

## Crossing 111

### Chapter 111: Calling Me Big Brother?

Right then, Ling Lan saw the J8 mecha move — some colour suddenly appeared on the entirely grey mecha.

“This is emergency activation. Now it all depends on what mecha it is. The emergency activation time of special-class mecha is between 4 to 7 seconds, while an advanced mecha’s is between 7 to 9 seconds ...” Little Four also began to feel a bit nervous; this would determine which mecha would gain the initiative.

For a heat detector to detect heat and relay its findings back to the mecha’s cockpit, there would be a 2 second delay. From this point onwards, this mecha battle would become a match of fighting over time ... to see which mecha could react faster, and which mecha operator could respond quicker.

Two seconds after the J8 activated, the J6 mecha found that a red heat spot had appeared on the screen connected to its heat detector. The J6 mecha, whose back was to the red spot, spun on one leg to turn around swiftly, and aimed precisely at the coordinate position indicated by the flashing red dot. But there was nothing there ...

Even so, the J6 mecha did not hesitate. It swiftly pressed down on the trigger of the laser beam gun in its hands. Energy from a clip of the gun’s energy storage unit was converted into beam rays, and the rays shot out in a torrent towards the sand dune before the mecha. This round of intense firepower actually turned the dune into a pit in an instant, but there were no mecha remains to be found inside. Besides yellow sand, there was just more yellow sand.

“Emergency activation 5.537 seconds. That J8 mecha is most certainly a special-class mecha. Its luck isn’t bad, managing to finish activation within 6 seconds,” remarked Little Four. If the mecha had finished activating just half a second slower, it would have been impossible for the J8 mecha to evade the J6 mecha’s beam gun attack.

“Not good!” The J6 mecha, which had been attacking the dune, abruptly leapt into the air. In mid-air, it pointed the laser gun in its hands straight down towards the ground below it and pulled the trigger, sending a wave of energy pouring out once more.

At the same time, a beam saber shot out from the sand, heading straight for the J6, while a sturdy beam shield emerged to block off the J6’s beam attacks.

Seeing that its beam gun attacks wouldn’t be able to fend off the other, the wings on the J6’s back spread open to reveal six high-efficiency guided missiles and fired them immediately.

The J8 mecha had intended to pierce the J6 mecha with its saber, but seeing the six missiles headed towards it, it knew that it wouldn’t be able to hold them off with just a beam shield.

It quickly reversed directions in mid-air, and under the combined screeching of the mecha’s thrusters, it forcefully pushed its own large frame several hundred metres away from the missile’s trajectory. At the same time, the mecha’s arms crossed behind it, and the J8 took out a beam laser cannon in an instant, keeping away its beam saber on its back.

The mecha lifted the laser cannon with a strong left arm and steadied it with its right hand. It turned to face the six guided missiles coming after it, and the operator decisively pulled the trigger. An immense surge of energy spewed out from the mouth of the cannon, rushing up into the sky.

When this energy surge made contact with the missiles, the missiles were blown up one after another. These consecutive explosions shook Ling Lan's entire body violently, making her feel as if she were really on a battlefield.

The J8 mecha had finally wiped out the six threatening guided missiles, but the J6 had also regained the attacking initiative. It flew up high into the air, aiming its laser beam gun at the J8 on the ground and fired once more.

Meanwhile, the J8 had no means to retaliate at the moment, and could only scurry all over the ground to dodge the J6's attacks. However, Ling Lan didn't think the J6 had the upper hand — instead, she felt that the J8 was already slowly reclaiming the initiative in this match.

This was because Ling Lan could see very clearly that the J8's steps had never become disorganised. It was obviously using the most widespread and most adaptable footwork — split steps.

Although the J8 looked like it was being forced to flee helter-skelter like a mouse, every step it took was calculated to be on the most advantageous position, neutralizing every attack from the J6 in the air.

The J6 seemed to also have figured out that it wouldn't be able to hit its opponent just by relying on its laser beam gun. It lifted its wings once more, and a new round of high-efficiency guided missiles were launched. The six new missiles descended upon the J8 mecha below in a horizontal line.

The J8 mecha didn't choose to retreat. It lifted its laser cannon again, and this time, it fired three laser beams simultaneously.

What was surprising was that the three shots were timed in such a way that they also created a horizontal line, flying forwards to meet the six missiles head-on.

When the first missile was set off, the following two missiles exploded as well. The concussive force from the explosion of the three missiles and the laser beams then set off the remaining three missiles. Once again, the J6's attacks were a bust. Besides that, due to the violent tremors from the explosion, yellow sand filled the air, obscuring the vision of the J6, preventing him from seeing what was happening below ...

Without thinking about it, the J6 shot downwards desperately with the beam gun in his hand. In the meantime, he was anxiously looking over the indicators from his heat detector, worried that the opponent would take advantage of his momentary loss of vision to fire its laser cannon.

Right then, he suddenly noticed a beam of light shooting towards his lower belly without a sound. This attack came too swiftly — he had no time at all to defend; the body of his mecha was already out of time to dodge the attack.

Quicker than words could say, the J6 decisively threw the laser beam gun in its hand onto the coming light beam. There was a loud 'boom' as the two collided and the J6's laser gun was utterly destroyed by the beam. Still, the J6 was thrown back by the resulting force, away from the path of the light ray, narrowly avoiding the fate of being pierced clean through the stomach. (That area was where the

cockpit was. If it were hit, even if the operator didn't die, he would still lose control of the mecha. Either way, the J6 would have lost.)

It was then when everyone could finally see what was happening. It turned out that after swathes of yellow sand had been blown into the air, and while visibility was poor, the J8 mecha had sprung upwards and, working with the power of its thrusters, it had flown up into the air in a split second. It had gotten close to the J6, and then, the J8 had purposefully discarded its laser cannon in favour of stabbing its beam saber at the J6.

A laser cannon shot produced heat, which would have been captured by the mecha's defensive systems, taking out the element of surprise from its attack. Thus, the J8 had chosen to use its beam saber, which was formed from cold light, because it was undetectable.

However, the J6 had reacted extremely quickly. It had sensed danger within that split second and decisively surrendered its weapon in exchange for a chance at survival.

Still, having lost its beam gun, the J6 could only fight with the J8 in melee combat. The moment they clashed, Ling Lan knew that the J6 mecha was definitely going to lose. In terms of combat instinct, the J6 was clearly weaker than the J8; they were on completely different levels.

Of course, the other audience members did not have Ling Lan's vision and couldn't tell. After all, the two mecha were both fighting passionately, no clear winner or loser between the two of them. The fight looked like it was neck-and-neck, extremely exciting. The reason why Ling Lan could tell at a glance was completely due to her innate talent — Profound Insight. From the very beginning, she had identified the J6's weakness, and had also noticed that the J8 was not yet fighting with its full strength.

Thus, Ling Lan knew that the difference between the J6's and J8's melee combat skills were actually very large. As expected, a cross-level challenge was not that easy.

She lowered her head and sighed, choosing to withdraw. A mecha fight was actually not that much different from a real physical fight. With just a glance, Ling Lan could tell that quite a few of the moves had been inspired and based off of real physical combat. It was just that these moves were much swifter and more incisive in real combat, while they looked obviously clumsier when executed with mecha.

Ling Lan had just withdrawn from the scene of the fight when she sensed something strange. The entire battle stadium was eerily silent and still. Everyone was sitting in their seats, unmoving — it looked like their attention had been completely captivated by the game fight in the other space.

Still, she was a little creeped out by the stillness of the silent scene. She couldn't help but twist her neck around, just moving a little to prove that she was still a living person.

"You didn't watch till the end?" The man beside her suddenly spoke up. Caught unprepared, Ling Lan was almost scared witless. Still, Ling Lan was still Ling Lan after all — after going through the insane torments of the learning space for so long, Ling Lan's little heart was unbelievably strong.

"Yes, aren't you doing the same?" asked Ling Lan reflexively after collecting her wits.

"The J6 is losing for sure. What else is there to see?" The man didn't seem to be in a good mood.

"You chose the J6's viewing angle?" asked Ling Lan, tone almost certain.

“I had wanted to see how a weaker person would be able to beat a stronger opponent ... unfortunately, that J6 wasted his own advantage.” The man seemed to have a lot to complain about the J6’s performance.

“What advantage did the J6 have?” His combat instinct was obviously off, so Ling Lan really couldn’t think of a way the J6 could win.

“That J6 is a famous marksman, but unfortunately, he didn’t show any of that skill in this match,” said the man regretfully. It looked like he was very familiar with the J6’s skills.

“Marksman? With beam shields, there shouldn’t be much a marksman can do though. Right?” Ling Lan was recalling how the J8 mecha’s beam shield had pretty much withstood the power of the laser gun.

“The J6 should have chosen to snipe. Melee combat is the J8’s specialty.” The man knew both combatants well.

Ling Lan thought back to the attack when she had first started school — it had been so troublesome to be targeted by snipers — and nodded in agreement.

Sniping was the best ambush, impossible to guard against absolutely. After all, a beam shield could only protect a specific spot and not the entire body. Moreover, sniping was undetectable. If the J6 had chosen to snipe from the very beginning, the outcome of this match might have been harder to tell.

Seeing Ling Lan agree with his opinion, the man’s mood took a turn for the better. “But an upset is still a very difficult thing after all. Even if the J6 had scraped a win in this match, he would still lose the next match. The outcome would not change.”

Ling Lan understood what the man meant. If the J6 had sniped his way to victory in this match, his opponent in the next match would definitely be prepared with anti-sniping gear. In other words, the J6’s sniping advantage would only be effective once, in the end, he would still have to rely on his own physical skills to pass.

“Perhaps the J6 understood this, and so decided to try a ranged attack where both sides could see one another. I think that if he won two times in a row, he would definitely use his trump, sniping, in the third match.” commented Ling Lan, putting herself in the J6’s shoes. If it were her, she also wouldn’t have used her pocket ace right at the start and let the opponents figure out a counterstrategy.

The man was silent, a little taken aback, before he made a low noise of agreement. Yet, Ling Lan could clearly sense that the other’s mood had gotten worse somehow ...

This wasn’t looking good. If the other’s emotions became so terrible that he lost control, wouldn’t she be in danger? Ling Lan had not forgotten that the other was a spiritual mutant turned spectre that was capable of killing her consciousness.

“I have to go now. Bye, Big Brother!” That should be right, right? Even though she couldn’t see his face clearly, just based off that lower jaw and those upturned lips, the man was clearly an adult ...

“Ah? Big brother?! Uh, goodbye!” The man seemed to be rather taken aback by Ling Lan’s address, pausing for a beat before responding.

Ling Lan did not notice this; she was anxious to get as far away as she could from this dangerous man. After she heard him say goodbye, she hurriedly walked off, quickly leaving the man behind as she distanced herself from the mecha battle stadium.

The man muttered moodily to himself, “Could it be that I really look that old now? Calling me big brother? ...” In a dark mood, he chose to exit from the battle stadium and then left the virtual world.

## **Chapter 112: Mecha Training Hall**

In a private manor on planet Azure, an old man was staring anxiously at a closed login pod to the virtual world. Soon, he saw the lights inside the login pod turn off and the pod’s door suddenly opened. An androgynous, pretty child of about eleven or twelve years old was lying inside the pod. His face was pale and his entire body was currently drenched with sweat, as if he had been through some strenuous exercise.

After several seconds, the child slowly opened his eyes. Seeing the old man before him, he smiled weakly and said, “Major-domo, why are you waiting here?”

“Are you still planning to fool me? Young Master, your body is not well. Didn’t your grandfather tell you not to go online?” The major-domo’s eyes held a trace of remonstrance, but was mostly heartache.

The pretty child continued to smile and said, “No matter what, I still have to go online a few times. Otherwise, I won’t be able to keep up with the pace of studies at school.”

The major-domo held back and said nothing more; he could not tell his young master not to study after all ... he could only walk up to lift his young master out of the login pod, and put him into the prepped recovery pod at the side to rest.

Looking at the sleeping figure of the lovely child before him, the major-domo heaved a heavy sigh. His heart was filled with affection and heartache for the child — it wasn’t that easy to be the first in line to inherit ... the young master excelled in every way, but his physical body was just too weak. His spiritual self mutation was just too much of a burden on the body.

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Meanwhile, Ling Lan, celebrating for finally leaving the dangerous person behind, continued to browse the streets of the capital. It had taken so much trouble to come out this once — she should make full use of the chance and see her fill. Unknowingly, she found herself on yet another mecha street. This mecha street wasn’t made up of mecha stores selling toys and figurines like those in the Central Scout Academy, but actually had stores selling real mecha, the strongest weapons of the Federation.

Ling Lan took a cursory look as she walked down the street, and then chose to enter the Anji <sup>1</sup> mecha store at random.

The moment Ling Lan entered the store, she saw several shop assistants chatting behind the store counter. The men and women were about to come forward to offer their assistance, but seeing Ling Lan walk in on her own, they stopped.

Little Four pouted and complained, *“Not coming forward to serve us ... do they think we have no money?”*

In contrast, Ling Lan wasn't too surprised. *“My current appearance is that of a 16 year old, with no accompanying guardian. Would you think that I'd be able to afford mecha? It's perfectly normal for them to ignore us. Besides, without them following us around, won't it be easier to browse as we like? Even more fun?”*

Little Four seemed to come to a realisation, *“That's true! But I must still make sure they know in the future that Boss is a wealthy person. Buying the best mecha here is not a problem!”* Little Four's expression was proud and cocky.

Ling Lan's glanced at him. *“Looks like you've earned quite a bit in the virtual world?”*

*“It's alright, not that much, probably about several hundred thousand billion.”* This world may be lacking in some things, but it was certainly not lacking in people, especially bored people. He had just randomly posted several novels online, and they were now all doing very well. Just the 'monetary awards' from fans alone had contributed several hundred billion to Little Four's account.

Ling Lan smiled and said, *“Good job. Keep up the good work.”*

Receiving Ling Lan's praise, Little Four was extremely happy. He was even happier over this than when he had 'conquered' this virtual world. In his heart, he was more determined than ever to get all the Federation's money into his wallet.

Let us give a round of applause for Little Four's grand goal ... and let us wonder when Little Four will find out that the Federation's money will never ever run out.

Right then, from among the shop assistants, a cheerful young man stepped out voluntarily. He approached Ling Lan and greeted her politely, *“Hello, I'm assistant 017 of Anji Mecha Store. May I know if you require any assistance?”*

*“Thank you, but I'm just looking around.”* Ling Lan was a bit startled, but she demurely refused 017's offer of service.

When Assistant 017 heard Ling Lan's response, he did not reveal any sign of disappointment. He just continued to smile brightly and said, *“Customer, this should be your first time getting close to mecha, right?”*

This customer with eyes full of curiosity — this should be the first time she is stepping into a mecha store. This scene made him recall his nervous excitement the first time he himself stepped into a mecha store. Back then, he had not known where to start and had really hoped someone would help him out; perhaps this girl would also require some guidance like him did ... it was this feeling that made 017 ignore the other shop assistants' jeering and come over voluntarily.

Ling Lan nodded firmly in answer to his question, for this was the truth.

Assistant 017 smiled at this and indicated for Ling Lan to walk with him. He then brought Ling Lan to a section filled with basic mecha — this area was a place suitable for novices to purchase mecha. Inside was various models of basic mecha, totalling about ten different types.

Ling Lan took a quick look and couldn't help but frown. These ten or so mecha all had differing shapes, but could overall be split into three categories. One category was bestial mecha, another was avian mecha, and the remaining category was the most commonly seen humanoid mecha.

The reason Ling Lan was frowning was that these mecha models were much cruder than the two mecha she had seen at the mecha battle stadium. Whether it was in terms of colouring, form, or even in terms of weaponry and equipment, these mecha here were completely incomparable. If the two mecha she had seen at the mecha battle stadium were considered adults, then these mecha here were undoubtedly toddler-level. This made Ling Lan feel rather disappointed.

Ling Lan's displeasure was clearly seen by assistant 017, but he wasn't at all surprised by this.

He explained kindly, "Customer, all the mecha in our Federation are actually variations evolved from these three categories of basic mecha. If you want to become an outstanding mecha operator, you'll need to master the controls of these three types of basic mecha. If you do this, no matter what type of advanced mecha you try to operate in the future, you'll be able to pick it up quickly."

Hearing this, Ling Lan was moved; she packed away her initial scorn. She would never forget the importance of basics — both the learning space and her father Ling Xiao had strongly emphasised the importance of basics — it played a large role in determining the final outcome of an individual's personal growth.

A warning flag rose up in Ling Lan's heart; she couldn't believe that she had actually made the low-level mistake of judging by appearances. It looked like the previous period of smooth sailing had made her forget to be humble and cautious, and actually become as arrogant as Yelang<sup>2</sup>.

Ling Lan's shift in attitude made Assistant 017 nod internally, his impression of her becoming even better. He continued to say, "Actually, I don't recommend you to buy a mecha right now. In fact, the virtual world has mecha training halls that specialize in teaching the controls of the basic mecha. Customer, you can first go there to learn more."

Ling Lan thanked Assistant 017. If it weren't for his help, she wouldn't have known that the virtual world had these things. After she asked Assistant 017 how to get to a mecha training hall, she left the Anji Mecha Store.

Assistant 017 sent Ling Lan off with a smile, and returned to the counter. He was welcomed back by the scornful jeers of the other shop assistants.

"Wasted your energy, didn't you? I told you that that girl had no money ..."

"At that age with no guardian along, she was definitely just here to look around. She would never have bought something as expensive as a mecha. 017, you just wouldn't believe it and still wanted to go forward. See, you've got nothing to show for it ..."

"Even if you wanted to gain more sales to earn a higher commission, you still need to find the right targets."

Assistant 017 did not get angry, only replying with a smile, "I wasn't doing it for sales. I just felt that she naturally belonged with mecha."

Assistant 017's words caused the other shop assistants to burst out into uncontrollable laughter, all of them mocking him and asking him when he had become a fortune teller. Mind you, girls, due to biological reasons, very very rarely advanced to become high-level mecha operators. So, among the millions and millions of mecha operators in the Federation, just having a thousand female mecha operators was already considered a lot.

017 was unperturbed by the mass mocking, only smiling and shaking his head in response. This carefree attitude of his soon sapped the interest of the others in mocking him, and they all left to do their own things.

All of them did not know what 017 was thinking — the closer he got to that girl, the more he had sensed it — the future of that girl on the path of mecha was boundless ... 017 smiled again. "It's also a good thing to build up some good karma ..."

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Very quickly, Ling Lan had found the mecha training hall. The moment she neared the entrance, a line of text appeared before her eyes. *"Do you want to formally enter mecha combat?"*

"Oh ... so this here is also a mecha fighting game!" Little Four exclaimed when he saw these words.

Ling Lan understood then that the mecha training was most likely connected to the mecha fighting game. Ling Lan would naturally have to join the game, or else how would she be able to learn and train in the mecha controls?

The moment Ling Lan made her choice, she was transported straight into a large hall. Inside, there stood a handsome soldier, and there were three hulking basic mecha standing beside him.

Ling Lan walked to stand before the soldier, but before she could say anything, the soldier asked, "Recruit, do you want to first understand more about the combat styles of the three mecha, their controls, or do you just want to choose a mecha directly?"

Ling Lan was a cautious person — she did not understand much about mecha yet, so she of course chose to first learn more about the three mecha's combat styles and controls.

Very quickly, two images appeared before Ling Lan. One of the panels was playing a video of the movements of the mecha from the outside, while the other panel showed the movements of the mecha operator inside the cockpit which caused that movement.

Ling Lan saw a pair of hands flying rapidly within the cockpit, and following the motions, the mecha in the other panel made a reactionary movement. For just one basic movement, the fingers in the cockpit had to make over 10 motions.

For instance, just taking one step involved the mecha's pelvis, knee, ankle, balance, as well as the energy distribution between its two legs. Ling Lan had counted, and just such a simple movement required 18 control motions from the cockpit in an instant — and this was still considered an easy movement.

*"It's very challenging, actually being all manually controlled. There's a lot of pressure on hand speed."* Ling Lan was very surprised. She had always thought that operating a mecha was just like driving, with a control stick or something similar.



*“Aren’t these things what Daddy has been teaching? If it weren’t for the fact that Boss you were having trouble with it, we wouldn’t have come out to sightsee. I wonder if you mix your training with operating a mecha, would the effect be better. If we could just break past Boss’s bottleneck in one go, that’d be great,”* suggested Little Four.

By now, Little Four was already calling Ling Xiao ‘daddy’. This was because Ling Lan had once heard Little Four say Boss’s daddy something something blah blah blah ... and felt that it sounded somewhat awkward. Besides, she had always considered Little Four, who had travelled along with her to this future, as her little brother, so she decided to just ask Little Four to call Ling Xiao ‘daddy’ alongside her.

### **Chapter 113: Rabbit Mecha?**

Perhaps the learning space had tweaked Ling Lan to become more boyish in personality, for her interest towards mecha was at an unprecedented high. She not only looked over the controls of all three basic mecha, but also eyed all the basic mecha models greedily. She found that she really liked every single type of mecha she saw, so much so that she really wished that she could own all of them.

Sensing Ling Lan’s greed, the soldier told Ling Lan steadily that all recruits were only allowed to choose one mecha to start. If she wanted to own more, she would have to rely on her own efforts to earn more points to redeem new mecha ...

The soldier’s words caused Ling Lan to calm down instantly. She began to consider which type of mecha she should choose as her initiate mecha. Ling Lan was a little uneasy, afraid that she would choose wrongly.

Still, Ling Lan was a good child — she just loved to ask questions, a habit trained up in the learning space. So, she asked the soldier — as a beginner, which mecha was best suited for her?

In fact, the first person Ling Lan asked was Little Four, but unfortunately, Little Four also didn’t know which of the three mecha before them was best or most appropriate for her. His familiarity with this world’s mecha was not much better than Ling Lan’s.

Ling Lan had no choice but to go to her second option and ask the soldier. Unexpectedly, Ling Lan really struck the nail on the head — the game’s system had indeed arranged it so that the soldier would be able to answer this type of question. When the soldier heard Ling Lan’s question, he gave a straight answer. “The mecha with the easiest controls, which are the easiest for beginners to learn, is the bestial mecha. I recommend you begin training from bestial mecha.”

Since the soldier who was familiar with mecha had already said so, it shouldn’t be wrong. Ling Lan immediately selected the bestial mecha without any hesitation. She had barely spoken when with a wave of the soldier’s hand, a large spin wheel appeared abruptly before Ling Lan.

On the spin wheel, Ling Lan could see countless images of bestial mecha. There was a ferocious cheetah and lion, and an ugly spider and giant ant, and of course, right in the middle of the wheel was a large compass needle pointing at those images of bestial mecha.

“What is this?” Ling Lan stared at it all blankly. Then, shocked realisation stole over her face. “Could it be that obtaining a mecha also depends on luck?”

“A beginner’s mecha is gifted by the system. So, a beginner has no right to choose the mecha. Which mecha model they get will be determined randomly by this spin wheel,” explained the soldier. “Luck, is also a form of strength. You should anticipate your luck and hope it brings you a strong and powerful mecha!”

In Ling Lan’s eyes, the soldier’s current smile was filled with schadenfreude. Ling Lan didn’t know what the other beginners felt during their first time here, but Ling Lan’s teeth were currently aching from holding back her irritation. She really wished she could just send a punch flying, and blow that despicable smile off the other’s face ...

Of course, Ling Lan could only think about it and not actually do it. After all, she still had to rely on the other to get her mecha. Ling Lan spun the spin wheel forcefully. The spin wheel spun frenetically, and then gradually slowed down as time went by. Finally, it got slower and slower, and just as it was about to stop on a panther-type mecha, the needle jumped unexpectedly.

Ling Lan hadn’t even managed to take a good look at which mecha model the needle was pointing at when with a ‘pop’, confetti swirled through the air. Then, an extremely cute giant rabbit abruptly appeared before her.

Ling Lan was gobsmacked ... a rabbit? Why a rabbit?! Even an ugly spider or ant would be more fearsome than a rabbit!

With some difficulty, Ling Lan calmed herself down. Then, she saw the weapon in the rabbit’s hands, and Ling Lan found herself utterly lost for words ... Dammit, this nonsense system! You’re really shameless! Actually equipping a rabbit mecha with a carrot — do you really think this rabbit here is a real rabbit?!

Within the mind-space, however, Little Four had stars in his eyes. With his hands framing his face, he wriggled his butt and shouted, *“Boss, this mecha is so pretty and cute! I like it!”*

When the soldier saw the rabbit mecha appear, the smile on his face grew even wider. “Congratulations, recruit, on obtaining our Federation’s newest rabbit mecha model.” That said, he reached out a hand to pass a white item that resembled a remote control to Ling Lan.

Ling Lan took the item; it was obvious that this was the activation key of the rabbit mecha. She said sullenly, “If you don’t congratulate me, I think I might be happier.”

The soldier seemed oblivious to Ling Lan’s sour mood. His expression suddenly turned grim, and he issued a command, “In that case, recruit, get into your mecha immediately. We’ll begin training in the basic controls now.”

“Yes!” Ling Lan stood at attention to receive the order, and then pressed a button on the remote key. The door to the cockpit on the belly of the rabbit mecha swung open. Ling Lan leapt up in one big stride, and then with several consecutive hops, she smoothly made her way into the cockpit. Lying down, she pressed the button once again and the cockpit door closed, turning the rabbit into a whole rabbit once again.

Ling Lan had just finished doing this when the soldier waved his hand, and the rabbit mecha with Ling Lan inside it disappeared from this login point. They reappeared in a room specially for training the basic movements, such as jumping and running.

At this moment, Ling Lan chose to activate the mecha. Of course, she chose regular activation — after approximately 3 minutes, the rabbit mecha completed its activation.

Just as Ling Lan was about to turn on all the screens, she noticed that a line of text had appeared on the main screen before her eyes. *“Basic control instructions for the rabbit mecha ...”*

Following these instructions, Ling Lan finally understood the functions of the buttons before her. She had initially thought there was no control stick, but in fact, there was. It’s just that the control stick was located among a sea of buttons. Back when Ling Lan had been watching the demo operations, because she had been dazzled by the hand speed, she hadn’t noticed it. As those fingers had flown over the control panel, the control stick was actually the item that was used most frequently.

“Who knew mecha controls are actually this complicated? In the past, when I watched the mecha fights, I thought it would be as simple as physical combat ... looks like I’ve underestimated mecha operators after all.” Just trying to understand and remember the array of buttons before her, Ling Lan felt the onset of a minor headache.

“Relax, Boss. As long as the mecha’s A.I. is evolved, it won’t be as complicated to operate anymore.” Little Four had been looking over the mecha’s A.I. closely, considering how he could improve it to help his boss save some energy.

But Ling Lan stopped Little Four, saying, “Little Four, don’t improve the mecha’s A.I..”

Little Four was puzzled, “Why not?”

“I came here to learn, so I should do it like the other children and start from the basics. The instructors in the learning space and my dad all repeatedly stress the importance of the basics — I cannot just avoid them because I’m afraid of trouble,” explained Ling Lan. “Besides, this is the virtual world. Not only is there systemic monitoring, there are also those dangerous figures with mutated spiritual selves. No one knows whether this area is being monitored; I don’t wish for you to be in any danger.”

Ling Lan’s concerned words made Little Four unable to protest, so he could only nod obediently and promise not to do anything to help Ling Lan with this. However, as a result, Little Four wasn’t in a very good mood, because he found that the areas where he could help his boss were really just too few.

Seeing this, Ling Lan quickly changed the topic. “Little Four, what do you think was the mecha type our dad used when he first started learning? If it was a bestial type, was the mecha he received also very silly?” The more Ling Lan talked about it, the more curious she was.

As expected, Little Four’s attention was pulled away by Ling Lan, and he found he had something new to do. Excitedly, he told Ling Lan to wait for a moment, and he then scampered off to collect all the information he could find on Ling Xiao.

Although Ling Xiao’s data was labelled as S-class, who was Little Four? He was a virtual god! There wasn’t anything that couldn’t be done as long as he wanted to do it — previously, it was just that he hadn’t thought to collect Ling Xiao’s data, which was why he didn’t have any on him right now. But now that Boss had indicated interest, as his boss’s follower, he would definitely satisfy his boss’s curiosity.

Very quickly, Little Four returned. Face filled with excitement, he said, “Boss, Boss, do you know who our daddy is? Oh wow, he’s just too incredible!”

Ling Lan's curiosity was instantly ignited by Little Four. After some thought, she said, "Dad's military rank is major general ... could it be that he's a special-class mecha operator?" Ling Lan vaguely remembered that Little Four had mentioned special-class mecha before; the associated operator rank should be special-class mecha operator, right?

Little Four shook a finger as he said proudly, "Nope! Mecha operators are not categorised that way." Following that, Little Four gave a breakdown on the levels of mecha operators in this world.

"Mecha operators are also called mecha warrior-masters. From the name alone, you can tell that there are two titles included. One is mecha warrior, while the other is mecha master. Operators of advanced mecha and below (inclusive of advanced mecha themselves), are collectively called mecha warriors, while those who operate special-class mecha and above are called mecha masters.

"Mecha warriors, are then further divided into trainee mecha warriors, junior mecha warriors, intermediate mecha warriors, and advanced mecha warriors. The corresponding mecha they pilot are trainee mecha, junior mecha, intermediate mecha, and advanced mecha.

"Meanwhile, mecha masters are divided into special-class mecha masters, ace mecha masters, imperial mecha masters, and god-class mecha masters. Special-class mecha masters and ace mecha masters both pilot special-class mecha, though an ace mecha master would have a higher level of control over their mecha. Imperial mecha masters pilot imperial mecha, while god-class mecha masters naturally operate the Federation's ultimate weapons, god-class mecha<sup>1</sup>.

"But this is just the military's internal categorization. For the public, the distinctions are not that discrete. All the mecha warriors and mecha masters are just called mecha operators.

"Generally speaking, imperial operators and above will not be deployed in cases of war. This is because these type of mecha operators are beings that can decide the outcome of a war. As such, each country has agreements binding them, which will not be broken unless under special circumstances.

"God-class operators are an even more fearsome and threatening existence. The Federation can possess such a vast expanse of land and distant boundaries all because the Federation has the highest number of god-class operators among the neighbouring countries ...

"Boss, now take a guess. Which level of operator does our dad belong to?" Little Four's brows and eyes were all scrunched up in a line from his exuberant smile; it was clear that he was in an excellent mood.

"Seeing you so happy, our dad must be pretty well ranked. Could it be that he had already become an ace operator?" Ling Lan thought back to her dad in the legacy mission — he was so unbelievably young; if he had really managed to achieve ace operator status, he would definitely already be among the best and brightest.

"No, no, no, that's wrong, that's wrong." Little Four glared at Ling Lan with contempt, somewhat miffed at Ling Lan for underestimating their dad ...

## **Chapter 114: God-Class Operator Ling Xiao!**

Ling Lan was shocked, “Could it be that our dad had already reached imperial level?” Heavens, their old man was just too abnormal!

Little Four’s expression was sullen. Couldn’t Boss take a more adventurous guess?!

The moody Little Four did not answer Ling Lan directly, but merely read the contents of a military report he had found to her. “The Federation originally had 12 god-class operators, but 8 years ago, they unexpectedly lost one of them, the youngest god-class operator of the Federation. That god-class operator had lost his life in a death tunnel on the evening of the day he was deployed to the enemy nation ...”

8 years ago? Death tunnel? What a coincidence — dying on the same year and the same place as her old man ... Ling Lan’s brows furrowed. Little Four wouldn’t have brought up unrelated things in their conversation; could it be that this had something to do with her dad?

Before Ling Lan could figure it out, Little Four tacked on a sentence that made Ling Lan blank out. “The mecha of that god-class operator, is named <Belief>!”

After a long while, Ling Lan asked shakily, “You’re saying that ... that god-class operator is Ling Xiao?”

Little Four nodded. “Yes, the only person to have advanced to god-class operator status in the Federation in the last 10 years, also the youngest ever in history to achieve that status — this person is Ling Xiao.”

“Lies!” yelled Ling Lan suddenly.

Little Four was taken aback. He had not expected that Ling Lan’s reaction would be so dramatic, even outright rejecting this news.

“If he really were a god-class operator, then how could he have been deployed? Didn’t you say that, imperial levels and above were not allowed to be deployed randomly? Plus, aren’t god-class mecha the Federation’s ultimate weapons? Such a formidable weapon — how could the person who controlled one die so easily?”

Seated within the rabbit mecha, Ling Lan involuntarily clenched her fists tightly. If Ling Xiao had been weaker, Ling Lan could still have accepted him dying just like that. But the Ling Xiao being described by Little Four was just too strong. Such a powerful man dying so simply — she just found it a little hilarious and unbelievable.

“According to the top-secret files I found within the military, our dad only used 6 years to ascend from ace operator to god-class operator status. Successfully advancing to imperial operator status in Star Calendar Year 4725, then successfully advancing to god-class operator status in Star Calendar Year 4728. However, from the moment dad became an imperial operator, this information had been sealed by the military. Around that time, the military probably already had plans to hide dad’s real status and deploy him to fight the enemy nation.

“So, that year when dad was deployed, he did so under the identity of an ace operator. This was also why dad only had the military rank of major general. If he had gone as a god-class operator, he would at least have gotten the military rank of general.” Little Four’s tone was regretful. If Ling Xiao had passed

away with the rank of general, the resources Ling Lan inherited would have been much more substantial.

The innocent and simple-minded Little Four didn't consider the fact that if things really panned out as he thought, the people who would set their eyes on those resources wouldn't just be the small Ling elite family. It was highly likely that greater forces would be drawn as well; at that point, Ling Lan may very well have lost the right to inherit completely.

Little Four's regrets only lasted for a moment. He moved on to say, "The Federation was initially planning to pull a fast one by deploying Ling Xiao into battle, hoping to uproot our historical enemy, the Twilight Empire, in one stroke. However, for some unknown reason, the upper ranks of the military sent down the order for Ling Xiao to lead a fleet through the death tunnel to sneak behind the enemy nation, in preparation for a pincer attack ... unexpectedly, the fleet encountered violent energy turbulence from deep within the death tunnel and lost their lives."

"It's really so coincidental!" At this moment, a trace of an ice-cold smile hung on Ling Lan's lips, causing chills to run through Little Four's heart. It turned out that, subconsciously, Ling Lan had begun to emit the killing intent she had amassed in the learning space.

"Yup, it's so coincidental that it's suspicious. In fact, there was indeed something wrong with the military command, and the energy turbulence within the death tunnel wasn't formed naturally as well." Little Four centred himself and continued to tell Ling Lan what he had found.

Little Four's searching capabilities were undoubtedly powerful, proving that he was truly the virtual god he claimed to be. Of course, Little Four was also putting in so much effort because Ling Xiao was now his daddy as well. He had to find out all he could about his daddy so that if anyone asked him about it in future, he would be able to give a proper answer. Still, he had not expected that this serious search of his would actually turn up some problems.

"Looks like, this was a plot targeting my dad." Ling Lan fully believed in Little Four's abilities. If Little Four said there was a problem, then there must certainly be a problem. Moreover, Ling Lan too had thought from the start that all these coincidences stacking up together was unlikely to truly be coincidence.

"Yes, I can confirm that, our daddy really did die from a sinister plot," said Little Four decisively.

"Originally, the complete annihilation of Ling Xiao's fleet had struck a heavy blow on the morale of the Federation. However, the military acted quickly. They immediately announced Ling Xiao's status as a god-class operator, along with the reason for his death. They claimed that he was killed by a plot of the Twilight Empire — this caused the fighting between the Federation and the Twilight Empire to escalate immediately, until it truly reached the point where there wouldn't be peace till one side was defeated. Now, the fighting has been going on for 8 years, and there are still no signs of stopping. There have already been countless deaths and injuries of the military on both sides."

Ling Lan was rather surprised. "Why would dad's death cause such an outcome?"

Little Four sighed, "Boss, you don't understand the position god-class operators have within the hearts of the Federation soldiers. God-class operators are like gods to military staff, and Ling Xiao was the youngest one. His victories spurred the excitement of all the soldiers — it could be said that Ling Xiao was the idol of the entire military. Also, because Ling Xiao was the youngest of the god-class operators,

he had much more potential and room to grow than the other god-class operators. It was almost certain that he would have become the guardian deity of the Federation for the next forty to fifty years.

“Think about it. Their guardian deity was sacrificed to an underhanded plot of the enemy nation — how could the soldiers of the Federation just let it rest? So they could only continue to fight endlessly until one of the countries no longer has the ability to fight.”

Listening till this point, Ling Lan descended into deep thought. She recalled how when others had fought over her right to inherit, the military had chosen to just stand by and watch. Then she thought about when she was ambushed on her way to school. And then, there was her father’s legacy mission — he had set up so many obstacles and tricks, just so he could narrow down the selection and find her ... she felt like she understood things a bit better now. The people within the upper ranks of the military who had caused Ling Xiao’s death had not loosened their monitoring of the Ling family; it seemed that they did not want to see anyone from the Ling family appear in the military world.

“Little Four, looks like we need to find the people in the upper ranks of the military who killed my dad,” said Ling Lan with an icy smile.

“Ah? Why?” Little Four didn’t understand.

“For one, Ling Xiao’s blood flows within this body of mine, and I am also learning from Ling Xiao’s legacy. Whether it’s a life debt, or a mentorship debt, I need to avenge Ling Xiao. I cannot just allow him to die senselessly.

“Secondly, in these 8 years, I believe the other has been monitoring us all this while. The moment we stand out a little in the military world, the other will definitely not hesitate to kill us off. I don’t wish to live with this hidden knife hanging over our heads.”

Ling Lan’s words drew Little Four’s bitter anger towards a common enemy. He immediately said, “Don’t worry, Boss, leave the virtual world to me.” Little Four recalled the monitoring of the legacy mission, and reminded himself again and again that he needed to be more careful than careful — he must not reveal any openings that could bring the threat of death to his boss.

Right after that, Little Four tacked on worriedly, “But, that person still hasn’t been exposed till now. Being able to kill dad without anyone finding out about them, they must be a skilled schemer. Can we beat him?” Little Four didn’t think his boss was the type that plotted well.

“If I can’t do it alone, I’ll just have to find a few helpers.” Ling Lan smiled coldly. Initially, she had not wanted to be a boss, but reality was forcing her to become one even if she didn’t want to. How could she go up against some military bigwigs without having some helpers on her side?

That’s right, Ling Lan’s sights were now set on Han Jijyun. Ling Lan had full confidence in her fighting skills — if she just worked at it, though she couldn’t guarantee she’d reach god-class level, getting to ace or imperial level was still possible. However, when it came to plotting and scheming, Ling Lan was at a loss, while the opponent was a master at it. Therefore, she could only seek external help. Now, of the few followers by her side, only Han Jijyun’s intelligence was clearly a head above the others, and recently, that intelligence was gradually moving towards the side of cunning and slyness.

It looked like she would have to push things a little more, and make Han Jijyun become even more sly and cunning ... that's what Ling Lan was thinking.

After making this decision, Ling Lan pushed the matter aside. After all, it was still too early to look for the opponent; Ling Lan wouldn't rush to seek out the other's tracks now while her own wings were still developing.

Temporarily setting the matter aside, Ling Lan started to study the controls of the rabbit mecha seriously, slowly experimenting with making the mecha walk. After all, this was the very first step of controlling mecha. Have you ever seen a mecha that couldn't walk, but which could hack at someone with a knife?

Alright, the 'walk' of bestial mecha was more like jumps and leaps, especially for a rabbit. The hind legs were designed to be much stouter than the forelegs, so Ling Lan would first have to learn how to get the hind legs to spring. Luckily, Ling Lan need only control it with her fingers, so there was no discomfort in trying to adapt.

After stumbling and face-planting a couple of times, Ling Lan finally grasped hold of the ability to move the rabbit mecha. Of course, she still could not get the mecha to hop in a straight line just yet. Watching as her mecha jumped left and right, but never in a straight line, Ling Lan sweatdropped.

Just like that, Ling Lan immersed herself in mecha training. By the time Little Four nudged her back to awareness of her surroundings, it was already time to log off.

Because Ling Lan had Little Four to cover for her, she logged off directly at the mecha training hall. Strolling out of the login pod, she took a quick shower and then went downstairs.

In the dining room, Lan Luofeng was humming as she set out dishes on the table. Of course, these dishes were all prepared by the servants; Lan Luofeng was a young mistress of a noble family who had led a pampered life — the most she could do was fry an egg, and even then the quality was not guaranteed ... it could very well be undercooked or overcooked.

Seeing Ling Lan come down, Lan Luofeng smiled. "My baby, if you still hadn't come down, I was about to go up and call you."

There was nothing Ling Lan could say in response to this. Previously, there had been several times when she had been forced offline by Lan Luofeng's persistent pestering. Her mum was the type of person that wouldn't give up before she achieved her goal. Trying to match her in terms of patience, Ling Lan didn't think much of her odds.

Ling Lan and Lan Luofeng ate together as usual. Ling Lan had only taken a few bites when she could not help but ask, "Mum, did you know that dad was a god-class operator?"

Lan Luofeng nodded, "I knew. Why?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" asked Ling Lan moodily.

**Chapter 115: The Tragic Rabbit!**



“Why should I have told you? Would his being a god-class operator affect your life in any way?” Lan Luofeng cast a confused glance at Ling Lan. “Not to mention he has already left us, and even if he were by our side, whether or not he is a god-class operator, what does that have to do with us?”

Ling Lan thought about it and felt that what Lan Luofeng said was correct. Knowing if Ling Xiao was a god-class operator or not really didn't have much impact on her life at all.

Lan Luofeng picked up a mouthful of Ling Lan's favourite side-dish with her chopsticks and placed it in Ling Lan's bowl, and continued to say, “Also, Ling Xiao is just Ling Xiao. He's a normal person, and also my husband, your daddy. Whether he's a god-class operator or not, he's still my husband and your daddy. These two identities will never change.”

Lan Luofeng's words caused Ling Lan's body to jerk in realisation, and the restlessness she had felt after finding out that Ling Xiao was a god-class operator abruptly disappeared.

“Also, Baby Lan, don't let your daddy's status influence your choices in the future. You must remember — you are you. You just coincidentally have a father named Ling Xiao, that's all.” Lan Luofeng was somewhat worried, afraid that her daughter would choose to do things she didn't like just because of Ling Xiao, like try to become a mecha operator or something. “I hope that you'll choose what you like to do in the future, and not choose out of some obligation or whatever other reason ...”

Lan Luofeng's words caused Ling Lan to look at her mum with new eyes; she felt as if she was getting to know a new side of Lan Luofeng.

Ling Lan reckoned that among all the females that her dad had encountered, her mum was the only one who didn't treat her dad as someone overwhelmingly strong or an idol or perhaps even as a long-term food provider. She had very simply and purely seen him as a regular person to live an average life with. And so, her dad had chosen her mum ... yup, decisively making a move even before her mum had become an adult.

“Thanks, Mum!” said Ling Lan sincerely. She finished off all of the side-dishes that Lan Luofeng had given her and then lifted her head from her bowl to ask, “Mum, say, do you think Dad could still be alive?”

Lan Luofeng's lips bloomed with a radiant smile, and she nodded decisively and said, “Yes, I think your daddy wouldn't die so easily. He's a god-class operator!” Her tone concealed none of her admiration and pride for Ling Xiao.

Ling Lan smiled too then. Since her own mum wished for this, then she would also hold onto this hope as well. Besides, it was just like her mum said — a god-class operator wouldn't just die that easily ...

Ling Lan finished eating and then went with her mum to the field outside to walk off the meal. After that, she returned to a training room to practise several sets of physical skills. In particular, Ling Lan ran through the scout academy's foundational physical skills set at least 10 times, because Ling Xiao had mentioned that this set of physical skills was not as simple as it seemed. It may even be a great help when operating mecha and advancing in the future.

At the end, she took a shower and lay down to sleep. Entering the learning space as usual, she saw Little Four sitting on the ground. There were countless papers piled high beside him, and he was flipping through several more sheets of paper in his hands.

Ling Lan asked curiously, "Little Four, what are you doing?"

Perhaps Little Four had been too engrossed in what he was doing; he was so frightened by Ling Lan's voice that he flung his arms out — the papers in his hands were thrown into the air, and one of them landed on his head.

Little Four quickly pulled down that piece of paper. Seeing Ling Lan grinning at him, as if amused by his panicked performance, Little Four said grumpily, "Boss, why did you have to sneak up on me? You almost scared me to death!"

"Scared you to death? Why? Were you doing something bad?" teased Ling Lan.

Unexpectedly, Little Four's face paled. He quickly reached out and gathered the papers in front of him, pulling them close. Ling Lan looked at him suspiciously and said, "Don't tell me you really were doing something bad?"

Little Four choked out a nervous laugh. "No way! I was just gathering some information, things about Dad and also stuff about mecha."

When Little Four mentioned mecha, he was mumbling somewhat unintelligibly, but Ling Lan's attention had been fully captured by 'things about Dad'. She cautioned Little Four, "Gathering the information may be important, but make sure you stay concealed. Don't let anyone discover you."

Little Four smiled and said, "Relax, Boss!"

"Still ..." Ling Lan pointed at the pile of paper in front of Little Four, "Is this necessary?" Frankly, Little Four could just absorb the information directly into his system procedures — he really didn't have to materialize the information onto these sheets and sheets of white paper.

"Boss, don't you feel that words on paper is classy?" asked Little Four, expression dreamy. "Reading from paper, doesn't it make me seem very intelligent?"

This troublemaking brat — so he's just trying to show off! Ling Lan said huffily, "In that case, you can continue being intelligent. I'm going into the learning space to learn now."

Ling Lan's unimpressed attitude made Little Four feel that there was now a generation gap between him and Boss. Thus, he sulkily waved Ling Lan away, indicating for her to not disturb his work.

Ling Lan could only shake her head silently at Little Four's heartlessness. She sighed to herself, mourning the fact that little brats nowadays were just too spoilt and pampered. She was just about to push open the doors to the physical skills learning area when from the corner of her eye, she noticed a large door to the side. A word had finally appeared on it: Mecha!

Could it be that because she had encountered mecha, the learning space had also activated a mecha course?

Ling Lan's heart heated up and she decisively turned away from the physical skills doorway. Tentatively, she prodded the door labelled 'mecha' and felt it move slightly. It wasn't like before when the door was fused to the wall, completely immovable.

Ling Lan gave the door a hard shove and the door swung open with a bang. She walked inside and saw an endless space. In the near distance, a rugged soldier with a full beard was guffawing boisterously as he watched her approach.

“Haha, Ling Lan, you’re finally here!” The soldier’s energetic greeting made Ling Lan glance at him cautiously. Could he be a new instructor?

The personalities of the instructors Ling Lan had met so far were all different ... Number One was cold and cool to the extreme, and meant every word he said. Number Five liked to laugh, but was sly and manipulative to the extreme, and was unbelievably perverse, capable of chilling others to the bone. Number Nine was very strict and looked very cold and aloof, but was actually a woman with a soft heart — Ling Lan had received much care from her since the very beginning.

As such, Ling Lan wasn’t afraid of stern-faced teachers, but was fearful of those with smiling faces and passionate appearances; she had been traumatized by Number Five’s torments ... So, seeing the other’s enthusiasm and wide smile, she was instantly on her guard. If by any chance this was another instructor like Number Five, she would definitely be toyed with most terribly.

“Don’t think so much. I’m not Number Five. I have no interest in torturing people. Right, I’m your mecha instructor, Number Three. In fact, when you turned 6 years old, I had already wanted to activate the mecha course. But, due to your real-life situation back then, Big Brother Number One refused my request. I had thought that I’d have to wait for another 5 to 6 years before it came up again. Unexpectedly, you activated it yourself after just one year, hahahahahaha ... that’s great!” Number Three laughed up at the sky, as if immensely pleased with Ling Lan’s choice. Looks like he had really become impatient with waiting.

The laughter finally stopped, but before Ling Lan could ask any questions, Number Three snapped his fingers. A rabbit mecha dropped from the sky, landing directly in front of Ling Lan. Ling Lan could only stare blankly at its familiar appearance. “Why is it this mecha?”

Number Three replied helplessly, “Can’t help it, our mecha’s controls are somewhat different from those in your world, so we had to let the space assistant gather all the mecha models and controls of this world. So far, the space assistant has only sent in the data for this one mecha. Of course, this is also because you selected this mecha ...”

Ling Lan finally understood why Little Four had had that dodgy look in the hall of the learning space. It turned out that he had secretly sent the stats of the rabbit mecha into the learning space, making it the initiate mecha for her mecha training. Dammit. He knew that she didn’t really like the rabbit mecha — couldn’t he have changed things a little and brought in some other models?

Of course, Ling Lan was most upset at her own luck. If she had managed to draw a more formidable mecha to begin with, then she wouldn’t have to take Number Three’s mocking gaze.

Regardless of how gloomy Ling Lan felt, she still had to listen to Instructor Number Three’s commands. She got into the cockpit of the rabbit mecha. As expected, the control buttons were the same, no changes whatsoever.

Ling Lan activated the mecha, and the mecha quickly booted up successfully. She then opened the mecha’s screen to display the situation outside, but found that the initially vacant and open space had

now become an extremely narrow tunnel. By Ling Lan's estimation, the tunnel was just 1.5 times the width of the mecha itself. To successfully make her way through the tunnel, it would require very fine control of the mecha's movement. Additionally, there were also some irregular obstacles within the tunnel — on the floor, and on the walls on both sides — which were probably designed to test a mecha operator's ability to handle the controls to adjust to circumstances.

"Firstly, you'll need to go through obstacle course training. Can you see the numbers on the bottom of the screen?" Number Three's voice rang out beside Ling Lan's ear.

Ling Lan looked at the screen as Instructor Number Three said, and sure enough, on the lower part of the screen, the numbers 03.00.00 were flashing at her, reminding Ling Lan of their existence.

"This is a countdown timer for 3 minutes. You'll need to complete this obstacle course within 3 minutes to pass. And your deadline to complete this mission is just one week." Number Three's tone was tinged with obvious *schadenfreude*.

F\*ck! Teaching her nothing and giving her a mission right off the bat? Instructor Number Three, you're a mecha instructor, not a mission distributor — isn't what you're doing too shameless? Before Ling Lan could give voice to her complaints, the flashing numbers on the lower half of the screen began to count down rapidly.

Ling Lan's eyelid twitched. Abruptly, she found that with the speed of her mecha's jumps, 3 minutes weren't long at all.

At this moment, Number Three's gleeful voice rang out once more, "Oh right, every time you fail an attempt, the system will dole out punishment. You hang in there now!"

Hearing this, Ling Lan frantically operated her mecha. Her fingers flew, actually blowing past the speed limits she had managed to achieve before this ... the system's punishment was not pleasant at all — she really didn't want to experience it ever again.

However, dreams are beautiful but reality is cruel. Ling Lan slammed into a wall for the nth time, and after repeatedly embodying the rabbit in the tale '*waiting for a rabbit by a tree stump*'<sup>1</sup>, the timer finally hit zero. Overall, she had only managed to jump forward a few metres. Oh, tragic rabbit ... Ling Lan had yet to finish bemoaning the poor rabbit when a wave of numbing pain swept over her body ...

### **Chapter 116: Arbitrary Punishment!**

"Dammit, I just knew this would happen!" Ling Lan swore loudly. She could almost see the faint smoke rising from her mouth, ugh ... she was about to be completely cooked by electricity.

Unfortunately, before she could get over the pain and numbness left by this electrocution, the scene before her shifted abruptly. She was brought along with her mecha back to the start of the obstacle course. And then, the learning space did not give Ling Lan any time to rest, immediately restarting the 3-minute countdown once more.

Seeing this, Ling Lan finally couldn't help but curse silently. *FUCK!*

After that, it was another flurry of frantic movements to control the rabbit mecha, to send it lunging out desperately. Perhaps tragedy likes to repeat itself, for Ling Lan had only taken a few hops when she once again slammed into a wall. And then she bounced back, and hit the wall again, and bounced back, and ... in the end, she still hit the wall again ...

The image before Ling Lan was a constant loop of falling and rolling around — the result of all this wall-slamming was a dizzy head and spinning eyes. Once again, Ling Lan was experiencing the feelings of the unfortunate rabbit in the folktale of *'waiting for a rabbit by a tree stump'* !

Failure, followed by yet more failure! Electrocutation after electrocutation, restart after restart ... Ling Lan had no idea how many times she had restarted this mission anymore. She estimated that she hadn't even managed to get 50 metres into the tunnel so far. And what's worse, she didn't even know how long this blasted tunnel was in total.

The reason to blame for Ling Lan's constant wall-slamming was that the tunnel was really just too narrow. There were times when Ling Lan clearly felt she had not made any mistakes with the controls, and even the screen display was telling her that her jump coordinates were in a straight line — but unfortunately, the mecha still somehow ended up slamming into the wall. This caused Ling Lan to become rather discouraged, frustration rearing up within her heart.

Goddammit! This tunnel just did not allow for any bit of error in her controls — was this the standard a newbie should have? Ling Lan, having been electrocuted to within an inch of her life, was filled with simmering indignation. Hells, it was like she thought, nothing good ever came from men who liked to smile ...

After god-knows how many failures, Ling Lan's spirit was worn down to the brink. After one last electrocutation, she was summarily thrown out of the mission space, and Ling Lan blearily found herself in the great hall of the learning space once again.

The hall was no longer as messy as when Ling Lan had first arrived; Little Four had tidied up the floor. When he saw Ling Lan appear suddenly before him, he was startled by her appearance and yelled, "Boss, you were electrocuted?!"

Ling Lan's head was heavy — she only stared uncomprehendingly at Little Four in response.

Seeing this, Little Four couldn't help but sigh and shake his head. With a sympathetic flick of his finger, a large full-length mirror appeared before Ling Lan.

In the reflection of the mirror, a completely black figure looked out blankly at them. There were even wisps of black smoke still wafting off the figure, the only break in the black being the whites of the figure's eyes ... oh, right, the figure's teeth were still white too! Ling Lan bared her teeth at the mirror, revealing her set of straight white teeth. Contrasted with the black, her teeth gleamed even whiter than usual.

Not just that, Ling Lan's hair was all standing up, puffed up in curls. They reminded Ling Lan of the instant noodles of her past life — really, her appearance was as bizarre as one could imagine.

“AH! Number Three, I want to kill him!” This horrible state of hers made Ling Lan scream out in frustration. Right now, she did not look one bit like the cute moe shota that she usually looked like — she was a total black phantom that had crawled out from the hearth.

Little Four smothered a laugh with his hand, “Boss, so you’ve met Number Three! Hehe, don’t be fooled by his brash and forthright-looking face; he actually loves to play pranks on people.”

Ling Lan was stunned. “You know them, Little Four?” She had always thought that Little Four belonged to a different system than the instructors, and so would not meet each other. Looks like that wasn’t the case.

“Of course! There are many things I don’t understand which require their help, like with those battle ... well, I just know them.” Little Four had almost let the truth slip. It turned out that those moves he had helped Ling Lan modify and appropriate was actually the hard work of the instructors. Little Four had just shamelessly claimed the credit for himself.

Sensing something amiss with Little Four’s words, Ling Lan stared at him suspiciously. Little Four’s heart started pounding erratically, afraid that his deceit would be discovered by his boss. He quickly changed the topic, saying, “Boss, how did you end up this way?”

At Little Four’s question, Ling Lan was in no mood to think more about the holes in Little Four’s speech. She sighed softly and said tiredly, “Instructor Number Three gave me a mecha control mission ...” She scratched her head, mussing up her instant-noodle hair into a bird’s nest, and then shouted resentfully, “Argh ...! He didn’t teach me anything! Just told me to get through that crazily narrow beyond narrow tunnel within 3 minutes. How would that be possible?”

Ling Lan’s words instantly made Little Four raise his little fists in anger as well. With sympathetic indignation, he said, “Yeah, how could Number Three be so unreasonable? No matter what, he should give Boss some time to adapt!”

“Er ... actually, he did in fact give me a week’s time to finish it,” admitted Ling Lan awkwardly.

“Then, Boss, how did you end up so messed up?” Wasn’t it just training? Why did it look like she had had to go through a mountain of swords and swim through a sea of flames?

Gloomily, Ling Lan said, “Though it was training, every time I failed, I would be electrocuted!”

Little Four’s eyes popped out in disbelief, and he muttered, “How can that be, electrocuted just for failing in training? When did the system become so strict?” That said, he cast a pitying glance at Ling Lan. “Boss, you’re in big trouble. If you fail the mission this time, I think you’ll lose a layer of skin even if you don’t die.”

Hearing this, Ling Lan’s spirits drooped even more. “Yeah, I didn’t expect to be electrocuted so badly just for failing in training ... if I can’t pass this mission a week later ...” Ling Lan shuddered violently, the sense of doom in her heart becoming even heavier.

The learning space’s punishments came in many bizarre forms, but every type would stay with you for the rest of your life ... no one would be willing to go through it again if they could help it. Ling Lan had failed N-times under Instructor Number Five’s tutelage, and so had experienced a multitude of mind-breaking punishments. All in all, she really never wanted to experience them ever again.

“But it’s really odd ...” Little Four sat on a step, face cupped in his hands as he said in a confused tone, “Since you were given a time limit for completion, why would you still be punished after failing during training, Boss? This doesn’t seem to match up with the system’s settings ...”

Little Four was the most familiar with the system of the learning space — although the system was very strict, its every step would be executed strictly according to the guidelines of the learning space. Could there be some other reason for this deviation in behaviour?

Hearing what Little Four had to say, Ling Lan couldn’t help but wonder, “Could it be that Instructor Number Three was intentionally messing with me?”

Little Four threw a disdainful glance at his boss. “The instructors are only in charge of assigning missions. They don’t have the jurisdiction to give out punishment ...”

But Ling Lan persisted, “Then what’s up with Instructor Number Five’s punishments? The degree of perversity involved is absolutely a sign of his work.”

Little Four explained, “That’s because Boss had already failed the mission. Among all the punishments offered by the system, the instructor has the right to choose which one is implemented.”

Ling Lan understood then. However, this just deepened the mystery — why would the system punish her for no reason when she only failed in training?

Little Four searched through the rules of the learning space, and finally found a regulation that somewhat fit this strange scenario. “Boss, when you were training, did you do anything against the rules?”

During training, if the host did anything the system viewed as breaking its rules, the system would implement appropriate punishment according to the severity of the violation!

Ling Lan gave it some serious thought, and felt that other than controlling the mecha to jump and slam into walls, she really had not done anything else. Could it be that the system considered her wall-slamming as the terrible sin of vandalism, and assigned punishment for it?

Ling Lan told Little Four her guess, and Little Four thumped the table in agreement. His boss’s assumption made sense.

However, Little Four was extremely curious. “Boss, why did you have to jump and slam into the wall? Wouldn’t it be fine if you just walked slowly?”

Ling Lan said with some embarrassment, “Isn’t it all because of that 3 minute countdown timer? I wanted to speed up and quickly complete the mission, but the faster I went, the harder the mecha was to control. And once I hit a wall, the mecha would bounce around like a rubber ball, making it impossible for me to control. Ahem! In the end, I could only become a dizzy rabbit ...”

When a mecha receives a concussive force, 30% of it would be realistically reflected upon Ling Lan’s body. Even if Ling Lan’s body was as strong as an ox, the consecutive impacts and tumbles had still been too much for Ling Lan. Disoriented and unwell, she had thoroughly experienced what it felt like to be a rabbit slamming into a tree.

“Boss, you know very well that you won’t be able to complete this mission within 3 minutes with your current ability level. So, why are you rushing it? Why don’t you first familiarize yourself with the controls to get the rabbit to walk? Slow down as much as possible and work hard so you don’t hit the wall. Take your time and walk through the tunnel slowly and familiarize yourself with the path. Wouldn’t that be better?” Little Four just could not understand Ling Lan’s decision. After all, didn’t she have an entire week to figure it out? Why was she so impatient?

Ling Lan said moodily, “It’s not that I don’t want to! But Instructor Number Three said, if I fail there would be punishment. Also, once the time is up, I’ll be brought back to the starting point. How am I supposed to get used to the tunnel ...” Suddenly, Ling Lan jerked, thinking of something. Her gaze brightened instantly.

“Thank you, Little Four!” Before Little Four could react to this outburst, Ling Lan had pulled Little Four into a hug and dropped a smacking kiss onto his soft and pink little cheek. This sudden affectionate action immediately crashed Little Four’s thought processes — his two eyes were wide as saucers, and his entire body froze up.

Ling Lan did not notice that Little Four’s spirit had been sent flying off by her unexpected kiss. She took a few large strides to stand once more before the doorway of mecha, and purposefully pushed it open. She needed to test her hypothesis to see whether she was right.

Entering the doorway, she saw Instructor Number Three still standing beside that rabbit mecha. Seeing Ling Lan return, Instructor Number Three said with an expression of surprise, “I thought you were only coming back tomorrow? How do you still have strength to train?”

Ling Lan said coldly, “I’m not that weak.” If it really was as she thought, Instructor Number Three was really just too sly.

Instructor Number Three seemed not to see Ling Lan’s dark expression. With a hearty laugh, he said, “That’s great! Get into the mecha then.”

### **Chapter 117: The Learning Space’s Warning!**

Ling Lan smoothly leapt up into the mecha’s cockpit, and then swiftly closed the door and activated the mecha. After 3 minutes, on the lower right corner of the display screen, the 3-minute countdown timer appeared once more. As before, the numbers flashed at her, a constant reminder of their presence.

This time, Ling Lan only took one glance at the numbers before looking away. This was not because the string of numbers made her nervous, but because she wanted to focus on the final image being displayed on the screen.

Sure enough, the image on the screen changed, and Ling Lan was once again at the entrance of the test tunnel. The learning space did not give Ling Lan much time to prepare; the numbers on the bottom of the screen began to roll, the countdown had begun ...

This time, Ling Lan did not rush — she did not try to increase her hand speed desperately to push the mecha out as fast as she could — instead, she chose to decrease her hand speed. Her current speed was



definitely not fast, with some pauses mixed in at times. She worked hard to coordinate her two hands, and facing the small and narrow tunnel, she controlled the rabbit mecha to hop lightly into it!

This hop was very short, not even 2 metres, not even the length of her rabbit mecha's body. However, this caution guaranteed that she made no mistakes this time. Slowly but steadily, she hopped her way to the centre of the tunnel. There were still no mistakes.

Ling Lan did not rush to make the next jump — only after properly calculating the distance needed did she flex her fingers and operated the mecha to jump.

Having calmed down, no longer affected by the 3-minute countdown, Ling Lan now noticed that this seemingly straight tunnel actually had a slight curve to it. However, it would not be noticeable with the naked eye when moving at fast speeds.

Right then, Ling Lan finally understood why she had kept slamming into walls previously. Having been unaware of the curve of the tunnel walls, even if she had used the coordinate data provided by the mecha and jumped to the marked coordinates, it would not have helped. Because in reality, she had already made a judgement error — all that awaited her was a crash into a wall.

3 minutes time wasn't very long, but it also wasn't very short. Ling Lan had just made her way through roughly 30 or so metres of the tunnel, avoiding several obstacles along the way, when her time ran out. However, Ling Lan was not aware of this. Because this time, strangely enough, the learning space did not impose punishment the moment the countdown hit zero. The electrocution did not happen, and Ling Lan also was not chased back to the starting point. Instead, after the timer hit zero, it did not stop, but continued to count down, going into the negatives ...

All this happened silently, so Ling Lan, who was thoroughly focused on operating her mecha, noticed nothing ... only after she had jumped a few more times, going about 10 metres deeper into the tunnel, did she remember to turn and look at the countdown timer. Ling Lan was wondering why the 3 minutes seemed to stretch on for so long this time.

Ling Lan glanced at the timer and saw that the timer was still moving, but this time, the numbers were not getting smaller, but getting larger and larger. In fright, Ling Lan abruptly stopped her hands, and the rabbit mecha immediately froze and lay down on the ground.

Looking closer, Ling Lan finally saw that the countdown timer was now displaying negative numbers. In other words, she had long gone beyond the allocated 3 minutes. Ling Lan started to think. Before this, she had been too anxious, desperately increasing her speed to charge and slam her way through the course, so much so that she completely ignored her surroundings. Thus, she had slammed into the walls repeatedly, and the final outcome was getting electrocuted after the timer ran out and being sent back to the beginning ... why did the learning space not react this time, seemingly content to let her do as she pleased?

Ling Lan thought back to when she had pushed open the 'Mecha' door, and her conversation then with Instructor Number Three. She recalled how she had so easily fallen for Instructor Number Three's misdirection and believed that there would be punishment if she did not finish the mission after the 3 minutes on the timer ran out. She thought about how she had become overwhelmed with panic and frantically tried to make her mecha run forwards recklessly ... she had really been so bloody stupid!

She had actually forgotten that, in the learning space, before a mission's deadline was up, there would not be any punishment for failing in training! She had had 7 full years of learning experience — and she had completely forgotten everything in that split second. No wonder the learning space had gotten mad. It had to be said that, ever since she had managed to obtain Ling Xiao's legacy from right under the military's noses, Ling Lan had become a little cocky. This made her lose her initial sense of caution.

Ling Lan mocked herself, "How shameful! I actually neglected such an obvious clue. And this trap would have been discovered easily if I had just stopped to think ... is this because I've lost my mental balance? Because I thought I was stronger than most other people, so I became too proud?"

Was the learning space trying to tell me through punishment that I still don't have the right to strut around with my tail up<sup>1</sup>? Ling Lan had the realization that this electrocution wasn't punishing her for failing, but was punishing her for her recklessness and carelessness, as well as her loss of mental balance. This was a warning from the learning space!

Ling Lan's lips curved up into a slight smile, her eyes glittering. Although the learning space was somewhat offbeat at times, it would always step in to prevent her from making mistakes at key moments. She really felt that she was extremely fortunate to have received the learning space.

Having thought things through, Ling Lan's mind was at peace. She no longer worried about the so-called countdown timer, but merely focused all her attention on operating the mecha to slowly manoeuvre her way through this tunnel. The start of the tunnel was so narrow that it only allowed one mecha to squeeze through at a time, and though the tunnel gradually widened out, the number of obstacles also increased. There were even sections where there were obstacle *piles*, which required several consecutive hops to clear.

Ling Lan overcame each and every one of the challenges of the tunnel, but then, a new problem appeared. A huge boulder appeared before Ling Lan, and there just was not enough space on either side of the boulder for the large rabbit mecha to pass through. Moreover, there were several rocks of uneven height below the large boulder as well; this completely prevented any challenger from passing through the bottom of the boulder.

It only took one look for Ling Lan to determine the path she should take. Right at the top of the boulder, there was a 'coincidental' gap with just enough room for the rabbit mecha to leap through. Note that she said 'leap through'. In other words, this time, she needed to make sure the rabbit mecha jumped high enough to reach the gap and moved forwards enough to clear the boulder, otherwise it would be all too easy to slam into the rock.

Ling Lan let the rabbit mecha's A.I. analyse the path she needed to take for this jump, along with the controls necessary for it. She then visualized it over and over in her mind, and only after she felt somewhat confident about it, did she get ready to move.

She controlled the mecha to retreat around 10 metres — the boulder was too tall, so she needed to use a run-up approach to build up momentum. The first time, Ling Lan sprinted up to the rock, but when she reached the jumping point, she felt that there was a deviation in her positioning and hit the emergency brakes. The mecha only managed to stop at a distance of 0.01 metres away from the rock, scaring the cold sweat out of Ling Lan.

The second time, she got the jumping position right, but she did not use enough power to reach the required height. Luckily, Ling Lan reacted quickly — at the moment she was about to hit the rock, she controlled the rabbit to kick out with its limbs at the rock, sending the mecha into a flip. She then controlled the mecha to land safely, avoiding the tragedy of slamming into the boulder ...

These two failures gave Ling Lan a better idea of what to expect. On her third try, with a steady grasp of all the key points, Ling Lan successfully got her mecha to leap swiftly through the gap at the top of the boulder. At this moment, Ling Lan was still unaware that making her way through the various obstacles in the course had steadily built up her proficiency with the rabbit mecha's controls. From being flustered at the beginning, till being able to handle unforeseen circumstances with ease now, Ling Lan's improvement was truly phenomenal.

Meanwhile, Ling Lan was still adjusting. In order to handle all sorts of scenarios, she had subconsciously begun slowly merging the combat moves she had learned in real life with her mecha control process. And this, was truly the ultimate objective of this tunnel mission.

Within the learning space, the passing standard for mecha operators was that a mecha operator had to be able to control a mecha as if it were their own hands and feet, just as if the mecha were an extension of their own bodies. And this wasn't something many people could do in the real world.

So, if Ling Lan wanted to pass, she still had much training to do to hone her mecha control! This also gave Ling Lan the false impression for a while that her mecha control was terrible ...

After overcoming several more obstacles, Ling Lan finally arrived at the finish line, completing a full run of the tunnel. The time she used was slightly less than 32 minutes and 13 seconds. Of course, this duration was worlds apart from the mission requirement of 3 minutes. Still, Ling Lan wasn't particularly worried. This was because she knew that she had limited her hand speed for this run, keeping it at a normal level. Besides, this first full run was just to map out the tunnel and get to know the situation inside it, so she had wasted a lot of time at every obstacle. The second time would be different.

Reality proved that it was indeed as Ling Lan had expected. The second time, Ling Lan directly shortened the time used to 23 minutes, and her third pass was infinitely close to 20 minutes. However, this time became her current limit — in the following fourth, fifth, and sixth attempts, she maintained this result, never being able to break past the 20 minute barrier.

To ensure that she did not make a mistake and slam into the wall again, Ling Lan still did not unleash her hand speed; she continued to use the hand speed she used at the start to control the mecha. But after testing out several different ways of jumping without being able to break past the 20 minute barrier, Ling Lan decided to increase her hand speed by one level.

However, after raising her hand speed, Ling Lan started making mistakes. Although she was still extremely careful, she still could not help but lose control at a particularly sharp turn, slipping out of her intended path to careen towards the wall. But Ling Lan reacted quickly, no longer allowing herself to slam helplessly into the wall like before. Instead, she used all four limbs of the mecha to kick off from the wall, and riding the rebound, she moved her mecha back on the correct path. Of course, this was also due to the fact that her speed was not yet at the maximum, and so was still within the limits of Ling Lan's control.

Just like this, she shuffled and stumbled her way through the tunnel — she then found that her time had not gotten any better, and had in fact gotten slower than before, clocking in at around 21 minutes. However, Ling Lan was not discouraged. This new speed would require some adjustment, and in the process of adjustment, it was perfectly normal to make some mistakes. As such, the time delay was within her expectations.

When she managed to fully get used to the new speed, Ling Lan was sure that she would be able to shorten the time to below 20 minutes.

And so Ling Lan maintained this speed, and went through the tunnel again and again, making adjustment after adjustment ...

The night passed without conversation — Ling Lan did not even know when she was kicked out by the learning space. From early the next day, aside from the classes that she had to attend, Ling Lan spent all her time in the learning space training to pass the mission.

Of course, to reassure her mum, Ling Lan pretended to be in the virtual world by lying in a login pod. Ling Lan naturally also did not forget to instruct Little Four to fake her appearance in the virtual world to collect information from all the major subject halls. She had not forgotten the threat within the military — it would not do to let that party notice anything amiss.

#### **Chapter 118: Miss. Luo Sent Me A Message, Said that She Broke Your Jacket and Doesn't Know What to Do**

“Well, anyway, a man who can only do it twice a night really can't satisfy me. Thank you for taking him away,” after saying that, Luosang quickly finished cleaning and headed back downstairs. While going downstairs, she began doubting if she had become as shameless as Nian Junting after spending some time with him recently.

With that thought, she stuck out her tongue. After that, she glanced down and suddenly saw Yi Jingxi standing by the entryway, holding a brown jacket.

The look in her face changed as she angrily rushed down and yelled, “Why did you touch my stuff!”

“It's a man's jacket,” Yi Jingxi held the jacket, sneered, “Gucci customized. It's worth a fortune. Xu Luosang, what kind of a man did hook up with? Or, are you planning to seduce someone?”

“You're sick. Give it back to me,” Luosang reached out a hand to try grasping the jacket, “I'm done with you. So even if I want to be with someone, it'll be none of your business!”

Yi Jingxi was so angry that even his heart was shaking. She used to love him so much. He couldn't imagine her loving another man. He knew that she was beautiful, and was afraid of losing her. However, he didn't want her to know that he still cared about her. That was why he used Zhong Yi to keep her around. On the one hand, he wanted her to suffer, on the other hand, he wanted to stimulate her, to make her jealous. Because that was the only way for him to feel that she still loved him.

He admitted that he was sick, but after falling in love with Luosang, he was no longer able to control himself.

Now, as he realized that there might be another man around Luosang, he even wanted to kill that man. "It's none of my business indeed, but I just don't want you to be happy."

Yi Jingxi dodged Luosang, then grabbed a pair of scissors and cut the jacket broken.

Luosang was so infuriated that even her eyes turned red. "This jacket is worth tens of thousands at least. I need to return it to someone. How can I possibly afford it? Do you want me to die?" She said.

Yi Jingxi took a bank card out of his pocket, threw it on the table and said, "There's tens of thousands yuan. Give it to that man."

"Who wants your money?" Luosang felt disgusted. She didn't want his money. Nian Junting definitely wouldn't want the money either, but he might be angry.

'Just let him be angry then, I have no fear,' thought Luosang.

"Without my money, how are you gonna pay for the jacket?" Yi Jingxi frowned. He surely knew that the owner of the jacket wouldn't care about tens of thousands yuan, but he worried that man might use the broken jacket as an excuse to get close to Luosang.

"Leave me alone," Luosang angrily glared at him, then turned and left with the broom.

Looking at the broken jacket and the bank card, Yi Jingxi slowly clenched his fist.

Was he annoying to her now?

Did she have another man in her heart?

...

Afternoon, Luosang accompanied Zhongyi to the filming site again, so did Yi Jingxi. In the filming site, Zhong Yi and Yi Jingxi were surrounded by all kinds of people.

Luosang took the opportunity to text Lu Kang—"Mr. Lu, I need your help. I broke Mr. Nian's jacket, what should I do?"

In Shengting Investment, Lu Kang read the message and knitted his brows. A while later, he went to knock the door of his boss' office. When finding his boss sitting in the leather armchair reading a book about horoscope, his mouth corners twitched slightly.

"Mr. Nian, Miss. Luo messaged me. She said that she broke your jacket, and doesn't know what to do," said Lu Kang.

"Why did she ask you?" Nian Junting gave him a threatening glance with narrowed eyes and asked, "Is she closer to you than to me?"

Lu Kang immediately had cold sweat oozing out of his back. "How can that be possible? I think Miss. Luo is afraid that you might get angry. But, I've thought about it, your jacket has a very good quality, so how could it be broken? I think, Miss. Luo might have done it on purpose."

Hearing that, Nian Junting put down the book and said, "You've got a point there. Why do you think she did it then?"

## Chapter 118: The Real No.1 of Year 4738

Ling Lan stood once more at the entrance to the tunnel; she had never stopped challenging it. She closed her eyes and counted the seconds, and then abruptly opened them again. Her eyes blazed with a vibrant light, and her fingers flew in a coordinated dance. With a strong push of its hindlegs, the rabbit mecha bounded into the tunnel.

At this moment, Ling Lan's entire body and soul were immersed in the mecha — she already knew the situation within the tunnel like the back of her hand, so there was no need for her to even think about how to overcome the obstacles. All of it was already a steady flow within her mind.

The rabbit mecha leapt and soared nimbly within that small and narrow space. At times it crawled, at times it leapt, at times it moved rapidly, at times it slowed to turn ... quite a few times it narrowly scraped by a wall, where just a hairsbreadth closer would mean a forceful crash and a violent tumble.

This time, Ling Lan did not hit the wall at all, successfully making her way through the tunnel swiftly. She looked down at the time — as expected, she had finally broken past the 20-minute barrier. In fact, she had improved her time by a whole 5 minutes, ending the course within 15 minutes.

Compared to her first time, Ling Lan had undoubtedly reduced her time by half. However, to achieve the 3 minutes required to complete the mission, Ling Lan still had a long way to go. Still, Ling Lan was very happy. This progress proved that her control of the rabbit mecha had improved by a substantial margin.

Ling Lan wasn't anxious to raise her hand speed further at this point; instead, she continued to work on stabilizing her current hand speed. She practised over and over again — running the same obstacle course repetitively was very dry and boring. Making the mecha jump and leap and run to break through obstacles may have been new and exciting for the first run or two, but after the tenth time and beyond, all that was left was boredom. Fortunately, Ling Lan was a very tolerant person. The dry monotony and boredom of the exercise were not enough to turn her off and make her choose to give up halfway.

In this manner, she stayed in her house for three to four consecutive days. Then, Ling Lan was dragged out of the learning space by Little Four over an unexpected occurrence.

Back then, Ling Lan had been focused on her training in the tunnel to try and apply a higher hand speed. Just as she had been running, the scene in front of her eyes suddenly twisted and spun, becoming blurred and unfocused. By the time Ling Lan could see clearly again, she had already been brought to the great hall of the learning space.

Little Four was waiting for her there with an anxious expression. Seeing Ling Lan come out, Little Four immediately rushed over as he shouted, "Boss, hurry! Qi Long and the others are looking for you."

During this time, Little Four had been substituting Ling Lan to enter the virtual world. So, he was also responsible for reporting anything of note that happened there.

"Can't you handle it?" Ling Lan automatically assumed it was something to do with the virtual world. That's why she was rather surprised, because Little Four had patted his chest and guaranteed that he would be able to handle anything in the virtual world back when he had first taken on this duty.

“It’s a real world issue. They were just trying to contact you online, and it looks urgent. They want you to go to the combat hall immediately. It looks like something major is happening,” explained Little Four in a hurry.

Ling Lan was rather bewildered, unsure what could have happened to make Qi Long and the others so anxious. With a worried heart, she quickly left the learning space and climbed out of the login pod to the virtual world. She took a moment to change into a clean uniform, and then immediately set out for the combat hall.

The moment she arrived at the entrance to the combat hall, Ling Lan found that there was an unusually large crowd here today. She took a swift look around, and found that there were not just students from her grade, but also quite a number of students from the other grades. There were younger juniors who had just started school here, as well as seniors from a grade or two higher.

Among the groupings of blue and green, Ling Lan could even see some white and red — looks like there were also quite a few students from the special classes. Ling Lan grew even more curious. What in the world had happened to make the students of the lower division gather here?

Although the scout academy had ten grades, these grades were in fact split into three different divisions. Grades 1 to 4 made up the lower division, 5 to 7 was the intermediate division, and 8 to 10 was the upper division. The students of every division had their own circles, and aside from those with intent, very few people were willing to cross these circles to get to know the students of the other divisions. Just take Ling Lan’s group for example. They may know about the matters concerning the lower division students, but they only knew vague details about things to do with the intermediate division, and the upper division was completely out of the consideration of these lower division children.

Ling Lan immediately contacted Qi Long, and finding out that the others were at arena 3, she hurried over. On the way there, Ling Lan’s ostentatious red uniform drew the admiration and envy of the surrounding merit class and regular class students.

Although Ling Lan kept a rather low profile within the academy, there were still quite a few people who recognised her. These people were talking in hushed whispers to the people beside them who didn’t know Ling Lan.

“Do you know who that person in the red uniform is?” said one of the informed grade one students excitedly to a student beside him whom he had just met.

“A Special Class-A student? From which grade? I don’t think I saw him at the cross-grade challenge matches.” Some of the people who had no acquaintances in the upper grades naturally did not know much about their seniors.

“You should at least know about Qi Long, right?” Qi Long had obtained the top rank of the special classes multiple times in succession, and so had often appeared at the cross-grade challenge fights. Thus, even the new students knew him.

“Of course I know! The leading person in the second grade — I’ve seen him in the cross-grade challenge matches. I get excited just speaking of him! In the last challenge, he actually managed to challenge all the way up to grade 4 before losing. He really makes us lower grades proud!” It looked like this new student was a fan of Qi Long’s; his face was filled with idolisation.

“Hehe, let me tell you ... that person just now is Qi Long’s boss! He’s also in the second grade.” The informed one was very smug; he actually knew about the strongest hidden boss.

“No way!” Shocked cries rang out one after another — eavesdroppers drawn by their discussion all had expressions of disbelief on their faces. Qi Long was the high-profile academy star of the lower grades — how could a superior being like him submit and acknowledge another person as boss so easily? And someone from the same grade at that, with a lower ranking!

“Hmph, you really think Qi Long dominates the second grade? If my elder cousin sister wasn’t in that grade, I may not have known about this secret.” The ones who paid attention to the internal grade rankings were basically those in the same grade. Very few students from other grades would bother with the rankings of another grade, which was why most people from the lower grades and the upper grades would not know the internal matters.

“What secret? Tell us quick!” Those who loved uncovering the truth all began urging the informant to hurry up and reveal the secret he knew.

“My cousin sister said that, every time that person encountered Qi Long, he would automatically forfeit, never ever choosing to attack.”

“Why?” Everyone wondered.

“Is it because he knew he couldn’t win, so he chose not to fight? That doesn’t mean that person is stronger than Qi Long though!” someone objected.

“I have proof. You all know that in the grade ranking matches, what’s the least number of moves Qi Long took to defeat his opponent?”

“Yup, I remember someone mention it once. I think it was 3 moves, against the weakest opponent in the first round ... Qi Long’s combat skills are amazing — he’s not just agile, his strength is also greater than others his age by too much. On top of that, his foundations are very solid, and I heard he has some sure-kill moves as well.”

“But as the opponents get stronger, Qi Long also can’t defeat them that easily anymore. From around 10 moves to over 10 moves, even using up to several hundred moves ...”

“That’s why I say, Qi Long is strong, but he still hasn’t reached the level of domination,” said the informant airily, nodding as he heard what everyone had to say about Qi Long’s abilities.

“You can’t say that. Anyone who can enter the special classes in our academy is a talent from the cream of the crop. Qi Long being able to press down everyone his age already proves that he is extremely outstanding.” The other people felt that the informant was being rather unreasonable with his comments.

“Hehe, once, that person managed to defeat an opponent in ... guess how many moves?” asked the informant coldly, in response to the others doubting his words.

“What’s his strength like? You can’t just ask us to guess blindly without any comparison point.”

“That opponent was also from the special classes. Qi Long managed to defeat that person in roughly 50 moves.” The informant provided a comparison point.



“About 50 moves?”

“Could it be less than the number of moves Qi Long needed?” Seeing the informant’s impassive face, everyone was shocked. “40 moves? Or maybe 30 moves?”

The informant just smiled but said nothing.

Everyone there drew a cold breath. “20 or so moves? Maybe about over 10 moves?” Everyone felt that their guesses were already very bold.

Sadly, the informant did not seem to agree. He shook his head, sighing, and said, “Can’t you all be more daring with your guesses?”

“Within 10 moves?” In a sea of silence, a wavering voice piped up quietly. This guess made everyone hold their breath, waiting for the informant to respond.

“Within 10 moves? Hehehe, you’re all wrong. He only used one move ...” revealed the informant proudly, just as if Ling Lan was his own boss.

“Woah, that strong?!” There was a cacophony as everyone exclaimed in shock. If this were true, then that person was definitely the reigning champ of the second grade.

“I predict that, if they really fought, even Qi Long wouldn’t be able to hold out for long.” The informant finally gave his hypothesis.

“Then why would he choose to forfeit? If he became the top rank, then he would be able to participate in the cross-grade challenge!” Some people felt it was a shame, because they had not been able to see that person’s awesomeness in defeating his opponent in one move.

“Who knows? Perhaps he prefers to keep a low profile.” An oracle of truth <sup>1</sup> presented himself.

“Right, what’s that person called?” Those with superior strength would always garner respect; the surrounding students were eager to find out the identity of their new idol from the informant.

“Ling Lan, the true number 1 of Year 4738 <sup>2</sup> ...”

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Ling Lan deeply mourned the fact that her hearing was so sharp — she had actually heard every single bit of gossip loud and clear. She had already tried her best to keep a low profile! Who knew that someone had still found her memorable? Still, Ling Lan wasn’t really bothered. This gossip would probably just circulate among the lower division; the upper division would have no interest in following the gossip within their circle. So, no one outside would care or recognise her ...

Very soon, she had rushed to arena 3, and she immediately saw Qi Long and the others waiting in front of the stage. Ling Lan walked over quickly and asked, “Qi Long, why did you call me to come over in such a hurry? What exactly is going on?”

Subconsciously, Qi Long glanced at Han Jijyun, clueing Ling Lan in that it was probably Han Jijyun’s idea to call her here.

Sure enough, Han Jijyun received Qi Long's signal, and spoke up, "Boss Lan, I was the one who asked Qi Long to call you here. Actually, calling you here this time is to discuss the matter of Lin Zhong-qing."

"Him? Is there any connection to us?" Ling Lan was too busy; she did not have that much time and effort to go worry about the other students in her class who she was just on regular terms with.

"Of course there's no connection right now, but there'll soon be one." The corner of Han Jijyun's lips quirked up, and there was actually a trace of deviousness in his smirk.

### **Chapter 119: Taking Lin Zhong-Qing In as a Follower?**

Han Jijyun's words made Ling Lan very curious. With a slight quirk of her brow, she waited for Han Jijyun to continue explaining.

"Earlier, Lin Zhong-qing contacted me urgently in the virtual world. He hopes that we can help him out, because he has been blockaded by Li Yingjie."

"What? That punk Li Yingjie hasn't given up on making Lin Zhong-qing submit?" Ling Lan was rather speechless to hear that. This Li Yingjie was really too stubborn — starting back in the first grade, ever since Lin Zhong-qing had refused to be his subordinate, this brat had been determined to pick a bone with Lin Zhong-qing. He kept finding opportunities to make trouble for Lin Zhong-qing, trying to make Lin Zhong-qing submit to him. As luck would have it, Lin Zhong-qing was also someone who was open to persuasion but not to coercion — the more Li Yingjie tried to force the issue, the more he refused to submit. Thus, the two of them had become locked in a never-ending feud.

"It can't be helped. Li Yingjie is now stuck riding the tiger <sup>1</sup>. Ever since he hit a dead end with Lin Zhong-qing, he thoroughly lost all credibility to become the boss of the special classes. Many students in class are now just agreeing in words but not in mind — some have even mocked him behind his back, saying that he should handle Lin Zhong-qing first before doing the talking. So, this year hasn't been easy for Lin Zhong-qing."

There was one more thing Han Jijyun didn't say. Another reason why Li Yingjie couldn't become the undisputed boss of year 4738 was the existence of their group. Compared to Lin Zhong-qing, Li Yingjie actually hated them even more for blocking his way. It's just that Qi Long alone was already hard for him to handle, not to mention Ling Lan, who was stronger than Qi Long. So, Li Yingjie, who was unable to take his anger out on them, could only go after the vulnerable Lin Zhong-qing who had no one backing him.

At the heart of the matter, Lin Zhong-qing was actually collateral damage of Li Yingjie's dispute with them ... Han Jijyun sighed deeply. Although the academy tried its best to minimize the influence of family background among the students, setting up lots of regulations preventing students from possessing special rights due to their backgrounds, was there any child who was stupid among those who could enter the Central Scout Academy's special classes? A full year of time and more had been enough for them seek out the loopholes in these regulations. With that, they managed to artfully avoid the rigid external protection of the academy, using other methods within the boundaries of the rules to force some children without reliable backgrounds to become their attendants, subordinates, or even gophers ...

In Special Class-A, most of the children came from some sort of weighted background. After all, genes determined everything — it was much more likely for a powerful and wealthy elite family to produce an outstanding child. So, in the Special Class-A of Year 4738, there were only three or four people from more common family backgrounds. Besides Lin Zhong-qing who stood his ground to keep his independence, the others had all chosen to rely on other classmates with stronger abilities and backgrounds.

Among the array of wealthy and powerful backgrounds present in the class, Ling Lan's background (leaving aside Ling Xiao's identity) was considered insignificant, but no one dared to bother him. In the academy, background wasn't the most important thing — might was the foundation which truly allowed a person to stand their ground.

Though Lin Zhong-qing, who had come from a poor district, had been gradually increasing his strength, the top 5 of the class could still handle him easily. In other words, Lin Zhong-qing was the easiest to handle among all of the Special Class-A children — who else could Li Yingjie target if not him?

However, Lin Zhong-qing himself knew that he would not be able to stand up against Li Yingjie. So he had chosen to tolerate — no matter how much Li Yingjie taunted him or insulted him, he had taken it and refused to react. This made Han Jijyun admire him greatly for his ability to restrain himself for a greater purpose.

"Hasn't he been targeted before all this while? Didn't he manage to resolve it all himself so far? Why does he want our help this time?" Ling Lan was curious. She knew very well that even though Lin Zhong-qing was a poor commoner, he had a prideful heart. Unless there was no other choice, he wouldn't have reached out for their help.

What could have happened? What could be grave enough to corner Lin Zhong-qing? Ling Lan stroked her jaw absent-mindedly as she thought about it.

Han Jijyun replied, "It's like this. Lin Zhong-qing told me that the opponent invoked the rule of nemesis combat, and challenged him to an arena battle. The one who loses will have to recognize the other as boss, and become his subordinate. A nemesis combat match cannot be avoided. The moment one chooses to refuse the fight, the academy A.I. will see that as a forfeit and automatically declare it as the loss of the side which refused ... This time, Li Yingjie was smart. He used the combat rules of the academy."

"How did Lin Zhong-qing fall for it? Hasn't he always been careful?" To avoid Li Yingjie's taunts and challenges, Lin Zhong-qing had learned all he could about the academy's rules. He was always careful to stay away from things that wouldn't benefit him, but it looks like he had been set up this time.

"Yes, well, in the virtual world, Li Yingjie recruited a regular class student and sent him to offend Lin Zhong-qing. You know how as well how all the students of Special Class-A have their pride. They would never permit someone else to trample over it easily. So, Lin Zhong-qing chose to teach him a lesson ... and then, this was the result ..."

"The other boy recorded a video of himself being beaten up and submitted it to the school A.I. to request for a nemesis combat match. After it was approved, he challenged Lin Zhong-qing. Under nemesis combat mode, Lin Zhong-qing cannot refuse, so he had no choice but to accept." Ling Lan

naturally knew what was going on instantly. “Looks like Li Yingjie really invested a lot of thought and effort to trap Lin Zhong-qing. For this plan, he had to complete the team formation mission in the virtual world. He’s most likely the third person of our second grade to succeed in building a team ...”

Only teams would allow the members of the team to substitute amongst themselves freely. And so, in the end, the one Lin Zhong-qing had to fight was no longer that regular class student, but Li Yingjie.

“That fellow is really willing to pay to get Lin Zhong-qing, actually willing to waste a team member slot.” Each team only had six member slots, and after the members had been chosen, the team members could no longer be changed. The existence of teams was a way for the academy to foster cooperation and team battle sense among the students. It was also a way to cultivate lasting bonds among team members, so that the team members would be able to learn more responsibility by watching out for each other, lending each other a hand, and progressing together.

The growth and strength of each individual member of the team would also be a determining factor in when they’d be able to enter the real virtual world. Once students reached the age of 13, they would have the right to challenge for the right to exit. If successful, the Central Scout Academy would remove the restrictions on those children, and give them free access to the virtual world. Mind you, only in the extended virtual world would they be able to experience mecha controls, and this ... *this was the dream* of all the students of the scout academy. All the children dreamt of the day they could operate mecha!

Thus, every team was very particular about its members. They wouldn’t take in just anyone, unless a team member accidentally becomes incapacitated ... that’s why, the members of a team were definitely the best of friends, steadfast comrades that one would be willing to fight beside till they graduated from the scout academy.

“What does Lin Zhong-qing want exactly?” Ling Lan had an inkling of what Lin Zhong-qing’s objective was, and her brow furrowed slightly.

“He wants to join us.” Sure enough, Han Jijyun gave voice to the answer Ling Lan had thought of.

“I don’t find him promising.” Ling Lan didn’t really like Lin Zhong-qing. She felt that Lin Zhong-qing was just too tolerant — in contrast with Ling Lan’s voluntary self-restraint and tolerance, Lin Zhong-qing’s brand of tolerance was forced by external pressure. As a result, he was very moody and sombre, and his gaze was always dark with murky shadows. Letting this kind of person join them may very well bring an unstable element into their team.

Ling Lan was totally preparing to lead Qi Long and the others to beat the exit challenge the moment they all turned 13. As such, she didn’t want there to be any surprises.

“He’s stated clearly that he wants to become Boss’s subordinate, and that he’s willing to serve you loyally,” added Han Jijyun. It looked like he really favoured Lin Zhong-qing’s addition to their team.

Ling Lan still wasn’t moved. She had the Ling family loyalists, who were way more reliable than Lin Zhong-qing.

“Actually, Lin Zhong-qing is not a bad addition. In my opinion, he chose us only after thinking it over very seriously. He probably wouldn’t betray us. You should know that right now, in Special Class-A, there are only 2 teams which can match up with Li Yingjie’s group. One would be the Wu Jiong-Ye Xu team, and

the other is our team,” explained Luo Lang, chiming in. “But the Wu Jiong-Ye Xu team is aligned with the federal military system, and Lin Zhong-qing really dislikes this sort of authoritarian elitism. So, he doesn’t really want to join them, which is why he chose us.”

“And *we’re* not aligned with the federal military system?” asked Ling Lan in confusion. She cast a doubtful glance at the boys standing before her, poking fun at their backgrounds. She had learned about their family backgrounds after over a year of hanging out together. Qi Long, Han Jijyun, and Luo Lang were all descended from upper ranking federal military families.

The three boys couldn’t help but laugh. Still chuckling, Qi Long retorted, “But Boss, you aren’t! Whether or not we are aligned with the federal military system depends on your identity as our leader.”

Ling Lan scratched her face in embarrassment. She wasn’t sure whether she should tell them now that she was actually aligned with the federal military system after all ... In the past, she had thought that with her father’s death, that her family was just an extremely normal martyr’s family, which would definitely have nothing to do with the federal military system. Therefore, she had told Han Jijyun and the others that she came from a middle-average family, and that her father had just been sacrificed in battle before she was born.

And so, back when Ling Lan had just discovered her father Ling Xiao’s true identity, she had been very conflicted. She just didn’t know how she could re-explain her identity to her companions now.

“You all want to accept Lin Zhong-qing?” Ling Lan wasn’t a self-opinionated person. Although she didn’t particularly like Lin Zhong-qing, she still decided that she would listen to what everyone had to say.

“Yeah, Lin Zhong-qing’s potential is great, and he puts in a lot of effort into studying. His improvement is obvious — in the most recent ranking tournament, he managed to make it into the top 15. His future results shouldn’t be too much off the mark. Boss, taking him in as a follower should bring us no disadvantages,” analysed Han Jijyun.

“But we’ll just have to go up against Li Yingjie’s group.” Ling Lan considered whether it was worth it to take on this troublesome issue for Lin Zhong-qing’s sake.

“Isn’t that pretty interesting? With no rivals, no competition, our improvement will be much slower,” said Han Jijyun with a smile as he looked to one side; it was Li Yingjie and company. Right then, Han Jijyun’s gaze was somewhat piercing, a little different from how it was usually.

A notion passed through Ling Lan’s mind. While the innate talents of Qi Long, Luo Lang, and herself were geared towards combat, Han Jijyun’s wasn’t. His innate talent belonged to the intelligence stream; in other words, he could not rely solely on book-learning or fighting to increase his abilities, but had to clash wits often with others ...

Ling Lan thought of her future plans — Han Jijyun was definitely one of the most integral links in the chain. Only if Han Jijyun became more capable would she be able to accomplish what she wanted to do perfectly.

So Ling Lan nodded and said, “Alright, I agree.”

## **Chapter 120: Joining Officially!**

Ling Lan's agreement caused the smile on Han Jiyun's face to deepen, and his gaze brightened even more. Perhaps Han Jiyun had found a game he wanted to play, and so his spirits were running high.

When Han Jiyun wasn't paying attention, Qi Long nudged Luo Lang lightly with a shoulder, and asked quietly, "Did your initiate instructor arrange some sort of mission?"

Luo Lang was startled, somewhat unable to wrap his mind around how sharp Qi Long's instincts were. This was because Qi Long always gave off a brash and forthright vibe, and seemed like he would be extremely careless. However, Luo Lang very quickly gathered his thoughts and nodded almost imperceptibly with a subtle dip of his chin, telling Qi Long that he had guessed correctly.

Qi Long grinned. Only he knew that he had guessed so easily, not because he was intuitive, but because his initiate instructor had also given him a mission. So, seeing Han Jiyun suddenly become so proactive, his mind connected the dots to his own situation, which was why he had jumped to this assumption so quickly.

"How about this? Let's leave Qi Long in charge of this matter." Ling Lan currently intended to cultivate Qi Long as the spokesperson for their team, wanting to put him in charge of representing their public image. This was because Qi Long's appearance was bright, lively and extremely positive, easily gaining the trust of others. In the future, no matter what mission they accepted, this disposition of his would be an unexpected boon when cooperating with others.

As Ling Lan had been trolled multiple times by the smiling faces of instructors Number Three and Number Five, she believed that people who smiled like they were kindly gentlemen were often representatives with 'black innards' <sup>1</sup>, bellies filled with murky waters of deceit and evil intentions. Therefore, she wasn't particularly fond of that kind of smile. In addition, she had the utmost respect for Instructor Number One, and held Instructor Number Nine in high esteem — and these two people were classic 'slackface' representatives. This led her current expressions and speaking tone to gradually shift infinitely closer towards the behavioural patterns of those two instructors. In Little Four's words, right now was the developmental phase of the slackface shota ...

"Ah ...?" Ling Lan's arrangement boggled Qi Long. What was he supposed to be in charge of?

"I'm saying that Lin Zhong-qing will be your attending follower. You'll be responsible for him." Since she would be pushing Qi Long to take centre stage, then it made sense for her to assign a lackey to him, right? Besides, Ling Lan had way too many secrets, which made it unsuitable for someone to keep following her around.

"Later, when you fight in the arena, you need to do your best, alright? Otherwise, you'll lose your follower ..." Ling Lan patted Qi Long's shoulder in encouragement, and then washed her hands of the responsibility.

Yet, Qi Long didn't care about Ling Lan's unexplained transfer of duties to him; he was in excitement mode. As a battle freak, the moment he heard the words 'arena' and 'fight', his blood boiled, and he just wished he could rush over immediately to the stage to satisfy a little of his battle lust. Although that punk Li Yingjie was somewhat iffy in the way he handled things, his personal combat ability was not bad. Good enough to be Qi Long's opponent.

Meanwhile, Han Jijyun had already got hold of Lin Zhong-qing via communicator, and told him to meet them secretly in a small room they opened for private arena combat. As this type of combat was set as private, no one would be able to get into the room without entering the correct password. Since Han Jijyun was prepared to let Lin Zhong-qing join the team, he would have to teach Li Yingjie a lesson no matter what. In the process, he wanted to reap more benefits from Li Yingjie, so he couldn't let Li Yingjie find out that Lin Zhong-qing had already joined their team.

Very soon, Lin Zhong-qing entered the private combat room. When he entered, Lin Zhong-qing couldn't see anyone, but just as he was wondering if he got the wrong room, he saw Ling Lan and the others waiting for him in a corner of the room that had been in his blind spot. Out of worry that Lin Zhong-qing could have been followed, Han Jijyun had arranged it so that everyone was located within a blind spot when someone first enters the room. This would eliminate any chance of them being discovered by an unintended audience.

Seeing the door close, Ling Lan and the others walked out of the corner. Lin Zhong-qing carefully glanced at Ling Lan who was standing in the middle of the group, and waited for the final verdict.

Being able to join Ling Lan's team would undoubtedly be the best outcome for him. Ever since Ling Lan had helped him previously without even batting an eyelid, Lin Zhong-qing had been extremely grateful towards Ling Lan. Back then, he had already been conflicted — wondering if he should lower his head and ask to join Ling Lan's group directly so that he could be under their protection. But at that time, he had just qualified for the Central Scout Academy and had also managed to become a Special Class-A student in one go — his pride and personal drive was high; he didn't want to become someone else's tag-along. Moreover, he was confident that he could evade Li Yingjie's pressuring, and so the thought of joining Ling Lan's group came and went.

However, reality was cruel. His relationship with Li Yingjie became increasingly worse, until it reached the point where they were almost archenemies. Meanwhile, although he continued to improve, the more he learned, the more he could feel the distance between himself and the top 5 of Special Class-A. Ling Lan, Qi Long, Li Yingjie, Wu Jiong, and Ye Xu were the ironclad top 5. Their strength exceeded the other Class-A students by a significant margin; it could be said that no one was even close to threatening their positions.

Of the five, Ye Xu was the weakest. And while Li Yingjie and Wu Jiong were about equal in strength, Qi Long was overall stronger than them by a head. Needless to say, Ling Lan was the uncontested #1 in the minds of all the students of their year. Although he had never truly obtained the top rank, the fact that his follower Qi Long had successfully earned the top rank 3 years in a row just proved how fearsome he was.

In the intra-grade ranking fights, Lin Zhong-qing had fought against Ye Xu and Wu Jiong before. Against them, he had only managed to hold out for 50 to 60 moves. Deep down, Lin Zhong-qing knew that if the other had really used their sure-kill moves, he would never have been able to hold out for that long. He could perhaps hold out for half that number of moves. The sheer pressure brought on by the gap between their levels let Lin Zhong-qing lose without any resentment.

Compared to the other four people, Lin Zhong-qing was actually much more curious about Ling Lan. In fact, you could even say that he was brimming with questions. Before this, he had asked around in a

roundabout way to find out more about Ling Lan's family background. He found out that Ling Lan was from a middle-class family, and was also a posthumous child — while he had still been in his mother's womb, his father had lost his life in one of the Federation's battlefields. Aside from having a slightly better background, Ling Lan and he had rather similar conditions — they didn't have any additional combat skills, and didn't have access to any battle experience from their elders — then why did Ling Lan have such formidable battle power? Could it be a genetic issue? But they were just lower than Ling Lan by one level, so logically, the difference shouldn't be that large.

Lin Zhong-qing had also studied Ling Lan's fights before, and found that his battles were clean, precise, and efficient, never dragging things out (with only just one move used, there really was nothing to drag). Furthermore, his every attack was neither so strong that it was unstoppable, nor so fast that it was invisible. A simple straightforward move, without any extraneous frills or flourishes, directly aimed to strike at his opponent's biggest weakness.

Of course, he himself was very familiar with those attack moves Ling Lan had used — they were all sourced from the basic physical skills set of the Central Scout Academy, with only some being sure-kill techniques appropriated from other students.

Originally, Lin Zhong-qing hadn't known this. But then one time, he noticed Qin Yi's sure-kill technique being executed perfectly by Ling Lan's hands, letting him defeat Ye Xu in one move. Then, he had known that Ling Lan had the unbelievable ability to rapidly mimic and absorb others' sure-kill techniques. This had also given him some insight on how Ling Lan could have become so strong.

Ling Lan didn't have a formidable family background, nor did he have any additional combat skills (or so he thought; yet another poor babe being kept in the dark). And yet, he had become the number 1 of their year — Lin Zhong-qing truly respected and admired Ling Lan from the heart. He felt that Ling Lan had brought honour to all the students from common family backgrounds. The only regret he had, was that Ling Lan was very aloof — not seeming to care very much for the students around him. Aside from those few people from the start, after a whole year, it was still those few people who were close to him.

Then, this time, he had unexpectedly fallen into a trap and was now forced to fight against Li Yingjie directly. Lin Zhong-qing knew that he was no match for Li Yingjie, but he was unwilling to just roll over and become Li Yingjie's subordinate. And so, he had thought of Ling Lan. If he really had to submit and become someone's subordinate, then he would much rather become Ling Lan's subordinate. Even though Wu Jiong was also a good candidate, Lin Zhong-qing wasn't as keen to submit to Wu Jiong.

Thus, he had taken the initiative to contact Han Jijun online and put forward his request. He had thought that he would feel horrible doing it — after all, he had fought hard for independence for over a year, but still couldn't escape the tragic outcome of becoming a follower. The only consolation he had was that at least contacting Han Jijun to submit to Ling Lan was his own choice. However, unexpectedly, the moment the words left his mouth, he had actually felt at peace. His heart seemed lighter, as if shedding a heavy weight<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps he had already been thinking about this for a long time subconsciously, but his pride and ego had not allowed him to consider it consciously.

Now, Lin Zhong-qing had come to face the person that could determine his future destiny. His initially steady heart actually started fluttering in panic — goddammit, he was actually nervous! And there were also feelings of fear; he was really afraid of being rejected ...



“Lin Zhong-qing, I have agreed to your request. But I’m used to acting alone, so, after this, you can just follow Qi Long and the others.” Ling Lan’s words brought both joy and pain to Lin Zhong-qing’s heart. The joy was because he could finally join Ling Lan’s team and receive their protection; the pain was because he had heard Ling Lan’s rejection. Ling Lan wasn’t taking him on as a follower personally, but handing him over to Qi Long and the others.

Who knew there would come a day where he would be dismissed by another as a follower? Lin Zhong-qing didn’t know how to feel — he merely nodded his head in a daze to indicate that he understood.

Only the team leader could request the addition of a team member; an individual wasn’t able to randomly search for a team and request to join on their own. So, when Ling Lan saw Lin Zhong-qing nod his acceptance, as the team leader, she used her communicator to connect to the academy’s mainframe, and submitted the request form for Lin Zhong-qing to enter her team. Once the request was approved, the A.I. would contact the team member listed on the form. Next, the team member need only enter the password of his communicator to complete the process and join the team.

The A.I. very quickly checked Lin Zhong-qing’s information to confirm that he was currently a free agent. Then, it forwarded Ling Lan’s invitation to Lin Zhong-qing’s communicator.

Lin Zhong-qing took a deep breath — he then resolutely pressed on the ‘confirm’ button and entered his password. When he saw the congratulatory message confirming his addition to Ling Lan’s team, Lin Zhong-qing let out a large breath. It felt to him as if the dust had truly settled and he was back on solid ground. He hid it well though; no one else in the room noticed.

“Qi Long, I leave the arena battle to you.” Ling Lan had simultaneously received a notification informing her of the successful addition, along with a copy of all of Lin Zhong-qing’s data. As a team, they were considered as one entity, so all the team members’ information was publicly available within the group. Meanwhile, any grudges on Lin Zhong-qing’s shoulders would also be extended to encompass the whole team. In other words, any of the other team members could substitute for Lin Zhong-qing in the upcoming fight. This logic was exactly the same as the one behind Li Yingjie’s plot to trap Lin Zhong-qing into a fight.