

## Mech 3121

### *Chapter 3121: Fast Delivery*

"You actually got the ships?" Ves asked in astonishment.

"Well, they're here right now. Can't you see?" Calabast grinned as she stood before him while holding Lucky in her arms. "To be honest, I can't claim full credit. A lot of barriers are no longer so insurmountable as long as I have Lucky at my disposal. Having an agent who can turn invisible and phase through every solid barrier as if it was a projection is practically cheating!"

The cat in question wasn't in a hurry to return to Ves. He instead settled into Calabast's embrace as if she was his mother. He even arched his back while letting out a lazy yawn!

"Meow~"

Ves furrowed his brows a bit. While he was happy that Lucky was able to make himself useful, he didn't want that to come at the expense of his pet's original purpose.

A gem cat's primary purpose was to produce gems!

The more Lucky grew, the less gems he produced on a yearly basis. Even though the quality and potency of the gems had gone up, Ves felt quite annoyed that Lucky spent most of his time napping, stealing food, fighting against Blinky, asking for petting and many other activities.

While Ves understood that there was probably little that the gem cat could do to control or hasten the production of his gems, he couldn't get rid of the suspicion that Lucky's other activities delayed the release of his next batch of gems.

The Larkinson Clan still needed the capital ships though. To see four of them being delivered to the Larkinson Clan at once was an amazing sight! As he looked at the projected view of what was happening just outside the Larkinson fleet, he could clearly see a small swarm of tugs dragging over four massive ships of varying shapes and sizes.

The Vivacious Wal, the Andrenidae, the Discentibus and the Blinding Banshee all appeared to be in decent shape, but their external condition was not indicative of whether all of their systems were sound.

"They're not moving under their own power." Ves stated the obvious.

"Yes. Well, given the nature of the hasty agreement I have forged with Mr. Gillian Semdam, I thought it was prudent to encourage him to send over the vessels as soon

as possible. The longer the ships stay in the hands of S&S, the greater the chance that the company might tamper with their systems. Rushing the handover will severely curtail the risks. In fact, with Lucky's help, I have already set up an extensive monitoring network around S&S. I have been able to track exactly what each executive, shipwright and engineer has been doing in the past few days."

Ves looked quite impressed. "You don't do anything by half-measures. What are the chances that the Semdams has done something improper with the ships anyway?"

She smiled. "Well, I have extensive access to their internal databases and body of correspondence, so I am somewhat aware of the routine tampering they do to every starship that passes through their hands. That said, I cannot account for any methods that the engineers and other specialists haven't documented or submitted to the databases, so the ships likely aren't completely clean."

"Will our forceful negotiating methods come to bite us back?"

"According to my read on Mr. Semdam, the chances of that happening is minimal." Calabast confidently stated. "He is a man that rarely lets his spite overtake his reason. We are still in the possession of incriminating material and we can release it to the right people at any point. Given these circumstances, it is in the best interests of both him and us to honestly abide by the terms that we have set. Any impropriety that takes place will inflict losses on us both, and no one rational will choose to go down this self-destructive path. This is why I have deliberately tried to keep the terms reasonable. The more we push S&S, the greater the chance of lashing out. We do not need anything else from the company, so I have refrained from issuing any further demands."

That sounded nice, but Ves bet that Mr. Semdam still felt pissed.

What if the man's emotions overtook his reasoning? What if he wanted to take revenge regardless of the consequences?

That was what the extra monitoring is for, Ves supposed. If Mr. Semdam ever made a dangerous decision, Calabast would probably know straight away. Ves just decided to trust her to deal with the aftermath.

"So how spaceworthy are the ships that we have just received?"

Calabast shrugged. "I am not entirely certain about that. You will have to ask Vivian Tsai once she has finished inspecting each of the four vessels. From what I have gathered, the ship parts are all there and they should all be in working condition. That doesn't mean that it is safe to put them into operation straight away. The necessary checks still have to be performed and the ship also needs to be loaded with an enormous amount of supplies and configured for our use. It will take a lot of time to prepare skeleton crews and rush them through the familiarization process of their new vessels. At minimum, this will take a couple of weeks, and that is on the extreme end."

This was one of the downsides to rushing the handover process. If Semdam & Sons was allowed to ready the capital ships through their own means, then they could have probably done a much more efficient job. Just because the capital ships had been in their possession for a while didn't necessarily mean the ships were immediately good to go once they received their crews.

The capital ships had been languishing in orbit of Talulah Silver for numerous months or years. As odd as it sounded, a lot of powerful and complicated ship systems were designed to be in constant use. Letting them fall silent for long periods of time caused them to deteriorate faster than if they were being used normally.

In order to prevent its complicated systems from breaking down while the ship in question went on ice, they had to be locked down and configured in ways that slowed down the deterioration process.

Now that the capital ships were being pulled out of stage, the Larkinsons had to invest a lot of manpower and effort to reverse these storage measures.

Though Ves hated it, as an engineer himself he understood the necessity to take proper measures to preserve the integrity of large and complicated machines. This was especially when there was a chance that a single critical system failure could potentially doom the entire vessel during FTL travel!

"I don't want to stay in the Pelsa Ryndover System for too long. I hope we can leave within a month at most" Ves murmured. "Anyway, what will you be doing with the Blinding Banshee now that you have obtained your dream vessel?"

Calabast grinned like a kid in a candy store. "The Blinding Banshee is not exactly the ship of my dreams, but she is leagues better than the facilities that my Black Cats and I are currently using. We'll be moving in right away to assume control over her extensive scanning and espionage-related systems. The most important priority is to make sure that all of the equipment is clean. As you can imagine, that is anything but easy to verify when you're dealing with a ship with such a background and purpose. I'll have to borrow Lucky for a while longer in order to make quick progress in this essential chore."

Ves frowned. "You said that too about the Spirit of Bentheim, but as far as I'm aware that task has stalled."

She shrugged. "So far, we have found surprisingly little backdoors and improprieties on this ship. Lucky and I have already inspected all of the most critical compartments and systems such as the bridge, the workshops and the data rooms. They're all fine. What remains are lesser ship sections that aren't critical to the functioning of this factory ship. Once our new Blinding Banshee comes online, we can utilize her powerful capabilities to sweep all of the vessels in our fleet one by one. You can't imagine the scale and efficiency of their operation. While I probably have to plug Lucky into the Blinding

Banshee in order to boost her capabilities, once the two are combined, there is very little that can avoid our sweep!"

Lucky began to grow a little uncomfortable in her embrace. "Meow?"

She caressed his ears. "Don't you worry. Aunty Calabast won't treat you wrong."

"Meow..."

Ves was thinking about the implications behind her words.

"If you plug Lucky into the Blinding Banshee, can you hack into enemy starships as well?"

For a moment, he began to imagine how he could make better use of this combination. With Lucky's advanced hacking suite and the Blinding Banshee's range, the two could potentially hack and sabotage starships from a distance!

Wasn't he worried about lacking fleet carriers in his fleet? Instead of buying them, he could hijack them instead!

Calabast firmly shook his head. "Don't be silly, Ves. Ships contain so many hardware-based safeguards against remote takeovers that it is impossible to take out a ship that easily. To do a proper job, the crew in question has to be debilitated and an agent such as Lucky has to sneak aboard the ship in person in order to physically access the core controls."

That was a lot more troublesome. The reason why Lucky managed to take over a modern fleet carrier like the Auralis with ease was because their entire crew had already been killed. If there were any senior officers or virtual security specialists still alive, then his cat would have encountered a lot more hindrances!

Ves reluctantly dropped this unrealistic notion. If he wanted to hijack a ship, he had to do it the old-fashioned way. The Larkinson Clan in its current condition should already be capable of doing that as long as it faced a weaker opponent.

The two discussed a small portion of what needed to be done to ready the ships for travel. Of the four ships, the Blinding Banshee possessed the lowest volume due to her unusually narrow hull shape, so it wouldn't take as much time to bring her online.

It was a different story for the other starships. The Vivacious Wal was so wide and fat and contained so many different facilities that it would take tens of thousands of crew members a lot of time to get everything up and running.

Fortunately, the civilian orientation of the leisure and entertainment ship meant that most of her stations didn't have to be crewed by highly competent personnel. There was

already a large population of civilians in the Larkinson Clan who could easily transfer over to the Vivacious Wal in order to bring her to life.

The Vivacious Wal was exactly what the Larkinsons needed to feel more at home. While she was not exactly an ark ship, there was enough overlap that she could essentially fulfill the same purpose. The only major shortcoming was that she was not able to take on as many permanent residents as a true ark ship.

The Andrenidae was also a civilian vessel, but she required trained personnel to crew. The basic ship systems themselves weren't too complicated, but she carried a large capacity of bee-themed mining mechs that all had to be piloted by humans.

Interestingly enough, the bee-themed mining mechs were designed in a way that allowed mech pilots with very low genetic aptitudes to operate them without too many complications. After all, they weren't meant to participate in battles where quick reactions and lots of data processing were vital.

Ves knew that it was even possible to replace the bee mechs with shuttle-like vehicles that could be piloted by a small crew of norms or automated entirely. This reduced the demand on potentates but also came with an inevitable loss in efficiency.

For now, Ves wasn't sure whether to retain the mining mechs or replace them with mining shuttles. He supposed there ought to be enough dropouts and marginal cases to give them something useful to do. The clan might also want to allocate mech cadets to the worker bees in order to give them useful experience in handling real mechs under real conditions.

"Hmm, it doesn't matter too much right now... It's not as if we need to mine anything while we are still in the Milky Way."

#### *Chapter 3122: Ship Readiness*

The value of many industrial vessels such as the Andrenidae would not yet come into play unless the expeditionary fleet reached the Red Ocean.

Right now, the Larkinson Clan did not have to worry about being deprived of many essential resources. Even out here in the galactic rim, humanity had already been rooted here for several centuries. The local economy and infrastructure was well-developed and the Larkinsons could buy any readily available goods at any major port system.

In fact, the efficiency of many large scale mining, resource processing and production companies was so high that the Larkinsons would actually waste a lot more time and money trying to mine and process resources themselves!

Unless the markets became inaccessible for some reason, there was no reason for the Larkinson Clan to make immediate use of the Andrenidae.

In order for the ship to actually mine resources, the expeditionary fleet had to visit a remote or unclaimed star system that no existing state cared about. The fleet would then have to park in the same place for days or weeks, wasting precious time that it could have used to reach a beyonder gate sooner.

The clan would essentially squander much more time and money trying to mine its own ores than just purchasing them from the market!

One of the few instances where the opportunity cost of excavating resources was lower than the cost of trying to buy it from another source was when the expeditionary fleet finally roamed the Red Ocean.

While a huge batch of colonization fleets were already trying to erect their settlements and build up their industrial infrastructure, it would still take many decades before the various markets reached maturity.

In fact, the supply of raw materials would likely be limited for a very long time as all of those rapidly-expanding colonies required huge amounts of building materials to grow as quickly as possible.

The colonies that grew the fastest would not only be able to exert more power in their local surroundings, but also bring them a lot closer to the threshold where they could turn into actual states!

Faced with so much competition for resources, the rationale for owning and operating an expensive capital-grade mining ship like the Andrenidae made a lot more sense.

The time needed to complete the journey to the nearest beyonder gate also gave the Larkinson Clan ample time to get the Andrenidae up and running. By the time they finally ventured into the deeper parts of the Red Ocean, the capital mining ship should be capable of operating at full efficiency, or close to it at the very least.

In contrast to the Andrenidae, there were other vessels that should be able to prove their worth on a much faster timeframe.

He directed his attention to the Discentibus. The oddly-named capital ship was actually the least impressive out of the four.

The Blinding Banshee was like a long and dark needle that could easily prick an unsuspecting target.

The Vivacious Wal was like a boisterous vacation destination packaged in a fat metal hull.

The Andrenidae was like a giant beehive that accommodated a formidable amount of specialist worker bees.

As for the Discentibus...

The ship's appearance was too generic in his eyes. The capital-grade academy ship adopted a typical oval shape that aimed to maximize the internal volume with the least amount of resources.

The Discentibus was neither too fast, too slow, too big, too small or too fragile. She could take a few hits, but she was no brawler and shouldn't even be exposed to enemy fire to begin with. While her ample spaces could be filled with combat mechs, they were actually supposed to accommodate training mechs.

"This will become the new home for my Chirons." Ves smiled in satisfaction.

While the Chiron was nowhere near as impressive as the Ferocious Piranha and the Transcender Punisher, Ves had never forgotten about its incredible value.

The Larkinson mech academies were filled with praise for this highly-adaptable living training tool. Any mech cadet who piloted a Chiron advanced their skills significantly faster than those who had yet to receive one. There were many indicators that the next generation of Larkinson mech pilots would substantially be able to surpass the current generation by a noticeable margin.

Not only would the average quality of future Larkinson mech pilots go up, but Ves also guessed that the Chiron's influence on them might increase the chance that they would develop spiritual potential!

The reason for that was that people in their teens and twenties had the highest chance of acquiring spiritual potential, thereby separating themselves from the masses and acquiring the most essential qualification for them to become extraordinary.

Ves wasn't sure what factors increased the chances of people developing their spiritual potential, but he guessed it had something to do with the richness and fullness of their lives as well as other factors that influenced strong emotions such as pressure, ambition and maybe even fear.

Though all of this sounded rather incoherent, the point was that spiritual potential shouldn't come from nowhere. It had to exist for a reason, and he did not believe it was entirely dependent on genetics or other uncontrollable variables.

In order to learn more about the nature of spiritual potential, Ves essentially treated the Chiron as a large-scale experiment on this topic. By subjecting lots of young and impressionable mech cadets to a living mech model that constantly exposed them to

Goldie's direct influence, he expected that at least some of that would pass on and linger inside the heads of the growing youths.

Of course, if a proper scientific panel ever took a look at his experiment, Ves would probably be arrested and tried for subjecting thousands of childrens to unknown and potentially dangerous stimuli! Even if this experiment turned out to be safe, he would still be sanctioned because he did not sufficiently address the possibility of harm to his test subjects!

He smirked. "It's a good thing I don't have to answer to such a panel."

Perhaps a group of senior scientists aboard the Dragon's Den had already formed an ethical discussion panel or the like, but Ves had no reason to put himself at the mercy of his own underlings.

The point of leading his own clan was to put himself at the very top! The rules he established for the clan was meant to control his subordinates, not himself!

He stopped considering this matter and turned his attention back to the ships. When he inquired how much time it would take for him to be able to visit the vessels, he heard that it would take at least several weeks.

"We don't know whether any of the capital ships are safe, sir. While we can afford to risk the lives of our regular clansmen, we cannot put you at risk. You're safest when you stay aboard the Spirit of Bentheim."

That meant that Ves could only admire the new capital ships from afar.

In fact, the clan didn't even think it was safe to put them right in the middle of the Larkinson fleet. The new acquisitions had to be parked a small distance away so that if they ever ran out of control and tried to ram into the hull of another ship, the Larkinsons would at least have plenty of time to react.

Time passed by as many Larkinsons became extremely busy. There were countless tasks that needed to be done.

While Ves continued to develop his crystal rifle concept, the four huge vessels that had more than doubled the amount of capital ships in the hands of the Larkinson Clan turned into hives of activity.

Hundreds of shuttles and transports docked with the capital ships in order to offload goods, equipment and personnel.

The demand for manpower was so great that the clan even had to expand and accelerate its recruitment activities.

Fortunately, Talulah Silver was a prosperous moon hub that hosted many trained and qualified personnel. Though the loyalty of those who accepted the offers of employment were always suspect, the Larkinsons didn't worry about this problem at all. It would always become obvious whether the newcomers had malicious intentions in mind.

The only snag was that they weren't the only ones recruiting. The Larkinson Clan not only had to compete against other organizations looking to bolster their security forces or something, but also had to compete against its own allies!

Now that the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan acquired their kinship networks, they no longer had to waste a lot of effort on verifying the backgrounds and testing the loyalty of their potential recruits. They could just sweep the Glory Torch or the Cross of Rebirth in their direction and allow the spirits associated with the relics to uncover the truth in an instant.

Fortunately, the recruiting goals of the three partners of the Golden Skull Alliance did not completely overlap.

The Glory Seekers mainly sought women who were attracted to the Hexer ideology. Even though a lot of people hated the Hegemony and its people, there were quite a lot of female supremacists in every state who actually thought it was a good idea to join a club of women who actively opposed equality!

The Cross Clan was a bit more troublesome to the Larkinsons because they claimed a large chunk of military veterans who were attracted to a more overt martial culture. There was a simplistic, one-dimensional appeal to joining a brotherhood that was largely centered around war and glory.

The success of the former left the Larkinson Clan with a much smaller proportion of former military personnel than it liked. The only reason why this wasn't a bigger deal was because it already had more mech pilots than mechs.

The new capital ships were mainly civilian in nature and didn't have to be crewed by former servicemen. The staffing of the four recently-acquired ships progressed quite briskly, though it would still take several more rounds of recruitment in order to fill up all of the stations.

"It is impressive how fast our clan is growing." Shederin Purnesse commented as he observed a projection that displayed all of the local traffic. "A jump from three to seven capital ships represents a major leap. With at least two more capital ships on the way, we have already formed a solid core to enter the Red Ocean."

"Only a handful of them are suitable for battle." General Verle replied as he stood next to the older man. "Time is running out. We need to get our hands on a fleet carrier or at the very least a mass conveyor in order to carry enough mechs to defend our fleet. Have you found any leads?"

The chief diplomat shook his head. "I have made no progress on that front and I don't expect that will change. I'm sorry, General, but those who possess either type of vessels will never sell them. Even centuries-old hulls that should ordinarily be retired from service and sold to ship resellers such as Semdam and Sons are being forcibly retained in order to provide more security to their owners."

The military leader expected as much. Though he heard many good things about Shederin Purnesse, there was only so much that talk could accomplish.

The Vandal inside his heart urged him to go out and conquer the ships they needed, but this was a stupid notion.

Attacking a fleet without a good reason would brand them as pirates.

While it was much more acceptable to attack known criminal groups, they tended to be poor and greedy for money. These scoundrels would never waste their money, effort and time on operating a slow and expensive capital ship, much less specialized vessels such a fleet carrier or a mass conveyor!

"We need to develop our own shipbuilding capabilities." General Verle stated.

"One day, general. One day we can make that possible. The Red Ocean imposes many limitations on pioneers, but simultaneously grants a lot of opportunities to them... We must work hard to navigate the dangers and find our own chances."

#### *Chapter 3123: Powerful Impression*

Though the new capital ships needed a lot of work to reach their full potential, Ves felt a lot more relieved now that his fleet made a huge advance.

He no longer had to worry about lacking sufficient capital ships to explore the Red Ocean. In fact, he suffered from the opposite problem now. Space for capital ships was rapidly running out, especially considering that the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan were working hard to expand their own lineup.

"We also have to scrounge enough merits to justify this expansion." Ves muttered as he considered what needed to be done.

The amount of MTA merits in possession of the Larkinson Clan hadn't changed. Even though the Crossers agreed to give them two of their precious ship slots, there still wasn't much room left for expansion unless Ves or other Larkinsons managed to contribute a lot to the Mech Trade Association.

Ves even felt tempted to 'donate' some of his less valuable trade secrets in order to alleviate this need. Teaching the MTA new tricks on how to design better mechs was a guaranteed way to earn a lot of merits!

With Master Willix on his side, he would be certain that his exclusive insights and methods would earn him a handsome payday.

He was very reluctant to resort to this option, though. Not only was much of his valuable knowledge tied to his spiritual prowess, he didn't want to give away his competitive advantages.

Not only that, he didn't want to attract too much attention from the MTA. While Master Willix was willing to cover for him, she could only do so much. The Association is way too big for any Master or Star Designer to dominate its decision making.

It was much different from his own clan where he still held a lot of sway even with future reforms in mind.

All of these worries caused him to leave the option of donating his knowledge as a measure of last resort. There were way too many risks and dangers for him to safely exchange his secrets on living mechs for a quick and easy bag of MTA merits.

"Besides, who knows how many merits I can get. If the MTA doesn't understand my theories or can't put them to use, then I might not even be able to earn more than a million MTA merits!"

A million MTA merits was a huge sum for most people but peanuts for Ves. He really needed to find an opportunity to earn a large amount of merits at once, but he didn't have much luck on that front.

Time was running out and Ves really had to find a way to make actual progress. He looked down at his current handiwork.

The latest iteration of his crystal rifle looked more resplendent and packed more power than ever. It was already a lot closer to the model that he intended to pair with the Sentry Project.

"Would the MTA give me a lot of merits if I teach them about luminar technology?"

Though the same concerns still applied, Ves wasn't as possessive about innovations related to luminar crystals.

No matter what the MTA knew about the crystals, Ves didn't mind as it wasn't directly related to his core advantages. Living mechs and man-machine symbiosis were his bread and butter.

Even if someone stole his research on luminar crystals and came up with a better application, Ves would just steal it back and use it for himself!

Still, there was a big problem with this scheme. Most of his valuable insights on luminar crystals were too intertwined with spiritual energy. He had to develop a non-spiritual improvement first before he could hand it over to the MTA for his reward.

"Ugh, that will also take a while."

There were more ways to earn MTA merits. Ves could even rely on talented personnel such as Ketis to give him a hand, though to be honest his fellow Larkinsons might not be able to provide much help at this stage.

The entire Larkinson Clan was still too young and immature to be ready for the challenges that lay ahead. The only reason why it managed to make good progress was because Ves was practically dragging the Larkinsons forward by force.

The clan was too dependent on him and his work. While this was good for maintaining his primacy over the Larkinsons, it also tired him out. He felt an increasing desire to raise other Larkinsons up so that they could share the burden.

"Why should I do everything myself?"

If possible, he even wanted to pass on his work on luminar crystal technology to others. He should be spending more time on designing better living mechs, not better energy weapons.

He began to understand the perspective of Seniors and Masters more and more. They were capable of accomplishing many great feats, but as incredible as they seemed, they were just individual persons.

The only way for them to get more work done was to take on students and build a network of helpers that could assist them in their research and development activities.

When Ves thought about who he could employ to help him, his thoughts wandered over to two specific individuals.

"Hey, don't I have two students already?"

Though he hadn't paid too much attention to Mikael and Zanthar Larkinsons, the two students were well on their way to mastering the fundamentals of second-class mech design.

According to his recollection, the two young men were not ready yet to design their first mechs, but they should at least possess enough basic scientific knowledge to start following actual mech designers as they went about their work.

Ves developed a bright idea all of a sudden. He activated his comm and summoned someone to his personal workshop.

A short time went by before a younger Larkinson entered the workshop. Zanthar meekly walked over to Ves and awkwardly adjusted his Larkinson uniform.

"You called, teacher?"

"Yes. Before I begin to talk about the reason why I've invited you here, let me check your progress. What kind of courses have you completed recently and how much progress have you made on developing your main research interest?"

Zanthar had already completed a lot of essential courses that any decent mech designer had to know. He knew how to work with mechanical and electrical systems, he knew how to design a very simplified mech from start to finish and he even learned some modern techniques that mech designers only made use of in the last few decades.

With at least two or three more years of study, Zanthar would be well equipped to become an independent mech designer.

"I've been studying the mechanisms of a lot of ranged weapons for mechs." He perked up a bit now that he was talking about his interests. "There are so many different weapon types in existence that I just want to build all of them! It's so infuriating to know that first-class mechs can make use of even more amazing and exotics weapon systems that we won't be able to get our hands on at our current state."

Ves raised his eyebrow. "What kind of weapons did you study in more detail, then?"

"Oh, just the basics. I started off with studying ballistic rifles and laser rifles. They're nice, but they don't pack as much power as the advanced weapon systems. I quickly moved over to kinetic rifles and gauss rifles. They're really fun and their principles are really easy to understand."

"It's simple electromagnetism." Ves nodded in agreement. "Every high school graduate is able to understand that running a current through a coil will generate a magnetic field. Make the coil large enough and crank up the current high enough and you get a solid projectile delivery system that can ruin the day of any mech or ship!"

"Still, there are a lot more details and nuances about gauss rifles that I still need to master. All of the forces these weapons are subjected to means they have to be strong and well-designed. You need to combine a lot of different materials with different strengths and weaknesses and combine them into a weapon that can channel enough power to destroy a mech without breaking apart in the process."

While Ves was interested in how much progress Zanthar had made on this front, that was not his goal today.

"What about your energy weapon studies? Have you spent any time studying more advanced energy weapons?"

"Of course! I haven't made that much progress, though. Plasma weapons sound simple but they're even worse than gauss rifles when it comes to making sure that none of the weapons break. I've been pouring a lot of time into figuring out positron rifles. It's really amazing to imagine how much power we are harnessing by generating and shooting out a bunch of antimatter."

Positron weapons required a lot more engineering to design and make than laser weapons, but most people considered it worth the effort. It was not without reason that positron rifles replaced laser rifles as the energy weapon of choice for second-class mechs.

Of course, it was not that difficult to combine the two into a single combined rifle. The weapon would just become a little bulkier and the effectiveness of either types of damage outputs would decrease.

Seeing that Zanthar still possessed a liking for energy weapons made Ves relieved. He was afraid the kid would fall in love with missiles or something.

Ves slapped his palm on top of the crystal laser rifle that he had placed on the work table. "Do you know what this is, my student?"

The kid could not have possibly missed such an eye-catching piece of equipment. He had been throwing fascinated glances at it for a while.

"Uhhh... it's an energy weapon?"

"Good guess, kid. It's a concept weapon that I have developed for the Sentry Project. If everything goes well, I can use it as a model for the main armament of a laser rifleman mech!"

Zanthar widened his eyes. "You mean..."

Ves held up the hefty crystal rifle in his hands and lifted it up and down as if it was a stick.

"It's not an exact representation of an expert mech weapon. The scale is too small and numerous key materials and components are missing. However, handling and firing this weapon will give you a reasonable impression on how the Sentry Project will perform in battle."

The student couldn't keep his eyes off the impressive weapon. Its crystalline construction caused it to reflect and glint in the light.

"Would you like to test fire it, Zanthar?"

"What?! Is that safe?"

"I have already tested this weapon numerous times." Ves reassured him. "I have also scanned it to make sure that nothing has broken in the process. Come on. Just try it out, It will be fun!"

Even if anything went wrong, it wouldn't be Ves who suffered. He planned to stand safely behind an armored enclosure.

It didn't take long for Zanthar's desires to overtake his caution. He quickly took hold of the weapon even as Ves gave him a brief reminder on weapon safety and equipment handling. He also had to wear protective goggles in order to protect his eyes.

When Zanthar took the hefty rifle over to the test firing range, he carefully pressed the stock to his shoulder and took up a proper firing stance.

"Fire!"

PZZZBOOMPH!

The bright and powerful beam that spat from the rifle actually missed the target dummy that Zanthar had been aiming at. Instead, the straight white beam instantly struck the thick wall behind the target.

Upon impact, the beam did not sear the wall with an excessive transfer of thermal energy.

Instead, a giant physical explosion took place as the beam transferred an overload of physical energy against the obstacle. Complicated reactions and interactions that flew right above Zanthar's head ensured that a loud boom occurred that was also accompanied by a blinding flash of light!

His ears became buffeted by loud pressure waves that shouldn't have been unleashed by a beam energy weapon!

Once the aftermath of his shot had died down, Zanthar opened his eyes and gaped in amazement at the large crater that his weapon had left behind on the thick protective wall.

"This is just the beginning, Zanthar." Ves grinned and stated. "The crystal rifle can fire other types of beams."

"H...How many?"

"At least six, and that is not even the complete story. I can load in other crystals in the rifle that can enable the weapon to fire other powerful beams!"

Zanthar had never heard about this kind of weapon system. The gauss rifles and positron rifles were incredibly primitive by comparison.

It didn't take long for him to become completely enamored with the weapon he had just fired!

*Chapter 3124: Just Another Choice*

When Ves introduced luminar crystal rifles to Zanthar, the mech design student immediately became hooked.

Under careful instruction, the younger Larkinson eagerly explored the limitless possibilities of this new weapon system.

With the help of the revolver mechanism along with the possibility to open up the chamber in order to load a completely different set of crystals, Zanthar's eyes grew wider and wider behind his goggles as the weapon in his hand disgorged beams with different effects!

From producing plain old-fashioned laser beams to creating more exotic twisting light streaks, the latest iteration of Ves' crystal testing rifle completely overshadowed any other weapon that the kid had handled.

The exotic appearance of the weapon in question also helped with making it seem special. The fusion between the alien tech base that was responsible for synthesizing the remarkable crystals and the human engineering approach that combined all of these capabilities into a powerful, efficient weapon system completely blew other comparable out of the water!

Though there were plenty of weapons like the Amastendira that possessed much more firepower, the difference in cost and tech level was too great. For someone who never personally experienced the grandeur of first-class weapons, the crystal rifle that he held in his hands was leagues ahead of any kinetic or laser rifle he wielded during training sessions.

"I love this weapon! Why haven't I heard about it? What's with these strange runes? Where is all of the metal?"

Ves patiently answered Zanthar's questions one by one, though he had to dumb down his explanations considerably.

He not only did that in order to account for Zanthar's competencies, but also wanted to entice his student into following up on the material he received.

It was bad practice to just give any mech designer what he needed straight away. Good mech designers achieved success by channeling their own desires to summon the motivation required to delve into difficult studies.

What Ves sought was to entice Zanthar into embracing luminar crystal technology from the bottom of his heart. Since the student already expressed a strong interest in powerful weapon systems, it was not hard to direct him into a specific direction.

Just as expected, the more Ves teased his protégé with the endless potential of luminar crystals, the more Zanthar developed the desire to grasp this tech for himself!

By the time Zanthar had to put the crystal rifle down due to concerns about its integrity after repeated powerful discharges, his eyes burned with passion.

Ves already knew without asking that he succeeded in seducing Zanthar to the wonders of luminar crystal technology.

Compared to other weapons in the same class, the luminar crystal rifle was not only more powerful and efficient, but could reproduce many different damage types and beam effects just by switching out the active firing crystal!

This was the main strength of the luminar crystal rifle system. Even if other advances in weapons technology allowed standard weapons such as laser rifles or gauss rifles to deal twice as much damage, the luminar crystal rifle still maintained its relevance due to its versatile damage output.

Of course, it was not as if luminar crystals couldn't take advantage of the same advancements in weapons technology as well. As an energy weapon, a portion of the innovations that improved the performance of laser rifles and positron rifles could also be applied to luminar crystal rifles!

For any function where conventional human weapon parts performed better, Ves could just employ that in his crystal rifle design. For any function where a specialized luminar crystal could do a better job, he could use that instead!

The crystal rifle he designed was not some sort of mysterious alien enigma. It was just a relatively shallow attempt at adapting luminar crystal technology to existing energy rifle designs. By utilizing the same existing framework that humanity was already familiar with, Ves and any other weapon developers could easily mix and match between different modular components to design their desired weapon models.

Although Ves had the feeling that he was utilizing luminar crystals differently from the luminars, who tended to create bigger, more complex crystals that were capable of displaying full functionality on their own, he lacked the knowledge to replicate these greater accomplishments.

Instead of blindly following the footsteps of these aliens, Ves saw greater value in trying to extract the best and most practical applications of luminar crystal technology in human weapon design.

Whether Zanthar opted to follow this same route or try to delve into the greater mysteries of luminar crystal technology, that was his choice to make. All Ves expected from his student was to obtain stronger, more efficient and more practical luminar crystal weapon systems in the future.

Of course, there was no guarantee that Zanthar would stick to this choice, but Ves felt that was very unlikely. Now that the kid had become hooked on luminar crystal rifles, it would likely be extremely difficult for any other conventional weapon system to drag his attention away from the exotic alien tech!

"I want to learn more about how this weapon works! Can you teach me what I need to know to make them myself?" Zanthar pleaded to Ves.

"Whoa there, slow down, kid." Ves gently raised his palm. "You need to graduate first before I can teach you properly. You'll need to take extra courses in subjects such as physics, crystallography, energy weapon principles, laser rifle design, heat-resistant materials, conductors, energy storage and a dozen other fields just to reach the starting line. After that, I can only help you get ahead for a little while. To be honest, my mastery in luminar crystal technology is quite shallow due to the difficulty of understanding how their internal circuitry works. We're working with genuine alien tech here, so there are no human experts or source materials that can clarify the secrets of luminar crystals."

Zanthar frowned and his eagerness faded a little. "What do I have to do, then?"

"You do what any other mech designer chooses when faced with a gap in existing human understanding. You go ahead and perform your own research!" Ves answered with a smile.

"This... isn't this a job that is more suited to those who specialize in studying alien tech?" Zanthar asked. He had obviously become intimidated by the prospect of diving head-first into this bottomless rabbit hole.

"Technology is technology, Zanthar. It is not a goal in itself, but merely a tool to make the mechs we want to bring into reality. That said, mech designers like us must master all the relevant tools of our craft in order to surpass our competition and bring value to the mech community. Whether you study existing alien technology or a brand new field that is untouched by any sentient in the galaxy, it doesn't matter as long as you can plug it into a mech!"

Ves didn't want the kid he was hoodwinking to get scared away by the challenge of studying alien technology. This was why he took the time to spin a random inspirational

story. He didn't want his future helper to stray away from developing new applications of luminar crystal technology!

"While it might seem that humanity has studied every possible field of science, the truth is that there are still plenty of gaps in our common understanding of reality." He elaborated. "Mech designers like myself aren't content with this. We hold dreams and ambitions that are beyond the current capabilities of the mech industry. This means that we inevitably have to step outside our comfort zone and make our own discoveries no matter how difficult it sounds. While I do not know a lot about the luminar race, I can tell you that their signature technology is anything but simple. It will take a lifelong endeavor to reconstruct all of the applications that the luminar race had come up with. It will take an even greater effort to surpass the pinnacle of luminar works!"

Slowly but surely, Zanthar began to pay less attention to the monumental amount of effort and ingenuity required to unlock the secrets of advanced alien technology. Instead, Ves painted a grand picture of a pioneering scientist and mech designer who was able to change the direction of human technology forever while allowing it to advance by leaps and bounds!

In truth, the chances of this happening was almost zero. The more difficult the endeavor, the lower the chance of achieving a groundbreaking success.

Ves did not dare to hold too many expectations on Zanthar. As long as he made some accomplishments, his innovations could be readily applied to any LMC mech armed with ranged weapons.

Perhaps the subsequent generation of mech designers and specialists would be able to build from Zanthar's accomplishments and achieve even greater breakthroughs, but that would probably happen centuries later. For now, it was unrealistic to expect Zanthar to invent something substantially better in the medium term.

After answering a few more questions and assigning a raft of energy weapon-related courses, Ves shoed Zanthar out of his personal workshop.

Though Zanthar's enthusiasm had faded a bit during this meeting, Ves was certain that his approach would still lead his student to dedicating himself to this weapon system.

There was no other choice that was as powerful, as versatile, as exotic and as unique as luminar crystal weapons. It was a braindead choice to delve in for anyone looking to stand out from the crowd of other weapon-oriented mech designers.

Once Zanthar had left, Ves began to feel a bit uneasy.

"Did I make the right choice?" He asked himself.

When he first took Maikel and Zanthar under his wing, he vowed to nurture them in a way that would allow them to discover and pursue their own interests. Strictly speaking, Ves shouldn't have tried so hard to seduce Zanthar into following up on luminar crystal technology.

Ves knew exactly how to package luminar crystal technology in a way that would instantly capture the imagination of an impressionable young student.

Was he robbing Zanthar of the opportunity to find his own specialty? Was he setting the kid on a path that ultimately steered him away from his calling?

Ves shook his head. "I'm merely presenting him with a new option that falls in line with his existing interests."

Before this meeting, Zanthar had already familiarized himself extensively with the standard ranged weapons that were utilized by any second-class mechs. The LMC mechs as well as the large inventory of infantry weapons offered the student an extensive hands-on experience with how they performed and how they worked in reality.

What Ves had essentially done was to add another weapon system into Zanthar's life.

Ves did not literally command or order his student to specialize in luminar crystal technology. In fact, Zanthar could choose another specialty at any point if he wished.

"It would be a pity if he chose to dedicate his life to developing better gauss weapons when he never came in touch with luminar crystal weapons before this point. At least I've expanded his horizons and expanded his options!"

After alleviating his sense of guilt and convincing himself that he had done the right thing, he returned his attention to refining his crystal rifle concept.

At this stage, he was reasonably satisfied with the current state of his framework. What he needed to do next was to scale it up and see what needed to be adjusted in order to translate this infantry weapon into a mech weapon.

"I need to start making bigger crystals."

Ves did not look forward to this time-consuming chore. The larger crystals were also vastly more expensive due to the high-quality materials he needed to use in order to create a weapon system that was suitable for expert mechs.

"Still... as long as the power of this rifle scales in proportion to its size, then the damage it could do is astounding!"

And that was just the rifle in its base form. When augmented by prime resonance and true resonance, Ves could scarcely imagine how high the maximum output of the final product would reach!

### *Chapter 3125: Vivacious Wal*

Scaling up luminar crystal weapons came with considerable challenges.

It wasn't so bad at first. Ves first started with scaling up his standard assault rifles to heavy assault rifles.

The former was light enough to allow regular baseline humans to handle them without any significant hindrance. While the weapon was certainly a bit hefty, Zanthar didn't exhibit too many issues when he test-fired the standard rifle.

The latter only looked a bit longer and thicker, but its total volume had scaled up drastically. This caused the weapon to become very dense and heavy, so much so that even Ves felt uncomfortable with handling it despite his augmented strength.

It wasn't just the weight that made it difficult to handle. Its exaggerated proportions and its longer rifle barrel made it harder to balance it in a person's hands.

The truth was that the heavy variant was not meant to be wielded by ordinary people at all. Ves designed it to match the heavy rifles that were customarily assigned to infantry in medium and heavy combat armor.

Their augmented, powered suits of combat armor not only granted them the strength to carry these heavy weapons, but also provided them with a stable platform to utilize them in an effective manner.

When Ves made these larger rifles, he began to encounter new problems relating to scaling. Each of them required him to come up with solutions that were derived from multiple sources, such as his material understanding of the crystals to the insights on alien circuitry borrowed from the Illustrious One.

Alien circuitry patterns that worked for smaller crystals no longer functioned quite as well when applied to larger crystals.

The greater mass and volume of a crystal caused the effects of the circuitry to be diluted.

Ves couldn't solve this problem by engraving these crystals with larger circuitry. Luminar technology didn't seem to work that way. Instead, he had to channel the Illustrious One for long periods of time in order to come up with longer and more elaborate patterns that took the increased volume into account.

This was tedious work because every unique crystal design needed its own separate circuitry that was tailored to both its physical properties and its intended purpose. Two crystals with identical shapes could contain completely different circuitry if one was made for physical damage resistance and the other was made for heat absorption.

Still, as much as Ves lamented the time required to reconfigure the enlarged luminar crystals, the outcome was worth it as the heavy assault rifles packed a much greater punch than the original version.

The slicer beam even cut right through the dummy and the rear wall of the firing range! If not for the shield generator that Ves had installed as a precaution, the beam would have gone on to destroy the rack of equipment further in its path!

"Damn, I need to beef up the protections before I resume the tests!"

It didn't take much time for him to install additional slabs of metal in order to prevent the near-disaster from repeating. Ves also made sure he stayed further away and examined the tests from a much safer distance.

Ves spent an entire week tinkering with these heavy rifles. Even after creating the new circuitry for the enlarged crystals, he still encountered several issues that reduced the efficiency of the weapon or increased its power consumption beyond reason.

As much of the Larkinson Clan continued to work on making the Vivacious Wal, the Andrenidae, the Discentibus and the Blinding Banshee fit for travel, Ves practically spent his entire waking hours in his personal workshop as he became more fascinated by making significant improvements with each new heavy crystal rifle he designed and crafted.

He made sure to thoroughly detect and address every adverse change in performance from scaling up the crystal rifle design. This led him to produce a pile of expensive weapons.

Instead of disposing of them, Ves selected the best twelve heavy luminar crystal rifles and handed them over to his honor guard.

"Here you go. These rifles are leagues better than the ones you are currently using."

The honor guard were all happy with receiving their new weapons. Despite their experimental and uncertain reliability, the many tests that Ves had conducted over the past few days had fully proven how much firepower and versatility they possessed!

Though it was too laborious for Ves to equip all of the infantry soldiers with powerful handmade weapons, it was not a big deal for him to give his bodyguards an extra boost.

"Besides, strengthening my bodyguards will increase my safety. It is more than worth it to give them my attention."

Once he was satisfied that he had mastered the heavy rifle version of the luminar crystal rifle concept, he decided to scale it up another notch.

He did not move on to designing and creating mech-sized rifles just yet. Instead, he settled on a middle ground and created a weapon system that was too large and heavy to be wielded by infantry but could easily be mounted on shuttles.

The Larkinson Clan did not have a habit of mounting weapons onto shuttles, though, so it was likely that these guns would not be put to use. Ves therefore tried to make as little of them as possible.

"It costs exponentially more money and resources to make them as well." Ves frowned.

Just one of these guns used up enough materials to outfit his entire honor guard with heavy luminar crystal rifles!

The fact that Ves was trying to develop a high-quality rifle for an expert mech meant that he could not cheap out on materials. He needed to gain a greater understanding of all of the materials used to make the strongest and most potent crystals. He also had to familiarize himself with all of the properties of these types of crystals whether they were scaled for infantry soldiers or mechs.

Even though the LMC's Procurement Department kept complaining to him about how difficult it was to source more batches of the rare exotics that he was squandering, Ves didn't care too much.

The LMC could easily cover the cost and the Pelsa Ryndover System was a major port system that should be able to supply all of his needs.

Ves justified all of the expenditures by emphasizing the importance of a good rifle to an expert mech that was completely centered around ranged combat.

Of course, it was out of the question for him to test the performance of these big, powerful beasts in his personal workshop. He had to take the trouble to move them over to a more appropriate testing space to make his measurements and collect the data he needed to further his development process.

Since the Larkinson fleet was parked close to a busy trading hub, Ves did not feel it was wise to test it out in open space. Even if his mech forces could set up a strong interference field, there was still a possibility that an advanced observation post on the surface of Talulah Silver would be able to gather some interesting readings.

"Even if I don't intend to keep my crystal rifles a secret forever, there is no reason for me to show them off beforehand." He muttered.

After exploring his options, he decided to test out the new powerful crystal guns at the mech arena section of the Vivacious Wal.

Enough time had passed for the Larkinsons to make substantial progress in crewing and readying the leisure-oriented capital ship. While she wasn't quite spaceworthy yet, many of her essential functions had been checked and brought online with few issues.

Ves had always grown curious about what the latest capital ships were like. He was thoroughly familiar with the Spirit of Bentheim and visited the Graveyard and the Dragon's Den enough times to get a good feel of them both.

Each capital ship played a vital role to the Larkinson Clan. Ves could not afford to be too detached to any of them. While they weren't alive like his mechs, Ves still believed that every vessel possessed a heart and identity formed out of the people who crewed them and depended on their functions.

After he had made his decision, he made the arrangements and ignored the safety concerns.

The Larkinsons had yet to sweep the Vivacious Wal of security concerns, so there was no guarantee that it was safe for him to step aboard the vessels. However, the odds of something awful happening was so low that Ves did not allow himself to be intimidated from visiting one of his own ships!

"I can't avoid every possible risk because of an imaginary threat. I would have never gotten this far if I maintained a risk-averse outlook!"

Just to be certain, the clan thoroughly prepared for his visit. Calabast dispatched a lot of Black Cats to hastily sweep the vessel of potential security vulnerabilities while hundreds of extra elite Heavensword infantry soldiers boarded the vessel in advance to be on hand if any personal threats arose.

Of course, Ves didn't think that the latter was any useful. When he shuttled over to one of the hangar bays of the Vivacious Wal, he became very impressed by the discipline and strength exuded by the guards.

The most notable aspect about them was that they carried swords as well as rifles. While these swords were all resting securely in their scabbards, Ves briefly imagined what it would be like to be stormed by a hundred copies of Ketis.

If any of these soldiers managed to get close, they could probably slaughter any other infantry troop!

"Getting close is not easy, though." Ves muttered.

Though he was aware that the combat armor of the Heavensworders possessed powerful boosters and other mobility enhancements that could help them close the gap, it was not that practical to rely on them all the time.

Ves no longer paid attention to them and instead directed his attention to the rest of the ship.

Since this was his first tour of a newly-acquired capital ship, he decided to request the company of Vivian Tsai.

The chief ship designer of the Larkinson Clan had already visited the vessel multiple times and was thoroughly familiar with the capital ship's design.

"As you can see from the bright and colorful interior, we are currently on the Joyful Side of this ship." She explained as they walked forward under escort. "The interior design is geared towards providing a comfortable, family-friendly environment that excels at reducing stress. For this reason, the original designers of this ship have tried to avoid as many distracting and discordant elements as possible in the public areas. Peace and harmony are central to this side."

That had become more evident as soon as they stepped into the corridors. Distracting signs and markings were kept to a minimum. Pastel colors such as pale yellow, light blue, baby pink and other airy tints dominated the spaces and made him feel as if he entered an amusement park.

There was plenty of greenery as well. Botanical parks not only offered ample space for humans to connect with nature, but also provided enough room for children to run around and play as if they were genuinely residing in an outdoor environment.

"It feels a bit empty and hollow here, though." Ves commented.

The parks and so on looked nice, but it was a bit too cold and artificial to his liking.

"Ah, that is because this park is meant to be populated by a self-sustaining population of animals and non-aggressive exobeasts. Once we have filled up these parks and other areas with cuddly beasts, the Joyful Side will become a much greater attraction to visitors."

That reminded him of his visit to Felixia. He could never forget the joy of being able to interact with all of those clever cats that resided in the more touristy areas of the cat-themed planet.

What made the Vivacious Wal even more remarkable was that she possessed more similarities to Felixia.

Just like the cat planet, the entertainment ship featured expansive fighting and hunting grounds on her other side. Once Ves had his fill of this warm and cuddly side of the Vivacious Wal, he enthusiastically headed over to the more exciting side...

### *Chapter 3126: Twilight City*

Ves and Vivian Tsai were currently trekking through a tropical forest biome. The simulated ground environment was so realistic that both of them experienced considerable discomfort.

The thick brushes, the humid air, the thick tree cover, the altered gravity, the buzzing mosquitoes and uneven footing all reinforced the impression that they were no longer on a starship.

If the Larkinsons deposited unconscious prisoners into one of the large hunting biomes of the Vivacious Wal, the poor fellows would probably become completely convinced that they had been dumped on an actual planet!

Still, the realism did not provide Ves with a comfortable touring experience. Even though his smart uniform shielded him from many discomforts and his augmented body could endure all of the rigors, he did not particularly feel any nostalgia about experiencing a real planetary environment.

His last visit to a real planet ended with the short but destructive rampage of a massive biojuggernaut, after all. A lot of things seemed to go wrong every time he visited a planet. This only reinforced his desire to stay on a ship, preferably a familiar one like the Spirit of Bentheim.

"As you can see, the biomes are quite large and extensive." Vivian said. "While their vertical height is not that impressive, the ship still offers ample room for landbound mechs and low-flying aerial mechs to fight to their heart's content. The Vivacious Wal's hull is specifically taller than other capital ships in order to accommodate several stacking layers of fighting biomes. And before you ask, each layer is separated by thick metal layers that can endure a lot of punishment. As long as the mechs inside do not focus their fire on any section, it is unlikely that any holes will form between the decks. Any damaged sections can easily be repaired and replaced with any materials that we have on hand."

Though the ceiling depicted a simulated sky that did not give out a hint of a barrier, there was definitely a limit to how high stuff could go. This was the biggest flaw to these simulated environments and imposed heavy limits on aerial mechs looking to make full use of their maneuverability.

The mech training environments of the Discentibus imposed similar limitations. Aerial mech pilots stuck in space still had to undergo extensive simulation training if they wished to get more familiar with how to move their machines in an aerial environment.

Still, something was better than nothing. Even giving aerial mech pilots a small taste of what it was like to fly a real mech under atmospheric conditions would go a long way in preparing them for a real aerial deployment.

Once they ended this short and rather boring tour, Ves and Vivian exited the hunting and training biomes and moved over to a more interesting urban environment.

Much like the artificial city on the eight deck of the Spirit of Bentheim, the Vivacious Wal featured her own city environment. In fact, the capital ship featured two separate cities.

Unlike the bright and modern city on the Joyful Side, the one on the Feral Side deliberately looked grittier and outdated. The lower lighting levels along with the brightly-colored advertisements made it seem as if the visitors had entered a dystopian city that looked as if it came straight out of a contemporary thriller drama!

"The vibe here is completely different from any city that I have ever visited." Ves said. "I like the novelty, though I'm not sure if it is good to expose our own clansmen to this kind of environment."

"Not everyone will feel at home in Dawn City over on the Joyful Side, sir. Twilight City is designed to serve as a deliberate contrast. It looks worse because you have just visited the brighter city a short time ago. On its own, Twilight City is explicitly designed to evoke more primal and baser needs. The level of decay is carefully controlled to manipulate visitors into lowering their inhibitions and unleashing their repressed urges. While you can argue that it is not proper for them to lose control at all, it is better for our clansmen to use the Feral Side of the Vivacious Wal as an outlet of their emotions than anywhere else. Twilight City offers enough bars, casinos, nightclubs and even fighting arenas to make people fully satisfied once they leave."

Since someone decided it was worth it to build an entire capital ship around this notion, there had to be at least some basis to this notion.

As they continued to walk alongside the avenues of Twilight Cities, they saw a shadow of what might become a famed and prosperous city in the future.

Right now, the Larkinsons were still setting everything up. The people who volunteered or had been assigned to work aboard the Vivacious Wal had to do a lot of work to bring the shops and entertainment facilities back to life. Even when all of that was done, these places still wouldn't see much use unless at least tens of thousands of visitors began to visit the Vivacious Wal on a regular basis.

In order to give every Larkinson enough opportunities to enjoy some leisure time aboard the Vivacious Wal, the entire clan had to set up a rotation schedule where those who deserved to enjoy a vacation could visit the leisure ship without leaving their old ships hanging.

The clan would probably have to expand to at least 300,000 or 500,000 members in order for Dawn City and Twilight City to truly come into their own, and that only counted for their most central districts.

It was quite amazing to imagine how a single capital ship could accommodate two large cities at once, but that was what huge vessels were capable of. As long as everyone conveniently forgot about the fact that the tallest structures weren't actually that high, Ves could easily imagine many permanent residents beginning to see the cities as a separate space altogether.

"Let's head somewhere more exciting." Ves suggested.

One of the most interesting places aboard the Vivacious Wal was the dedicated mech arena that was situated in the center of Twilight City.

It was quite obvious that the designers of the city considered the mecha arena to be the heart of the Feral Side of the Vivacious Wal. The thick, imposing structure featured a large and wide center space that offered enough room to hold several smaller duels at once.

If more space was called for, then the barriers between the smaller arenas could be retracted in order to form ample space for group combat or less restrained mech duels.

An ample amount of thick and solid walls along with a plentiful amount of shield generators ensured that none of the attacks of the mechs would hit the spectators of the matches. Ves was quite happy to see that there were several layers of redundancy.

Ves met with a surprising pair of people while he toured the mech arena.

"Oh hey, Ves." Director Raella Larkinson of the Larkinson Mech Games Circuit greeted as she was studying a projection of the arena. "I heard you were stopping by. Do you like what you see?"

"I'm quite impressed, but it is difficult to know how boisterous it will be when everything is fully up and running."

"I'm sure the sights here will not disappoint you. Now that I can finally turn some of my plans into reality, our clan will finally have the dedicated show it needs to keep every mech fanatic in our ranks happy!" Raella grinned.

"I wish I could compete in the arena as well." Her boyfriend sighed as he wistfully looked out into the empty fighting ring. "I'm sure I could have beaten every other Larkinson and claim my trophy if I had the chance to participate."

"You're an expert candidate now! Have some dignity, Vincent!"

It was a long time since Ves last saw Vincent in person. Even though he managed to advance to expert candidate, it didn't appear as if he had gained any professionalism out of it. The only noticeable change in his appearance was the slightly larger bulge between his legs.

Ves tried very hard not to turn his eyes downwards.

"Do you have any requests or feedback about the mech arena, director?" Vivian asked.

Raella looked thoughtful. "Hmmm. I would prefer to have more arenas, but I'm already happy with what we have. The only difficult problem I have right now is finding enough competitors to keep this place busy. Since it is not possible for us to retain a group of full-time professional mech athletes, we have to invite volunteers from the various mech forces. It will be quite a pain to schedule matches and conduct regular league matches around FTL travel and existing commitments."

Even though the Vivacious Wal offered a lot of space, at this stage the Larkinson Clan could not afford to waste any time on useless competition mechs that held little practical value on the battlefield.

The competitive scene had to wait until the Larkinson Clan gained a solid footing in the Red Ocean before it could form a more dedicated and professional array of teams.

None of this was of particular concern to Ves. It was the responsibility of Raella and other people to figure out how to deal with these matters.

Ves did not forget about his original purpose.

"Let's put the safety measures of this arena to the test." He proposed. "I just brought an experimental new weapon that needs to be tested in a safe and solid environment."

They quickly prepared the test run by clearing and prepping the arena. The managers and technicians brought several shield generators to full power in anticipation of blocking a powerful attack.

Since these shield generators were rated to resist crashing mechs, if only momentarily, they should fully be capable of blocking a shot from the vehicle-sized luminar crystal cannon!

Even so, a lot of people began to grow a little nervous once the exotic-looking weapon was mounted to a firing platform placed in the middle of the mech arena.

Vincent loudly whistled once he saw the weapon. "That's an impressive gun! When will you hand out all of this bling to our mechs?"

"Not anytime soon." Ves flatly answered.

He quickly proceeded with the test by pressing the remote fire button.

TZZZT!

A bright flash and a loud zapping noise sounded out as the experimental crystal weapon unleashed a bright light beam that crashed straight into the multiple layers of energy shields that encapsulated the mech arena!

Surprisingly enough, the relatively small cannon managed to pierce through the initial shield layer and inflicted severe damage against the second shield layer!

"Damn, how come this small cannon is so powerful?!"

Though part of the reason why the crystal cannon was able to break a shield so easily was because it concentrated its attack output on a single point, that did not detract from the fact that the weapon managed to inflict a high amount of damage while remaining quite compact!

In fact, Ves could even adapt the current crystal cannon into a long, mech-sized pistol that matched well with light mechs such as the Dark Zephyr.

The only issue with that was that such a luminal crystal pistol would not be able to sustain such a high output of damage for long if the mech wasn't able to supply an abundant amount of energy.

The Sentry Project was designed to accommodate a large quantity of high-capacity energy cells, so it was able to maintain the output of a full-sized rifle for quite some time, but melee mechs such as the Dark Zephyr were much worse off in this regard.

Even though the crystal cannon only fired once, Ves was more than happy with the damage of its full-powered shot. Once he scaled up the crystal weapon one more time, the Sentry Project would probably be able to break through all of the protective layers of the mech arena with a single casual strike!

In fact, if the expert rifleman mech changed the attack phase of its crystal rifle to a disruptor beam, it could shred through even stronger shields and energy barriers!

*Chapter 3127: Crystal Potential*

The tests that Ves performed aboard the Vivacious Wal yielded plenty of useful results.

Not only did Ves gather a heap of new data on how a shuttle-sized crystal cannon performed, he also tested the defensive properties of the entertainment ship's shield generators in the process.

Due to obvious reasons, the short-ranged shield generators were mostly optimized to resist physical damage.

After all, no one wanted a mech to crash right out of the ring and slam against the stands where thousands of spectators were seated to enjoy the action up close. A mech arena would quickly go out of business if even one accident occurred, and if such a catastrophe took place here, Raella's entire venture might collapse overnight!

This was why she reacted with considerable dismay when she saw that the shield generators were already straining to contain the firepower of a single discharge of the crystal cannon.

"If bigger versions of these crystal weapons become standard-issue in our clan, then it will become a lot harder to hold matches safely. I guess we'll have to stick with fielding purpose-built arena mechs that are weaker and lighter than standard mechs."

Her boyfriend didn't care about that at the moment. He only had eyes for the incredible firepower shown by the new weapon.

"I like this gun!" Vincent enthusiastically grinned. "You should install like a dozen of them on a single mech! No wait, it'll be even better if you make it really huge so that a single mech can blast a hole through any mech no matter how tough it is! It'll be like one of those Eternal Redemptions from the Penitent Sisters but much easier to land a hit at a distance!"

Thinking about the Eternal Redemption which had yet to see any action made Ves feel a bit of pity. The cannoner mech design that Ves had finished some time ago was armed with a large and powerful gauss cannon. The mech designed exclusively for the Penitent Sisters possessed top-notch single-shot firepower and physical impact, but that was before Ves conceived of this new weapon system.

Now that he was close to developing a powerful and versatile luminar crystal weapon system that had the option to deliver a lot of kinetic energy at higher efficiencies, the Samheim Cannon wielded by the Eternal Redemption seemed tasteless in comparison.

Sure, the mass production luminar crystal weapons wouldn't be as exaggeratingly powerful as the ones handmade by himself, but their numerous advantages such as incredibly fast beam propagation and ultra-low heat build up more than made up for the reduction in firepower.

The advantages of luminar crystal weapons became especially obvious at longer ranges. The muzzle velocity of a physical weapon could never catch up to the speed of light. Even other types of energy weapons still landed their shots at relativistic speeds!

In space combat, range was king. The capability to inflict reliable damage at extended ranges could completely change the direction of a battle. It was incredibly hard to deal

consistent damage at such distances. This was why the Transcendent Punishers piloted by the Eye of Ylvaine was such a valuable trump card to the Larkinson Clan.

The mass introduction of luminar crystal weaponry would definitely change the equation. It would allow other ranged mechs piloted by other clansmen to catch up to the amazing performance of the devout Ylvainan mech pilots.

This didn't make the Eye of Ylvaine obsolete. In fact, combining the two should result in even better results!

He shrugged. This was a regular problem that many mech designers faced throughout their careers. Different technologies advanced at different rates and major breakthroughs rarely coincided with the intentions of individual people.

Ves should be glad that he gained an option to equip even better weapons onto his ranged mech designs. Looking back and feeling regret about not being able to equip them to his prior mech models was pointless and counterproductive. He couldn't change the past but he could definitely affect the future.

He smiled. Soon, his second expert mech would be the first machine to wield his incredibly powerful enhanced luminar crystal rifle! The rifle of this amazing machine would serve as the benchmark for all of the other luminar crystal weapon models to come.

"It would have been even better if we had an energy weapon specialist on hand who could optimize this weapon even further."

It was too difficult to raise any of his assistants to Journeyman. Though Ves had yet to intervene too much in the development of his Braves, none of them possessed the brilliance he sought, at least not yet. They were still young and could always bloom into greater mech designers, but the odds that any of them would follow in Ketis' footsteps was quite slim.

Ves realized he was expecting too much from his men. His own life trajectory was anything but normal and the only homegrown success in the form of Ketis was not a good example at all due to her abnormal development pattern.

Though he supposed he could grant helpful companion spirits to mech designers with spiritual potential such as Miles Tovar, he did not want to expend valuable resources to prop up weaklings.

A Journeyman raised in this fashion would definitely lack the essential drive and other essential qualities that could bring them forward.

This was why he started off with someone younger like Zanthar Larkinson.

Even though it would take at least a decade before Ves would begin to see some fruit, once Zanthar came to his own, the Larkinson Clan would hopefully gain a powerful ranged weapon specialist and could fill up one of the gaps in the Design Department's roster.

To be honest, the Design Department still had other vacancies that limited the potential of any completed mech design projects.

"We also have to obtain a kinetic ranged weapon specialist, an armor system specialist, a neural interface specialist, a sensor and ECM system specialist, an amphibian and aquatic mech specialist, a heavy mech specialist and so on. This list can go on forever if I wish!"

In practice, it was impossible and impractical to take on so many lead designers. A given mech could only accommodate a limited amount of design philosophies. Range was also a difficult issue.

Now that Ves remembered, Ketis and Juliet hadn't left any PPs behind in the Yeina Star Cluster. Unless someone forked over the merits required to insert their essence into their PPs, any commercial mech models that Ves wanted to release in his old star cluster would not be able to display their full strength.

"Hmmm, we'll have to solve this problem before we enter the Red Ocean." He murmured. "It will be a lot more expensive to arrange this matter once we leave this galaxy."

This meant that he had to earn even more merits to take care of this problem.

"I could also choose not to solve this problem."

The Design Department would definitely take on more Journeymen eventually. It was unrealistic to arrange PPs for all of them so that they could extend the influence of their design philosophies into a backwater region that Ves and many Larkinsons had already forgotten!

He shrugged yet again. "I'll see how many merits I have at my disposal once I am about to enter the Red Ocean Dwarf Galaxy."

He really needed to make some progress in helping the MTA mech pilots advance to the rank of expert pilot. He hadn't heard much about them for a while. This was bad news as this implied the mechers that Master Willix had dumped on his lap were not experiencing any significant changes.

"I'll take a closer look at them after I finish the Sentry Project." Ves tentatively decided. "Completing my expert mech designs is important, but satisfying Master Willix is also important!"

First, he had to complete his immediate priorities. He returned to the Spirit of Bentheim with his crystal cannon and continued to explore the new changes and challenges that arose as a consequence of scaling up the weapon system.

Due to his prior experiences, he didn't encounter as many new issues. He already built up an arsenal of existing solutions that could easily be adapted to the current circumstances. Only a few major issues came up which was a natural consequence to massively increasing the energy consumption, heat generation and other parameters.

Though he had to make occasional trips back to the Vivacious Wal in order to test fire each new iteration of his crystal cannon, he completed this phase of the side project a bit faster than expected.

Ves finally embarked on scaling up the weapon system to a full-scale mech-grade rifle after he addressed all of the issues.

This was a larger project than the ones he had embarked on before. The material consumption had increased to a drastic degree due to the expensive materials he was using up. The painful part about all of this was that the volatile exotics he was using up were very difficult to recycle. This meant that there was little point in scrapping the weapon because the yield wasn't great.

Poor recyclability was one of the more obscure downsides to luminar crystals. Though the material composition was a major determinant of recyclability, the recycling industry developed a lot of equipment and methods to extract as much value as possible out of metallic parts. The recyclers were less adept at recovering valuable materials from crystals because they just didn't work with them on such a large scale.

In any case, this wasn't a big deal to Ves as he was willing to spend extra money to obtain greater performance. The LMC still earned enough profits for him to dismiss these costs.

Once he finished his first mech-sized rifle, he needed to test it out as well.

Considering the damage output of the smaller-sized shuttle-grade cannon, Ves was not sure whether it was a good idea to test it out indoors.

He suddenly realized that he had another option.

"I can test it out on one of the many testing grounds of this star system!"

Still, that came with its own risks as Ves was never certain whether the testing grounds he rented would record and pass on the data that all of its sensors had gathered. Perhaps he could alleviate this issue by ordering the Black Cats to inspect the site, but that was no guarantee that everything would be fine.

In fact, it would have been better if the fleet was situated in a remote star system. Without thousands of ships and huge populated settlements in the vicinity, it was a lot easier to guard against any potential onlookers.

In fact, according to the local laws, mechs couldn't arbitrarily fire their weapons out in space. The expeditionary fleet was parked too close to Talulah Silver and all of the traffic going in and out. Even if a mech did its best to point away from all of the hustle and bustle, accidents could always happen.

Even if the Larkinson Clan possessed enough strength to bend the rules, it was not a good idea to do so on a regular basis.

He rubbed his smooth-shaven chin. "Hmm, maybe I'll just wait until we get going again. We just have to make a small detour to a relatively quiet star system."

Hopefully, he wouldn't have to do this too often in order to get the results he wanted. He felt that his initial mech rifle design already came close to meeting his goal. Once he returned to his wife, she would probably embrace its power!

Yet... was this all he could do with the crystal weapon system?

He frowned. "Now that I think about it, I haven't really explored the prime resonance potential of my luminar crystal weapons."

In fact, he suddenly realized that luminar crystals were actually spiritually reactive materials that he could make on demand!

That latter part was important because P-stones and Unending alloy were impossible for him to make. If he could replace some if not all of their functions with different varieties of luminar crystals, he could easily solve the greatest limitation to producing more prime mechs!

A very important question emerged in his mind.

"I already know that luminar crystals can interact with spiritual energy. Can I develop a crystal that can store this energy?"

If he could answer this question with a yes, then that would be a major breakthrough that would open up a lot more possibilities!

*Chapter 3128: Crystal Wall*

Ves immediately got sidetracked. Though finishing the luminar crystal rifle was important, he could not get rid of the notion of developing a new luminar crystal formula that could essentially substitute the role of P-stones.

Though the material composition of P-stones varied considerably, they all had one property in common.

They were capable of storing spiritual energy. Their capacity was quite big for their size. What was truly remarkable about them was that they were stable and reliable. Even if Ves filled them to the brim with spiritual energy, he was fully confident he could leave them out for years and come back later to regain everything he put in without missing any portion.

As far as he was aware, the energy stored in P-stones did not decay over time!

If not for the fact that P-stones were naturally occurring rocks that were rare and difficult to find, it could have become one of his staple materials. As it was, their incessant scarcity prevented Ves from expanding his reserves of spiritual energy and applying the P-stone to a whole list of spiritual engineering projects.

Yet what if luminar crystals could perform the same function?

Even if luminar crystals could only a minute amount of spiritual energy, this was already a major advancement in his eyes! He could always improve and refine the initial versions of a storage type luminar crystal as it was a synthetic product that he could make by hand.

Currently, the greatest potential use case of such a storage medium would be to make more prime mechs.

While this new type of mech sat in an awkward middle ground between standard mechs and expert mechs, their value was great.

Not only did they offer expert pilots without expert mechs an opportunity to exercise their resonance strengths, they also had the potential to accelerate the progression of expert candidates.

Though the latter was only a theory, Ves guessed that as long as he tuned down the amount of Ves in a prime mech, an expert candidate should be able to gain a huge amount of exercise as well as a lot of assistance from a design spirit while piloting such a powerful machine.

"In fact, the two might even be made for each other!" Ves boldly guessed!

Expert candidates sat in an awkward position as well. Pilots such as Isobel Kotin-Larkinson, Commander Casella Ingvar and Commander Taon Melin had long outgrown their standard mechs, but they were far too weak to pilot a genuine expert mech.

Prime mechs had the potential to give them enough room to display their expanded piloting skills while at the same time help them firm up their formative force of wills.

"Still, designing and making all of those prime mechs will take a fair amount of time and effort." Ves muttered.

The list of mechs he needed to design after concluding the current round of mech design projects became longer and longer. The only consolation was that he did not need to design prime mechs from scratch. Just like last time, it was already sufficient to design a variant of an existing standard mech design.

He didn't even need to bother with customizing each individual prime mech to each individual expert candidate. Though the piloting experience would probably suffer, Ves did not have to commit to designing a new prime mech whenever the Larkinson Clan welcomed a new expert candidate.

However, all of these considerations might end up going nowhere if Ves did not succeed in creating the crucial ingredient that made it all possible.

He already had a hunch that formulating a storage type luminar crystal was a lot harder than it sounded.

Before he embarked on this new side project, he had already spent several weeks tinkering with successively larger luminar crystals. He gained a considerably greater feel on what they were and how they behaved.

"The key to manipulating their spiritual interaction is by altering their internal circuitry patterns!" He concluded based on his existing knowledge.

There were many ways he could vary the hardness, opacity, density and other basic properties of luminar crystals by synthesizing them out of different raw ingredients.

Yet their more special properties such as transforming an influx of energy into a physical light beam were all derived from the tiny alien runes that Ves had yet to fully master.

Ves lacked far too much understanding in this area to play around with the circuitry in order to achieve different results. All of the circuitry patterns his luminar crystals gained so far were derived from either the crystal cube, the Illustrious One or both. He only made minor adjustments and contributions to the existing patterns.

As a result, when Ves tried to find out whether the crystal cube or the Illustrious One possessed a circuitry pattern that was capable of holding or storing spiritual energy, he ended up with nothing.

The crystal cube seemed to be filled with circuitry patterns that were associated with a large variety of attack phases, but it did not hold much else. The Illustrious One was even less helpful since his scattered knowledge that he inherited from his predecessors

did not cover this area at all. All of this meant that Ves did not have an easy way to accomplish his goal.

It was either difficult or impossible for the luminars to make a storage type crystal. Ves wasn't sure which one was the case. In fact, it could also be that the luminars never felt the need to develop such a crystal.

"Perhaps they never saw the need to store their spiritual energy."

It could also be that they had ready access to an alternate storage solution. P-stone or some other useful materials might have been a lot more abundant in the past.

Whatever the case, Ves soon hit an insurmountable wall. Unless he was willing to waste many years of his life to manually play around with circuitry patterns, it was extremely unlikely for him to come up with a viable solution.

He reluctantly shelved this research project, though he vowed to revisit it once he made more advances in luminar crystal technology. As long as he managed to decipher the secrets of the circuitry patterns that the luminar race was so fond of, he had great confidence that he could achieve his goal.

He sighed. "It's not easy to get to this point, though."

It was as if he was confronted with a brand-new programming language that had nothing in common with the existing programming languages that he knew. The syntax, meaning and even the letters were all different.

It would have been nice if the Illustrious One was a full-time programmer, but he was not. He was the amalgamation of a leader and a mutated outcast sprinkled with a dash of chaos and life. Ves had already exhausted much of the help this luminar design spirit could provide in his crystal projects.

"Oh well. At least I managed to make my crystal rifle."

Since his latest side project went nowhere, Ves set everything aside and decided to wait until his fleet started moving again to properly test the mech-sized weapon.

Now that he no longer directed all of his attention on his R&D activities, he could finally catch up to all of the changes that took place within the Larkinson Clan.

As expected, enough time has passed for the Larkinsons to barely make the newly-acquired capital ships space worthy. A lot more work still had to be done to activate their primary functions, something which was very hard to do when they were all severely undercrewed.

The Larkinson Clan shuffled over a lot of personnel from the sub-capital ships in order to hasten the preparations, but the clan mainly needed to hire a lot more trained and certified spacers.

At this point, the clan had already tapped out the recruitment potential of the Pelsa Ryndover System. The merchant mariners and spacers for hire that were open to working for the Larkinsons had already been picked up. Those that did not accept their offers were unlikely to change their minds.

"How soon until we are ready to depart from this port system, Benny?"

"Our fleet is already ready to go aside from the new vessels. As soon as all of the critical work on the four capital ships is done, we can resume our journey. According to the latest estimates, this will take a few more days barring any complications."

"Has anything else happened that needs to be called to my attention?"

"Hmm, nothing in particular." Gavin answered. "The LMC's sales have continued to flatten and the new Sanctuary Treatment Editions are still not catching on in the market. We don't expect these trends to change, so it is becoming increasingly more important for you to publish a new and useful mech design."

Ves crossed his arms. "That will have to wait. While I'm just as eager as anyone to design a batch of new mechs with great sales potential, our expert mechs come first. We're making brisk progress on them but it will still take a lot of time to complete the remaining ones."

This was not a critical issue in his eyes as the LMC was not the kind of mech company that had to offer a full lineup of mech types. It rose to prominence by selling wildly useful individual mech models. What Ves needed to do was not to rush a lot of mechs to market, but take the time to properly design a single winner that could sell at least a million copies a month.

The importance of money became a lot greater once he reached the Red Ocean. Prices of products over there were incredibly inflated due to several factors.

First, a lot of the pioneers that had already come before were used to spending many times more money than Ves. They came from the more prosperous regions of the galaxy and could often rely on powerful backing back home.

Second, the supply of many goods and services was severely constrained. This was a huge issue that Ves had already grappled with many times despite the fact that he hadn't even reached the Red Ocean!

Third, the ability for the Larkinson Clan to earn revenue in the Red Ocean would definitely not be impressive, at least at the start. The Spirit of Bentheim could only produce so many mechs a month and also had to fulfill the demands of the clan itself.

Ves seriously doubted that he could outsource production to major third-party manufacturers since there were so few of them. Besides, they were too busy trying to push their internally-developed mechs. Why should they help their competitors?

For these reasons and more, the LMC's mech business in his native star cluster was still significant to the Larkinson Clan. Ves might act nonchalant for now, but he knew very well he could not allow the LMC's existing market presence to collapse entirely.

"You know, we already talked about this, but have you considered releasing the second-class version of the Ferocious Piranha? Now that we have left the Yeina Star Cluster, we won't get affected by the backlash coming from this region anymore." Gavin tentatively suggested.

For a moment, Ves seriously considered this option. Gavin was right that the equation had changed.

"No." Ves shook his head. "You make a good point, Benny, but there are more reasons why I'm reluctant to release the Ferocious Piranha IB. Not only does this mech play a vital strategic purpose to the defense of our clan, I'm also worried whether the Friday Coalition will make use of it in some way."

"You can do something about that, right?"

"I can, but the other reasons still apply. I don't want to give away an advantage and compromise the defense of our fleet just to earn extra money. From what I heard, our finances are still decent even if we increased our leverage as of late."

It was a pity that the Sanctuary variants failed to catch on... He had great hopes that their sales would be able to inject a lot more cash into the coffers of the Larkinson Clan, but so far his stubborn pricing scheme did not do him any favors.

*Chapter 3129: A Second Rifle*

"Miaow~"

Clixie laid comfortably on both Ves and Gloriana's laps. Two different hands tweaked her ears and rubbed her belly at once. Her lovely fur felt soft and smooth to the touch.

Lucky was nowhere to be seen. The mechanical pet was spending most of his time with Calabast in order to inspect every single system aboard the Blinding Banshee. The Black Cats with the help of a different cat were making brisk progress in verifying that the ship could be trusted to function as advertised, but she was still a capital ship for a

reason. Five kilometers was still a long stretch even if the volume of the ship was actually not that large.

Fortunately, the Black Cats didn't need to scour the vessel from stern to bow in order to get her to move. The Blinding Banshee's power reactors, sub-light propulsion systems, FTL drives, life support systems and so on had all passed the required inspections and were ready to bear the stresses of regular space travel.

The other new capital ships were in a similar condition. As civilian-grade vessels, they were designed with lower standards in mind. Their performance might not be stellar, but that also meant it wasn't as difficult to work with them. The expeditionary fleet would probably be ready to depart within a week.

"I'm glad nothing has happened during our stay here." Ves remarked as he tickled Clixie's paws. "The last time we stopped at a star system, we got caught in one of the stupidest civil wars that has ever broken out in the star cluster. The Life Research Association is still paying the price for their shortsightedness."

"Miaow!"

Gloriana leaned comfortably against her husband's side. Her mind was not on the LRA at the moment.

"I love all of the work you have done on the crystal rifle. I had hoped that you would be able to come up with a surprise, but I never expected you to go all the way and utilize luminar crystals as the principal material for the weapon. I kind of want to see it in action already."

Ves took a deep breath, causing his nose to sample a liberal dose of her pleasant fruity scent.

"I feel the same way, but we have to be patient. We can't expose too much to the public."

Compared to his wife, he placed greater importance on maintaining the confidentiality of the combat capabilities of his clan. Their perspectives were different so the way they treated powerful tech was also different.

To her, all of the tech she dealt with were mainly tools to be used to make her mech designs stronger. As a purer mech designer, she cared less about the consequences of her decisions as long as they didn't get in the way of designing a better mech.

To him, tech was associated with advantages. Powerful new applications held most of their value if the enemies of the Larkinson Clan didn't know about them yet. The Larkinson Clan managed to defeat many enemies by unleashing surprising new tricks that their foes had no way to predict beforehand!

Now that the Battle of Reckoning had exposed the existence of prime mechs, the Transcendent Punisher and the power of battle networks, Ves was sorely in need of a new batch of trump cards.

This way, anyone who specifically targeted the Larkinson Clan and already accounted for the existence of the former would definitely see their plans go astray!

Though Gloriana wasn't happy with this answer, she let it go. The wait wasn't so long anyway.

Still, now that the topic of the luminar crystal rifle had come up, she wanted to talk about another expert mech that could take advantage of this new development.

"Ves?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Once we have completed the Sentry Project and fully verified that your new weapon system can deliver on its promises, let's work on adding it to the Star Dancer Mark II as well! I suddenly find the dual-type laser and positron rifle that we initially planned for this machine to be tasteless."

Ves frowned. "The Larkinson Clan's expert mechs come first, Gloriana. Also, even if we are working on the same project, this is my work. The strongest versions of my luminar crystal rifles can't be made without my personal involvement."

"Don't be so stiff about it, Ves." Gloriana leaned closer and planted a kiss on his smooth-shaven cheek. "Brutus is family now that we're married. Will you deny your brother-in-law a powerful new weapon that can not only increase his own survival chances, but also help with defending our clan? Don't forget that my Glory Seekers are on your side. Helping them is helping us. There is no reason to deny this powerful new rifle to my brother."

As Gloriana continued to plant kisses on his cheek, he softened his stance. "I... suppose you're right. The Golden Skull Alliance doesn't have that many expert ranged mechs to begin with, so boosting the performance of one more will go a long way in overpowering our future foes."

He decided it made good strategic sense to equip a luminar crystal rifle to Venerable Brutus' upcoming expert mech. The logic was simply too strong. Even Aristotle would agree to her impeccable arguments.

He definitely did not allow Gloriana to get her way because she melted his resolve by bombarding him with kisses.

"I'll have to design a different rifle model for the Star Dancer Mark II." He said as he began to envision the weapon. "The current luminar crystal rifle model that I have developed is completely configured towards high-powered precision fire. It's a sniper rifle that is not meant to be employed in medium-range run-and-gun firefights that your brother excels at. At the very least, I have to find a way to crank up the firing rate, which will probably come at the expense of single-shot firepower."

"That's okay, Ves. I understand the limitations. If one shot isn't enough to do the job, then multiple shots will. The weapon needs to be a little smaller and more compact so that the Star Dancer can handle it with great control even as it performs intensive movements. A heavier weapon will not only slow down its acceleration, but also make it more unwieldy."

"I understand. I've worked on energy weapons before so I am well aware of what pairs well with a mech like the Star Dancer Mark II."

So far, Ves and Gloriana hadn't spent much time on the expert mech design project dedicated to Venerable Brutus. The future Glory Seeker expert mech fell outside the terms of their deal with Master Willix. This was why a couple of Hexer Masters acted as the technical consultants of this design project.

Gloriana handled all of the communication with the Masters, so Ves was spared from the torture of speaking to them in person. If the project progressed substantially, that might change, but neither of the two could spare much time on it when their schedules were already filled with other obligations.

She didn't seem to be in a hurry. She thought that it was better for them to gain valuable experience in designing a succession of expert mechs. Once they completed all of the expert mechs, they would have gained a lot of experience and a lot of new insights that would doubtlessly be very helpful in elevating the quality and the performance of the Star Dancer Mark II.

The only downside was that Venerable Brutus would have to wait a long time before he finally got his turn, but Ves didn't care about that problem.

The couple continued to cuddle against each other while they discussed what to incorporate in the Star Dancer Mark II design. The mech presented an interesting mix between the Dark Zephyr and the Sentry Project.

There was no need to reinvent the wheel when the Design Department already had a couple of existing ones on hand. Reusing the solutions they developed while working on the expert light skirmisher and expert rifleman mech designs would hopefully speed up the timeline of the project and add a powerful new asset to the Golden Skull Alliance as soon as possible.

"It's time." Gloriana suddenly said. "Come. Let's greet our new help."

She stood up while Clixie hopped back onto the deck.

Ves stood up as well and walked alongside her as they exited the lounge and headed over to the design lab.

Once they reached the main lab, they walked to the front where the other two Journeymen were already awaiting their arrival.

"The new brats have just arrived and are waiting in the other lab." Ketis said.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Bring them in. Let's see what these mech designers from Bardo Star Cluster are like."

Around a hundred young and eager mech designers moved into the main lab. They stopped and faced the fifty-or-so existing assistant mech designers before facing their new superiors.

The recruiters had carefully vetted each of these Apprentices before sending their profiles to Ves and his wife for approval. There were actually several hundred applicants that made it this far, but the couple didn't want to go overboard.

This time, it was Gloriana's turn to induct the new hires. She stepped forward and presented them with a charming smile that completely obscured the fact that she possessed a completely different personality when she was under pressure.

"Welcome to the Larkinson Clan and welcome to the Design Department of the Living Mech Corporation. Each of you have made the right choice to join our clan. Unlike most mech companies that are based in the Ivena Federation and the surrounding neighborhood, our clan and company is destined to rise above them in a more exciting and prosperous region of space. Several decades from now, you will fully appreciate the choices that you have made in this period."

The decision to leave everything at home behind and join a clan that was moving far away was a difficult one to make. The mech designers that had passed through the screening all had strong motivations to abandon their old lives. Whether they were successful or not, each of the new recruits were definitely driven by ambition!

As his wife continued to enlighten the hundred new assistant mech designers to their new rights and responsibilities, Ves studied the men and women in several different ways.

First, he took a simple look at them. Just as specified, none of the new mech designers were older than forty. While he did not doubt the competence of older mech designers, Ves preferred to obtain younger personnel so that it became easier for him to get a greater return on investment.

After all, it was pointless to hire a 100 year old mech designer only for the old sod to retire just a decade later!

Since enough enthusiastic locals had applied to join the Larkinson Clan, Ves had the luxury to discriminate by age.

The latest batch of assistants also looked relatively normal and proper. There were no obvious oddballs among them. This was probably due to the selection criteria applied by the recruiters. They were instructed not to consider any crazies.

Though eccentric mech designers tended to have higher peaks, Ves didn't want to deal with the headaches that came with trying to herd unruly cats. This was why he preferred to settle on less exciting talents even if their chances of breaking through was smaller.

"Speaking of that..."

Ves switched to his spiritual senses, which had experienced a substantial improvement after he acquired Blinky. It was no trouble at all for him to sweep across the minds of all hundred mech designers.

To his dismay, only less than 10 of them possessed spiritual potential.

This was the downside to relying on other people to perform the initial selection process. The recruiters were incapable of determining who possessed spiritual potential. They didn't even know what it meant!

Last time was better because Ves had an opportunity to screen a handful of spiritually active mech designers from a larger batch of prospects.

He shrugged. Oh well. At least he had a few more potential Journeyman candidates to keep his eye on... As long as he invested in them a bit, one of them might become the fifth Journeyman of the Design Department one day.

#### *Chapter 3130: Educational Opportunities*

The new mech designers all looked eager and ready to go, but there was no way that Ves would allow them to work on the expert mech design projects straight away.

Putting them to work this way would just mess up the design teams and cause a lot of disruptions. No matter what prior work experience they held, the Design Department of the LMC developed its own system where mech designers teamed up into fixed groups and dedicated themselves to working on specific aspects of a mech design for long periods of time.

What mattered most to Ves was that every assistant gained an emotional attachment to the mech they were contributing. It was a lot easier to manage how other people

affected a given mech design as long as it was the same group of people working on the same mechs.

Changing the teams while they were in the middle of working on an expert mech design project would cause a fair amount of disruption. Ves preferred to wait until the current round of expert mech design projects was over before making use of the new recruits. By then, the newcomers would have acclimatized to their new jobs and acquired the necessary know-how in order to slot into the existing structure.

The lead designers didn't have to take charge over the new recruits. Ves and every Journeyman was too busy with their primary responsibilities to waste their time on management duties.

Though certain individuals like Miles Tovar and Oscar DiMartin were relatively uninspired mech designers, they possessed decent management and leadership capabilities. The other design team leaders were also capable of taking charge of groups of new recruits.

After splitting up the hundred recent entrants and assigning them to different assistants with greater seniority, everyone went back to work.

Whether any of the new assistants would stand out and showcase their talent remained to be seen. Ves didn't dare to judge any of them prematurely. They were all young and had plenty of time to bloom in their new jobs.

The LMC and the Larkinson Clan offered many chances for hard-working mech designers to promote their capabilities. From offering high-quality second-class augments to allowing them to borrow a lot of valuable textbooks for free or for a modest Larkinson merit fee, the mech designers received more than enough chances to climb to a greater height.

The only issue was that they needed to do most of the work themselves. Ves had increased the cost of receiving a personal tutoring and advice session with any of the Journeyman from 1 Larkinson merit to 5 Larkinson merits.

This increase reflected the increased value of receiving the full and undivided attention of a mech designer who overcame the first major hurdle of their careers.

To be honest, he wanted to remove these interview sessions entirely, but thought that was a bit too harsh. Though a proper mech designer should be able to develop their design philosophies and figure everything out on their own, anyone who encountered a bottleneck often needed a little push to get ahead.

In those circumstances, let alone 5 merits, even 50 merits was worth the answer an Apprentice Mech Designer needed to find a way to advance to Journeyman!

Of course, no one took up the offer to exchange 5 merits to receive the full attention of Ves and Gloriana. The same amount could be redeemed for several high-quality textbooks. At their stage, it was much more useful for them to expand their knowledge base and deepen their technical skills.

Shortly after the new batch of mech designers joined the Larkinson Clan, the expeditionary fleet finally completed its extensive expansion and resupply and reluctantly departed from the Pelsa Ryndover System.

During the Larkinson Clan's stay in the port system, the recruiters managed to pick up a whopping 25,000 people who managed to pass through all of the checks.

The majority of the new clansmen consisted of essential spacers needed to crew the four new capital ships. Their qualifications were fairly solid as the Larkinson Clan wasn't picky about the age of the new recruits this time.

Though these solid former merchant mariners brought a wealth of competence and experience to the table, they also brought their families along. This was not necessarily a downside as those who brought over their spouses and children would definitely be committed to the clan for life.

One of the reasons why the Larkinson Clan was able to attract these married spacers was because of the excellent living conditions of the Larkinson fleet.

Unlike ordinary trade fleets and trade vessels, the Larkinson fleet possessed a dedicated entertainment ship that could also serve as a decent ark ship. Dawn City was already heralded as a utopia and the amount of family units requesting to be reassigned to the Vivacious Wal was insane.

In fact, every other capital ship offered plenty of facilities and amenities for families to live as if they were residing on land. Ves didn't think there was anything wrong with Dorum, the simulated city environment on the 8th deck of the Spirit of Bentheim.

Good living space wasn't the only factor that convinced many spacers to join the Larkinson Clan. The growing educational opportunities for students of all stripes turned out to be a surprisingly effective attraction.

One of the downsides to raising a family on a ship was the lack of access to crucial facilities such as good and prestigious schools. The only way for parents to give their children a decent education was to enroll them into virtual schools and universities.

Yet no matter how good these study programs were, attending a virtual institution was incomparable to attending the real deal. There were so many factors that were different that it would take an entire library to explain all of the details.

However, everyone knew that most students benefited a lot more from attending real schools where they could hang out with real classmates in person.

The Larkinson Clan happened to be one of the few space-faring organizations that invested a lot of money and resources into raising the next generation. The Larkinson Education Department, which would soon become a ministry, had done a good job with keeping up with the growth of the clan.

The fact of the matter was that the Glory Seeker and Cross Clan fleets didn't have anything close to the sheer breadth and depth of educational opportunities provided by the Larkinson Clan! The latter had already taken a dozen steps ahead while the former were still at the planning stage!

A great example that encapsulated how well the Larkinsons had prepared to raise the next generation was the acquisition of the Discentibus. Even though the academy ship was just a chance purchase, she already promised to provide excellent military training and higher education to both potentates and norms.

The high and consistent demand for starship personnel also drove the Larkinson Education Department to set up a naval academy on the Discentibus. Though the clan was able to hire a large batch of spacers this time, the job market was a lot tighter in the Red Ocean. It was best to plan for the long term and take advantage of the abundant amount of teaching facilities on the capital academy ship to set up another school.

In fact, the Discentibus offered so much room for teaching that the Larkinson Education Department also intended to set up a general university on the vessel. By mingling both military students with civilian students, neither groups would become alienated from each other.

Of course, the other capital ships weren't left out either. The Spirit of Bentheim already hosted the Larkinson University of Technology while the Dragon's Den recently set up the Larkinson Biotech University.

The Vivacious Wal was next on the list. Shederin Purnesse and many of his family members pushed to set up a higher institution for arts and humanities. Dawn City was the perfect place to raise the next generation of elites of the Larkinson Clan.

Let alone one higher institution, the Larkinson Clan would soon operate six of them at the same time!

"Don't expect too much from them, though." Gavin warned Ves during a morning briefing. "While the Larkinson Education Department can set up the facilities and hire the staff and teachers needed to put them into use, it takes more than that to establish an effective school. The Larkinson University of Technology doesn't have the certification, recognition, heritage, history and prestige of a conventional university."

"I know, Benny. It's not as if we can do anything about it, though."

Ves leaned back on his chair while placing his feet on top of his desk. He idly petted Blinky who he pulled from his mind.

Mrow~

Though he still found it rather weird to pet another aspect of himself, Blinky was simply too adorable. Who couldn't resist the opportunity to stroke his fluffy intangible ears?

"We could opt to host branches of existing renowned institutions." He suggested. "Certain large fleets are eligible to apply to establish a branch school. The advantage of doing this is that every graduate will receive a standard diploma that is universally-recognized throughout human space."

Ves shook his head. "I already looked into that. I don't like it. Hosting these branch schools come with harsh requirements, such as relinquishing all control over the teachers and curriculum. I don't want foreigners to indoctrinate our future Larkinsons. If anything, it should be us doing the indoctrination!"

Schools were excellent places to shape the attitudes and opinions of young and impressionable children. Anyone who believed that schools were apolitical was completely naive. A lot of school material that people considered neutral and common sense was actually the product of a lot of compromises of past struggles.

"The diplomas of our homegrown universities aren't worth much outside the clan." Gavin pointed out. "It will take many years or decades for our schools to meet the requirements of certification. The education industry places a heavy emphasis on stability and tradition. It's a hostile place for newcomers."

Anyone with money could start a school. That didn't mean that it was any good. Since the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next was an extremely important pillar of human civilization, humanity did not joke around when it came to schooling.

The MTA along with many other organizations formed a common set of standards and agreements that served to make sure that schools dedicated themselves to raising proper graduates who were ready to join the workforce rather than grifting gullible students out of their tuition money.

Usually, the strict rules forced every new colony to invest a considerable amount of funding and effort to set up a good school. A new settlement would definitely lose a lot of attraction and competitiveness if it botched this priority!

This was why branch schools of famous old institutions existed. Any colony or organization who couldn't be bothered with all of that trouble could just pass on the responsibility to a dedicated organization.

Ves never considered this option. "We're not in a hurry. So what if we need to wait a few decades for our schools to become recognized? Besides, it's not as if our younger Larkinsons will work for an employer outside of the Larkinson Clan. The study programs of each of our universities will be completely tailored to the needs of our fleet. No one in our clan will refuse a diploma from our own schools."

Though Gavin looked as if he wanted to respond to that, he eventually reined himself in. His boss had made it clear that it was more important for the Larkinsons to maintain control than to provide the absolute best schooling for the next generation of Larkinson clansmen.

"If that is what you wish, boss..."

"Considering how many spacers we manage to recruit, they apparently don't care so much either. As long as their children have a decent opportunity to become a doctor, an engineer or even a mech designer, who cares what fancy name is attached to their diploma? A real job is a lot more important than these vain distractions. The greatest benefit to attending an elite institution is all of the elite friends you can make... That is not applicable to our situation."