

Mech 3111

Chapter 3111: Sharing Burdens

Though Shederin did not look pleased that Ves insisted on maintaining a more direct hold over the military wing of the Larkinson Clan, he did not speak out too much.

"While not ideal, the Larkinson Army will probably remain under control as long as you exercise enough diligence. I suggest that you still rely on the Ministry of Defense to assist you in that. The defense minister does not have to hold much authority over the military, but he or she should at least be able to perform inspections and act as a liaison between the soldiers and the civilian population."

Ves waved his hand. "That's okay. I don't want whoever gets to become the defense minister to arbitrarily fire my favorite generals and legion commanders or impose radical changes to our mech doctrines. My relationship with the military is very good given that I'm the principal source of all of their wonderful mechs."

Retaining direct control over the military was also a guarantee for him to remain in power. If the civilians ever got uppity, then the soldiers would likely back him up and serve as his main support group.

He realized that this might be key to remaining in power over the long-term. He had to retain the support of enough stakeholders in order to enjoy enough support.

What Purnesse was warning him about was that different parts of the Larkinson Clan might no longer support him as much as now. In order to account for this, Ves had to pay more attention to this and secure at least a minimum number of supporters to keep his position stable.

If one group of stakeholders no longer backed him up, he could just rely on another backer.

Though it sounded far too political for his liking, he had no choice but to 'play the game' as Shederin Purnesse mentioned from the beginning. Every large organization necessitated a balance of interests in order to stay stable. Ves was not arrogant to believe he would remain universally loved and respected forever.

"I've noticed that you outlined three different pillars." He remarked.

"Correct." Shederin Purnesse acknowledged. "One represents the civilian administration. Another represents the Larkinson Army. The last pillar stands for the Living Mech Corporation. As a clan dominated by your mech design activities, the LMC plays an indispensable role in financing the clan, thereby directly keeping it alive and well."

Ves ruefully smiled. "This might not be the case anymore as time goes on. Our clan is already hard at work trying to diversify its industries. It is not healthy for our growing clan to depend solely on selling mechs to earn its keep. The Larkinson Biotech Institute is already making strides towards adding a second income stream to our clan and I'm sure that we will host more companies in the future."

"That is very much possible, but for the time being, the Living Mech Corporation will continue to play an essential and outsized role to the Larkinsons for a long time to come. While it is still strictly a company that should solely be concerned about providing value to its shareholders, which in this case is essentially you, it is in itself a formidable institution in itself."

There were two vital aspects to the LMC. First was its ability to produce and sell a lot of mechs. The second was the ability to come up with new and innovative mech designs that served both the market and the Larkinson Army directly.

Ves had a guess where Shederin was taking this discussion. "You're referring to the Design Department."

"Of all of the people in our clan, no one possesses as much influence and power as you." The diplomat nodded. "In the greater scheme of things, your enduring prominence has also amplified the role and importance of the entire profession of mech designers in the clan. Unlike the Cross Clan where Patriarch Reginald Cross is able to suppress a Senior Mech Designer, such a notion would be unheard of in our clan. Even if one of our expert pilots breaks through to ace pilot one day, it is highly unlikely that this individual would be able to become the next patriarch."

Ves could read the implications of this statement. "The situation will become different if an expert designer gains prominence..."

He nodded. "Even if a talented mech designer such as Gloriana Wodin or Ketis Larkinson advanced to Master ahead of you, your position as patriarch won't necessarily be lost. However, it is undeniable that such a great mech designer will have an outsized influence over the rest of the clan. Their ability to design powerful mechs for the Larkinson Army, their immense earning potential and the ease in which they can earn MTA merits all means that they are qualified to set up their own organizations. In fact, it is traditional for Masters to do just that."

What Shederin alluded to was a potential future in which the Design Department might split up. This did not sound ideal to Ves, but once any mech designer advanced to Master, it would be very hard for Ves to keep them under control even if he was a Master himself.

The only reason why this hadn't happened yet at the Journeyman stage was because everyone needed each other to progress their design philosophies. There was a much

greater incentive for collaboration than trying to go alone, but a day might come where the mech designers gained so much clout that they developed their own power bases.

However, now that Shederin pointed this out to Ves, he was no longer ignorant of what might happen and how he should address this issue.

"It's fine if our mech designers want to become more assertive." He said. "As a mech designer myself, I understand the need to develop a network of helpers and supporters. It is very difficult to advance a design philosophy when it has reached the Senior-level."

"This could easily grow into something more if you are not careful. Perhaps individuals such as your wife or your student will seek to gain more control over the clan itself. Just like you, they can gain the support of a portion of the stakeholders that we have already discussed in order to have their way."

This was already the case, in a sense. Juliet Stameross stood for the Penitent Sisters, but at the same time enjoyed their support as well. The relationship between Ketis and the Swordmaidens along with the large group of newly-joined Heavensworders was so tight that they could be considered a single entity in some cases!

"How would you deal with this issue?" Ves asked, as he had little idea himself beyond using his personal power to keep the others in check.

"Well, we do not have to do much. You have already given your fellow mech designers enough opportunities by implementing your so-called Exemplar Plan. By giving your most prominent mech designers a share of the profits earned by the LMC, they have a strong incentive to remain within the current system. This is especially the case if most of the profits are generated by you instead of anyone else."

Out of all of the mech designers, Ves was by far the greatest earner of the LMC. Most if not all of its customers bought its mechs because of their glows or living aspects. Gloriana's design philosophy wasn't nearly as prominent in mass market mechs as custom mechs and Juliet's own specialization was not exciting enough to stand out in the market.

In fact, the only other mech designer who could rival Ves in sales was his own student Ketis. The Swordmaster had gained so many new capabilities due to her double breakthrough that she was able to design very potent sword-wielding mechs that practically rivaled his own products in value!

If she succeeded in realizing her crazy notion of allowing mech pilots to channel the empowered sword styles that she had instilled into her mech design, then she might very well be able to sell millions of mechs just like Ves!

While Ves was happy that his student was doing so well because of the assistance he provided to her in the past, there was no doubt that her standing within the clan would rise meteorically!

Though Ketis never thought about usurping Ves, that did not mean that he should remain complacent.

"I don't think your plan is as simple as that." Ves told Shederin. "The Exemplar Plan is enough to keep contributors happy, but if someone emerges who can equal or surpass me, I'm afraid how that will influence our clan."

Neither Shederin nor Novilon had an easy solution in mind. This was perhaps the thorniest problem they all faced.

"This is the consequence of imparting a culture that reveres mech designers above anyone else." Shederin noted. "The Larkinson Clan mirrors the Life Research Association to a disturbing degree. The only differences are that the latter enjoys a head start and admires biotech researchers instead of mech designers."

What the former ambassador was basically implying was that the entire premise of putting a specific profession or class of people on top of everyone else was a bad idea.

No matter if the ruling class consisted of self-righteous nobles, obsessive biotech researchers or greedy mech designers, none of them had the best interests of their constituents in mind.

Instead, they primarily pursued their own selfish interests. The fact that other people benefited from their rule was incidental rather than a primary goal.

"You must have something, right?" Ves didn't give up.

If Shederin had no solution at all, he wouldn't have included a third pillar in his expansive proposal.

The old man smiled. "Well, if you don't mind, I can give you a speculative plan that I am not entirely certain about."

He manipulated the projection to put focus on the Design Department, or more specifically its lead designers.

What Shederin Purnesse proceeded to do next caused Ves to feel a bit alarmed.

The old man directly flicked the names of the Journeyman out of the LMC and created new companies that cooperated with but also competed against the original mech company!

"Hey, what the hell is this?!"

"This is a long-term development, not a short-term one." Shederin tried to reassure Ves. "You can rest assured that the LMC will likely remain the only dominant mech company of the Larkinson Clan, but as time goes by, I believe your fellow lead designers will no longer remain content in following your instructions and designing the mechs you prioritize. They will want to pursue their own projects as well, as that is an essential part of their development."

"So we should just allow them to go and start their own companies?"

"Why not, sir? Before you become more distressed, think about when this will happen. I believe each of you will have already become Seniors or Masters at that time. Will you really be unable to manage on your own once you reach those ranks? From my understanding of your profession, you don't have to depend so much on the help of others to design a strong and successful mech. It helps if you collaborate with equally-strong partners, but this is not an essential criteria to design a good mech."

Ves backed down a bit. Shederin made a good point. Even now, Ves was confident he could deliver strong mech designs as always. He was just accustomed to delivering better products because of all of his collaborations. The Dark Zephyr wouldn't have nearly been as strong if Gloriana and so on weren't involved!

"So in this theoretical future, every highly-successful mech designer will split off and form their own commercial influence in the clan?"

"Yes. I don't believe this will affect the LMC in an overly negative fashion. Just because your colleagues wish to preside over their own companies doesn't stop you from continuing to collaborate with them. Also, it is much healthier for the Larkinson Army in the long-term if you and the LMC are no longer the source of all of its mechs. Not only will numerous mech companies be able to service specific groups better or fulfill needs that the LMC has always neglected, the increased diversity will prompt a greater competitive drive in each of you. Think about where the clan will stand in a century. If it has grown to encompass 100 million clansmen or even 100 billion clansmen, do you really think that just one mech company is enough to supply them all with mechs?"

Ves shook his head. "No."

"Then you should be prepared for this possible future. Don't suppress the emergence of competitors. Welcome them instead. We will all benefit if the LMC is no longer the sole source of external revenue for the clan. While your importance will diminish slightly, your design philosophy is still dominant enough to remain secure in your position. The main difference is that you can start to share your burdens and responsibilities to others."

A single mech designer could never provide all of the mechs for the Larkinson Clan in the future. In fact, this problem was already evident today... There were only so many mech design projects he could engage in at the same time, and that would never fulfill the needs of his increasingly diverse clan.

Chapter 3112: Added Division

Ves fully understood the underlying intent behind the Larkinson State Plan.

It primarily served to balance out the interests of all of the stakeholders of the Larkinson Clan. Chief Diplomat Shederin Purnesse was particularly sensitive towards the level of content and discontent of different groups of Larkinsons, so he sought to develop a transition plan that would bring the clan to a form where everyone would reasonably be happy.

According to the old man's vision, Ves would become more content by passing on authority he wasn't using much anyway but still be able to remain on top when it mattered most.

The growing civilian population of the Larkinson Clan would have little reason to defy the current order because they enjoyed sufficient representation. The members of the Larkinson Assembly as well as the heads of the Larkinson Ministries became accountable to the 'people'. In exchange for wielding a considerable amount of power and legitimacy, they had to endure all of the tedious squabbling from different subgroups.

The mech pilots and other servicemen in the Larkinson Army would remain content as well. Their grasp on most of the military strength and their crucial role in keeping the Larkinson Clan alive meant that no one would be stupid enough to neglect their desires.

Fortunately, every soldier came from the civilian population and the integration between the two was quite tight due to living on cramped ships. This meant that the alienation between the CFA and human society was unlikely to take place in the clan.

Even if other Larkinsons began neglecting their own soldiers one day, Ves would always back them up with fantastic mech designs, thereby ensuring that he and his own protectors remained intertwined for many years to come.

The expert pilots enjoyed less power and authority in the Larkinson Clan than in other organizations, but their needs were well taken care of. Ves provided them with the most potent living mechs while the rest of the clan all looked up to them. Even if more politically-active mech pilots like Venerable Jannzi emerged, the structure of the Larkinson Administration was designed to both accommodate and limit their influence.

However, the most influential individuals in the Larkinson Clan were definitely its mech designers. Due to its history and development under the leadership of Ves, no prominent mech designer would remain anonymous.

The best ones might even attain a status close to Ves in the future. Their immense earning potential along with the capability to satisfy the greatest needs of Larkinson mech pilots meant that prominent mech designers possessed the capability to earn widespread support from every stakeholder of the Larkinson Clan.

This support served as the essential foundation of leadership. Without support, a mech designer would never be able to exercise real power in the Larkinson.

On the other hand, as long as a mech designer like Ketis became popular in many circles, even Ves had to give her sufficient space.

After Shederin and Novilon Purnesse outlined the Larkinson State Plan, it was time for Ves to issue his judgement.

"You need to make a decision sooner or later." Shederin emphasized. "While my plan will disadvantage you in the short term, the transition away from a despotic state will give you plenty of room to secure your position in the long term. The key is to empower different stakeholders while preventing them from becoming too dominant. The implementation of several new checks and balances along with fostering internal rivalry will keep most people occupied with competing against each other rather than setting their sights on you. An invisible leader is a lot less easy to target than more visible ones."

Ves faintly had the impression that Shederin's governance model took inspiration from the ruling structure of the Bright Republic.

From a legacy standpoint, the founding families of the Larkinson Clan succeeded in retaining the most essential reins of power over their state. While every Brighter knew that the The Tovar Family and so on carried a lot of weight, no one ever challenged these powerful families because they didn't officially rule over the entire Bright Republic.

As Ves weighed the implications of this expansive plan, he understood that Shederin was essentially encouraging him to become the mastermind in the shadows rather than the emperor in the open.

While the latter position sounded much more impressive and prestigious, Ves was not a professional politician and he did not have any inherent desire to rule. Controlling the Larkinson Clan was a means to an end for him, so why should he quibble over the details?

He let out a deep breath and faced Shederin with a calm expression. "I can't make a decision right away. Your plan is based on many predictions and assumptions that may

or may not be accurate. I need to see more studies that prove that everything will proceed as you have claimed. A reform package as big as this also needs to obtain the support of the Larkinson Assembly in order to pass without significant obstruction. The rights and responsibilities of a lot of people will change if your plan is passed, so it is best to build up plenty of awareness first in order to prevent any unpleasant surprises."

"Understood." Shederin Purnesse nodded. "Those are my thoughts as well. I have carefully constructed my plan to benefit every major stakeholder in some fashion, and I am confident that they will recognize the necessity for our clan to get ready for the future. I do not anticipate any significant objections since they are mostly gaining power at the expense of yourself."

Ves partially felt as if he was already admitting defeat ahead of time. In order to prevent a hypothetical rebellion that might or might not happen in the far future, he was supposedly making the far-sighted decision to concede power ahead of time in order to cling to whatever he had left.

The disadvantages of this choice were obvious.

The question was whether the benefits outweighed the downsides. He didn't trust his own judgement on this matter and he was quite reluctant to lean on the judgement of a single other person, even if it was someone who was very adept at statecraft such as Shederin Purnesse.

The safest course of action was to circulate the plan among the upper echelons of the Larkinson Clan and listen to their input. With more people taking a look at the Larkinson State Plan, Ves hoped to hear enough opinions to gain a thorough understanding of all of the consequences.

Shederin did not expect Ves to accept his reform plan right away. Receiving permission to explore his plan further was already the best answer he could hope for. As long as he was able to convince every other stakeholder to accept the reforms, it would only be a matter of time before Ves gave his assent.

The air in the office grew colder after Ves had made his tentative decision. Everyone knew that the chance of this plan going through was high. It was already a given that the patriarch would become a much less dominant entity in the near future.

Ves decided to ask one more question. "By the way, what is your reason to nominate your son as the vice patriarch?"

Shederin gestured at Novilon. "He is the most suitable candidate to establish the office of vice patriarch and implement our reforms. He is highly qualified in matters of high-level governance and I have confidence that he will not lose control or go astray."

"He hasn't been a Larkinson for long."

"It is exactly because he is new to the Larkinson Clan that he is able to view it from a more neutral and objective standpoint." Shederin easily replied. "As a Purnesser and my protégé, he possesses a thorough understanding of the theories and examples that I have relied upon to draft my reform plan. You cannot find a better person to become the first vice patriarch of the Larkinson Clan."

"I have a different opinion." Ves stated. "No offense, but you Purnessers are moving into power too quickly. I know that you guys are hugely qualified and so on, but that is not the sole criteria which determines who gets to make the important decisions. There is an even more important quality that leaders must have."

"...And what is that, sir?"

"Loyalty." Ves stated.

"I see." Shederin slowly replied. What Ves said was not entirely beyond his expectations. It fit with his profile. "Then how can my son and I prove our loyalty to the Larkinson Clan further? I believe we have already made a considerable amount of effort to show our commitment to the clan."

"I'm aware of that. If you weren't sincere about serving the Larkinson Clan, you wouldn't have never been able to sit in front of me in the first place. However, that is not enough for me to put my unreserved trust in you. I much prefer to lean on the comrades that have stood by my side from the beginning."

Shederin began to frown. "What do you have in mind, then? The arguments that I have laid out still apply. I doubt that anyone else can implement the reforms as well as myself, my son or another qualified Purnesser."

"Who says our clan should only have a single vice patriarch?"

"Pardon?"

Ves smirked. "I don't really feel reassured to put all of my eggs in one basket. I think it's best if we add a couple of other baskets. If one of them gets crushed, I won't lose all of my eggs straight away. I think we can start with introducing three vice patriarchs. That way, you can vote on certain decisions among yourselves."

This was not an original component of Shederin's plan, but to the former ambassador's credit, he accepted the suggestion without trying to fight it. He understood that this was one of several ways for Ves to cope with the drastic changes. By splitting and diluting the power of the effective head the Larkinson Administration, none of the vice patriarchs would be able to pursue their selfish interest unscrupulously.

"Who do you have in mind for the vice patriarchs?"

Ves gestured at Novilon. "I can allow your son to become one of the vice patriarchs, but the other two must be old-timers who have already been in the clan for a long time. They need to serve as a check and a counterbalance to the newer influences of the Larkinson Clan. Ideally, one of them should have a military background and the other one should come from the LMC."

According to this scheme, the vice patriarchs came from each of the three pillars of the Larkinson Clan. While there were downsides to this, Ves wanted to ensure that none of the essential pillars was unrepresented at the top of the hierarchy.

Shederin nodded. "Understood. Will you be nominating the candidates yourself?"

"Yup. I'll give you a list by the end of the week. I need to make a careful consideration of who should represent my will and the will of the clan."

The power to select and dismiss the vice patriarchs was essential to Ves. It was one of his most important means of influencing the direction of the clan. Best of all was that if any of them made a mistake, none of the blame should fall on himself!

This latest alteration caused Ves to feel more at ease. In essence, Ves employed the same principles that Shederin had employed, but this time at the vice patriarch level. By dividing this rank, he would ensure he would always be able to conquer them if necessary.

The lengthy meeting eventually ended on an optimistic note. The current version of the plan was much more palatable to Ves. The Purnessers didn't even lose that much either. Regardless of how many vice patriarchs got to be in charge, it was already a certainty that many of them would become a part of the clan administration.

"I hope they will see themselves as Larkinsons first and Purnessers second..." Ves muttered.

Chapter 3113: The Next Priority

It would take months for the Larkinson State Plan to go into effect. The extensive package of reforms were so drastic and far-reaching that it was mandatory for it to go through extensive rounds of consultations. Ves predicted that the input of other Larkinsons would eventually result in many tweaks and compromises. No one wanted to be left out of the party.

Ves sighed. "I'm turning more and more into a manipulator like Senator Tovar."

Even though a third-rate statesman like Senator Camden Tovar no longer matched up to Ves' identity, the man still left a profound impression behind. The way the senator for life kept the Tovar Family in power and manipulated others like chess pieces in order to advance his goals were universal methods that applied to every layer of power.

If Ves wanted to maintain control and avoid getting hoodwinked by his own underlings, it was necessary for him to learn some of the tricks of players like Senator Tovar.

"I'm still a mech designer, though." He shook his head. "As long as I improve my original foundation, I'll always remain respected."

Mech designers possessed an outsized influence in the Larkinson Clan, and Ves was the most prominent and successful among them. Even if newer talents such as Ketis showed signs of catching up, he was immensely confident in his ability to remain relevant!

After Ves processed the aftermath of this pivotal meeting, he turned his attention back to his more immediate priorities.

The expeditionary fleet was just about to reach its next stop. While Ves didn't have to pay any attention to most of what the clan intended to do, he might have to take a more active stance in order to close the deals on the capital ships that he intended to add to his fleet.

"One way or another, I'm getting those ships." He muttered.

The fleet was getting closer and closer to the beyonder gate. He much preferred to fill up his capital ship quota sooner rather than later.

The only major concern he had about the clan's capital ship composition was that it featured a distressing lack of fleet carriers.

"It's essential for our clan to bring enough mechs into the Red Ocean."

While building up a versatile and rounded expeditionary fleet sounded nice, it was even more important to ensure that all of these vulnerable non-combat vessels enjoyed sufficient protection.

He shrugged. "Well, if we really can't get our hands on any fleet carriers, we'll just pack as many mechs as possible into the cargo bays of our existing vessels."

This was an emergency solution that was actually employed by many pioneers. As long as any starship possessed sufficient internal space, there was always a way to convert them into temporary mech hangers.

It was far from ideal, though. Dedicated carrier vessels accommodated mechs in many different ways. They were also suitable to be deployed fairly close to the battlefield.

However, as long as Ves was willing to accept more burdens, it shouldn't be a big problem to stuff a lot of mechs into ships like the Spirit of Bentheim, the Dragon's Den, the Vivacious Wal and other large-hulled starships.

The only vessel that wasn't able to fit any mechs was the oddly-shaped Blinding Banshee. Her extreme specialization along with her unorthodox design heavily limited her ability to take on large cargo.

In any case, if the Larkinson Clan wasn't satisfied with the amount of mechs it could bring into the Red Ocean, the Larkinsons could employ even more tricks to increase that number.

A quick and dirty example would be to affix extra cargo modules onto the hulls of the starships. They only had to be large enough to hold additional mechs in packed or even disassembled forms.

Even though this meant that it was impractical for the Larkinson Clan to deploy them into battle right away, it was better than abandoning a lot of existing mechs.

Though there were technical limitations that prevented the Larkinsons from turning every capital ship into huge and chunky external cargo carriers, as long as the engineering was sound, his fleet would easily be able to bring in a couple of thousand extra mechs in this fashion.

Vivian Tsai had already been tasked with exploring these improvised measures.

"Maybe I should fill up our remaining capital ship slots with even larger hulls." He wondered.

A lot of large trading companies made extensive use of huge capital-grade mass conveyors. These titanic ships were little more than immense hollow hulls that contained enough essentials to allow them to traverse the stars. They were the most economical means to conduct inter-sector and inter-cluster trade.

The only problem was that these vessels were mostly built for massive trade corporations with extensive reach. The Larkinson Clan would have to expend a great amount of effort to obtain a mass conveyor, especially considering that many other pioneering fleets preferred to make use of these titans to bring all of their precious mechs and bulk cargo into the new frontier.

"Ugh, I shouldn't have to worry about this problem." Ves shook his head. "This is what Mr. Shederin is for. He should understand the importance of bringing a sufficient amount of mechs into the Red Ocean as well as I do. Our clan might suffer the fate of his former family if we go in without sufficient protection."

The Larkinsons were victims of the current galactic environment. Their lack of strength and reputation caused them to miss many opportunities to obtain the ships they truly needed.

Ves no longer expended any time on these matters. Instead, he left his office and headed over to the design lab in order to engage in something much more interesting.

All of the mech designers were still basking in the aftermath of the successful test run of the Dark Zephyr. They not only felt satisfied that all of their hard work paid off, they also gathered a lot of real data that provided them with countless little insights.

After so many days of trying to imagine the performance of their first expert mech as best as possible with the help of complicated mathematical formulas and spurious simulations, they finally obtained a huge amount of verification!

In fact, the actual performance of the Dark Zephyr exceeded their expectations! The amplification effect of true resonance was a bit more potent than they initially thought.

With the help of all of the new data, the mech designers would not only be able to gain a greater understanding of how the Dark Zephyr worked, but could also use what they learned to increase the accuracy of their assessments of the performance of their subsequent expert mech designs.

This was an especially crucial benefit to a detail-oriented mech designer like Gloriana. When Ves dropped by her corner of the design lab, she didn't even acknowledge his entry.

"Miaow."

"Hey there."

Clixie, who looked as if she was being neglected, rose up from her perch and padded over to Ves. She brushed her side against his legs as if to mark her scent.

Ves grinned and bent down to hold her in his arms. The furry cat lovely settled in the embrace as if he was her favorite pillow.

"Miaow~"

Even a cat knew when it was necessary to hedge bets. With Gloriana openly dreaming about obtaining another pet like Blinky, Clixie felt as if her position as her favorite feline companion was being threatened.

"Don't worry." Ves smiled at the cat. "Gloriana won't forget about you. She's just a bit too obsessed with her work right now. Once the excitement dies down, she'll take care of you like always."

"Miaow."

Once he finished reassuring Clixie, he moved behind Gloriana's back and watched over her shoulders in order to see what she was currently doing.

Her perfume already started to pamper his nose. He relaxed in her presence.

It turned out that Gloriana was already using the conclusions she derived from the real test data to refine the formulas and models used in the other expert mech design projects.

The more accurate their predictions, the more they were able to anticipate potential faults and inefficiencies. This would eventually result in more optimized end results.

It shouldn't have been a surprise to Ves that Gloriana exuded so much happiness as a result. She even hummed a playful tune as she gained a significantly more accurate picture of the other expert mech designs.

She eventually noticed his presence and pulled herself from her current preoccupation. "You're finally back, Ves. Look at this. With all of the lessons we're learning from the Dark Zephyr, we can make more extensive preparations to ensure our other expert mechs will become even stronger."

She quickly detailed what she had come up with. Every project benefited in some way, but the additional data also pointed out more issues that they needed to address in some way. This meant that it would take slightly more time than expected to complete the other design projects.

"All of this sounds interesting, but I'm more interested in knowing which expert mech designs you want to prioritize next." He said.

"Hmm, I already have some thoughts on the matter." She replied. "The next easiest expert mech that we can complete is the Sentry Project. It is the second-lightest mech design after the Dark Zephyr. Since it doesn't incorporate a significant amount of Unending alloy, it is substantially easier for us to work with its armor system. As long as we pour enough attention to it in the next two months or so, we can probably complete it in the shortest possible time frame."

While the Design Department rushed the Disruptor Project to completion, the mech designers hadn't completely neglected the other projects. Ves and some of the design teams had already made a decent start at designing Venerable Davia Stark's future expert mech, though they weren't able to invest enough time to get it anywhere close to completion.

All of that would change once the entire Design Department raised its priority. The only issue that Ves had trouble with was whether it was appropriate to continue working in this fashion.

"I'm not entirely sure that it is a good idea to keep prioritizing one project over another." He spoke. "Our work efficiency won't be high and we'll end up taking more time to complete every project one at a time as opposed to working on them concurrently."

Gloriana didn't look convinced. "You have a point, but you're overlooking a vital aspect. We've already learned a lot of new lessons and became aware of what we need to improve for next time. Don't forget that expert mechs are very new to us and that we are far from mastering this classification of machines. I don't think we have learned all that we can just from completing a single expert mech. If we tackle another expert mech this way, we'll be able to gather other insights after we complete it. We can go on and on until we have achieved our optimal state when we finally finish our final expert mech design."

Her argument sounded highly compelling to Ves. He hadn't been considering this dynamic beyond the Disruptor Project. Since he agreed with her that they had only scratched the surface of expert mech design, it would be very helpful if they could continuously level up after finishing one expert mech after another as if they were playing a game.

"Which mech should we reserve as last?"

In this proposed chain, the last one left would likely be the best of the batch.

"The Shield of Samar, of course! It's not only the largest and most massive expert mech, but it is also a lot more complicated to make because we have to perform an upgrade on an existing mech rather than fabricate a new machine from scratch. With all of the variables that we have to take into account, I want to accumulate enough experience with working on other expert mechs before we tackle the most difficult one."

"I don't agree!" Ves firmly shook his head. "While you have a point, the combat value of the Shield of Samar is not as high as that of the Chimera Project. Venerable Joshua's expert mech is by far the most promising and versatile expert mech out of the batch. We should reserve this project as the last!"

"Are you stupid, Ves? The Shield of Samar is not a worthless mech! With Master Willix's help, we can completely transform this defensive mech into an impassable bulwark that can serve as the final line of defense of our fleet!"

"The best defense is offense. Our clan has always been on the attack!"

"That's a simplistic attitude!"

Chapter 3114: Weight of a Rifle

Ves and Gloriana couldn't come to an agreement. They argued for more than half an hour on whether they should leave the Bulwark Project or the Chimera Project at the end of the timetable.

Though the order of when they completed their expert mech design projects wasn't the sole factor that decided their quality, there was a considerable chance that the best would truly be reserved for last.

Ves had an obvious interest in maximizing the quality and potential of the Chimera Project. Venerable Joshua was his strongest supporter among the ranks of expert pilots. The stronger he became, the more support he was able to provide.

If Venerable Jannzi benefited from this gift instead, she would likely become an even more insufferable political opponent. Ves did not want her Shield of Samar to surpass the other expert mechs.

Therefore, Ves did not give up and insisted on reserving the Chimera Project for last.

It was too bad that Gloriana didn't see it that way. Compared to a brand new expert mech that involved many uncertainties, she preferred to bet on a more reliable horse in the form of the Shield of Samar.

She was confident that Master Willix would divert a bit more attention to the Bulwark Project due to its high compatibility with the MTA Master's original design philosophy.

After all, Master Willix was one of the original developers of GT-535. She knew more about this potent gravity-oriented resonating alloy than any of the other resonating materials used in the other expert mech design projects. This practically ensured that the Shield of Samar would incorporate GT-535 in a much more exquisite manner!

This was the primary reason why Gloriana believed that she would have the best chance of completing a masterwork mech if she accumulated experience by completing the other projects first!

"The expert mech version of the Shield of Samar isn't even a completely new work!" Ves yelled at her. "It cannibalizes a significant amount of material from the current revision of the space knight. How can we possibly fabricate a masterwork mech when only a portion of its upcoming form is even new? Can masterwork mechs even be formed by modifying an existing frame?"

"You're just saying that because you don't like Venerable Jannzi as much as Venerable Joshua! Can't you put your stupid bias aside for a second and recognize the superiority of the Bulwark Project?! The Chimera Project is a male expert mech piloted by a male mech pilot. The Shield of Samar might not be the most feminine mech in existence, but

after we complete its latest revision, it will become a fully-fledged female expert mech that is piloted by a female expert pilot and is watched over by a female proto-god! This falls completely in line with the six phases of existence. It is entirely appropriate to end our expert mech design cycle with the most female expert mech of the current batch!"

Ves became speechless for a moment. How could she possibly accuse him of bias when her latest argument was drowning in it? There was no way for him to refute her arguments with logic!

In the end, the couple decided to defer this argument for later. In any case, they still had a lot of months to complete the other expert mech design projects, so they didn't have to come to an agreement on this issue too soon.

Besides, Ves did not completely buy into the notion that the last expert mech was guaranteed to be the best. The amount of insights they gained after completing each successive expert mech would quickly drop. In addition, a lot of different variables determined the final outcome of a fabrication run. A good day might boost one fabrication run while a bad day might ruin another one irrespective of the order.

It was just that Ves couldn't take the risk of dismissing the importance of order. He wanted to give Venerable Joshua the best possible opportunities, so he was not about to concede to his wife.

"We're wasting too much time. Let's focus on the Sentry Project first." Gloriana tiredly sighed.

Ves wearily nodded as he stroked Clixie's soft and luxurious fur. "Yes, let's do that. What are your thoughts?"

"The most troublesome factor about this expert mech is that it doesn't incorporate any Unending alloy like the other expert mechs. It's an expert mech that is overwhelmingly slanted towards offense and possesses relatively few defensive capabilities."

"We decided on this knowing full well what we would end up with. According to our intentions for this expert mech, the Sentry Project relies on other defensive assets in order to make up for this shortcoming. Whether it's a starship or the Shield of Samar, it shouldn't be necessary for our expert rifleman mech to take care of its own defenses."

Gloriana pointed her finger at the projection of the rifle of the incomplete design. "I'm not talking about the armor system, but instead on how much of the strength of this mech is actually concentrated on this rifle."

"What's the problem?"

"Neither of us specialize in energy weapon systems, Ves! We both know enough to design a serviceable rifle, but our work pales in comparison to someone who is truly

capable of designing a unique rifle that is completely compatible with a unique expert mech. If we want to make sure to maximize the performance of the Sentry Project, we can't settle for mediocrity."

Ves frowned. "We can't involve an outsider to work on something so crucial and delicate. The Sentry Project will become one of our core defensive assets once it is complete, and I would hate for the design of its most essential element to leak out or fall into someone else's hands."

"Then how do you propose to solve this problem, hmm? Unless Master Willix helps us with the design, we won't be able to finish a proper rifle by ourselves."

"Let me take care of this issue. This is what I have been working on from the beginning. Have you already forgotten my successful experiments with luminar crystals? The augmented crystals that I have managed to produce will give our rifle a lot of surprising power and versatility."

"I know that, but this isn't your specialty. Most of the power of the rifle will be derived from the parts you are using as opposed to the combination of them. The heart of a good design is to produce a work that is far more than the sum of its parts. I don't have much confidence in your ability to meet this high standard."

The look she was giving him was as if she was a teacher staring at a lazy student.

"I'm not that bad! Give me a chance. You're being too unfair to me by judging my work before I have even given you a sample. Let me work on this for a few weeks. I have a few interesting ideas on how to increase the integration of the augmented luminar crystals to the energy rifle. I also have a suspicion that Opticonium, the resonating exotic responsible for allowing energy beams to bend, might have a surprising interaction with my luminar crystals."

Both of them worked with light and energy in some fashion. Combining the two together could either produce a fantastic new form of synergy or blow the entire rifle into pieces!

Ves would have to perform a lot of lab tests to be sure.

Though Gloriana still didn't have much faith in his ability to meet her expectations, she reluctantly decided to give him an opportunity to prove his ability to present her with a powerful rifle that was fit for an expert mech like the Sentry Project.

"You better do well. If you fail in this, I will insist on resorting to other measures. There are several reliable Hexer specialists that we can employ as technical consultants for this subproject."

He looked skeptical. Ves wasn't sure whether the words 'reliable' and 'Hexer' belonged in the same sentence.

Still, he was quite confident in his ability to design an excellent rifle. He had a secret weapon that gave him enough confidence to surprise his wife.

They moved on to discussing the other aspects of the Sentry Project. Due to its extreme emphasis on offense, it did not possess much in terms of defense and its mobility was not that impressive.

"Even if this mech is bad in those aspects, I don't want us to neglect them." Gloriana insisted. "In a real battle, even the tiniest difference can determine the life and death of Venerable Stark and many other Larkinsons."

"Do you have anything special in mind?"

"No." She shook her head. "I think we should just aim to design the most solid mech frame possible. This is quite difficult as much of the Sentry Project's internal capacity is devoted to energy cells and auxiliary systems that improve the attack capabilities of the expert mech. Juliet and I will do our best to make the most out of what little available room there is left."

"What about Ketis?"

Gloriana snorted. "She never puts in her best when she works on a ranged mech design. She's not even that useful in an assisting capacity, so I've told her that once she is done with working on the backup weapon, she's free to work on the Decapitator Project instead. Perhaps by the time we complete the Sentry Project, we will already be more than halfway done by the time we tackle Venerable Dise's expert mech."

It was a pity that Ketis couldn't make too many significant contributions to the Sentry Project. That would put the expert rifleman mech at a slight disadvantage in terms of design philosophy support.

Still, it was not as if Ketis' specialty would add anything useful to the Sentry Project anyway. The only marginal case in which her assistance would be appreciated was if Venerable Davia Stark was forced to draw her expert mech's backup weapon.

If a battle had reached that point, then something had gone drastically wrong. The Sentry Project should never be caught alone.

Their progress on the Sentry Project would slow down considerably if Ketis wasn't there to share the burden. It was fortunate that the expert rifleman mech was not that much bigger than the Dark Zephyr. Though the ranged machine still fell under the medium weight class, it leaned on the lighter end of the scale.

As long as everyone worked as productively as possible, they might be able to finish the Sentry Project in just over two months.

A crucial factor that accelerated their progress was because they already knew the solutions to some of the problems that were common to all expert mechs. The Journeyman had spent a lot of effort on solving many of the new problems that they encountered when working on the Disruptor Project. If they could apply those existing solutions to similar problems, then they would save a considerable amount of time!

Overall, Gloriana was quite optimistic that they would be able to finish the Sentry Project relatively quickly.

"The premise is that you deliver an energy rifle that meets my requirements." Gloriana reminded him. "What you are about to make might serve as a model for subsequent ranged mech designs."

Ves understood what she was talking about. Already, both of them gained a lot of inspiration after they completed the Disruptor Project. While the Dark Zephyr was an incredibly expensive expert mech that incorporated materials and components that were too precious to be used in normal mech designs, some of the design principles still carried over.

Even if these Little Zephyrs paled in comparison to their big brother, as long as he was able to field thousands of them, who cared? The light mech enthusiasts of the Larkinson Clan would probably be thrilled with a powerful new alternative to his successful Ferocious Piranha line, one that prioritized evasion instead of suppression!

While people might argue about which one was stronger in battle, a mech that possessed better mobility characteristics were much more suitable to be employed as scouts and flankers.

He almost couldn't wait to complete the current round of mech design projects so that he could go back to designing mass produced mechs!

Chapter 3115: Talulah Silver

The more Ves traveled, the less significant each location became.

It all started to blur together at one point. While his first forays outside of the Bright Republic affected him in profound ways, nowadays he barely paid attention to the states the expeditionary fleet was passing through.

It didn't matter anyway. The fleet didn't intend to engage with the local institutions and just wanted to cross through foreign territory without dealing with any complications. The fact that there were many other ships and fleets trying to do the same helped with allowing the Golden Skull Alliance to fade into the background.

Though the combined fleet was extremely formidable and made many local system defenders nervous, as long as all of the carriers along with their bountiful mechs remained in the outer system, there was no cause for concern.

It was different today.

After a lengthy trek where the expeditionary fleet had not rested for several months, the starships could all use a break. Even if they were rated for more arduous journeys, it was still a good idea for them to halt at a port system in order to perform routine maintenance and inspections.

Stopping at a port system was also a great opportunity to replenish supplies, sell redundant goods and hire thousands of new recruits.

Port systems like Pelsa Ryndover served as large, attractive hubs for any ships and fleets that needed replenishment.

The Pelsa Ryndover System belonged to a notable second-rate state called the Ivena Federation. Compared to other states, Ivena was a rather loose territory that was divided into many provinces that were dominated by different commercial groups and alliances.

The closest comparison was the Friday Coalition. When Ves initially learned about the Ivena Federation, he mentally regarded it as a more commerce-oriented version of one of his least-favorite states.

The Ivena Federation was situated in the Vilsam York Star Sector, a rather average star sector of the Bardo Star Cluster.

None of these names mattered to Ves. As long as these areas didn't have any dangerous or unusual characteristics, there was no need for him to delve into the history and cultures of his stopover points.

Neither the state, star sector or star cluster were characterized by any significant traits. None of them were dominated by dwarves, female supremacists, religious nuts, glory hounds or other crazies. The Ivena Federation was merely a state that took advantage of its favorable location to attract a lot of commerce.

One of the reasons why Ivena acquired a favorable reputation among trade fleets was because the state did not impose too many restrictions on visitors. While there were signs that the Crown Uprising might cause the state to tighten up its security measures, it would take some time to pass the relevant laws.

In the meantime, the Larkinsons were allowed to bring a sufficient amount of mechs to the surface of any trading planet. Even if Ves did not intend to leave the fleet this time, it

was still a reassuring measure as the nightmares of Prosperous Hill VI still haunted the clan.

There was good reason for Larkinsons such as Shederin Purnesse to visit the trading hubs in person. The Larkinson fleet was constantly expanding. The planned acquisition of four whole capital ships demanded a huge expansion of spacers.

Fortunately, the Vivacious Wal, the Andrenidae, the Discentibus and the Blinding Banshee were not as difficult to crew as the Spirit of Bentheim.

The Hexer-built factory ship that the Larkinsons acquired first was an upgraded vessel that incorporated many advanced production, energy generation and defensive systems. It was not without reason that a lot of difficult functions had to be crewed by trained Hexer officers and specialists.

The second-hand vessels that the clan intended to acquire next were more regular vessels built to civilian standards. The only exception was the Blinding Banshee which was built according to paramilitary standards, but all of her basic functions were not that complicated to control.

This meant that it was barely sufficient to crew the vessels with ordinary spacers who came from a merchant marine background. Only the captains, chief engineers and a number of other critical functions had to come from better stock.

Though it was difficult to source high-quality spacers, in the worst case scenario the clan would just promote a bunch of existing officers who were currently serving aboard one of the many sub-capital ships.

As Shederin Purnesse briefed Ves on their upcoming rest stop, he did not consider the staffing issue to be a major problem.

"Merchant marine officers usually aren't available on the open job market, but they congregate in their own circles." The old man patiently explained. "In every port system, there are numerous guilds, clubs and associations where a large number of spacers band together in order to take care of each other and make themselves available for hire by vetted, trustworthy employers."

Ves frowned a bit. "Are we a vetted, trustworthy employer?"

"No. Our clan is not only a new and volatile organization, but we are also strangers in this region of space. We also have a history of getting embroiled in several large-scale battles. All of these factors put our clan in the high-risk employment opportunity basket. Merchant mariners tend to abhor risk. Their dream is to work a stable job, travel the entire galaxy and retire on a paradise planet with a hefty amount of savings."

Space travel wasn't entirely safe, so the people who trained and studied to serve aboard space-faring vessels had to make careful decisions. The wrong choice could easily ruin their lives forever!

"How do we overcome these hiring challenges, then?"

"Not every spacer is as conservative and risk averse as you think." Shederin confidently smiled. "As long as we offer enough incentives, we can pull in the more greedy and ambitious spacers. Our clan already offers excellent benefits to its members. Also, don't forget that as the Crown Uprising rages across the galaxy, many positions are no longer safe as before. There is a greater appreciation to work for employers that possess ample strength. Another factor that could serve as a powerful attraction for spacers was the prospect of entering the Red Ocean."

All of these reasons and more gave the Larkinson Clan enough of a chance to fill up at least half of the vacant positions aboard the new and existing ships of the Larkinson fleet.

"Since we are acquiring so many capital ships at once, I do not expect we will be able to staff them completely. It is already sufficient to crew them with the bare minimum so that they will be able to travel with the rest of the fleet without delaying our journey. We can slowly fill the remaining positions as we continue to recruit in subsequent star systems."

There were only so many spacers available in every location. With space travel booming due to the opening of the Red Ocean and the recent establishment of the Gate Consortium, practically every ship rating with decent qualifications were able to find a berth.

Ves inwardly sighed. The people and assets that his clan needed the most just happened to be popular with other organizations as well. This was the downside to getting caught up in galactic trends. The Larkinson Clan was just one of many followers of recent developments.

The only way for the clan to become less dependent on external services was to take care of its needs by itself.

In the long term, Ves believed that his clan would probably be able to grow to a point where it could build its own starships and train plenty of qualified personnel from within.

The problem was that his clan needed the ships and the people to crew them right away. It took years if not decades for the Larkinsons to meet their own needs by relying on their own capabilities. That was fine if they were already settling in for the long haul, but right now the clan had to rush its growth so that it could enter the Red Ocean on a stronger footing.

"I don't want to waste this trip." Ves told Shederin with a determined tone. "I'm giving you one week to acquire the capital ships in our sights. We can solve the crewing issue easily enough, but we absolutely have to secure the vessels that will become our foundation in the Red Ocean."

While the capital entertainment ship, capital mining ship, capital academy ship and capital espionage ship did not directly increase the combat power of the Larkinson fleet, they still provided powerful auxiliary functions that would comprehensively boost the growth of his clan. Without their presence, it became a lot harder for the Larkinsons to stick to a nomadic way of life.

Ves did not want any of his men to develop a yearning to settle on a planet or any other permanent settlement. The best way to stave off this undesirable desire was to round out the fleet.

"I will endeavor to persuade the vendor to sell the ships to us." Shederin promised.

Several days passed by after the diplomat made his promise. While Ves devoted most of his time to developing the high-powered energy rifle of the Sentry Project, the entire fleet slowly made its way to Talulah Silver, a famed trading hub of the Pelsa Ryndover System.

Talulah Silver was a moon that orbited Pelsa Ryndover III. The stormy, toxic planet was deemed uninhabitable and not worth terraforming, but the moon was calm enough to serve as an excellent base for heavy goods storage and transfer due to its naturally low gravity and relatively stable conditions.

Practically the entire surface was urbanized to various degrees. Cities, manufacturing complexes and lots of warehouses covered the entire moon. Tens of thousands of major companies were either headquartered at Talulah Silver or established major branches on the surface.

The Crown Uprising didn't seem to have affected business all that much. The local authorities tripled their security presence in and around the moon settlement. While the risk of terrorist attacks were considerable, that did not stop the visiting traders from conducting business.

No matter how much the state of the galaxy deteriorated, goods still needed to flow and bills still needed to be paid. It was impossible for businessmen to stop their activities just because the risks had been raised.

Of course, the Larkinson Clan and its allies were far from average. As their formidable capital ships and hundreds of combat carriers surged forth, the local military garrison grew very nervous at the approach of so many combat vessels.

Traffic control instructed the powerful foreigners to keep all of their serious hardware well away from the inner system. However, Shederin Purnesse began to show his value at this instance. He served some kind of nonsense story about their experiences in the Prosperous Hill System and somehow managed to allow the fleet to enter the inner system with remarkably fewer restrictions than Ves anticipated.

While the fleet still had to be parked well away from the hustle and bustle of Talulah Silver, at the very least backup would not have to take days to arrive at the moon settlement.

Of course, not even Shederin was able to convince the local officials to give the Larkinson Clan permission to field an entire mech regiment on Talulah Silver, but the clan was willing to make do with 'just' several hundred mechs.

The bribes he paid to more pliable officials helped a lot with securing this concession.

With so many escorts, Ves didn't believe that anyone was willing to stir up any trouble against his men.

As the expeditionary fleet entered into a stable orbit, a large number of shuttles, transports and larger vessels began to venture towards the trading hub.

Ves wasn't paying attention in this direction. Instead, he called up the local plot and set his sights on a distant orbit where a lot of derelict and mothballed starships had been parked.

"Those are a lot of ships."

Chapter 3116: Semdam & Sons

Semdam & Sons was one of the largest companies based in the Pelsa Ryndover System. It was headquartered in Talulah Silver and had grown into one of the foremost ship vendors of the port system.

S&S managed to beat out multiple local competitors through a rather admirable fashion. Instead of pursuing unrelenting growth of aggressive business opportunities, the ship vender kept its head down for most of its history.

In the past, it had never been the market leader of the Pelsa Ryndover ship market. Larger, more well-funded companies dominated this sector for a long time, causing S&S to be relegated to the background.

However, no giant lasted forever. For one reason or another, these market leaders fell from grace. Perhaps they broke the law and got caught. Perhaps they backed the wrong faction. Perhaps they invested in a major business venture that subsequently incurred immense losses.

Whatever the case, none of these ship trading companies survived the test of time. Instead, the mid-sized player that had long played second string gradually filled the void and silently grew to become the main player in the local ship market.

The company's primary business model was nothing complicated. It purchased pre-owned starships at a considerable discount. Most of them tended to be damaged or severely worn out, though there were also instances where organizations had to get rid of their better ships quickly.

Regardless, what S&S did to the ships it bought with a lot of money determined the profits it could earn from them. The company possessed an extensive amount of shipyards and repair facilities in and around Talulah Silver that were all dedicated to repairing and refurbishing the damaged vessels.

Though the effort and expenses were considerable, the markup was even greater! Even if S&S mainly sold second-hand ships, there were many buyers who needed to obtain suitable starships in a short timeframe. The cost and hassle of ordering custom starships from shipbuilding companies was not always the best solution, and recent events had made it a lot harder for customers to get the shipyards to accept their orders.

The second-hand ship market was booming at the moment. S&S keenly understood the market trend and was already regarding its large and diverse stock of pre-owned starships as treasure troves!

Gillian Semdam was the second-generation chairman and CEO of Semdam and Sons. While he was not the founder of the ship trading company, he was the principal leader and businessman responsible for allowing S&S to become the market leader after many decades of steady growth.

Due to Gillian Semdam's shrewd but stable leadership, the company possessed an extremely firm foundation in the Pelsa Ryndover System. Its financial strength was robust, it operated a strong mech security force, it formed a symbiotic bond with supportive politicians and it never sought to expand beyond its familiar region.

For this reason, Semdem & Sons managed to avoid the fate of its predecessors. The company was very difficult to assail because it was simply too stable and secure in its current condition.

Even if some terrorists blew up a large chunk of precious inventory, S&S was sitting on such a big mountain of money that it could easily weather the setback.

If the company's finances were drained for some reason, it still wasn't a big deal because it could just sell a bunch of ships to solve its liquidity problem. In fact, the company's leverage was low enough that it could easily take out more loans instead.

Gillian Semdam supported multiple sides of the local political scene by spending lavishly on campaign contributions. No matter who came into power, S&S would always have their bases covered.

The company even developed a friendly relationship with the Ivena Federation's military by purchasing their old and outdated starships at higher prices.

Faced with such a stable company led by a careful leader, it was immensely challenging for the Larkinson Clan to apply any leverage in its business negotiations.

Shederin Purnesse and his negotiating team had already spent months trying to progress the stalled talks. However, instead of moving the deal forward, it actually showed signs of sliding backwards!

The incentives to hold on to the precious capital ships and reserve them for more lucrative business deals grew stronger with each day that passed.

Even entering the Pelsa Ryndover System didn't seem to make a difference. Face to face talks went nowhere as not even Shederin's personal charm was able to penetrate the armor of the Semdams.

While the Larkinson Clan experienced fewer difficulties in procuring supplies and recruiting thousands of vital personnel, the continual failure to acquire the four capital ships that Semdam & Sons had in inventory served as a glaring disappointment.

At the end of the one week deadline, Shederin Purnesse had no choice but to return to Ves with his head bowed in defeat.

"What's the problem?" Ves asked as he did not bother to turn around while he was assembling an experimental human-sized energy rifle.

Ever since he accepted Gloriana's challenge, he had been working intensively on trying to develop a powerful weapon that was potent enough to serve as the main armament of the Sentry Project.

He did not slack off even if he was tempted to pay more attention to what Talulah Silver had to offer. There was no time for him to go on a vacation when he still had to complete several important expert mech designs.

"Semdam & Sons has become increasingly more unwilling to sell its capital ships to us." Shederin straightforwardly answered. "After our clan has performed some investigations around Talulah Silver, we discovered that the ship vendor is already in talks with multiple local organizations about selling the relevant vessels."

Ves frowned. "Didn't we offer enough money? How much is our latest offer?"

"We offered to purchase the four ships at the equivalent of over 12 trillion hex credits. This is at least double the ordinary market value for a collection of non-combat capital ships. Their age, physical conditions and functional capabilities are serviceable, but not particularly impressive. They are ordinarily worth around 1 to 2 trillion hex credits in calmer times."

"It's too bad that times have changed." Ves sighed as he continued to tinker with his test rifle. "Do you think we can still solve this problem with money?"

The chief diplomat hesitated for a second. "We believe this option might still be viable. Currently, Gillian Semdam is aiming to barter his trade goods for intangible benefits in order to increase chances that his company will be able to survive the worsening trend, but enough money can accomplish that as well. The problem... is that the sum will plunge us deeper into debt."

"How. Much?"

"At least 15 trillion hex credits. This is the minimum sum that will match the inflated value of the capital ships once we extrapolate the explosive growth in market price. Mr. Semdam would rather delay the sale of his starships by one or two years in order to sell them at comparable prices than to trade them away too early at a lower price."

No one wanted to be scammed if they could help it. If Ves was in Mr. Semdam's position, he would make the same decision. Only an idiot or someone desperate would sell a hot good when prices were still trending upwards!

From what he heard, Gillian Semdam was not an idiot, so the only viable way to persuade him to sell his ships at fairer prices was to make him desperate somehow.

A darker mood settled over Ves. "Have you considered... alternative solutions to the problem? We can probably make a lot more progress as long as we apply more pressure."

"I would advise against that, patriarch." Shederin took a firm stance. "We have considered this option as well, but the circumstances are not right. First, the security situation in this star system is high. S&S directly employs thousands of mech pilots to secure its expansive assets and industries. While we are strong enough to overrun their guards, the consequences of taking goods by force are extremely severe. Our credibility will sink to the bottom and we will end up in the blacklist of numerous powerful organizations. This one mistake will make it a lot more difficult to conduct transactions and make deals with willing trading partners for at least several decades. We cannot sink to the level of pirates!"

Well, there went that idea. Shederin made a good point. The Larkinson Clan was far from self-sufficient. It depended heavily on trade and could not afford to acquire a stinky reputation.

Fortunately, Ves also had another angle in mind. If an overt solution was not good enough, then what about a covert one?

He activated his comm and hailed a specific person.

Calabast's projection soon showed up in front of their faces.

"Ves. Mr. Shederin. I heard that you have encountered a particularly thorny problem."

"Since you know that much, you probably know why I've taken the initiative to contact you." Ves said.

The woman smirked. "I already saw this situation coming light-years away. I've been preparing for this situation for quite some time. I already planted my agents in the right positions."

It did not surprise Ves that Calabast became so involved. She had personally appealed to him to secure the Blinding Banshee. If they let this espionage ship go away, the spymaster might have to wait a lot of years before the Black Cats obtained a suitable base of operations!

It had become increasingly more untenable for Calabast and her staff to operate from the Spirit of Bentheim. While the factory ship offered plenty of space for her offices, her unit lacked the facilities needed to perform their jobs at high efficiency.

With Gloriana hogging all of the available processing power on the factory ship, Calabast was left scrambling for any remaining computing resources that she could scrape. Since a lot of intelligence work involved number crunching and data processing, the Black Cats were effectively working at reduced capacity all this time.

There was no way that Calabast was patient enough to tolerate this situation any longer!

"How long do you need to accomplish a breakthrough?"

"Three days at most."

Ves raised his eyebrows. "That's faster than I expected."

"I might be able to achieve some results sooner, but I've added a safety margin to account for any unanticipated surprises." Calabast confidently stated. "However, if you're willing to lend me a hand, I can promise that our clan will be able to close the deal within 24 hours."

That was a hefty boast!

"What do you need?"

"Lucky." She answered.

"Meow?"

Though Lucky had been lounging on a nearby work table all this time, he suddenly paid attention now that someone called his name.

Calabast's projection grinned. "I only need your help for a couple of hours. In fact, you'll be spending more time on transit than performing your mission. I just need you to do a quick job before you can go back."

"Meow..."

"Just do it, Lucky." Ves commanded his cat. "We need those ships quickly before Semdam & Sons has sold them to other customers. Get moving!"

"Meow!"

Though Lucky was not particularly enthusiastic about performing a risky infiltration mission, he was by far the best infiltrator of the Larkinson Clan.

Ves quickly packed Lucky off for a quick trip to Talulah Silver before returning to his current project.

The rifle he made was substantially different from anything he created before. The only major shortcoming was that he wasn't able to incorporate Opticonium in the design of this test weapon.

That heavily curtailed its value as a reference for the Sentry Project. Still, the weapon still contained numerous improvements that would hopefully allow him to meet Gloriana's expectations.

"Hehe... who says I can't develop my own energy weapons?" He smirked.

The most notable difference that caused the weapon to stand out was that nearly its entire body was made out of enhanced luminar crystals!

Chapter 3117: Huge Changes

The body of a conventional energy rifle was made out of metallic alloys for obvious reasons. The most suitable materials had to be able to contain or endure a lot of heat, electromagnetic forces and external attacks.

While there were plenty of innovators who sought to reinvent the concept of an energy rifle by utilizing alternative materials, their applications always turned out to be limited.

The alternative materials either turned out to be weaker, more expensive, more difficult to fabricate or more troublesome to repair. As long as one or more of these flaws held true, it simply made too little sense to adopt these alternative products on a larger scale.

In fact, even if a brilliant Master invented a weapon made out of alternative materials that was just as powerful and efficient as their conventional counterparts, it still wouldn't be a success!

Just like the problem with biomechs, the current mech infrastructure was unaccustomed to working with rifles made out of wood, crystals and other weird materials. Owners of these weapon systems needed to hire or train special personnel to handle them as well as purchase plenty of strange materials to fix them if they broke.

Who wanted to go through all of that hassle? Only a small number of abnormal customers were willing to go through all of that trouble. The rest were more than willing to settle with their normal guns.

In short, rifles made out of crystals were a solution in search of a problem. There was no compelling justification why anyone would resort to them when a conventional metallic weapon model was already able to do the job.

This 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it mentality' exemplified the laziness of humanity. There was nothing inherently bad about sticking to known solutions as it was a lot more efficient if people just stuck with solutions that already worked.

Anyone who had the opportunity to act lazy was either efficient, a bum or both.

Ves preferred to consider himself as someone who worked efficiently. Time was an incredibly precious resource to him and he could never have enough.

This was why it was rather odd that he would deviate from convention and make a rifle out of luminar crystals as opposed to normal materials.

It wouldn't have been a surprise if Ves specialized in either energy weapons or crystals, but that was not the case. His domain still revolved around life and mechs, which meant that he did not possess any exceptional advantages in this field.

Then why did he decide to create something that was so far out of his comfort zone that his test product had a high risk of exploding or malfunctioning?

"Alright, let's see how my latest version handles." Ves spoke with satisfaction as he integrated the final parts and performed a quick check to see if everything was in order.

The crystalline rifle looked exceptional. The white, semi-transparent luminar crystals that comprised its main body granted it a unique appearance that made it look like a giant jewel instead of a functional war weapon. Its sparkling, attractive appearance caused it to look wholly out of place on a battlefield!

"It can probably attract a lot of compliments if it is used as a prop in a fashion show."

During the design phase, Ves couldn't help but play around and make the rifle look more pleasing than necessary. He liked it when his products looked good because that made it easier for his customers to care about them. People were a lot more reluctant to abuse products when they looked so damned nice.

However, the test rifle was not a weapon made to appeal to anyone's vanity. As pretty as it looked, Ves did not neglect the functionality of it at all. There were good reasons why he made so much use of luminar crystals.

The design of the weapon actually deviated from conventional rifles in other ways. It featured a lot less internal components and even lacked many systems deemed essential to energy weapons.

Where were the heatsinks? Where were the energy converters?

Ves did not forget about them or anything. Even though his rifle lacked a lot of basic necessities, he had great confidence that it would work as anticipated!

However, just to be sure, he did not hand the rifle over to Nitaa so that she could test it out in person. He handed it over to a bot instead and hid behind a secure enclosure that was well away from the firing range in his personal workshop.

"Even if it blows up and unleashes all of its energy at once, It's unlikely to affect me at this range." He muttered as he huddled behind a workstation that was set against a solid metal barrier.

Once he implemented the right settings, he commanded the bot to fire the weapon.

BZZZZT!

A surprisingly loud noise echoed across the workshop as the crystal rifle spat out a laser beam that was more powerful than the discharge of any other rifle that Ves had tested!

Compared to the output of the improvised revolver rifle that Ves had made a few months ago, the attack unleashed by the crystal rifle was at least three times more powerful!

This was a massive difference!

Of course, the two rifles didn't strictly belong in the same category. The crystal rifle was made out of substantially more precious materials and its fewer amount of discrete parts were a lot more high-end.

"Again!"

The bot handling the weapon electronically pulled the trigger multiple times in quick succession. What was remarkable about the performance of the crystal rifle was that it hardly generated any waste heat at all. Ves had taken full advantage of the fact that luminar crystals were able to absorb thermal energy. Since the entire rifle body was made of this material, there were hardly any paths where heat could escape!

Since Ves didn't have to worry too much about heat buildup, the crystal rifle offered a lot more room for other advanced systems. In fact, he had actually decided to fill up a portion of the available space with even more luminar crystals!

He was quite certain that no one had ever made a crystal rifle like this. Not even the MTA should have been able to perform the required techniques and follow the strange methods that Ves employed to make such a revolutionary weapon possible.

Once he completed the round of testing, Ves summarized the results and made some preliminary conclusions.

"My weapon can fire more powerful beams at a sustained rate without draining its energy cells too quickly." His eyes shone. "Even though my weapon is more expensive to make and more troublesome to repair and maintain, all of this effort is worth it as long as it is applied to an expert mech like the Sentry Projects!"

That didn't mean it was uneconomical to apply the same principles to the weapons of regular ranged mechs. Ves just needed to lower the complexity of his rifle design and tone down the materials he used so that other people could handle the mass production models.

The performance increase wouldn't be as drastic as a result, but the gains in efficiency alone was well worth the trouble. Out of every material that Ves had handled, nothing was as cheap and effective in handling heat as enhanced luminar crystals!

The only other part that was able to do a better job was the dimensional heatsink of the Amastendira, but the difference in cost and production difficulty was so huge that Ves didn't even spare any thought in this direction.

A normal Journeyman shouldn't have been able to create such an impressive weapon, especially in just a week.

There were two reasons why he was able to come up with this amazing weapon.

A week ago, Ves decided to call up an old friend after a very long time. A lot had changed since the last time he made use of one of his unique advantages.

[Status]

Name: Ves Larkinson

Profession: Journeyman Mech Designer

Specializations: Spiritual Man-Machine Symbiosis

Design Points: 175,142

Attributes

Strength: 1.6

Dexterity: 1.6

Endurance: 2.0

Intelligence: 2.4

Creativity: 2.2

Concentration: 2.7

Spirituality: 4.9

Neural Aptitude: F

Skills

[Assembly]: Journeyman - [3D Printer Proficiency V] - [Assembler Proficiency V] - [Masterwork Mech Assembly III]

[Battle Mechatronics]: Journeyman - [Knight Mech Mastery I] - [Rifleman Mech Mastery I] - [Space Knight Mastery I] - [Hero Mech Mastery I] - [Light Skirmisher Mastery I] [Custom Mech Design III]

[Business]: Apprentice

[Computer Science]: Journeyman - [Mech Hacking III] - [Programming IV]

[Electrical Engineering]: Senior - [Structural Pathway Configuration V] - [Energy Storage V] - [Conductors IV] - [Ultracompact Energy Storage II] - [Power Reactors II] - [Dense Energy Transmissions II]

[Materials Science]: Journeyman - [Crystallography V] - [Crystal Laser Propagation V] - [Lithic Materials I] - [Heat-Resistant Materials I] - [Luminar Crystals IV]

[Mathematics]: Journeyman - [Simulations V]

[Mechanics]: Senior - [Jury Rigging V] - [Speed Tuning IV] - [Mechanical Fault Detection III] - [Fine Motion Control II] - [Heavy Mech Design III]

[Metallurgy]: Senior - [Alloy Compression V] - [Fixed Armor Specialization IV] - [Flexible Armor Specialization I] - [Smart Metal IV] - [ASMAS III] - [Internal Structure Specialization III]

[Metaphysics]: Journeyman - [X-Factor V] - [Spiritual Senses IV] - [Spiritual Exploration II] - [Spiritual Manipulation V] - [Spiritual Engineering III] - [Spiritual Energy Processing V]

[Interfacing]: Novice - [Neural Interface Optimization I]

[Physics]: Senior - [Directed Energy Weapon Optimization V] - [Gamma Laser Weapons II] - [Lightweight Armor Optimization II] - [Mediumweight Armor Optimization IV] - [Melee Weapon Optimization IV] - [Polarizing Shielding II] - [Rapid-Fire Laser Weapon Operation IV] - [Optics V] - [Ballistic Weapon Optimization IV]

[Propulsion]: Journeyman - [Flight Systems IV] - [Propulsion Boosters I]

[Salvaging]: Apprentice - [Field Repairs IV]

[Signals and Communications]: Journeyman - [Anti-Stealth Detection III] - [Active ECM Systems II] - [Passive ECM Systems II]

[Stealth and Cloaking]: Journeyman

Abilities

[Superpublish]: Available. Can be activated once a year.

[Inventorize]: Unavailable.

Evaluation: A competent Journeyman Mech Designer who has made progress in the mysteries of life, mechs and synergy.

The fact that Ves consciously tried to minimize his dependence on the System as much as possible made the changes all the more drastic. He managed to improve numerous Sub-Skills by himself as he spent a considerable amount of time expanding his knowledge in order to solve specific problems while he worked on difficult projects.

The difference to his Spirituality was particularly drastic. Not only did he manage to boost his Spirituality Attribute to a huge degree, his Spirituality-related Skills and Sub-Skills also underwent a huge improvement!

"It has to be Blinky! There is no way I could have grown so much stronger on my own." He concluded.

For some odd reason, the System bugged out and lumped Ves and Blinky's spiritual capabilities together. This was partially the right approach, but in practice it was not always possible to leverage all of this power on many design-related activities.

Ves did not grow arrogant all of a sudden for that reason.

The changes in his Status that were related to his Spirituality did not change anything for him. It was merely attempting to describe what was already the case.

"It's much more interesting to look at my DP." He grinned.

Last time, he expended nearly all of his Design Points to acquire the Odineye. Though he did not regret the decision, it pained him a lot to drain nearly all of his DP.

That had changed after he completed a number of mech designs. The previous round of design projects handed him 150,000 DP, which was in line with his expectations.

However, he earned a surprising windfall after he completed the Disruptor Project.

[Design Evaluation: Dark Zephyr DR-1]

Model name: Dark Zephyr DR-1

Original Manufacturer: Ves Larkinson, Gloriana Wodin, Juliet Stameross, Ketis Larkinson

Weight Classification: Light

Recommended Role: Expert Prime Light Skirmisher

Armor: A

Carrying Capacity: C+

Aesthetics: B

Endurance: D

Energy Efficiency: D-

Flexibility: B+

Firepower: B

Integrity: C+

Mobility: A+

Spotting: B

X-Factor: A

Cost efficiency: E

Project involvement: 17%

Original component composition: 26%

Overall evaluation: The Dark Zephyr is an expert prime light skirmisher that excels at evasion and damage avoidance. Its maneuverability characteristics lend itself well in large, chaotic battlefields where it can approach any enemy position without incurring too much damage. In the right circumstances, its strong resonance and prime capabilities can amplify the performance of the Dark Zephyr in combination with its pilots to an immense degree.

[You have received 100,000 Design Points for completing an expert mech design that has no other equivalent.]

[You have received 100,000 Design Points for designing a mech with an impressive presence of X-Factor.]

[Your project involvement is lower than 50 percent. Your rewards for completing this design are halved.]

Ves was pleasantly surprised that designing an expert mech netted him with twice as much Design Points compared to designing a regular mech!

Even if the System ruthlessly halved his income due to collaborating with other mech designers, he still earned a large chunk of DP, enough for him to splurge on numerous crystal and energy weapon-related Sub-Skills!

Chapter 3118: A New Minor

Even before Ves spent his Design Points on upgrading his Sub-Skills, he had already managed to raise most of them on his own. Just like any other engineer, a mech designer never stopped learning. There was a huge body of existing knowledge and the mech industry constantly came up with new developments.

If Ves didn't want to stagnate, then it was essential for him to keep up with the evolution of the industry. He did not have to waste his precious DP on quickly absorbing easily accessible articles and textbooks.

One of the only instances where Ves felt it was worth it to spend his DP to acquire instant know-how was when he needed to master Skills and Sub-Skills that were not as accessible.

To him, that translated knowledge, insights and masteries that either took a disproportionate amount of time for him to learn or were not accessible through public sources.

Advanced, higher-tiered Sub-Skills such as Crystallography V, Luminar Crystals IV, Optics V and so on fell into one or both of those categories.

For the more general Sub-Skills, Ves would have to spend years to reach their degree of mastery in the relevant fields. He not only had to invest his time in a lot of book learning, but also apply the theories by performing practical experiments in order to truly comprehend what he gained.

Though these discoveries always brought joy to those who were passionate about finding new ways to improve their mech designs, Ves couldn't wait that long. Even his own patience had limits.

As someone who paid a lot of attention to efficiency, the benefits of spending his Design Points to skip through these lengthy, tedious processes far outweighed the downsides of having all of that knowledge forcefully stuffed in his mind!

This was because he deliberately spent a lot of the DP he recently earned on upgrading the Sub-Skills related to luminar crystal technology and energy weapons.

Even though this brought him further away from the crucial threshold of 1,000,000 Design Points, he believed that he was making a clever strategic choice.

"Luminar crystal technology has a lot of synergy with my main specialty." He muttered.

The luminar race who developed their signature tech were spiritually capable. This meant that their crystal tech incorporated a lot of spiritual engineering aspects right from the start!

"Anyone who tries to make use of luminar crystals without spiritual energy is simply missing out on at least half of their potential!"

It was quite interesting for him to work with luminar crystal technology. Conventional human technology did not fundamentally rely on any spiritual interactions because the human race was deficient when it came to manipulating spiritual energy.

Their sensitivity towards spirituality or psionic power was negligible. This was why humanity's tech base was highly mechanical and rooted in physical interactions. Human civilization's greatest weapons were battleships, and these titanic vessels derived their entire strength from fantastic materials and incredibly advanced technology.

Great battleships like the Starlight Megalodon that Ves had once entered in the past did not rely on spirituality at all despite the fact that the Common Fleet Alliance must be aware of the phenomenon!

In fact, the MTA actually fell out of step compared to the rest of humanity. It was the one institution that made semi-overt use of spirituality in order to enable mechs to be strengthened beyond their physical attributes.

However, it was clear that this was only a half-hearted measure as the integration of psionic power in mechs and mech designs was not that extensive.

There were huge differences between designing a mech and designing a crystal rifle!

As someone who was capable of doing both, Ves felt as if the latter pointed in the right direction. By employing technology that took greater advantage of the benefits that spiritual energy brought, the luminar race was able to accomplish greater feats while expending less resources!

The fact that the human approach to mech design was so pathetic in comparison was because of helplessness. Unlike a small number of exceptional people like Ves, most humans simply didn't possess the ability to perceive and interact with spiritual energy as easily as him. Without these basic conditions, it was out of the question for any human, even one with spiritual potential, to consciously and methodically make use of spiritual energy.

The way most mech designers like Gloriana harnessed their extraordinary power was to rely on their mentalities to passively channel their spiritualities in specific directions. Strong emotions like passion amplified and directed this effort so that competent mech designers were able to achieve real differences without seeing or comprehending the underlying spiritual mechanics.

It was an approach that worked. Human mech designers were able to rely on this rather stupid method because of their domains. Low-ranking mech designers mainly had to

focus on developing their greatest interests and ambitions into a specific design philosophy that encapsulated their desired contributions to the mech industry.

Once they developed a promising and coherent design philosophy, the mech designers had to keep devoting to it. The more successful ones tended to be so obsessive about them that they essentially rewrote their own spiritual potential into a mirror of their own design philosophies!

At least, that was the current theoretical framework that Ves had developed after going through this progression and witnessing other mech designers go through the same struggle.

He even extrapolated what might be in store for him in the future.

If his guess was correct, then the main purpose of the mech designer progression track was to turn average human engineers into powerful spiritually-endowed creators.

In other words, it was an opportunity for the smartest, talented, hard-working or lucky humans to solve the deficiency of their race by developing their spiritualities step by step!

"This is quite amazing now that I think about it." He muttered.

Something similar took place with mech pilots, though they mainly developed their willpower rather than spiritual power.

Ves grew quite curious how the original members of the Mech Trade Association came up with the mech designer progression track in the first place. Did they derive it from a past profession as was apparently the case with the mech pilot progression track?

He felt as if he was beginning to touch a profound truth that the MTA probably didn't want to come to light.

"The MTA didn't come up with expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots out of nowhere. It's quite obvious that they plagiarized many methods and principles from the ancient swordsmanship tradition." He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Since this is the case, there is a high probability that the mechers didn't invent the concept of high-ranking mech designers out of the blue either. The question is, what craft or profession came before?"

Was it sword forging? Jewelcrafting? Woodworking?

Who knew. All Ves could assume was that it was unlikely that it all came out of blue now that he learned about the surprising connection between swordsmanship and mech pilot.

What all of this meant was that Ves heavily suspected that the higher ups of were likely aware of these considerations as well.

"The MTA must know of humanity's weakness in spiritual capabilities."

This was not necessarily a big deal. After all, human civilization managed to defeat countless alien races and dominate more than half the galaxy by relying on iron and blood.

Yet for some reason, the MTA fell out of lockstep with the CFA and encouraged humans to develop their spiritual potential in disguise. Why the urgency? Why did the mechers insist on mitigating one of humanity's weaknesses rather than focus on furthering their race's greatest strengths?

Speculating any further than this was extremely spurious and not that helpful to Ves. All he knew was that humans might only be able to achieve parity with spiritually gifted races like the luminars when they reached the height of Master Mech Designer or Star Designer!

"Then again, the luminars might be in a similar position as well."

It was rather far-fetched to assume that every single member of the luminar race was as strong in this aspect as Masters or Star Designers. The more probable scenario was that every luminars possessed a little talent, but certain individuals were more gifted than others such as the original crystal builder leader and the individual that eventually transcended his own undersized physique and became known as the Blinding One.

Yet from the fact that luminar crystal technology was both widespread in their heyday and heavily dependent on spiritual engineering, there had to be a lot of luminar aliens that possessed at least some capability in this area.

All of this had profound implications to Ves when he considered his future progression.

What was his goal? To make mechs more alive. To design mechs that not only served his customers better, but also come up with products that were able to do more with less.

To Ves, the best and most appropriate mechs shouldn't just grant mech pilots a lot of power, but also do so in a way that wasn't prohibitive in terms of cost and requirements.

Not every mech pilot was able to harness an expert mech like the Dark Zephyr. As long as Ves was able to design a mech that was much more efficient than the competition, then he would experience a lot of fulfillment for providing the mech market with a better option!

"Combining mechanical engineering with spiritual engineering is the key to increasing the power of my products!"

Ves was not content with following the masses.

Luminar crystal technology served as an excellent gateway to further the integration with the two. As a successful fusion between the two, Ves could derive a lot of lessons as long as he deepened his understanding of this exotic branch of knowledge!

It was one thing if Ves hadn't become exposed to the greater potential of luminar crystal technology, but now that he learned that intertwining luminar crystals with spiritual energy was capable of producing strong outcomes, how could he ever let go of this opportunity?

All of these considerations drove him to invest more in his ability to work with luminar crystal technology. He justified the expenditure of tens of thousands of Design Points in the Skill Tree in the hopes of deriving the fundamental principles that allowed the ancient luminars to successfully merge mechanical engineering with spiritual engineering.

However, what Ves got was... not quite what he had in mind.

He didn't exactly know where the System borrowed all of the knowledge from, but whatever it chose to dump into his mind was always structured from a human perspective.

The same happened when he improved his Luminar Crystals Sub-Skill to the fourth tier. The System supplied him with a large chunk of systematic know-how that gave him greater comprehension on luminar crystals from a different angle!

His main strength in luminar technology was his ability to work with its spiritual aspects. By melding his mind with Blinky or the Illustrious One, he was able to gain an even greater insight of the spiritual depth to luminar crystals, allowing him to make use of them in a different manner from the rest of humanity!

Yet the knowledge that he acquired from the System did not deepen his understanding from this angle at all. Instead, it bestowed him with a considerable amount of details on luminar crystals from a materials science perspective.

He acquired thousands of formulas on how to synthesize stronger crystals that converted incoming energy into different forms of output. Ves had already discovered some of the combinations through his earlier experiments, but it turned out that he was only scratching the surface of what was possible!

He became a lot more knowledgeable about how to shape crystals in different physical shapes in order to change or narrow down the effects of luminar crystals further. This

was the key on how he was able to design and craft an energy rifle that was almost entirely made out of luminar crystals. Without being able to make crystals that excelled at different functions such as heat absorption, damage resistance, energy conversion and so on, it would have been too impractical to make such a groundbreaking weapon!

Given this different take on luminar crystal technology, Ves developed a strong suspicion on who came up with this body of work.

"Did the System steal all of this from an MTA research team?"

Chapter 3119: Crystal Musings

Ves was quite sure that he inadvertently acquired classified research materials from the System.

Unless a state or a private organization managed to make a lot of successful advances in deciphering the physical attributes of luminar crystals, it was highly likely that the knowledge granted by Luminar Crystals IV came directly from the MTA research team that Master Willix had once mentioned!

"It's not exactly what I was looking for, but hey, since it's there, I'll just take it." He grinned.

The reason why he concluded that the new knowledge originated from the MTA was because it matched with the documents that Master Willix had already decided to release to him. It was as if Ves had only gotten part 1 of a series while the System supplied him with parts 2 to 6!

The huge amount of insights he gained on the material properties of luminar crystals might not bring him closer to combining mechanical engineering with spiritual engineering, but they substantially expanded his possible uses for luminar crystals.

"It's exactly what I need to bring the Sentry Project to the next level!"

In fact, what he learned went far beyond this. He could employ stronger and more versatile varieties of luminar crystals in all sorts of other projects.

Unlike the progress he made with the assistance of the crystal cube and the Illustrious One, the methods he gained from the System did not rely on spiritual engineering at all! The MTA research team accomplished most if not all of its successful research results by imitating excavated luminar crystals through human methods.

Even though humanity's attempts to decipher and replicate luminar crystals were fairly shallow, they leveraged their existing understanding of crystals over the course of their studies.

Now, a large chunk of this relevant human-derived insight had fallen into the hands of Ves.

The biggest implication of this was that Ves had gained the capability to mass produce stronger luminar crystals without being bottlenecked by his limited spiritual capabilities!

He looked down at the crystal rifle which the testing bot had placed on the work table. Ves had handcrafted it with the help of the crystal cube in order to instill the crystals with alien circuitry that somehow channeled and converted spiritual energy in specific beneficial ways.

A crystal synthesized by other humans or from an automated production line lacked this potent circuitry for this reason. This meant that it was impossible for Ves to produce thousands of powerful mechs that incorporated the stronger varieties of luminar crystals!

Even if Ves limited its spread to his own mech troops, he would still be forced to toil for thousands of hours just to make all of the enhanced luminar crystals for his own clan!

This was why he initially gave up on the notion despite knowing that his men would be missing out on a lot of benefits.

As a service provider, Ves hated it when he wasn't able to supply his own mech pilots with better products.

Although he still wasn't able to grant others the ability to make the strongest possible luminar crystals that he knew of, the grounded methods provided by the System gave him an alternative solution that made it a lot more practical for him to design mass production models that took advantage of luminar tech!

He became more and more certain that upcoming ranged mech projects such as the Crystal Lord Mark III would enjoy a definite firepower advantage over other ranged mech models.

"Even the next revision of the Transcendent Punisher will probably enjoy a substantial boost in firepower!"

While he fell short of realizing one of his ambitions, he was not dissatisfied with what he gained at all. The changes he experienced and the options he gained all reinforced his determination to explore this field further.

One day, he would be able to derive the lessons he needed to integrate spirituality with physical objects. Before that happened, Ves would settle with being able to design energy weapons that possessed far greater potency and versatility than what other mech designers were capable of devising.

"Not even mech designers who specialize in energy weapons can match the power of my current work!"

Given the same budget, materials, facilities and design criteria, Ves believed he possessed a distinct advantage. This was because a conventional mech designer was only able to harness his spirituality through passive methods while Ves was able to channel his strength to empower his luminar crystals in an active manner!

Of course, when it came to his mass production models, this gap was a lot less drastic. There was only one of him and it was impossible for him to stay stuck in a production hall all the time in order to churn out empowered luminar crystals day after day.

Ves wasn't in a hurry to solve this problem. Given that not even the MTA managed to find a way to easily allow humans to solve their fundamental spiritual deficiency, how was he supposed to do any better? It was not as if he was capable of making expert pilots on demand either.

Luminar crystal technology aside, Ves was tempted to use the System to strengthen his other Sub-Skills, most notably ones related to fabrication and assembly.

Fabricating the Dark Zephyr caused him to feel inadequate on those fronts for the first time in a very long time. His previous mech design projects were only a fraction as powerful and advanced as his first completed expert mech design.

However, he already spent a lot of Design Points already. He was quite reluctant to improve an aspect that he could improve through his own capabilities instead.

"Hmm, I still need to accumulate 1 million Design Points. I won't be able to get there if I solve every problem with DP."

He realized that he was experiencing the same temptation that had caused him to avoid the System in the first place. He didn't want to become dependent on its services. If the habit of spending DP to overcome every issue became rooted in his mind, then his road to become a Master and Star Designer would surely come to an end!

His face firmed up. "I need to rely on myself again."

While he was willing to compromise on this issue in order to accelerate his progression to Senior, the key premise was that he still retained his chance of becoming a better mech designer at the end. He felt that he was skirting too close to the line if he mindlessly spent his DP on other goodies, so he decided to refrain from thinking in this direction further.

Ideally, he should put the System on ice again. He needed to exercise more discipline so that he wouldn't constantly delay the time where he was able to earn enough DP to spend on huge, life-changing acquisitions.

One way to spend 1 million DP was to exchange it to acquire the essence of expert mech design.

Another way was to appoint Gloriana as a guest user of the System, allowing her to take advantage of some of its powerful capabilities.

While Ves was not sure which option he should choose, there was no way that either of them were weak or useless.

"Obtaining either of these options will probably influence my design career in a profound way!"

He was far from reaching that point, though, so there was not much point to making a decision straight away.

Ves still had to complete the design of a bunch more expert mechs. As long as he did a decent job with all of them, he would likely obtain at least 100,000 Design Points for each completed project. That brought him a lot closer to the 1 million DP threshold.

"I can't continue with designing expert mechs, sadly." He sighed.

None of the Larkinson Clan's expert candidates broke through, so there were no suitable pilots for him to serve.

Instead, there were a lot of regular mech pilots that built up a huge demand for his products. Both his own clansmen and the market had gone on for a long time without receiving anything new from him. Even if designing standard mechs awarded him with less DP, they were not as troublesome to work with. He just needed to find a way to pump them out faster so that he could reach his goal faster.

"It's easy enough to hire more assistants, but we'll probably remain stuck with four Journeymen for years."

None of the assistants currently in the Design Department possessed any exceptional talent. Not even Miles Tovar, the only other Journeyman candidate that he knew of, had made any significant progress towards forming his design seed.

"This guy is too useless." Ves muttered in disgust.

The main issue he had with Miles was that the man was too careful and rational. His specialization didn't sound very exciting and he just didn't show the same degree of passion as more successful mech designers like Ketis.

Granted, the Swordmaster benefited hugely from Sharpie, but even without her companion spirit Ves was fully confident that she would have succeeded in breaking through the normal way!

He felt tempted to give Miles Tovar a little push by performing an experiment on the stalled Apprentice Mech Designer, but he eventually decided to refrain from taking action.

"He has all of the necessary opportunities to advance to Journeyman through his own merits." Ves determined. "If he can't make the final step himself, then it proves that he is ultimately unworthy to become a Journeyman."

The case of Miles illustrated a rather depressing situation with the Design Department. The harsh truth was that most of the assistants over there were not particularly promising. While people could always change, the chances were slim that any of them would suddenly become more brilliant.

For now, Ves had to take care of more immediate priorities. He picked up the crystal rifle and studied it from a spiritual perspective.

He sensed a rich and intricate spiritual structure inside. The alien circuitry that resembled strings of tiny runes gave him the impression that they were alive in a way.

"It's like a programming language for spirituality." He whispered.

Though the Illustrious One possessed a greater insight into the meaning and application of specific circuitry patterns, the luminar design spirit only possessed a vague familiarity with the underlying principles.

It was the latter that Ves truly needed to accomplish a breakthrough in bringing the spiritual closer to the material.

"One day." He muttered. "One day I'll crack this secret."

He returned to trying to iterate on his crystal rifle design. The previous test provided him with a lot of data. While the results were already impressive, there was still a lot of room for improvement. The crystal weapon he designed was still too crude and rough for his liking.

"Besides, I also need to scale it up for the Sentry Project."

A huge amount of changes took place if he tried to design a crystal weapon for a mech rather than a person. Ves had to perform a lot more tests on giant crystals in order to make sure that the mech-sized version of his crystal rifle would perform as intended.

"This is going to take a lot of work!"

He continued to tinker with crystals and weapons made out of crystals. While their efficiency was already high, Ves found several ways to push the envelope and increase the maximum output of his creations.

The Sentry Project needed a rifle that was able to deliver a powerful strike with a single pull of the trigger. In order to maximize the lethality of its single attacks, Ves had to make several sacrifices. He lowered the firing rate, increased the energy consumption, added more crystals that excelled in absorbing heat and so on. Each of these changes gradually shifted the iterations of his crystal rifle towards a precise but powerful sniper armament.

"Perhaps I can even create a crystal version of the Amastendira one day!"

Chapter 3120: A Friendly Mediation

Gillian Semdam, one of the richest entrepreneurs of the Pelsa Ryndover Star System, looked grave.

He waved his bodyguards and assistants aside as he entered his penthouse office at the top floor of the headquarters of Semdam & Sons.

His teal business suit accented with purple patterns usually instilled him with a lot of confidence. After all, not every businessman could pull off his look without looking silly.

He used to wear more earthy colored outfits in the past. Back when S&S was still a smaller player, he rarely sought to attract attention to himself.

All of that changed once S&S was vaulted to the top. The market and the competition held different expectations towards the market leader of a sector. Gillian Semdam not only accomplished this transition, but also managed to avoid the fate of his predecessors by performing a careful balancing act!

Each day, he made important decisions that allowed his company to remain stable. This was not enough for Semdam & Sons to truly stay prosperous, though.

Sometimes, he needed to make bolder decisions, especially in response to new crises and changing circumstances.

A good leader needed to know what kind of decisions they needed to make at any given moment. From what he observed from his competitors, each of them eventually failed due to misjudging the situation.

Some acted too conservatively when bolder action was required. While their companies didn't collapse straight away, the decline became progressively worse to the point where it could not be stopped anymore.

Others took too many risks and overestimated their judgement. Arrogance and greed were two of the most dangerous character traits. While every successful leader had to possess both of them to some degree, the challenge was trying to keep them at moderate levels.

Those who lost touch of reality would quickly find themselves defeated by it! Whatever fantasies they spun in their mind would not help them if their company suffered enormous losses or if they crossed a line that they should have never crossed.

For a long time, Gillian Semdam constantly reminded himself of all of the possible failings that he could make. While this didn't ensure that he would be able to avoid mistakes entirely, he thought that it was enough to keep S&S in business.

Today, he was feeling a lot less certain about that. Sweat was already pouring from his brows as he slowly sat behind his large and imposing desk.

He ignored every agenda item and every other priority in order to focus on the sudden crisis that had beset his company.

Gillian let out a deep breath before he activated nearly every security and isolation setting. His office began to lock down as solid shutters slid over the windows, energy shields came to life and interference measures blocked most signals from passing through.

The only other intact connection to the rest of the galaxy was his special communication terminal.

He reached out and pressed a specific button. Soon enough, he established a connection with his latest bane.

A high-quality projection showed up in front of his desk. It displayed a woman wearing a tight black uniform with lustrous black boots. She currently sat on a sofa of all things, as if this meeting was nothing more than a sideshow to her. A remarkable bronze-like mechanical cat rested comfortably on her lap.

Her long fingers slowly massaged the mechanical cat's back, causing the animal to purr with pleasure.

"Meow~"

"Hello Mr. Semdam. I see you have received my calling card." The black-haired woman greeted him with a smile. "I believe we have much to talk about today."

Gillian Semdam stared daggers at the woman. She was responsible for the biggest fright that he had ever experienced over his 180 years of life. Not even taking over the company after his father had eventually passed on was as concerning as the crisis that had beset him out of the blue.

He would rather have his company attacked by crown terrorists than engage in a conversation with this evil woman!

"Who might I be calling?" He asked.

"You can call me Calabast." She smirked. "You can say that I am a problem solver of the Larkinson Clan. While there are plenty of clansmen in our fleet who excel at addressing different issues, the problems I have to deal with tend to require a special touch."

The head of Semdam & Sons was quite familiar with her type.

"You're a fixer. A thief. An extortionist."

The woman shook her head. "That is a crude description, Mr. Semdam. I prefer to view myself as a... mediator."

"What is that supposed to mean, woman?"

"A mediator is exactly what you think. I mediate between parties that have differences in opinion. I do my best to make all of the parties come to an amicable agreement. The main difference with other mediators is that I am mediating on behalf of the Larkinson Clan. I am quite good at my job, isn't that right, Lucky?"

"Meow!" The cat obediently answered as he nuzzled his head under her fingers.

Gillian Semdam was not amused. "Why must we talk?"

"You should know quite well why we are holding this discussion. I believe you have already held talks with another prominent member of our clan. It is regretful that you have decided not to engage any further with Mr. Shederin Purnesse. The four capital ships that you have on offer is exactly what our clan needs to prepare for its upcoming entry into the Red Ocean."

"Those ships are not your property. They belong to Semdan & Sons, and as long as that is the case, we can sell them to anyone we damn well please! We don't need your money!"

Calabast released a chortle. "Ah, but that is where we disagree. Those ships are already ours as far as we are concerned. You are merely holding them on our behalf. Our patriarch has already set eyes on the Vivacious Wal, the Andrenidae, the Discentibus and the Blinding Banshee, and as long as that is the case, he will not allow anyone to take what belongs to us. We preferred to settle this difference with money, but your lack of sincerity in your talks with Mr. Purnesse has led me to take action in person."

When Gillian Semdam thought about what kind of action she took that resulted in the breaking and entering of all of his secret vaults, he almost wanted to shut the connection right away!

When he inspected each of his vaults in person, he discovered that a lot of assets were missing. Whoever broke into his high security stashes smuggled out his secret data chips, his crucial trade documents, his secret ledgers and even his sentimental keepsakes!

Although the head of the Semdam company could do without the latter, he and his company would suffer an incalculable amount of damage if the former leaked out to the public or just to certain people!

He would bet his competitors, who never managed to grow into a threat to Semdam & Sons, could probably use the compromising information to collapse the foundation of his company!

The threat of this awful outcome hanging over his head was the primary reason why he kept his impulses in check. He had not grown S&S to become the dominant player in the local ship market by letting his emotions make his decisions.

His face grew grimmer. He did not see the need to hide his emotions and obscure his own thoughts.

Those were more appropriate in actual negotiations, not situations like this where the other party had him over the barrel!

From what he could observe from the woman, she knew exactly what she had and what she could do. He was not dealing with someone incompetent or naive. The professionalism and control she exuded just by sitting on a sofa was enough to make him give up resorting to theatrics.

He decided to go for the direct route. The longer they held this conversation, the greater the risk that others would be able to break into this transmission.

"What do you want?" He asked. "What do we need to do to obtain your guarantee that you will not disseminate the information that you have gained?"

"Ah, you wish to come to business now. That is a refreshing change. We are already making progress!" Calabast grinned with satisfaction. "Mr. Semdam, despite what you might think, our clan has always been sincere about our dealings. Our clan is led by a mech designer and an entrepreneur that has achieved great success in the mech industry. We understand the importance of conducting mutually-beneficial deals. Our original offer stands. We are willing to pay a reasonable amount of money for you to transfer the four aforementioned capital ships in our possession."

"That's... all?" Semdam frowned.

He thought the Larkinson Clan would have asked more. While the information they managed to steal from his vaults was not fatal, they were still compromising to the point that his company could easily topple if he did not manage the crisis properly!

Calabast leaned back and made long strokes across Lucky's back. "As I said before, I am a mediator. I am merely here to solve problems, preferably for both sides. The fact that I am speaking on behalf of the Larkinson Clan does not prevent me from looking after your own interests as well. The best possible agreement we could make is where both sides win."

For a moment, Gillian Semdam seriously doubted whether the Larkinson Clan was being serious. No one would be that generous, not with the amount of leverage that he was worrying about.

However, as they continued to talk, Semdam slowly realized that the Larkinsons didn't want anything more than to purchase the relevant capital ships at a 'fair price'.

Of course, the Larkinson woman's definition of a fair price was much more in line with the previous price levels for the ships than the current inflated ones. The only concession she made was to pay S&S a slight premium to accelerate the handover and put the ships under the control of the Larkinson Clan by the end of the week.

Though the consequence of this new agreement was that S&S wouldn't earn as much money as he hoped from the precious assets, the company's finances could easily take the hit.

"I... agree." Semdam lowered his head. "My team and I will make the arrangements. The capital ships will belong to the Larkinson Clan, but you MUST give me assurances that the data that you possess must not leak out. If you have spilled information that doesn't belong to you, then I promise you that I will do everything in my power to drag your clan down!"

Even though there weren't many ways he could make the Larkinsons suffer, he had plenty of money to throw around!

It was important for him to show his determination. Otherwise, the Larkinsons might actually do what he was most afraid of and ruin everything.

"You can rest assured that we will not break our agreement with you. We have principles, you see. We will honestly abide by our new agreement and hope that both of us can walk away after we both have what we want from each other."

"I hope your promises are more honest than your conduct, woman."

"In turn, I hope that you and your ship handlers will not tamper with the ships that will soon become ours." Calabast added. "Don't even think about trying anything. We have

many specialists and engineers in our ranks that can quickly detect any improprieties. We even have an entire shipbuilding team on hand that can determine whether you have compromised the designs of the capital ships."

Semdam grew a bit angry. "All of our products are independently certified by several reputable galactic institutions! When it comes to the trustworthiness of our brand, we do not make any jokes!"

Calabast laughed. "Hahaha! That's funny, because from what I have perused from the data that I have sampled, it seems your company has been less than honest in some instances. We know all of your tricks. We will be watching. Do not make another mistake. Goodbye, Mr. Semdam."

The projection disappeared, leaving the businessman alone in his office.