

Everyone that looked up from the ground would definitely become awed by the sheer amount of heavy vehicles flying over their heads!

This aerial armada did not dare to fly too high in the air. Though it was too large to hide its presence, the Larkinsons didn't want to make it easy for hooligans to take potshots at their fleet assets.

Biomechs along with a small number of metallic mechs frequently went on ranging patrols. It was not enough to defend against any threats that took action. The Larkinsons favored a more proactive approach where they preemptively squelched any potential danger along their route!

Few of these patrols actually bumped into dangerous elements. The notoriety of the Larkinson airfleet had already spread among the locals. Many gangs had already chosen to relocate. The few troublemakers that stayed either did not receive word or didn't believe in the rumors.

Venerable Tusa enthusiastically scouted the way forward with his Piranha Prime. He and a number of other scout mechs shouldered the important mission of gathering real-time data on the warehouse complex.

The last time that Tusa eyed the place, he spotted a large group of unknown grey mechs helping themselves to the abandoned containers at the site.

Ves stood in the improvised command center of one the larger biotransports. Though he still felt uncomfortable about travelling inside the belly of a large vehicle that was entirely made out of flesh and bone, he brushed aside his feelings as best as possible.

He was waiting for Venerable Tusa to broadcast a live view of the site in question. While average people did not have much use for the containers filled with feed stock and other industrial goods, the abandoned cargo was very valuable to large and organized mech forces.

"What will you do if a strong group already occupies the site?" Commander Casella Ingvar asked as she stood on the opposite side of the operations table.

"It depends. If the other party consists of less than a hundred mechs, then it shouldn't be an issue to push them away."

"What if there are more mechs? What if there are 300 biomechs present like last time Venerable Tusa scouted the site? If we approach them like this, we will undoubtedly make them feel threatened. It is one thing if they are criminals or hostiles. However, they may also be similar to us. What if they are just trying to survive?"

"Then we'll still insist on taking over the place." Ves answered. "It's just a warehouse. Most of the containers there are filled with feeder stock that is only useful when it is put into feeder pools. There aren't any production facilities in the immediate vicinity so there shouldn't be a reason for them to insist on staying put."

Commander Casella did not look particularly convinced at his arguments.

She felt that this was folly. The airfleet wasn't short on feeder stock after they had raided the inventory of the biomech production complex that they had just departed.

In fact, their transports were already filled with supplies and loot the Larkinsons managed to salvage from their surroundings. There was hardly any room for more cargo!

"Where's Lucky?" Casella changed the topic. "I haven't seen him around recently. Is there something wrong?"

"Ah, he's fine. My cat just needs a break. He'll be back in action in no time."

Lucky looked like he had drained his soul after ejecting his latest gem from his metallic body. Ves had no idea why this was the case. He chalked it up to his cat's recent hoarding behavior.

He briefly patted his chest pocket where he was still hiding his pouch of gems. The large Supreme Comprehension gem was still active most of the time, but it had nowhere to go. As much as he disliked the vague gem, he did not discount its potency.

Ves was determined to find a use for it. He guessed that it should have a very powerful reaction if he paired it up with a biomech.

A few minutes passed. Soon enough, the airfleet picked up the transmission that Ves had been waiting for. A new projection appeared over the map that displayed a live view of the warehouse in question.

Ves immediately felt his heart sink.

"These bastards again!" He cursed. "Why are they here?!"

The Piranha Prime had moved close enough to the suspicious warehouse complex to transmit a detailed view. Venerable Tusa did not dare to resort to any active sensors for fear of alarming the other party.

"Ves." The expert pilot whispered over the comm despite the futility of lowering his voice when he was inside a cockpit. "There are a lot of grey biomechs out there. Compared to last time, my mech counts at least a hundred more organic machines. They've also

brought a lot of vehicles as well. It doesn't look like they're planning to depart anytime soon."

The clearest sign of this was the defenses erected by the other party. Work parties were installing numerous turrets, sensor arrays and more around the complex.

The airfleet slowly halted. Ves needed time to make a decision on how to handle these strangers. He was not in a rush to barge into their territory and provoke a destructive fight.

Ves sighed. "Please rein in our scout squads. I don't want them to alarm these unknowns, though I suppose we can't hide our massive fleet forever."

"Very well, sir. What do you wish to do next?" The Sentinel Commander asked.

"We need to learn more about this organization before I am ready to decide. I don't want to fight against this force, but I don't intend to rule out this option. Can anyone tell me about the organization behind these grey biomechs?"

The Larkinsons asked around, but no one in the airfleet recognized their color scheme and markings. Not even Samandra Avikon and all of the other former members of Spiritus Sancti recognized these strangers.

While the intelligence specialists in the airfleet attempted to take a closer look at the occupied warehouse complex, other Larkinsons were trying to glean clues through observations.

Commander Casella quickly made note of some relevant points.

"The unknown organization runs a tight ship. Their mechs are moving with precision and purpose while their people on their fleet are always preoccupied with work. Look at how orderly they organize their new base. Nothing looks sloppy."

"Are they military?" Ves guessed with worry. "I haven't spotted any military-grade mechs, but if their mech pilots are as tough as nails, I don't want to tangle against them. Our own forces are too heterogeneous to fight in a uniform fashion."

"Hmmm... my guess is different, sir. In my experience of training and leading the Living Sentinels, I estimate that these unknowns are equal or maybe a little bit better than my men. In my opinion, we're not looking at a military unit, but I think there are definitely numerous veterans in their ranks. My best guess is that we're looking at a paramilitary force."

"Paramilitaries?" Ves puzzlingly frowned.

That sounded quite troublesome to Ves. Paramilitary organizations were quite formidable in some cases. Their mech pilots were not as selfish and cowardly as mercenaries, but they weren't as disciplined and coordinated as active service members either.

Paramilitaries sat somewhere in between. In fact, the Larkinson Clan also fit in this category in a sense.

If Ves had 500 Larkinson mechs at his disposal, then he would have no doubt that his side could crush the unknown party.

The problem was that his airfleet was protected by dozens of smaller forces that had only recently joined hands!

Ves had observed the quality of his newly-acquired biomechs and their accompanying pilots and came away disappointed. While the quality of biomechs did not diverge that much, the mech pilots were a different story!

Despite being able to attend a second-class mech academy, the mech pilots he recruited during this campaign were mostly used to the lower standards of the private sector. Hardly any of them were ready to fight a pitched battle where they needed to put their lives on the line!

The only mech pilots he could trust were Venerable Jannzi, Venerable Tusa and a small band of Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers. He only had less than thirty of them, which was far from enough to carry an entire battle!

However, even if he had confidence that his side could win the battle without suffering crippling losses, Ves still lacked a reason to enter hostilities with the unknown force.

For several weeks, the Larkinsons on the ground purposefully cultivated an honorable and righteous image. They did not harm civilians and only attacked vicious criminals.

Ves could already tell that the unknowns were not like the rest of the people that the Larkinsons had dealt with. Their solid discipline along with their lack of independent movement suggested that he wasn't dealing with thugs.

If this was the case, how could he possibly convince his fellow Larkinsons to attack the people that were preventing him from investigating the warehouse complex?

Although the possibility of encountering a high-life life-prolonging treatment serum at this site was low, Ves did not wish to miss this opportunity to obtain an absolute treasure!

In any case, most of the Lifers his airfleet spontaneously recruited were completely expendable in his eyes. Ves didn't care for the Lifers at all. Though they had

officially joined the Larkinson Clan, the current circumstances meant that Goldie and the Larkinson Network were not very effective at changing their behavior.

He recruited them because he had no other choice, not because he wanted them. There were many mech pilots in the airfleet that were completely unworthy to fight alongside 'real' Larkinsons. He was not opposed to getting rid of them early.

It was too bad that many other Larkinsons wouldn't agree.

"Damn. How will I be able to solve this problem?"

After an hour of careful observation, the analysts barely learned anything new. The paramilitaries did a good job of controlling their emissions. Every communication signal was under heavy encryption and their off-duty personnel never chatted with each other outdoors.

Ves grew suspicious at these precautions. This was yet another sign that there might be something of great interest at the warehouse complex!

Still, looking at them from afar only yielded so much information. Ves urgently needed more.

For this reason, Ves temporarily left the command center. He moved through the corridors and entered the compartment where he slept.

"Lucky! I have a job for you!" He shouted.

"Meooowww..."

Lucky lied flat on his bed while trying his best to return to his slumber. He looked kind of cute in the way his pale bronze body slumped his limbs.

Ves grew impatient. He stormed over and picked up his cat. "Hello? Is anyone home? I have a mission for you! I don't care if you are sick! You've already used up all of your sick days for the year."

"Meeeowww... meeeooww!"

"Pfff! You can't sue me for exploiting your labor and endangering you! Stop joking and get to work. You still have a lot of debt to repay after eating for so many months only to produce a weird gem!"

## *Chapter 2920: Unknown Power*

The warehouse complex became more and more intriguing to Ves. Aside from all of the unusual points that he had already ascertained, the fact that a force of roughly four-hundred mechs not just visited the site, but beefed up its defenses was very suspicious.

The warehouse complex was a poor defensive site. It was overly large and expansive. It did not hold any terrain advantage. It was vulnerable to long-ranged bombardment. It did not offer any substantial logistical support aside from offering lots of supplies. Yet these raw materials needed to be brought to an industrial facility in order to be of use. It was much harder to make use of feeder stock in field conditions.

"The unknown paramilitary organization is not entrenching the warehouse complex because they wish to use it as their new base." Commander Casella Ingvar noted as she studied the projection in the command center. "Their overall approach suggests that they are merely setting up a temporary forward operating base."

Commander Rivington looked thoughtful. He may be decent at managing different personalities, but his civilian background limited his vision when it came to military deployments.

One of the reasons why Ves valued Casella so much was that she had attended formal officer and command courses. That made her very suitable to lead a large mech force like the Living Sentinels.

"Tell me why you think so." Ves requested.

The female commander pointed at the areas where the paramilitaries stored their ammunition, energy cells and other relevant supplies. "The amount of supplies these unknowns have brought is too little to sustain a mech force of this size on a long-term basis. I estimate that the paramilitaries can probably live off these supplies for half a year under calm circumstances but weeks if they are engaged in active combat."

Ves hadn't noticed this, but now that she pointed it out, that did sound suspicious. "A mech force as large as this must have a permanent base. If they are migrating from their old location because it is too close to the center of the city or something, then they should have brought a lot more goods. Even if they are lacking in transports, they can just procure more from their surroundings."

Casella nodded. "That leads me to believe that this is not their entire force. It is possible that they still have hundreds or even thousands of mechs back in their base."

That caused Ves to frown. That was bad news! If he ordered his Larkinsons to attack the paramilitaries occupying the warehouse in a hurry, then even if he managed to secure a victory, they might be subject to an intense counterattack!

He felt a bit relieved that he chose to pause the airfleet's advance. Right now, his troops had diverted to another light industrial district in order to give the impression that they were merely taking care of their own business.

Under normal circumstances, there should be no reason for his airfleet to attack the occupied warehouse complex. As long as the paramilitaries remained unaware that Ves might have hostile intentions towards them, then he should still hold the initiative.

This was important as Ves could initiate all kinds of operations that could stack the deck in his favor.

However, if it turned out the occupation force was just one battalion among several, then that changed the equation. Ves did not want to piss off a secretive organization that could potentially field 2000 mechs at once!

Casella continued to point out some details that caught her attention.

"The turrets they have deployed around the base are made up of modular organic parts. While I'm not familiar with organic technology, the principles should be the same. These turrets shouldn't be ordinary goods that you can buy from the market. Private sector outfits vastly prefer to rely on mechs and maybe other mobile assets such as self-propelled anti-air platforms. Installing static defenses means that they will just lose a lot of money if a fight gets too dicey."

Mercenaries never fought to the death. They always secured an escape route for themselves.

"So you're suggesting that the paramilitaries are well-funded and not profit-seeking in nature."

"Correct. The biomechs they use might not be top-of-the-shelf goods, but none of them are cheap. Together with the tight discipline exhibited by their people, I have the feeling we are dealing with former veterans turned mercenaries. In other words, we may be looking at a private military force that works for a powerful insider in the Life Research Association."

"It could be anyone, then." Commander Rivington shrugged. "I bet that any Master in the LRA can set up a paramilitary force like this. They have the wealth to afford all of the hardware, the status to attract former military mech pilots and the connections to somehow get away with organizing so many biomechs on a planet known for its stringent restrictions on mechs."

The more clues they gathered, the more Ves felt intimidated by these unknowns.

Attacking them rashly with a poorly-organized force that was made out of lots of random mechs would surely end in folly!

Even if Ves was able to rely on strong heroes like Venerable Jannzi and Venerable Tusa, they could only do so much without genuine expert mechs.

A frightening possibility came to mind. "Do you think they have an expert pilot on retainer?"

Neither Rivington nor Casella knew the answer. They both frowned.

"I'm not sure, sir." Commander Casella replied. "It's unlikely for a typical paramilitary organization to have an expert pilot on retainer. You probably know what expert pilots are like. They are extraordinary soldiers who are willing to dedicate themselves to a cause that is greater than themselves. It is hard for mech pilots in the private sector to adopt this mentality. Any expert pilot who broke through while in military service will often remain in service for the remainder of his career."

Ves tentatively nodded. While it was not impossible for expert pilots to resign from the military for various reasons, it was a low-probability occurrence. The chance that the paramilitaries had an expert pilot in service should be very minimal, though he was still careful enough to take it into consideration.

"Expert pilot or not, it's clear we can't mess with these guys. Not with our current force composition."

He felt rather weak and helpless at the moment. For the umpteenth time, he wished he had access to all of his mech forces. Even at their depleted numbers, the Avatars of Myth, Living Sentinels, Battle Criers, Flagrant Vandals and so on could definitely crush these paramilitaries!

Yet right now, they were situated several light-hours away from Prosperous Hill VI. They were so deep in space that they might as well be stationed in a different star system!

Commander Rivington approached Ves and softly patted his back. "Sir, I implore you to reconsider your options. Even if there is something valuable buried underneath the warehouse complex, it's not worth sacrificing hundreds of mechs for it. Our airfleet has become a safe haven for all of us because of how many combat assets we have managed to put under our banner. If we lose much of them in pursuit of treasure, we lose the ability to defend ourselves against major threats. Do you think you can keep hold of whatever riches you have plundered in that case?"

He was right. The Larkinsons and converted refugees had fought hard to build up their strength and remove the threat of annihilation due to weakness. Ves had no doubt that numerous hidden enemies would begin to eye their vulnerable airfleet if he lost over two-thirds of his mechs!

Ves lowered his head for a moment. Numerous considerations flowed through his mind. Eventually, he slumped.

"Fine. Let's abort our war planning. As long as these paramilitaries occupy this warehouse complex, we won't take initiative to displace them. For now, we should remain put and maintain a healthy distance from these unknowns. Keep scouting, but don't make any aggressive moves."

"Very well, sir. You made the right decision." Commander Casella smiled in relief.

She wasn't the only one who reacted positively to the decision. Many other Larkinsons who were in the loop expressed relief as well. Their patriarch wasn't pushing them into fighting a ruinous battle this time!

In fact, when other Larkinsons heard about the news, they became confused for a moment.

"What? Ves called off the attack?" Tusa sounded as if he had difficulty accepting the truth. "Has someone replaced him with a clone or something? That's not like him at all! He's always looking to grasp opportunities!"

Venerable Jannzi lightly punched the other expert pilot's arm. "Shut up. This is a good development. Ves is actually listening to me this time. There's at least some good sense in him left."

"Uhm, I don't think that you had anything to do with it at all. From what it sounds like, the other guys are too strong."

Fortunately, the rank-and-file remained ignorant of the considerations at the top. They just thought that the airfleet was still accumulating strength as usual.

After Ves made the difficult decision to give up on an assault, he left the command center and returned to his temporary bunk.

One of the primary reasons why he lacked confidence in defeating the current occupants of the suspicious warehouse complex was because one of his strongest combat assets was out of action!

"How are you, Lucky?"

"Meeeeeoowwww..."

Lucky still looked as listless as ever as he rested on a pillow. When Ves came close and petted his cat, he noticed that the situation hadn't improved.

For some reason, the 'production' of the Supreme Comprehension gem caused Lucky to enter into a period of long-term exhaustion!

It was as if Lucky expended a significant amount of spiritual energy to synthesize the mysterious living gem!

Ves was quite familiar with this particular condition. Under normal circumstances, it took weeks or even months for a typical spiritually-active individual to recover to full. Though he sensed that his cat hadn't drained himself completely, it was clear that Commando Lucky wouldn't be making an appearance anytime soon!

"If I knew this would happen, I would have insisted you to hold it in! You've avoided going to the toilet for months. Couldn't you have waited a few weeks more?"

"Meeeoow..."

He didn't hound his gem cat too much. It was unreasonable for him to rely so much on Lucky. Though his feline companion had been an invaluable aid in many circumstances, he should have been relying on his subordinates instead.

The fact that Ves was not at this point yet meant that there was still much to go before his clan became strong enough to solve all of his problems on his behalf.

"When do you think we'll be able to return to space?"

"Meeeoow... meooww..."

"Weeks have passed. Civil war or not, it's unreasonable for the Lifers to maintain a blockade for so long. What is going on, exactly?"

Day after the day, the planet remained in hot contention. In the distance, the sounds and vibrations of active fighting continued without interruption. No matter whether it was day or night, the forces fighting on behalf of the political factions continued to throw themselves at each other without any regard for their losses!

Was it worth it for their masters to expend so many assets to secure a pinnacle lab? Perhaps this frenzy might make sense if there was a chance of retrieving high-grade life-prolonging serum, but Ves didn't entirely believe this was the case.

There had to be something else of great value on this planet. Something that might be worth more than the opportunity to extend an old geezer's life.

Ves lacked too much information to make a guess. It could be anything as the Supreme Sage worked on many different high-level projects. He only revealed a fraction of his work to the public. Many of his accomplishments never saw the light of day!