

Mech 3131

Chapter 3131: P-Stone Theory

Though Ves held a disdainful attitude towards the cabal of elite educational institutions that took it upon themselves to dictate how students should be taught, he did not dismiss them completely.

No matter what, they were actually good at what they did. These centuries or millennia-old universities might charge a fortune for tuition and tried their best to devalue education programs provided by outside schools, but the graduates that left their halls were mostly set up for success.

Of course, it was not necessarily true that these young elites were that much smarter and more well adapted to the challenges of the future. A large part of why schools renowned throughout the galaxy were so successful was the extensive, age-old networks they formed.

Their most successful graduates went on to found huge companies with galaxy-wide reach. Once they made it in life, it was usually customary for them to give back to their alma mater by handing out sumptuous donations and providing special opportunities to future batches of students.

The universities applied strict standards when selecting their students. While they gave sufficient opportunities to poor but extremely gifted applications in order to make sure they scored high enough, the main business model of an elite university was concentrating the children of well-heeled elites and giving them plenty of opportunities to form connections that would serve them well when they transitioned to their professional careers.

All of these factors allowed the upper class to maintain their superiority over the masses over the long term. No matter how many generations went by, as long as the younger generations weren't completely useless, they were practically guaranteed to graduate with a prestigious degree and land a desirable job at a major company right out of the gate.

"Just because our own schools fall outside of this old boy's network doesn't mean it will stay that way forever." Ves muttered.

While he didn't expect the universities that the Larkinson Clan had set up to provide immediate value, he always held greater expectations for them in the long term.

As long as he became a Senior or Master and as long as the Larkinson Clan kept growing, it was not impossible to raise the universities in the Larkinson fleet into the higher ranks.

The reasons why he was confident about this was because of the lack of existing schools in the Red Ocean. Regardless of how many branches and off-shoots the old institutions established in the dwarf galaxy, it wasn't quite the same. There was plenty of room for new entrants to occupy the top spots.

If the Larkinson Clan's universities opened their doors to foreign students and gained a good reputation for preparing them for their future careers, then recognition would eventually follow. A Master alone was more than sufficient to bestow a lot of reputation to a school.

A strange thought entered his mind.

"Now that I think about it, Senior Mech Designers always turn into professors. It's practically an obligation for them to teach classes at a serious mech university."

He already speculated that Seniors needed to propagate their design philosophies in order to make further progress. If this was what Ves needed to do as well, then why not do it on his own terms?

"I can become the professor of one of my own universities!" His eyes shone. "In fact, forget about that. I can become the dean, no, the president or chancellor of the Larkinson University of Technology!"

Since he was pretty much the boss of the entire Larkinson Clan, who could stop him from shaping the educational program and more specifically the mech design program according to his ideals?

"It's a lot of work though." Ves belatedly realized.

He already had his hands full with leading the clan. How could he possibly squeeze enough time to manage an entire university?

Though he had not given up on controlling the way his schools taught their students, he probably wouldn't invest too much time on it. No matter what, designing mechs was still the best way for him to advance.

Since it took a lot of time for the academies and universities to get up and running, Ves left them be and returned his attention back to his main priorities.

Now that the fleet continued to make its way across the Bardo Star Sector, Ves only had to wait a few days before he could test his mech-sized luminar crystal rifle out in space.

The expeditionary fleet specifically diverted from the busy trade routes in order to enter a small and dim red dwarf star system.

Though the local space wasn't completely empty, it was easy enough for the Larkinson fleet to block the long-ranged surveillance conducted by automated satellites and listening posts.

"Who will have the honor of test-firing your new rifle?" Gloriana asked.

Ves smirked. "Who else but the first user herself? We haven't touched the Bright Beam Prime. It shouldn't be a problem to replace its current rifle with my prototype."

They hadn't gotten rid of all of the prime mechs right away. They only had to disassemble them in order to repurpose their Unending alloy armor plating, so the expert pilots still had plenty of time to practice with their current machines.

Even the Bright Beam Prime was on the chopping block. Despite the fact that the prime rifleman mech did not incorporate any Unending alloy, Ves still needed to retrieve the P-stones and put them in the production version of the luminar crystal rifle that was meant to be paired with the Sentry Project.

"At least, this is what I should do as long as I haven't found a way to create an artificial substitute for P-stones."

He was still disappointed at his failure to create a luminar crystal that could store spiritual energy. He was quite certain that it was possible to make a storage type luminar crystal, but his foundation in the alien tech was too shallow to create something so advanced.

For now, he had to make prudent use of the P-stones he had left. While there was a chance that he might be able to find more samples elsewhere, so far the search wasn't going too well.

It would be incredibly inconvenient if P-stones turned out to be an exclusive product of the region that he had just left!

"This shouldn't be the case." Ves shook his head. "It probably comes in a different package. After all, it doesn't matter if it is a yellow rock, a green rock, a heavy rock or a lighter rock. There is so much variety to P-stones that I can't find them by blindly finding rocks that match their physical parameters."

He had another theory why this might possibly be the case. The phenomenon of spirituality was intrinsically tied to life, so what did a bunch of lifeless stones have to do with that?

A possible answer was that the space rocks may have absorbed some spiritual energy over the course of their existence. A more drastic possibility was that the P-stone might partially or entirely consist of the fossilized remains of a powerful spiritual lifeform!

The latter theory fits the current circumstances particularly well. It not only explained why certain rocks had become spiritually active, but also explained why they came in such different shapes.

The explanation even offered a logical answer to the possibility that P-stones might come in different forms in other star sectors.

Perhaps one star sector used to be occupied by one ancient race of spiritually active aliens. These aliens lived on planets with specific environmental circumstances so the P-stones that their remains had empowered were mostly light and small.

In contrast, a neighboring star sector might have been dominated by a larger race of aliens. Perhaps this second race preferred to live on heavy gravity planets that featured a lot of dense and heavy materials.

As a result, the odds that the P-stones that originated from this star sector came in the form of heavier rocks was higher.

"Still, the only way to test whether this theory is true is to find more P-stones from different locations."

This was rather troublesome because Ves had to visit different marketplaces that offered a lot of exotics in person.

He could have done so in the Pelsa Ryndover System, but he was too busy with his existing priorities back then. He was also reluctant to make landfall on a surface settled like Talulah Silver and risk an accident again.

"Hmmm. Maybe I'll go next time. I can't hole myself up in my fleet on a permanent basis."

As the awful memories of Prosperous Hill VI began to fade, Ves felt a greater yearning to set foot on solid ground again.

However, it would take some time before the expeditionary fleet was ready to make another pitstop. The extensive break it enjoyed at Pelsa Ryndover allowed it to keep moving for several months. Even the fact that the four new capital ships were only tentatively operational wasn't a big deal.

So far, the vessels reported no major faults or warning signs. Their used FTL drives all enjoyed extensive servicing. Any potential problems that could have emerged as a result of wear and tear had already been preempted by preventative maintenance. The engineers assigned to the new capital ships were keeping the core systems under careful observation.

The chief engineers of the respective vessels received permission to halt the entire fleet if they detected anything wrong!

"The test is starting." Gloriana announced.

Both Ves and Gloriana stood behind their work stations as the test of the prototype luminar crystal rifle was about to commence.

The current version was far from reaching its final state. The most crucial elements it lacked were the prime material that made it alive and the resonating material which would allow Venerable Stark to empower it beyond its physical limitations.

Even so, Ves had very high hopes for the weapon. In order to test the firepower of its full-powered shot, a couple of mechs placed several solid pieces of ship-grade hull plating in space.

After the Larkinson mechs closed off a large area of space from outside observation, the Bright Beam Prime fired a bright laser beam!

The attack achieved drastic results. The laser beam almost managed to sear through the entire plate!

"What an amazing result!" Gloriana gasped. "The amplification in firepower from scaling up the weapon system is a bit higher than I expected!"

Ves possessed a greater understanding of luminar crystal technology, so the results weren't entirely outside of his expectations.

He shot her a grin. "I've refined my application of luminar crystal technology. I managed to squeeze more internal circuitry inside a crystal than before."

The fact that the luminar crystal rifle almost managed to punch straight through a hull plate that was rated for second-class combat carriers was quite amazing. Most mechs weren't as durable, which meant that the high-quality rifle could easily one-shot most mechs as long as it landed a solid hit!

Of course, the energy consumption of a single discharge was not light. Even if luminar crystal rifles were much more efficient than conventional ones, the Bright Beam Prime did not have enough shots to annihilate an entire mech regiment from a distance.

What was promising about this result was that the final version of the rifle could leverage both prime resonance and true resonance to achieve much more devastating results!

"Let's test out the other firing modes of the weapon."

The luminar crystal rifle could fire more than just a standard laser beam. In the next few minutes, the Bright Beam Prime calmly fired different types of beams. From slicer beams that cut straight through two solid places to positron beams that inflicted a lot more localized destruction, a lot of Larkinsons were able to witness the performance of a weapon system that might become the standard in the Larkinson Clan!

Seeing that the tests had gone well, Ves felt it was a pity to end the testing session. He spontaneously came up with an interesting idea.

"Gloriana."

"Yes, Ves?"

"What do you think about using the Dark Zephyr as a practice target?"

Chapter 3132: Everyone Has A Pattern

"You want me to do what?"

"You heard me." Ves' projection said. "I want you to suit up and hop into your new expert mech. Didn't you complain about lacking sufficient training opportunities? Right now we have a great exercise prepared for you! Only another expert pilot can give you a good challenge."

"Uhm, I'm not so sure about that, Ves. I mean, while I'm confident in my Dark Zephyr, this doesn't sound like a safe practice."

"It'll be fine, Tusa. You're piloting an expert mech that excels at evasion. Just make sure you don't get hit and everything will be fine. In fact, even if Venerable Stark manages to land a hit, her attacks aren't enhanced by resonance, so your expert mech's resonance shield combined with a solid layer of Unending alloy should be sufficient to block any damage."

The mech designer had a point. Tusa received the privilege of piloting the first expert mech designed by the Larkinson Clan. The Dark Zephyr was everything he dreamed about and more.

Ves was also right that Tusa needed a better exercise. Even though he already received his expert mech more than a month ago, he wasn't able to test his limits as much as he wanted.

The situation would doubtlessly be alleviated once the other Larkinson expert pilots obtained their expert mechs. Only expert mechs could give him proper exercise. An alternative was deploying hundreds of regular mechs against his Dark Zephyr, but the chances of accidents happening was too great and it was not good for morale to subject mech pilots to crushing defeats all of the time.

Tusa recognized that this was a great opportunity for him to test the Dark Zephyr's damage mitigation capabilities. He quickly donned his customized piloting suit and moved down to the hangar bay in order to board his Dark Zephyr.

The special team of technicians assigned to service the powerful expert mech had already prepped it for action. Venerable Tusa hopped into the cockpit straight away and brought his powerful expert mech online.

The slim, dark shape exited the hangar bay of the Spirit of Bentheim and ventured to the testing area that the Larkinsons had set up beyond the immediate perimeter of the fleet. The expert light skirmisher flew right past the envelope of specialized interference devices that had been anchored to their specific coordinates.

"Alright, I'm here." Venerable Tusa told Ves. "When will I be put under fire?"

"Please wait for a moment. We're setting up extra sensors in order to gather extra data on the performance of your mech."

A short amount of time passed before Ves was ready to commence the test.

Both the Dark Zephyr and the Bright Beam Prime were facing each other from a fair distance away. The latter was tasked with landing a hit on the former.

In order to make the competition more fair, Venerable Tusa wasn't allowed to employ any resonance abilities other than a resonance shield for protection purposes. They might change the rules if Venerable Stark managed to land a hit, but until that happened, it was more important to see how the two performed when the playing field was more even.

Due to the substantial amount of damage that the crystal rifle could do to the civilian ships of the Larkinson Clan, the fleet had to adjust its formation to allow the heavier armored vessels to be put in front of them. This way, even if an accident occurred, the crystal rifle should only harm the surface of the Graveyard or a combat carrier.

Of course, Venerable Stark didn't intend to aim her rifle in that direction at all. The back of the Bright Beam Prime would face the fleet throughout this entire exercise, leaving no chance that the crystal rifle would inadvertently damage a friendly ship or mech.

Venerable Tusa also received orders to keep his mech in a specific zone further away from the fleet. He still enjoyed plenty of room for evasion. He just needed to make sure that his mech did not slowly drift outside of his movement zone.

"Commence the test!"

The prime mech immediately began to attack the expert mech!

While the Dark Zephyr's characteristic Perception Distortion resonance ability wasn't active, Venerable Tusa did not exhibit much pressure as his expert mech was incredibly quick to respond to his commands.

"Heh, is this it? I could dodge this shot with my eyes closed!"

Davia Stark did not deign to respond to Tusa's taunt. She was several decades older than him and had moved beyond childish games.

To her, the power of an expert pilot was a burden as well as a reward. She knew she was capable of inflicting great harm to people and was well aware of how she could swing the future of many people with her performance.

Tusa's rather flippant attitude grated on her, but she didn't let that divert her from her current approach.

After test-firing the different modes of her new luminar crystal rifle, she had already gained a general feel of the properties of each of the six different beams.

She decided to start with the humble laser beam. Though it was not as exotic as the other options, it was by far the most efficient and scalable choice.

While part of her mission was to explore all of the capabilities of the prototype weapon, she couldn't deliver a good result if she wasn't even able to land a single hit on the Dark Zephyr.

She knew exactly what she faced right now. Venerable Tusa might be younger than her, but he was still a genuine expert pilot who excelled at evasion. Now that he was paired with an expert mech that completely matched his inclinations, Stark could already foresee that she needed to make many attempts before she could accomplish her first goal!

As a result, the Bright Beam Prime maintained a stationary position in space in order to maximize its accuracy and precision and fired a fairly rapid barrage of laser beams.

Considering that Venerable Stark was facing an expert mech, she had to maximize her chances as much as possible. By disregarding the defense of her own mech and using quantity in order to increase the probability of a hit, she managed to exert considerable pressure against her opponent.

The range between the two wasn't even all that far, which made it a lot easier for her to succeed, yet the opponent she was sparring against wasn't an average opponent!

Just as how Venerable Stark didn't have to worry about a lot of variables, so did Venerable Tusa. The light mech specialist was able to devote himself completely to making him and his mech as untouchable as possible!

As a result, even though the Bright Beam Prime unleashed more than a hundred rapid shots, the expert mech remained completely unscathed!

"Hah, if this is all you can do, then maybe I should half my speed!"

Just a second after Venerable Tusa said those words, a laser beam surprisingly grazed the left arm of his expert mech!

"What?! This is impossible! How did you hit me?! This has to be a coincidence!"

Venerable Stark twitched her mouth into a smile as she continued to put pressure onto her target. Even though her subsequent shots went wide, it only took around sixty misses for her to be able to land another hit!

"No! Your mech is a lot slower than mine! How the hell are you able to predict my movements?!"

"Everyone has a pattern." She finally decided to respond. "The more you move, the more I understand your habits. With each of my attempts, I am able to get a greater read on your movements. Watch."

The intervals between hits became shorter and shorter. Even though Venerable Tusa felt professionally challenged to the point where he put an even greater amount of effort into avoiding getting hit, the Bright Beam Prime's success rate continued to increase until it only took twenty attempts to land a successful hit!

"Ahh! If my mech isn't flying so close and if I wasn't prohibited from resonating with my mech, I would have never let my Dark Zephyr get hit by your attacks!"

He wasn't even allowed to activate the powerful boosters of his expert mech, depriving him from the fastest possible solution he could employ to dodge an incoming attack.

Though Tusa felt indignant about trying to perform at his best while having his hands tied, he became more and more invested in trying to 'win' this exercise. He consciously tried to change his evasion patterns and randomize his decisions as much as possible.

It worked somewhat. Venerable Stark needed to make more attempts to land a successful hit, but she quickly adjusted as well and somehow managed to figure him out to a degree.

Before Venerable Tusa could try something else, the Bright Beam Prime suddenly dialed up the power of its shots. Though the next couple of beams went wide, one of them succeeded in nailing the Dark Zephyr!

"Damn!"

Even though the Unending alloy layer of his expert mech should be able to resist the full-powered attack without any issue, Tusa activated the resonance shield of his mech just to be certain.

A strong sky blue corona formed around the black-coated mech. The newly-formed resonance shield easily withstood the impact and hardly showed any signs of strain.

When Ves and Gloriana witnessed the result of this attack from their workstations, they didn't exhibit much surprise.

"Resonance shields are really ridiculous." He commented. "They can resist a lot more attacks than conventional energy shields."

"That's just how it responds against a normal laser beam. Didn't you boast to me that your crystal rifle has a better way to overcome this layer of defense?"

Venerable Stark wasn't in a hurry to resort to this solution. She instead cycled her rifle's attack phase to the other options first so that the Larkinsons could gather plenty of data about their performance.

A succession of positron beams, slicer beams, disruptor beams and kinetic beams lanced out at the Dark Zephyr.

Despite Venerable Tusa's determination to break his patterns and try more inventive ways to avoid the attacks, Venerable Stark seemed to be able to figure him out without fail!

Unfortunately for her, the four different attack phases yielded very little results against the Dark Zephyr's resonance shield.

Due to the expert light mech's limited size and capacity, it didn't carry a lot of resonating exotics responsible for forming this shield. Larger and heavier expert mechs were able to form much stronger resonance shields, but that did not make the Dark Zephyr a pushover!

From its current level of performance, the expert mech's resonance shield could easily resist a barrage of full-powered positron beams. This granted Venerable Tusa plenty of time to perform many different actions.

However, once Venerable Stark switched the attack phase of her luminar crystal rifle to the mysterious-sounding light beam, Venerable Tusa's instincts suddenly detected a threat.

"What the...?"

The Bright Beam Prime began to fire thin white beams of light that caused him to feel increasingly threatened.

When a light beam finally hit the resonance shield, the glowing barrier glowed brightly as it had to expend a lot more energy in order to resist the attack!

"Ouch! That hurt!"

Though the expert mech began to move a bit more frantically, the Bright Beam Prime had become relentless in its fire.

It took a total of just a dozen hits to exhaust the resonance shield!

"That's too quick!" Ves reacted with shock!

He expected the light beam attacks to be more effective against intangible and spirituality-based defenses, but he never expected that just a dozen hits was enough to expend the resonance shield of a proper expert mech.

His wife's reaction was just as dramatic. "If we arm a squad of rifleman mechs with this crystal rifle, wouldn't it be able to strip the first layer of defenses of nearly any expert mech in just a couple of salvos?"

The dramatic results soon caused Ves to feel concerned. He had just proven that he managed to develop a weapon system that was able to counter one of the most important methods that guaranteed the superiority of an expert mech.

Even though expert mechs could rely on other advantages to remain operational in actual battlefield circumstances, this did not detract from the fact that they would have a much harder time if they could no longer rely on their resonance shields!

"Is this... the real reason why the MTA is limiting the spread of luminar crystal technology?" He wondered.

Chapter 3133: Exclusive Club of People

It did not surprise him at all that the fleet received a special visitor a few days later.

At the next star system, a simple-looking frigate just happened to linger close to the coordinates where the expeditionary fleet emerged.

The vessel quickly attracted a considerable amount of scrutiny, but every sensor that examined her claimed that she was just a typical second-class vessel akin to the Barracuda that Ves once owned.

He didn't believe a single piece of data that all of the sensors spat out. He had been waiting for some kind of response ever since he managed to verify that the light beam attack mode was considerably effective at stripping the resonance shields of expert mechs.

Though the prototype luminar crystal rifle that Venerable Stark utilized in the testing session was a high-quality weapon that only Ves could make, even mass-produced versions of the weapon would be able to inflict significant damage onto an expert mech when fielded in great numbers!

It didn't take long for Gloriana to catch on to the greater implications of this weapon. While she managed to hold in her enthusiasm for several hours as they wrapped up all of the data they collected from the testing session, she finally couldn't resist once they returned to their grand stateroom.

"Miaow..." Clixie yawned as she hopped onto a couch and began to slumber.

Gloriana on the other hand raced right in front of Ves and clutched his uniform with her small hands.

"Ves!" She hissed. "Do you realize what you have done?"

"Uh, slow down, honey. Before you get too excited, hear me out first."

"YOU'VE FOUND THE KEY TO BEATING THE FRIDAY COALITION!" She shouted! "I've always worried about how to help the Hex Army overcome the Fridayman. I was reluctant to set aside other opportunities to design Hexer mechs in favor of designing our expert mechs, but now that you have managed to develop such an amazing weapon system, I have no regrets anymore. This is exactly what we need to save our aggrieved sisters from unwarranted Fridayman aggression!"

'Unwarranted Fridayman aggression? Though Ves had expected her to beg him to transfer this tech to the Hex Army, he didn't think she could be that shameless! Who was it again that struck the first blow?

"Gloriana." Ves spoke in a firmer tone as he took hold of her hands. "Listen to me. I know you're eager to help the Hegemony. Even I don't want the Friday Coalition to get its way, but THINK for a moment. Do you realize what will happen if we hand over this weapon system to the Hegemony?"

"Uhm, the Hex Army will arm millions of ranged mechs with your new crystal weapons and completely obliterate the enemy expert mechs that have caused the Hegemony to give ground time and time again?"

"The tech will leak to the rest of human space!" Ves shouted. "If the Hexers can make the luminar crystal rifle, then so can others, including the Fridaymen themselves! Damn

the licenses and so on. The value of this revolutionary weapon system is too great. What do you think will happen once people have a way to easily strip one of the core defense layers of an expert mech?"

Ever since Ves and Gloriana began to work on multiple expert mech design projects, they gained a much greater understanding on how expert mechs worked and how they performed in battle. While there was still much more to them that they had yet to learn, they at least understood their performance standards and their usage in battles.

Expert mechs possessed much greater attack power, defensive capabilities and mobility than ordinary mechs. When paired with expert pilots that were capable of resonating with them, they turned into immensely powerful individual units that could collapse a unit of hundreds of mechs on their own in the right circumstances!

The resonance shields that came with every expert mech was one of the crucial elements to ensuring their superiority. While the upfront requirements were rather burdensome, as long as an expert mech possessed the right resonating materials, they enjoyed a huge defensive boost that was incredibly efficient against ordinary attacks.

The greatest advantages of resonance shields was that their defensive power was ridiculously high while the cost of maintaining them was very low. With resonating materials doing most of the work, the expert pilot only had to expend their willpower in order to maintain this protective barrier.

Even if a resonance shield eventually succumbed, the amount of time and effort needed to take them down was so great that the expert mech and any friendlies could have accomplished a lot in the meantime.

In normal battles, the only way to efficiently break a resonance shield was to attack it with resonance-empowered attacks. This was one of the many reasons why many people assumed that only expert mechs were able to counter expert mechs.

If regular mechs armed with crystal rifles were able to accomplish the same, then enemy expert mechs would no longer be able to act so rampantly on the battlefield anymore!

Only their high-quality armor systems would be able to fend off against enemy attacks, but this was a much less desirable circumstance as some sections were much more vulnerable than others.

For example, without the cover of a resonance shield, it became a lot easier to target the flight systems of an expert mechs. As long as their vulnerable flight systems incurred serious damage, their wings would be clipped and they would lose most if not all of their initiative.

Not even expert mechs could survive getting bombarded by thousands of mechs at a time!

This was exactly what Gloriana wanted to bestow to the Hex Army.

"Who cares if the tech leaks out?" She frowned. "At most, the influence of expert mechs will be diminished regardless of whose side they are on. Since the Fridaymen depend a lot more on them than the Hexers, the former will become a lot more disadvantaged by this change! Once we manage to level the playing field, I'm certain that the Hex Army will be able to sweep the floor against their Fridayman counterparts!"

"I'm not talking about that, Gloriana! Think of what kind of disruption we'll trigger throughout the rest of the galaxy. Expert mechs will become less impactful. Expert pilots will die in greater numbers because their mechs aren't as resilient against enemy firepower anymore. Less ace pilots will emerge as a result of these consequences which also means that less god pilots will emerge from this diminished pool. Now, if you were standing in the shoes of the MTA, will you let this invention go on sale?"

Though Gloriana didn't think as much as Ves about the overall policies of an organization as big as the Mech Trade Association, even she knew about its preoccupation with encouraging the rise of as many high-ranking mech pilots as possible.

Everyone who was involved in the mech industry knew that the existence of ace pilots and god pilots was one of the few reasons why mechs were able to obtain a measure of respect in front of warships.

Without powerful pilots and powerful machines, mechs would have been relegated as toys with no hopes of surpassing the oppressive tyranny of warships.

Though the amount of expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots were way too few to threaten every human warfleet in existence, this might change one day. As long as the mech industry continued to innovate, it would only be a matter of time before someone achieved a breakthrough that allowed mech pilots to advance through the ranks with greater ease than before.

Until then, existing high-ranking mech pilots needed to be preserved as much as possible while still offering them plenty of opportunities to advance.

Right now, the current state of human civilization had struck a delicate balance. There was enough conflict to generate a steady stream of expert pilots, but the battles weren't deadly enough to cause them to die off quickly.

Only other expert pilots posed a considerable threat against them. While it was wasteful to allow them to kill each other, ace pilots and god pilots only emerged in circumstances

of great need and pressure. Coddling them would just cut them off from any chances of further advancement.

When Ves reminded his wife of the MTA's stance, she finally stopped and considered the issue from a broader perspective.

Her expression fell as uncertainty crept up in her mind.

"What do we do?" She whispered.

"We wait. If my guess is right, the MTA will issue a response. Let's not do anything drastic until we know the Association's stance."

In the end, it took several days later for the MTA to come calling. Though no one was able to tell that the small vessel was anything remarkable, Ves felt a faint degree of familiarity from the ship.

He had seen this vessel before. Though the mass, dimensions, material composition and design were completely different from any other frigate that he had seen before, he was certain that he was facing a familiar vessel.

Strangely enough, the frigate maintained its distance from the expeditionary fleet. She sat well outside of the security perimeter and did not attract too much scrutiny from the Larkinson Clan.

Even so, Ves did not let down his guard.

The truth soon came to light when Ves received a direct message to his comm. He barely had time to call Gloriana over to a private, shielded office before a group of individuals directly teleported exactly three meters in front of the couple!

"Mr. Larkinson. Mrs. Wodin-Larkinson. We meet again."

Ves and his wife bowed. "Welcome aboard the Spirit of Bentheim. We are honored by your visit."

The guards that surrounded Master Willix quietly swept the office and took up positions around the sides.

Meanwhile, all three mech designers sat down at the nearest available chairs. The fact that Master Willix took the time to do so meant that her attitude shouldn't be too harsh.

"I find myself back on this ship much sooner than expected." The Master Mech Designer calmly spoke. "Do you understand how much trouble you have stirred up? I had to pause my current projects and travel to this star cluster straight away in order to

make certain that I will be able to handle this case. I can assure you that it is unlikely you will receive as much courtesy from my colleagues."

Ves lowered his head. He was afraid of this. The MTA truly had a problem with his latest invention.

Master Willix gave him a reassuring smile. "I do not disapprove of your actions. You merely did the best you could to develop better luminar crystals. The alien tech is the signature accomplishment of an ancient race that preceded our rise. Our Association has collected plenty of evidence that the luminar race were capable of accomplishing great feats with their characteristic crystals. Even so, you have given the few of us who have become aware of your latest invention a considerable amount of concern. Do you know why?"

There was no way for Ves to deny the obvious.

"Because... my weapon system has the potential to threaten the balance of mech warfare. Expert mechs and expert pilots will become a lot less relevant if my invention spreads."

The older woman nodded. "You are not the first mech designer who has developed a more effective counter against expert mechs."

"Why haven't we heard about them, ma'am?" Gloriana asked.

"The answer to that is simple, young Gloriana. We regulate the mech industry and the mech market. From the beginning, we have always controlled the spread and growth of mech technology. If a mech designer or a developer ever invents a solution that has the potential to adversely disrupt the mech landscape, we take steps to prevent that from happening."

The mech market was never a free one. No one was able to sell any mech they liked as long as the Mech Trade Association hovered over everyone's heads.

It did not surprise Ves at all that the MTA restricted applications that fell outside of the usual categories such as untested neural interface technology and weapons of mass destruction.

He just had a lot of trouble accepting the fact that he of all people had joined the 'exclusive' club of people who attracted the wrong kind of attention from the MTA!

Chapter 3134: Restricted Technology

It didn't take much explanation from Master Willix to hit home the fact that the MTA was not happy.

The last thing the mechers wanted was for Ves to spread out a weapon system that could fire light beams that inflicted devastating damage against resonance shields!

Though the conventional wisdom was that nothing could ever stay a secret forever and the progress of technology could never be halted, the Big Two exerted a lot of control of humanity.

If the MTA and CFA was able to restrict everyone from using warships, weapons of mass destruction, mass brainwashing technology and many other unsavory applications, then they could surely prevent humans from utilizing luminar crystal technology!

Ves had no doubt that the MTA was willing to go through extreme measures in order to ensure that not a single human organization or state would field any mechs armed with luminar crystal rifles.

It didn't matter that the stronger version that Venerable Stark had just tested a few ago was a special version. Even a rifle that was just a tenth as effective at breaking resonance shields was already a gamechanger to many military organizations.

"Why must the MTA stand in the way of progress?" Gloriana still didn't want to give up the chance of arming the Hex Army with improved luminar crystal rifles. "No tech is invincible. I'm sure that someone will develop a counter against light beam attacks sooner or later. However, this won't happen if you keep the new weapon system out of people's hands. What if hostile alien empires deploy something similar one day?"

"We don't lock every tech we don't like in a vault and forget about it, Mrs. Wodin. Our research teams are constantly at work in order to get ahead of the curve. While I admit that our researchers may not be able to make as much progress as the total population of humanity, this is but a small price to pay to ensure that the development of mechs will not experience too many disruptive shifts. There are some disruptive innovations that we have permitted to spread, but your light beam rifles do not fall under this category."

Master Willix's tone made it clear that she did not intend to make an exception for this case. The MTA's priorities mattered a lot more than the opinions of others.

"Does that mean that we have expended all of this effort for nothing?" Ves frowned.

"What about my former state?" Gloriana desperately asked. "It's not fair to deprive them of the solution that we have developed to save the Hegemony from destruction."

The MTA Master frowned and crossed her arms. "I am not requesting you to suppress your new innovation. I am stating the MTA's stance. We cannot allow your luminar crystal rifles to become ubiquitous. If we see any weapon that is similar to the one you have made, both you and the Hexadric Hegemony will soon cease to exist."

The daunting threat put a stop to any attempt at blocking this ban. Once Ves and Gloriana accepted the MTA's judgement, Master Willix loosened her demeanor.

"Don't worry. We are still fair. We recognize and applaud any attempt at furthering humanity's technological development. As long as you surrender the full details on your luminar crystal weapon system, we will grant you the reward that we issue to anyone who shares their innovations with us. Mr. Larkinson, I will personally do my best to allocate the maximum possible MTA merit award to your account."

"How many merits are we talking about?" Ves cautiously asked.

"As long as you enable us to reproduce the luminar crystal rifle that can fire a so-called 'light beam' attack in its entirety, then I am able to grant you 10 million MTA merits."

10 million MTA merits.

Ves and Gloriana had to go over these several times in order for the reward to hit home.

The two had never expected that this single invention was worth a lot more than turning a couple of MTA mech pilots into expert pilots!

Then again, if the MTA did not possess this tech itself, then it was a lot more reasonable for the organization to issue such a hefty reward.

Though Ves and Gloriana still lost out considering how drastically the weapon system could alter the paradigm of mech warfare, the consolation prize was enough to keep them silent.

They benefited a lot more if they quietly accepted the MTA's judgement and avoided greater sanction.

Ves still wasn't entirely pleased with this outcome, though. How could he possibly proceed with designing the Sentry Project after the MTA took away the most essential piece of the puzzle? What about his other expert mechs such as the Chimera Project?

The thought of depriving Venerable Joshua a powerful means of defeating other expert mechs did not sit well with him! If the Larkinson Clan ever encountered another ambush like it did during the Battle of Reckoning, should Ves obediently allow thousands of good men and women to be slaughtered just because he couldn't equip their mechs with light beam weapons?

Since Master Willix was involved in the design of most of their expert mechs, she possessed a great understanding of the Larkinson Clan's position.

"I believe you are misunderstanding something, Mr. Larkinson. Our goal is to prevent the spread of a dangerous new weapon that can threaten the lives of expert pilots. That

does not mean we oppose progress. As the principal developer of this new application, you are entitled to some additional rights. Depending on my discretion, I can allow you and your Larkinson Clan to continue utilizing this weapon system. The only requirement is that you are not permitted to spread it any further."

Ves was shocked! If this was the case, then most of his objections against this ruling would disappear. As long as his Larkinsons maintained an advantage, it didn't matter too much if he wasn't able to equip his commercial or commissioned mechs with the same capabilities.

"Thank you, Master Willix."

"Don't thank me yet. I will only grant you this dispensation as long as you divulge the theory and production method of your light beam weapons. You will also have to sign a contract that will formalize your new status as a contributor of restricted technology within our database."

Master Willix briefly explained what that actually meant.

Just like how mech designers could gain rewards if they handed over their mech-related trade secrets, the MTA instituted special rules to those who contributed more controversial technology.

While the mechers could rely on their domineering power to coerce mech designers and other inventors into giving up their tech, this was a short-sighted approach that would definitely generate a lot of resentment in the long run.

Since innovation and technological progress were sacred to the MTA, any attempt at restricting them could lead to stagnation in the long run. In order to make sure that innovators remained happy and productive, the MTA was willing to give them special accommodations to make sure that they continued to pump out useful new inventions.

"Mind you, if you developed a new superweapon such as a bomb that can split apart a planet, we would never allow you to retain the right to use it. It just so happens that your case is not as severe. Even if we allow you and your clan to retain the use of light beam weaponry, the damage you can do to human society is limited."

Human society was too big for any single player to change the game. The real danger was spreading out the new killer weapon to other players. As long as that didn't happen, the MTA simply didn't care that the Larkinson Clan would be able to bully any expert mechs it came across.

Master Willix even took the time to explain all of the terms. The dispensation that she was willing to give would only apply to the Larkinson Clan. If the clan ever grew too big one day, then the MTA might opt to change the rules.

This was their right. As long as the mechers were no longer happy with the current arrangements, they had no qualms about altering the terms. They were simply too powerful to stop.

For now, the deal was fairly favorable to the Larkinson Clan. Ves knew that his fleet would be able to retain a powerful trump card to ensure its survival in the Red Ocean.

The only other problem was that the MTA didn't give out this exemption for nothing.

Master Willix gave Ves an important reminder. "The rationale for allowing the developers of a restricted tech to retain the right to use their new inventions is to give them the room to improve their work. You can be certain that our own research teams will do their best to develop your tech further, but we have observed that allowing the original inventors to keep iterating on their inventions will also yield a considerable degree of progress."

"So if I make any improvements, I have to give your Association an update?"

"Correct, Mr. Larkinson." Willix smiled. "Humanity must continue to develop its technological base. We are far from reaching the apex that other alien civilizations have reached. We need you to continue to work on this odd light beam weapon of yours as there might be a situation in the future where it can play a crucial role against our common enemies."

Ves narrowed his eyes. He had a feeling that he knew exactly what she was talking about. Though he never really tested it out, he had a very strong hunch that light beam weapons were also effective against the spiritual methods of the Five Scrolls Compact.

If this was the case, then 10 million MTA merits was obviously not enough to reflect the full value of a powerful counter against one of the MTA's main opponents!

He knew better than to voice his greed. The MTA held an overwhelming advantage in this negotiation. Whatever concessions it was willing to give was primarily dependent on Master Willix's generosity.

It was a good thing that she was on Ves' side.

Yet even if she was willing to fight for his interests, there was a limit of what she could do. The MTA never engaged in a losing transaction. It had no reason to suffer a loss when it was powerful enough to flip the board whenever a game wasn't playing out in its favor.

While the merit award of such a massive contribution was rather tasteless to Ves, at least he got something. Besides, this wasn't the end of the story. If Ves ever made any significant advancements in light beam weaponry, he could expect to receive even more MTA merits!

Overall, this turn of events did not exceed his bottom line, especially after he asked an important question.

"Just to be sure, you're talking about restricting the tech related to weapons that can fire light beams, right?"

"Correct."

"Then am I still allowed to sell regular luminar crystal rifles?" Ves eagerly asked. "The component responsible for allowing my rifles to fire resonance shield-busting light beams is fairly complicated and abstruse. There is no way that other people will be able to develop it independently."

Master Willix had already thought about this distinction. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Larkinson, but we do not desire the spread of alien technology. We are willing to ignore weaker applications, but your second-class luminar crystal weapons are too powerful. We do not desire human progress to take a detour. Any improved weapon system must be fully based on human technology and human science. This is better in the long run."

This was a huge disappointment to Ves. This effectively meant that he wouldn't be able to equip his commercial mech models with a powerful advantage that would put them ahead of the competition.

Perhaps the Crystal Lord Mark III wouldn't be as revolutionary as he previously envisioned!

The Master adopted a sterner expression. "It's rather interesting how your applications of luminar technology have experienced a sudden leap in recent times. I am certain that I did not grant you the classified research materials that allow you to develop crystals with this degree of material strength. Will you tell me how you came to possess this restricted knowledge, or do I have to perform an investigation myself?"

Uh oh... Master Willis finally asked the question that Ves was least willing to answer at the moment.

Chapter 3135: Difficult Explanation

Though Ves was not that happy about being unable to spread his luminar crystal weapons outside of his clan, he at least understood why the MTA maintained this stance.

The galaxy was old and plenty of other powerful alien civilizations had risen up in the past. During the Age of Conquest, humanity had even beaten a bunch of them. One of the ways the human race managed to get ahead was by stealing alien technology and reverse-engineering the hell out of it. This was the fastest and most convenient way to narrow the technological gap between the races.

Yet just because others came up with better technology didn't mean that humanity should blindly adopt alien paradigms. The only tech that humans could truly rely on was tech that they fully mastered. As long as alien tech remained inscrutable, it was never safe to rely too much on it. Who knew if some alien empire was able to exploit humanity's blind reliance on alien devices one day.

The best way to prevent this situation from backfiring was to avoid the proliferation of alien technology from the start.

Many humans were already aware that humanity always discouraged the adoption of alien ideas, culture and other aspects. A lot of space in human society used to be occupied by many other alien civilizations, but the conquerors wiped out every trace of them in order to avoid any human developing any mistaken sympathy for their enemies.

This attitude also extended to the use of alien technology. From a certain perspective, Ves and the Larkinson Clan violated the prevailing consensus. Not only did they move out of lockstep with the rest of humanity, their growing reliance on luminar crystal technology also left them open to any future attacks that used their own luminar crystals as attack vectors!

Ves had to admit that the MTA was quite justified in restricting the spread of luminar crystal technology. Even though the weapons that he developed were unquestionably more powerful than their equivalents on the market, there was no denying that much of that power was based on alien internal circuitry patterns, whose principles and production methods were too obscure.

Thinking about the knowledge on luminar crystal technology that he had redeemed from the system, he understood a lot better why the MTA research teams approached the alien tech from a materials science perspective.

This was the MTA's best way to expand its understanding of luminar crystal technology through human paradigms.

Unlike Ves who simply wanted to equip his mechs with the strongest weapons regardless of how he achieved his objective, the MTA research teams were trying to advance human technology by using alien tech as a reference.

The MTA never intended to fully reconstruct luminar crystal technology. The MTA researchers instead aimed to develop 'human crystal technology' that humanity could fully comprehend and master!

Understanding this perspective was extremely important to Ves. The only way he could get ahead was by working within the framework of rules set by the MTA and the rest of human civilization.

Of course, if he saw an opportunity to cheat, he would definitely do so without hesitation!

Right now, Ves first had to solve a potentially serious problem. He could not properly explain how he managed to obtain knowledge that was clearly derived from classified research that Master Willix had definitely withheld from him. The current versions of the luminar crystal rifle made so much use of the MTA's research that there was no way that Ves could deny the connection.

If Ves claimed that he obtained the research from another source, then Master Willix would definitely follow up on that. She would not be satisfied until she knew who broke the rules of the MTA and supplied him with forbidden knowledge!

If he claimed that he came up with the formulas that resulted in stronger luminar crystals, then he would have to supply the full research logs and notes that proved he performed independent research. Of course, all of these logs and files didn't exist because Ves never performed this research in the first place!

In the end, Ves decided to lean on a familiar tactic.

He innocently shrugged. "Who do you think supplied me with the classified research documents? Not every mech designer agrees with humanity's strict approach towards alien technology."

Master Willix fell very quiet at this moment. A lot of wheels started to turn in her mind.

Ves inwardly grew nervous. He had just attempted a massive bluff. It was now up to his target to develop the right conclusions from his deliberate choice of words.

The MTA Master eventually frowned. "I understand. I was afraid of this. It is highly regrettable that Mr. S. has sided with the cosmopolitans. We live in a competitive galaxy rather than a cooperative galaxy. The cosmopolitan ideals are much more appropriate if the alien empires that once ruled the space around us were friendly and generous towards other races, but history has not played out in this fashion. It is far too late for mankind to change its stance and seek coexistence and unity with the alien civilizations that still remain. The feuds that we have started during the Age of Conquest will never end until only one civilization is left."

Ves tried very hard not to comment on what she was saying or show his ignorance. He never heard about these so-called cosmopolitans before. The fact that Master Willix apparently grouped Mr. S. in this category according to the clues she pieced together was a complete coincidence!

After Master Willix came up with a conclusion that made logical sense to her, her eyes turned sharp.

"Are you an adherent of the Cosmopolitan Movement, Mr. Larkinson?"

While Ves tried his best to defend himself, Gloriana had turned into a complete bystander. She merely stood and listened to them both without doing anything to help Ves out of his predicament.

To be fair, it wasn't as if she could save him anyway.

"Uhm, I'm here, right? I'm nowhere near any of the members of the Cosmopolitan Movement. I'm just a mech designer. All of these political and ideological struggles are way over my head."

"Yet you consciously put effort into developing luminar crystal technology in its original direction." She pointed out. "I also recall that you host a religious cult with cosmopolitan leanings. There is a reason why the Ylvainan Faith has failed to maintain their presence in their origin star sector."

The implications of those last words were quite terrifying. However, Ves had to take care of himself first.

"I didn't seek out the Ylvainans. They just fell in with me after going through some difficult ordeals. I needed all of the help I can get and I don't pay much attention to their kooky beliefs. I'm still a secularist. As for my focus on this particular tech, it is nothing more than an attempt to strengthen my clan given the resources that I have at my disposal. If you ask me, I would rather equip the Sentry Project with a first-class rifle, but that is not possible, so I can only choose the next-best option. I just need power. It doesn't matter to me if it comes in a human or alien package."

It seemed that he conveyed enough sincerity for Master Willix to lessen her suspicion.

"Hmmm. I see." She pursed her lips. "Your decision is not unwarranted. However, that does not mean I approve of your choice. Do you know why I am allowing you to keep your innovations?"

Ves thought about it for a moment. The answer was quite clear if he followed the thread of this conversation.

"You are hoping that I will be able to crack the secrets of luminar crystal technology in my own way. As long as I find a way to translate the alien technological paradigms in a form that is compatible with human technology, then my work will contribute to a human weapon system that we can fully harness!"

Master Willix finally smiled. "You understand your role. That is good. Never forget that mech designers only exist to add value to our society. We can overlook numerous smaller matters as long as you contribute to the advancement of humanity. Your

success in developing this light beam attack method is of interest to us. We wish for you to continue to achieve results on this front."

"I'm not an energy weapon specialist, ma'am. I merely came up with my latest invention because I needed to pair the Sentry Project with a powerful weapon. The only reason why I was able to develop it in the first place was because I possess an advantage over your Association's research teams."

"And what is this advantage, exactly?" Willix raised her eyebrow.

"Eeehh, it's complicated. Let's discuss that later." Ves nervously replied.

In truth, he hadn't figured out how he should explain his own advancements in luminar crystal technology. He knew he had to come up with an answer quickly or else he would get in a lot of trouble!

"I do not see a reason for your clan to retain the usage of luminar crystal weapons and light beam weapons if you do not deliver any new advancements."

"I am not giving up on it, Ma'am! I am just warning you that my progress will probably not be quick. I'm trying to solve this problem by raising a mech designer who can specialize in this area, but it will take at least a decade before he is good enough to perform his own research."

Master Willix didn't seem to mind. "A decade is not a long time. We can wait that long, at least."

"Also, the expert mech design projects that I am working on right now won't be the last time I will make use of luminar crystal weapons. I will probably design plenty of ranged mechs after this, and most of them will be equipped with this weapon system. I will probably be able to make some gradual progress on this front."

Once Ves reassured Master Willix that he was not going to sit idle on this tech, she no longer threatened to take away his exemption.

Now came the hard part.

"I have waited long enough, Mr. Larkinson. It is time for you to provide me with an explanation on what you have discovered and how you are able to produce your useful light beam crystals."

"Uhhmm..."

Ves was stumped for a moment. The reason why he was able to make the latter was because of three essential elements.

First, he borrowed the power of the crystal cube.

Second, he borrowed the perspective of the Illustrious One.

Third, he leveraged his own spiritual capabilities.

None of the three were easily transferable to others. Ves did not want to lose the crystal cube. This was his overriding priority. He tried to come up with a solution that did not involve giving away this crucial asset.

He quickly developed an improvised plan and decided to execute it despite his misgivings.

"The key to developing stronger and more exotic luminar crystals is to make use of psionic power."

Master Willix became a lot more attentive all of a sudden.

"Explain."

Ves activated a projection that showed a typical luminar crystal. "The internal circuitry patterns that you see here are based around psionic power..."

The MTA already knew or suspected some of what he said, but he provided enough new insights that Master Willix genuinely became intrigued.

"Interesting. Then what method do you employ to develop these circuitry patterns and make a coherent product such as a light beam crystal?"

That... was a lot more difficult for Ves to answer.

"I... eh... borrow from unusual help."

"Will I be able to reproduce your method?"

"That... I'm not sure... it's rather complicated... you can probably make crystals that are close to mine in power, but without leveraging psionic power during the production process, it will come out weaker than it should. It's lacking a critical ingredient."

This was anything but sufficient to Master Willix. Ves had to think up a real solution quick or else he might have to say goodbye to all of those MTA merits!

Chapter 3136: Supreme Marshal Caramond Perle

"Hmm. Interesting. The internal circuitry of this weapon is constantly affecting the flow of different energies." Master Willix spoke as she floated around the giant luminar crystal rifle that Ves had placed in his personal workshop.

A few of the guards were holding large scanners and methodically began to gather data from every angle.

Gloriana was present as well, but she had been relegated to the background. She played no role in the development of the luminar crystal rifle and could not provide any insight that Master Willix could already figure out by herself.

"I hope my husband's work meets her approval." She whispered as she held Clixie against her chest.

"Miaow."

Ves nervously stood closer to the giant mech-sized rifle as he occasionally answered a few inquiries from Master Willix. The problem was that he couldn't fully provide her with the information she wanted because even he hadn't figured out how the internal circuitry patterns worked.

Eventually, Willix got tired of his insufficient attempts to explain the functioning of the weapon. She briefly paused her examination and faced Ves from above.

"Do you see how little control you have over your own invention? Many human researchers in the past have gone down the same path as you. During the Age of Stars, our race were newcomers to the galactic stage, and we became dazzled by the breadth and depth of alien technology utilized by the new and unfamiliar aliens we came across. Do you know what happened at the time?"

"Uhm... we somehow muddled through by staying under the radar of strong local powers?"

"A lot of events took place during this humble stage. Much of which has been deliberately erased from the history books." Willix ruefully smiled. "What I can tell you was that attitudes like yours were in the mainstream. Our tech base was woefully underdeveloped compared to the galactic standard at the time. We did not have the luxury to develop our own native tech base. Many researchers and developers have managed to adapt a large amount of alien tech for human use. Yet we rarely hear of their names or remember their deeds today. Do you know why?"

This was an important question and Master Willix obviously wanted Ves to think deep on this issue. In her perspective, he was in the same shoes as the researchers of the past. This made it crucial for him to learn from the mistakes of his predecessors.

Thinking about all of the warnings issued by Master Willix, Ves came up with a reply.

"In order to study alien technology, you need to understand its creators. What is their history? What are their traits? What do they value? Why did they choose to develop a specific tech? It is much harder to figure alien tech if you don't understand a thing about the minds that created it. In my own studies, I tried to figure out everything I could about the ancient luminar race. I imagine those past researchers have done the same. The only difference is that the luminar race is extinct while those other alien races were still alive and well at the time."

Willix nodded. "There is a concept known as assimilation. In this context, it describes how one alien race is able to absorb another alien race by seducing it with superior tech, an attractive culture and many other subtle means. Assimilation is different from conquest. The former is covert and gradual while the latter is overt and will always produce strong hostility. Yet make no mistake, Mr. Larkinson. When assimilation is employed as a strategy, it can lead to the same outcome as conquest. The end result is that the aliens have effectively subdued the human race and forever shackled us to the point where we only live to serve our new masters."

That sounded ominous.

"What happened?"

"It is a long story. A large proportion of the people that have led us into the stars had effectively become vassals to the surrounding alien powers. Our race would have never been able to break through the net woven around our civilization if not for a number of factors. If not for the fact that the different alien polities were competing against each other, we would have already become subsumed. The delays caused by alien rivalries has given us enough time to move past our most vulnerable period and attain strength that is not conditional to any outside influence. Has your school taught you about Supreme Marshal Caramond Perle?"

Ves immediately recognized the name even though it had been a long time ago since he last encountered the name in a history book.

"He's the Father of Human Dominion. The Supreme Marshal was the first leader of our race who managed to unite the scattered nations of humanity into a single union. This allowed all of us to speak with one voice towards the aliens we interacted with. Before this happened, Old Earth and the colonies that followed all treated each other as rivals. Once the Supreme Marshal came along, he managed to convince many different nations and other organizations that they should be directing their schemes at the aliens instead of themselves."

Master Willix nodded. "We cannot understate the importance of figures such as Supreme Marshal Perle. What the history books didn't tell you was that the opposition against his stance was much more fierce than you realize. Human nations have become

so corrupted by alien influencing that they have even waged war against each other at the prodding of their inhuman

Overlords. Each major nation was backed by a different alien race. It took an unimaginable amount of effort to break the old power structures and convince the majority of the population to stand up for themselves and reject the temptation of superior alien technology."

There was much more to this history than what she was willing to mention. Ves couldn't even imagine how the Supreme Marshal managed to stand up to all of the ancient human nations of the past.

It was equivalent to someone in the modern day who had decided to rebel against the Big Two! The power disparity was so vast that it was practically impossible for a small faction of humans to overthrow the entire status quo!

However... if the Supreme Marshal and the people around him were part of the Five Scrolls Compact, then that was different.

"Though the period spanning the Age of Stars is usually treated as an afterthought in most high school history courses, it is a crucial time that has defined much of who we are today." Master Willix generously explained even as she turned back to study the luminar crystal rifle. "This is also the origin of the conflict between human supremacy and cosmopolitanism. The winners of this early conflict went on to spark the Age of Conquest which many consider to be the most glorious time of our history. As for the losers, these disgraced and misguided dissidents went on to live in exile. Even now, they still advocate for a future where humanity lives in peace with alien neighbors. It is too late for that."

Human nationalism and supremacy was firmly rooted in the minds of most people. Despite all of the hiccups that happened throughout the last millenia, there was no doubt that humanity achieved great success by looking out after its own interests and treating aliens as enemies.

Though Ves agreed with this stance as well, he didn't have any particularly strong opinions about it. He was quite sure that there had to be more to cosmopolitanism than Master Willix let on, otherwise it wouldn't have been able to cling to existence for such a long time.

There was no way that he would be able to get an honest explanation from Master Willix, though. As the representative of one of the greatest organizations that officially embraced human supremacy, the MTA xenophobic tendencies was only surpassed by the CFA!

Well, it didn't really matter to Ves. All of these ideological struggles completely flew above his head. Even if he supported a particular stance, he was too far away from

power to be able to influence anything. The only choice he had was to abide by the prevailing rules.

Right now, the MTA and CFA were in charge, so Ves could only live in their reality.

Master Willix concluded her examination. She not only devoted her time to the luminar crystal rifle, but also studied the individual attack phase crystals that were responsible for modulating the output of the weapon system.

The attack phase crystal responsible for creating the remarkable light beam attacks attracted most of her interest. She demanded Ves supply her with the smaller versions of the crystal that he had made in the past. Comparing their similarities and differences would go a long way into figuring out the mechanisms of their unique internal circuitry patterns.

Much to his surprise, Master Willix wasn't content with studying the hardware. She snapped her fingers, causing the mech-sized luminar crystal rifle as well as many lesser samples to be teleported straight out of the Spirit of Bentheim!

Ves almost choked when he saw how effortlessly the MTA Master stole his property.

Fortunately, none of what she took was irreplaceable. The weapons and crystals were early development samples anyway. As long as he used up a batch of expensive resources, he could make much better versions of what he lost.

"This is not enough." She said. "Examining existing samples is not as good as mastering the method behind their production. It is time for you to show me how it is done."

He had been dreading this request. While Master Willix performed her initial examinations, Ves spent much of his time trying to figure out how he could get out of this predicament.

He came up with a few ideas, one of which looked promising.

Ves grimaced. "My unique production method is not transferable, ma'am. It is based around my design philosophy as luminar crystals are alive to an extent. What I can do is try to create a tool that will allow anyone to make a specific type of luminar crystal."

The MTA Master looked intrigued. "Let me see it, then. You have two hours."

He quickly began to gather a bunch of materials while forming the design in his mind.

Two of the biggest limitations to making powerful luminar crystals was the fact that it required spiritual energy and the use of the crystal cube.

A powerful Master should not be lacking in spiritual energy, but there was only one crystal cube which Ves had to preserve at all cost.

If he wasn't able to satisfy her demands, she would probably keep digging further until she uncovered his precious cube. This was an unacceptable outcome.

In order to solve this problem, Ves came up with a drastic idea. While he wasn't able to reproduce the crystal cube in its entirety in his current state, what about a lesser version?

What if he dialed back the scope and removed all of the extra features in order to create a more modest cube that could only perform a single job?

The only uncertainty was whether he could actually make it. He knew he had to pull out all of the stops.

He had no choice but to consciously channel the Illustrious One while he worked. He also had to pull out the crystal cube and make use of its capabilities in order to program the internal circuitry pattern in his new crystal.

He felt quite nervous because Master Willix was definitely watching!

In order to draw attention away from the crystal cube, Ves grabbed a bunch of other crystals and pretended to do something with them. He also consciously changed the shape of his creation into a ball.

Time passed by in a haze as Ves embodied the Illustrious One to the greatest degree he could manage. All kinds of alien thoughts and impressions occupied his mind. Whether they aided in his goal or not was not entirely clear. He blindly accepted the suggestions and just hoped that his crystal ball was able to do something useful.

"It's done." He finally sighed as he let go of the Illustrious One... His presence immediately diminished in front of Master Willix's eyes.

Chapter 3137: Crystal Ball

Master Willix's expression remained carefully composed. She rarely revealed any strong emotions and she never exposed her true thoughts.

This made it difficult for Ves to judge what she was thinking.

Ves knew that he had exposed a portion of the capabilities that he didn't want to show to her. There was no way that she had managed to miss the changes in Ves when he actively channeled one of his design spirits.

Though he was unsure how much spiritual sensitivity a Master Mech Designer typically possessed, he did not think it was weak. People like Master Willix had all moved away from the spiritually deficient origins and only needed to take one final step to reach the end point of their progression track!

This meant that the chances were great that Master Willix detected that Ves had solicited a distinctly alien presence. It would not take much thought to realize that Ves had actually made contact with a luminar entity.

What he had just done probably looked like a cosmopolitan's dream!

Ves innocently shrugged. "I told you that I can't make these crystals by myself. I need to borrow some assistance in order to make the strongest versions of my products. I think this crystal ball might help, though. It should allow you to make the same light beam attack phase crystals that are of great interest to you. You should be able to make as many of them as you want, though don't ask me how it all works. I think your research teams will be able to figure that out themselves."

An entire minute passed before Master Willix summoned the newly-produced crystal ball. The object smoothly flew in her direction and paused just in front of her floating body.

She was clearly examining the crystal ball in detail. She didn't need to employ any scanners to observe a complex array of internal circuitry patterns hiding within its transparent surface.

"I shall pass this orb along with your research data to the relevant research teams." She eventually said. "However, it needs to be verified. Please demonstrate how it works."

When the orb flew back to Ves, he tentatively took hold of it before moving to his production equipment again.

He consciously did not call upon the Illustrious One again. The point was to enable others to produce the enhanced crystals. This was a problem that had long restricted him from using his best crystals on a larger scale, but now that he was under pressure, he hoped he managed to come up with an actual solution!

In order to speed up the work, Ves decided to make a small infantry-grade light beam crystal. He gathered the right materials and processed them like normal, but instead of drawing upon the crystal cube, he utilized the crystal ball instead.

The cube absorbed a portion of his spiritual energy, causing its internal circuitry to buzz and light up. What happened next caused even Master Willix to take note.

This was because the crystal ball began to exude the presence of the Illustrious One!

The crystal ball turned out to be a totem!

Ves specifically aimed to create an auxiliary production tool that directly drew from the Illustrious One in order to support its functioning. However, the design spirit wasn't able to do so independently. The person using the ball needed to supply it with a portion of spiritual energy in order to power the connection.

This was the essence of his idea. As he proceeded to use the activated crystal ball as a tool to carve the internal circuitry pattern into his latest attack crystal, he saw that it was working exactly as he hoped!

Just like before, the Illustrious One was doing the heavy lifting. It helped that the crystal ball only contained a limited amount of instructions. It served no other purpose than to create the light beam attack phase crystals that interested the MTA the most.

With the creation of this ball, Ves finally created a means that allowed others to create powerful luminar crystals without requiring his personal attention!

However, it was not a perfect solution yet. The price of activating the crystal ball was to donate a significant chunk of spiritual energy.

This might not be a big deal to Ves, who could easily supplement the cost with the help of Blinky, or Master Willix, who doubtlessly possessed much greater reserves.

The real problem came with handing over the crystal to someone who had much less energy to spare. If Ves handed a crystal ball to a random mech technician, then there was a considerable risk that this person would probably drain himself dry!

Once he finished his latest product, he handed both the attack phase crystal along with the crucial crystal ball to Master Willix.

She looked a bit more pleased now that Ves gave her a solid result.

"Be careful with the crystal ball." He softly warned her. "In order for it to work, it needs to consume a portion of psionic power. It takes at least a Journeyman in order to be able to use the crystal to produce a light beam crystal."

Master Willix didn't look surprised. She remained remarkably calm despite all of the oddities that Ves had demonstrated.

"What variables determine the consumption?"

"It should be usage time as well as production quantity. It takes more power to extend its active state. It also has to expend more energy in order to configure larger and more voluminous luminar crystals."

At least, that was what he guessed. He didn't really have a thorough understanding of what he created. Whether it contained anything extra or possessed different parameters, he could tell for certain. He would have to test the crystal ball under many different circumstances, but this was obviously not the time to perform such an extensive study.

He could only hope that the crystal ball presented to Master Willix wouldn't produce an accident or something once the MTA researchers made use of its capabilities.

After studying the crystal ball and the product that it helped create, the MTA Master finally teleported them back to her ship before turning her attention back to their maker.

"This is barely sufficient, Mr. Larkinson. Though I am impressed by your unconventional method, it is not an approach that can be performed through purely human means. You are still too far away from mastering the working principles of this tech."

Ves sighed. "I am aware of that, ma'am. I am more focused on the power that I can gain than trying to understand its roots."

"You are following a crooked path. The power of these crystals are not weak. In fact, if fully understood, the underlying tech can revolutionize our energy weapon systems, but you are still too far from this point. As long as your methods and products bear traces of alien technology, we cannot embrace it. Do you understand?"

"I do." He said.

Much of the tech that was used to make mechs, ships and other devices were fully mastered by humanity's scientific community. There may be a couple of exceptions, but for the most part anyone was able to understand and reproduce a particular device after learning the underlying theories and mastering the relevant methods.

This universality was key to empowering humanity as a whole. Any mech designer and any developer could make any product as long as they had the right means.

The current state of human technology wouldn't be nearly as easy to learn and apply if it was split up into many different alien-derived branches!

"Mech designers such as yourself must fully understand your creations in order to go further along your career." Willix dropped another hint. "If you continue to overreach and make use of tech that does not belong to humanity, then how can you possibly realize your design philosophy? No mech designer has ever advanced to Master by borrowing help. You must find your own solutions."

This was quite a massive hint. Both Ves and Gloriana silently carved these words in their hearts. What they just heard already fell in line with what they expected out of great mech designers.

"I will take your words into consideration, Master." Ves mildly responded. "May I know whether you have completed your evaluation?"

"You may. After observing your methods, going over your research data and receiving some tools and samples, I judge that your contribution to our Association is worth... 7,500,000 MTA merits."

A weight had lifted off his shoulders. Though the award had not reached the maximum limit of 10,000,000 MTA merits, three-fourths of it was not a small prize!

He didn't have to ask why Master Willix withheld the remaining 2,500,000 MTA merits. The lack of sufficient theory along with the dependence on the crystal ball to engrave special internal circuitry patterns in new crystals significantly reduced the practical applications of this tech.

It was far from ready to be employed by humanity on a wide scale.

Still, Ves had donated a lot of useful material to the MTA, enough for its highly-competent researchers to derive a lot of clues and further their understanding of the working principles through their own means.

Now that she had completed her task, Master Willix was ready to wrap up this visit. She had already taken a lot of time out of her busy schedule in order to handle this case in person.

"If you ever come across or develop another major technological innovation, then I advise you to bring them to my attention." She pointedly said to Ves. "We will always be fair when awarding you with MTA merits, and do not think that you don't need to accumulate them anymore once you have redeemed your beyonder ticket. The value of MTA merits is even greater in the Red Ocean."

That sounded pleasant. Not. While Ves seriously doubted whether the MTA treated technological contributors fairly, he did not question her main point.

The Big Two specifically arranged the Red Ocean for ambitious, hardworking pioneers who wanted to seek their fortunes in the new frontier. How could the MTA and CFA let these talented and capable people go about their day without finding a way to leverage their value even further?

"I will be sure to inform you if I have made any breakthroughs in luminar crystal technology or any other powerful tech." Ves lied.

"You do that. Now, before I go, let me examine the Dark Zephyr."

They moved over to the hangar bay where the Dark Zephyr had been parked. The expert mech quickly drew the interest of Master Willix. Though she was thoroughly familiar with its design, the real mech nonetheless exceeded her expectations.

"This is a remarkable expert mech."

Gloriana beamed at the compliment. "We tried our best to surpass our prior work!"

Ves didn't know what Master Willix was actually looking for, but she took at least half an hour to satisfy her curiosity. He was half-afraid that she would take his expert mech away, but fortunately it didn't come to that.

Once Master Willix was about to depart, Gloriana somehow mustered up her courage.

"Wait, Master! Before you go, can I make a request?"

Master Willix paused and turned around.

"What is your request?"

"We're working on another ranged expert mech design that is reserved for my brother. I would really like it if he is allowed to wield a luminar crystal weapon as well. In fact, I would also like to ask if you can extend this privilege to the rest of my Glory Seekers."

"If your Glory Seekers answer to you, then they ought to be a part of the Larkinson Clan." Willix noted.

"That... is not the case. The Glory Seekers must remain Hexer. They're entrusted to me by my dynasty. I cannot force them to abandon their identities."

"Then I'm afraid that I cannot grant them an exemption." Willix ruthlessly declared.

Gloriana's expression turned glum. What she really wanted was to give her brother a powerful means of attack, but with this restriction, it was impossible for her to make the Star Dancer Mark II as good as she hoped!

"However..." Master Willix spoke up again, causing Gloriana to gain some hope. "It is not impossible for you to gain your wish, but rewards must be earned. Your husband has just made a notable contribution. He is therefore entitled to receive our generosity. Now it is your turn. Any mech designer that goes far enough cannot continue to take from the mech industry without giving back. Work hard and do your best to achieve a result that is of use to the Mech Trade Association. Goodbye."

Once she said her piece, the powerful MTA Master and her silent bodyguards silently teleported away.

Her message was very clear.

Chapter 3138: Yearning to Succeed

Once the seemingly-ordinary second-class frigate left the star system in a seemingly normal fashion, life on the Larkinson fleet went back to normal.

Work on the expert mech design projects still proceeded as normal. Master Willix's visit hadn't fundamentally changed any of the projects and most of the plans related to them. The Larkinson Clan was still allowed to field these powerful weapons, though any thoughts about selling them went out the airlock.

Ves felt quite ambivalent about what had happened. A part of him actually wished that he hadn't created such a powerful means to strip an expert mech of its resonance shield. Without the light beam attack phase, he guessed that he would have never tripped the MTA's alarm.

"Oh well. At least my clan won't have to be so afraid of expert mechs anymore."

Master Willix's judgement had removed a cloud of uncertainty over his head. He had always felt a bit nervous about increasing his reliance on luminar crystal technology. Now that he received official sanction from the MTA, he did not have to worry about losing the right to use it as long as he did not do anything excessive.

The biggest downside was that Ves, like any technological contributor, was expected to continue to supply the MTA with any significant advances he made. Though the mechers promised to grant him additional merits for each significant contribution, he still felt irked at how extensively the Association took advantage of him. The entire scheme reeked of a scam.

He couldn't imagine how much knowledge the MTA received from all of its contributors every day!

"At least I've already gotten merits out of this arrangement."

After spending a long time without completing any missions for the MTA, Ves finally managed to alleviate his need for merits.

His personal account now held over 44 million MTA merits!

Together with Gloriana, the Larkinson Clan essentially held 45 million MTA merits, which was enough to claim 9 out of 20 capital ship slots of a beyonder ticket.

This reward alone was enough to wash away all of his lingering sourness.

"Together with the two free ship slots that the Cross Clan exchanged with me, my clan has a total of 11 ship slots!"

This was more than enough for the Larkinson Clan to get off to a decent start in the Red Ocean. Ves was particularly happy that he had room to add additional capital ships to his fleet if he could get his hands on a couple of them. As long as he stumbled into an opportunity to obtain a fleet carrier or a mass conveyor, he would definitely pounce on it as the fleet urgently needed to reinforce its combat capabilities!

"This doesn't mean I should stop finding ways to earn more merits, though." His expression turned serious. "45 million MTA merits isn't quite enough to grasp the majority of the rights in the Golden Skull Alliance."

Ves wasn't sure how many merits the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan would be able to earn in the next year or so. If they weren't as good as he hoped, then the expeditionary fleet might end up arriving at the lesser beyonder gate without all of the merits needed to leave the galactic rim!

The best way to prevent any delays was to keep finding more opportunities to earn additional merits. Besides, Master Willix was right that they didn't become useless once he reached the Red Ocean.

Aside from offering the usual rewards such as exclusive knowledge, rare exotics and most notably life-prolonging treatment serums, the Big Two also offered many precious goods and services that were difficult to obtain in the current state of the Red Ocean.

Merits never lost their relevance! The MTA and CFA certainly made sure of that!

Once Ves processed all of the changes, he paid a visit to Gloriana.

Ever since Master Willix told her that she needed to contribute to the MTA in order to get what she wanted, his wife had become incredibly invested in her work!

"Ves!" She said as she noticed his arrival. "I need you to refine your work on your luminar crystal rifle further! What you sent to me yesterday is too rough. Even though I don't understand this tech as well as you, I can easily spot more than a hundred significant issues. I've already transmitted my list to you, so get to work and don't come back until you've addressed my complaints!"

"You're working too hard, Gloriana." He said as he approached her back and massaged her shoulders. Her flowery scent already began to tickle his nose. "I know you're in a hurry to please the MTA, but there is only so much you can do as a Journeyman."

"I'm not working hard enough in my opinion." She growled. "I can't settle for as many compromises anymore, Ves, not if I want to earn the MTA's appreciation."

"How do you intend to do that? Tell me you have a gameplan. As far as I know, you aren't versed in any field that the MTA has not mastered as of yet. I managed to luck out by gaining proficiency in a tech that the MTA hasn't cracked, but I doubt you have a similar opportunity."

Gloriana merely shook her head. "You're right. I am not familiar with any alien or exotic tech. I don't excel in researching new tech. So I won't."

"Then... what are you trying to do, then?" Ves puzzlingly asked.

"Isn't it obvious? I might not be as good at researching new tech, but I am confident in my ability to apply existing tech. I intend to work as hard as possible and turn one of our upcoming expert mechs into masterworks!"

Ves widened his eyes. "That's almost impossible! Expert mechs are in an entirely different league from normal mechs. The difficulty is so great that it is unrealistic for us to expect that we'll be able to succeed in our next attempts."

"I still intend to succeed! Don't tell me that I should give up. I will work as hard as possible and give my brother the opportunity to keep up with the growth of the likes of Venerable Joshua and Venerable Jannzi. Only by wielding your best weapons will he be able to realize his own potential!"

He could see that she was dead set on making an expert masterwork mech.

The Dark Zephyr already earned Master Willix's appreciation. Ves had no doubt that a masterwork version of one of his expert mechs would earn vastly more attention from the MTA!

In fact, regardless of the properties of an expert mech, any remarkable machine that managed to reach masterwork quality was an absolute treasure. Ves would probably be able to earn an unimaginable sum of MTA credits if he put it up for auction.

What was even better was that the MTA would be eager to pay a sumptuous amount of MTA merits if it could take possession of the powerful masterwork!

Considering the MTA's well-known love for masterwork mechs and especially masterwork expert mechs, Gloriana had indeed picked a goal that would definitely allow her to get her way.

"The odds are too low, Gloriana. Don't you recognize that? I'm not trying to put you down, but I don't want you to hurt yourself if you get too impacted by continuous failures. Not even Masters who can make masterworks on a regular basis can maintain their success rate when they attempt to make an expert mech. There is something very different about these machines that makes expert mechs a lot harder to reach masterwork level."

"YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT WHAT I CAN DO, VES!" Gloriana yelled as she turned around to push him away. "Go away and get back to refining that flawed rifle of yours! I am going to do my best to make the Sentry Project as good as possible, but I won't be able to succeed if you don't pull your own weight. Now get going!"

Ves looked rather helpless as he exited Gloriana's workplace. His attempt to temper her expectations had failed. He envisioned a rather busy time for everyone in the Design Department except for the new recruits.

"Well, at least our clan will benefit from receiving a higher-quality expert mech."

He didn't dare to be too greedy, not after he made the Dark Zephyr. Expert mechs were difficult to get completely right. Aside from their greater complexity and higher performance, much of it had to do with the inclusion of complicated resonating materials.

Due to a lack of understanding on how they worked and how they functioned when embedded into a mech, it was impossible for Ves and Gloriana to know how they should be applied best.

If they didn't even know that, then how could they elevate the quality of an expert mech to the greatest height?

Ves had a hunch that without understanding the full nature of expert mechs, he could forget about making a true masterwork expert mech. He tried to convey that to his wife, but evidently she thought differently.

Well, perhaps he misjudged the situation. He could only wait until they completed all of their expert mechs to see who was right. He just hoped that Gloriana wouldn't become devastated to the point of falling into a coma or something.

This was actually a real threat considering her extreme passion for her craft and how much her entire design philosophy centered around success.

He did what she asked of him and went back to refine his luminar crystal rifle project. Though she hadn't exactly been polite about it, the list of issues she provided him did point out all of the areas where Ves had been less than thorough.

"I was focusing more on expanding the capabilities of this weapon system than to optimize its performance." Ves complained. "The two are different things."

This was also why he wasn't in an immediate hurry to optimize his rifle design. Instead, he continued to try out different measures that would hopefully increase the performance of the weapon further.

Not all of the attempts succeeded, but Ves managed to develop a handful of inventive solutions that slightly increased the power and versatility of the crystal rifle.

It was only then that he started to work on the issues that his wife had meticulously documented. Though it took a significant amount of time to go through every issue, Ves could feel his work becoming more refined.

After two weeks of intensive development, Ves finally completed a highly-refined weapon design. Though the rifle design still had to be altered by Master Willix so that it contained Opticonium, its current form should already be an effective weapon in its own right.

"It's... okay." His wife eventually said after she examined his latest work. "I'm not entirely happy with it, but it serves as an adequate base for now. I can make more precise tweaks and adjustments to the mech frame now that I know the exact parameters of its rifle."

The tentative completion of the luminar crystal rifle design meant that the Sentry Project was much closer to finishing. According to their estimates, it would only take a couple more weeks of intensive design effort to finish the first iteration of the expert mech design.

It would probably take at least a month to optimize the initial design and start another pivotal fabrication run.

In fact, they could have completed this project faster, but his wife wanted to spend a bit more time on it to make sure that they were maximizing their chances of making a masterwork expert mech.

During this period, the expeditionary fleet quietly passed through the Bardo Star Cluster without encountering any disturbances.

The main trading routes that ran through every star sector were usually safe and free from local unrest.

There were way too many people and organizations who had an interest in keeping the trading routines free from trouble. It was not easy for anyone to disrupt the flow of ships passing through the busy star systems.

"It seems that as long as I don't bother any states, no one will take the initiative to bother my fleet."

This was exactly what Ves wanted.

Chapter 3139: Banshee Eyes

The Larkinson Clan achieved a lot of progress after the expeditionary fleet departed from the Pelsa Ryndover System.

Not only were the Larkinsons making their way out of the Vilsam York Star Sector, they quickly internalized all of the new additions they gained from their last stop.

The new clansmen were quickly being integrated into the fold. They were not only immersed in the unique and developing culture of the Larkinson Clan, but also became accustomed to their new jobs.

There were opportunities everywhere in the fleet. The more ambitious clansmen all knew that they could climb to unimaginable heights as long as they worked hard enough and kept improving their skills.

This was because the Larkinson Clan was still young!

The clan grew so quickly that new positions associated with greater responsibilities constantly opened up. While the clan often tried to plug these gaps by hiring outsiders, most Larkinsons preferred to bring someone up within their own ranks instead.

This contrasted sharply with older and more mature companies where their hierarchies no longer expanded and where upward mobility slowed to a crawl. After all, it was not enough to rely on normal attrition where older employees retired or people occasionally quit their jobs to find other opportunities. Many talents would inevitably remain buried if they stayed in such a rigid structure.

The rich opportunities that the Larkinson Clan presented to its workforce motivated everyone to work harder.

However, they had no choice but to do so anyway as there were many difficult problems that only a younger organization suffered from. The downside to joining a newer organization was that many areas were still underdeveloped.

Fortunately, the expeditionary fleet didn't encounter any disturbances throughout its journey. It blended in with the immense stream of traffic that was running through every star sector.

Even if the Larkinson fleet encountered any dangerous elements in a given star system, the range was either too great or the threat simply wasn't strong enough.

The Larkinson Clan had a lot of teeth, and it wasn't even alone. When the Larkinson Clan combined forces with the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan, nothing less than a fully-equipped military mech division had a realistic chance of defeating the Golden Skull Alliance!

Even then, the chances of that happening was poor because the mech forces of the alliance were anything but conventional. Their parameters on a data pad did not fully reflect their effective combat power.

Not even crooked military patrol fleets dared to get close to such an intimidating fleet in order to collect a 'protection fee'.

At best, the corrupt officials would win a pyrrhic victory where they lost most of their forces and had to account for such a disaster to their states.

At worst, they would get defeated outright and most definitely lose their lives!

This was why no one bothered the powerful fleet. The Golden Skull Alliance was clearly passing through and didn't show any intentions of meddling in any of the local regions. Their battle record and their high combat preparedness put them in the same category as the fleets operated by major trans-galactic organizations.

Touching them would lead to certain death!

Ves was quite happy about that. After living through one crisis after another, he already experienced more than enough excitement for him to suppress his restlessness. Right now, his current and upcoming projects had the potential to massively strengthen his clan. He preferred to finish all of them first before he was ready to take some risks again.

"I need to wrap the most essential projects up before we reach the Red Ocean." He muttered. "Once we pass through, we'll be beset by dangers."

He was not satisfied with the current strength of his clan. While his mech forces may have grown to the point where even the strongest second-rate states didn't want to suffer so many losses to take down the Larkinsons, this didn't apply in the Red Ocean.

Not only was it filled with powerful fleets that were built to the standards of the galactic heartland and the galactic center, but the incentives of preying on others was much greater!

The combination of these two factors caused Ves and many other far-sighted Larkinsons to feel an increasing sense of urgency. The lesser beyonder gate was getting closer and closer. Time was running out. If they didn't take advantage of the current circumstances to strengthen their forces in ways that were still doable in the Milky Way, they might never have the opportunity to do the same in the Red Ocean!

The search for a crucial capital ship that could carry a lot of mechs was still ongoing. Though the chances were slim that the Larkinsons would ever be able to pick up a fleet carrier or a mass conveyor without suffering devastating consequences, they still had to

try as the addition of even one of those ships would make them a lot less likely to get attacked in the Red Ocean!

The responsibility for finding a way to purchase or obtain one of these crucial capital ships not only rested on Shederin Purnesse, but also on Calabast.

It was a pity that the Black Cats were more preoccupied with bringing their new capital ship online. Just making this long and thin capital ship space worthy was not enough. The intelligence arm of the Larkinson Clan invested a lot of time and effort into disassembling, inspecting, modifying and reassembling all of the advanced systems of the new espionage vessel.

Though the Black Cats still had a long way to go before they were able to utilize the full capabilities of their new capital ship, they already managed to activate the most essential systems.

Calabast sat on a wide, black seat while surrounded by hundreds of projections. Each of them displayed different sensor feeds, galactic net articles, written reports and other relevant data.

She wasn't actually paying attention to all of them at the same time. Even her implants and improved genetics couldn't turn her into a supercomputer. She was just enjoying the ambiance of having a lot more data at her disposal.

Of course, collecting data was only one aspect of intelligence work. It was sorting them, interpreting and judging their validity that truly separated good intelligence agencies from bad intelligence agencies.

The large number of processors and specialized data gathering and data analysis systems aboard the Blinding Banshee could not reliably automate these processes. What they could do was to refine raw data to a greater degree and accelerate the work needed to accomplish a task.

Right now, Calabast was largely preoccupied with countersurveillance. More precisely, she sought to detect and neutralize as many bugs and software vulnerabilities in the fleet as possible. There were still far too many ships in the Larkinson fleet that had yet to receive a thorough examination.

It didn't matter too much if the smaller vessels were compromised, but it was crucial for the capital ships to be cleaned of any bugs that could give their enemies an entry point into their systems.

This was a challenging mission to complete, but the Black Cats enjoyed several advantages.

First, they were working in full cooperation of the crews of the respective vessels. The captains and officers readily granted the Black Cats access to the systems they controlled. After all, the people who were living aboard the relevant starships had the greatest interest in making sure their homes wouldn't suddenly lose control!

Second, the Black Cats hired a lot of competent hackers, virtual security specialists and other highly-skilled personnel in the past few months. With the help of the Larkinson Network, the recruiters for the Black Cats did not have to reject as many talented applicants due to an inability to verify their trustworthiness.

Passing the judgement of the Golden Cat was a much more foolproof way of filtering out potential spies and saboteurs!

The Larkinson Clan and its allies had become so good at detecting duplicitous recruits before they could enter the fold that the Golden Skull Alliance even gained a reputation for being impossible to penetrate.

Through hidden circles where only certain people could communicate with each other, more and more stories circulated on how any hidden agents sent to the Larkinsons, Glory Seekers and Crossers simply disappeared without exception.

Of course, the relevant intelligence agencies weren't stupid enough to knock on the doors of the Golden Skull Alliance in order to get their missing people back.

Every game had its own rules. Those who tried to infiltrate an organization had to be ready to pay the price for failure.

In any case, the huge reduction in infiltration attempts made Calabast's life much easier. Even though the Golden Cat was doing a great job, that didn't mean her men could slack off. Goldie's test did not encompass other troublesome elements that could otherwise pose problems to the Larkinson Clan, such as psychological addictions, mental diseases, irrational fanaticism and so on. The case of Dr. Nigel Redmont served as a powerful reminder that no means was foolproof.

This was why most of the Black Cats were currently preoccupied with countering electronic, software and other non-human spying methods.

The third and greatest advantage that Calabast had at her disposal came in a surprisingly small package.

"Are you comfortable, Lucky?"

"Meow..."

The gem cat looked as if he had just performed a lot of exercise. The cat was lying listlessly on Calabast's lap. His tail didn't flicker.

The reason for his tiredness was related to the thick data cable hooked up to one of his paws. A lot of data was running through this connection as one of the main analysis programs of the Blinding Banshee was relying heavily on Lucky's advanced hacking capabilities.

"Squeak... squeak..."

An eight-legged exobeast was resting next to Calabast's shiny boot as usual. He was much more content these days as Lucky no longer had the energy to bully the arganid clisenta.

In fact, Arnold constantly felt as if he was growing stronger with each passing day. While his body wasn't experiencing much change, his mind grew firmer and more intelligent.

That said, his character remained much the same, and the improvement was only relative to his base state.

"Squeak. Squeak."

Arnold comfortably turned his body in order to hug and lick Calabast's already-shiny boot. The act had become so ingrained to him that he would still be licking a boot in his sleep!

Calabast didn't even pay attention to the pathetic behavior of her pet. She instead paid careful attention to a number of data feeds which displayed how many bugs were included in the Spirit of Bentheim.

As a former DIVA agent, she knew the methods of her former Hexers well. The shipbuilders that constructed the factory ship probably couldn't have imagined that Lucky's hacking capabilities could see through all of their means!

"Interesting." She smirked.

With the help of the high-powered, sophisticated scanners of the Blinding Banshee, her new mobile headquarters could see through any other vessel at close range.

Other than the vault and other highly-shielded compartments, the Spirit of Bentheim had turned into an open book in her eyes.

"Well, the good news is that my former sisters have restrained themselves."

Calabast had already found that out when she and Lucky performed manual inspections, but it was good to know that the rest of the capital ship was relatively unaffected.

What gave her a lot of relief was that she hadn't detected any hidden sabotage that could damage or destroy the ship. While this inspection method wasn't completely foolproof, anything that could significantly impact the performance of a capital ship certainly wouldn't be small. If this powerful suite hadn't detected any major issues, then they probably didn't exist.

Not everything was good, though. The few improprieties that Calabast did manage to detect were incredibly well-hidden and only sporadically transmitted data back to the only Hexer presence that was traveling alongside the Larkinson fleet.

"I knew there was something fishy about the Glory Seekers."

Chapter 3140: Small Talent Pool

Two of the most important leaders of the Larkinson Clan stood on a balcony overlooking a large data analysis center. Many uniformed clansmen were working quietly to improve or refine the coordinated battle plans that were formed in order to account for any conceivable possibility.

From landing right in the middle of minefield to getting attacked by a powerful first-class mech, the Larkinsons had learned the hard way that it was better to make preparations beforehand.

The young and growing clan had encountered far too many surprises and unanticipated incidents that could have led to disaster if it was any weaker. The Larkinsons realized that they could not blindly rely on their strength to solve every issue.

"I always anticipated that my Military Bureau would be called something else some day, but I did not expect that evolution to happen so quickly." General Verle spoke as he observed his men from above. "We've grown so fast that I can barely keep up with the pace."

Shederin purnesse smiled as he stood by the general's side. "A mere bureau cannot encompass the heavy responsibility of managing and coordinating our future mech legions. You will be the glue that keeps them together and the web that ties them into a cohesive whole. Even as our reforms aim to make them more independent, that does not change the fact that we need a stronger central body to keep them tied to their original purpose."

A mixed expression appeared on General Verle's face. "Back in the old days, I used to be a field officer who often felt alienated from the distant headquarters of the Bright Republic's Mech Corps. Ves and I shared frequent complaints about how little the brass cared about the Flagrant Vandals. Now I am about to become one of them. How ironic."

"Your experiences give you the perspective you need to do better, general. You don't have to follow the same model. You still have sufficient power and authority to structure

your new Central Command in a form that will make sure that the rear serves to support the front rather than the other way around."

The general didn't look very optimistic. "That sounds great, but I have a feeling that it will be a lot harder to stick to that in the future. I guess I have to make sure I pick the right successor once I retire."

Fortunately, it would take a long time for that to happen. General Verle might be older than Ves and many other Larkinsons, but he was far from a geezer like Raymond Billingsley-Tusa. As long as he received a round of life-prolonging treatment, he could easily hang on to his position for one-and-a-half centuries!

Of course, Verle never intended to stick around that long. He was well aware that he was a relic of a rather poor and unsophisticated third-rate state. With the way the Larkinson Clan was growing, its military wing would eventually grow into a behemoth that required a more competent leader to manage all of its problems.

While Verle was willing to step aside for a better replacement, he knew the time had not yet come. As a former Brighter, he knew what Ves desired from the Larkinson Army the most.

One of the downsides to all of the rapid growth and expansion was that the Larkinson Clan's connection to its original roots had become more and more diluted. If not for the strong insistence on propagating the original culture of the trueblood Larkinsons as the main unifying factor, the clan would have become unrecognizable by the Brighters by now!

The former Brighter shifted his eyes to the former Loxian. "While I generally approve of your plan to reorganize the Larkinson Army, I'm not so certain about all of the other changes that you have proposed."

"You're a smart man, General Verle." Shederin calmly responded. "The Larkinson Clan owes much to its patriarch, but it has also grown too dependent on him. This is not a healthy development, particularly when our clan is increasingly showing more and more flaws due to its inadequate governance. Relinquishing temporal power in order to preserve supreme authority that matters is the kingly way."

It was true that General Verle could see the purpose behind the reforms, but he still maintained his guard towards Shederin and the Purnessers. As a former intelligence operative, he knew quite well that oily politicians like the old man were rarely as noble as they pretended to be. Their interests always come first.

The Larkinson Assembly and many leaders such as General Verle had already wrangled back and forth about the specific reform measures. Shederin had to tweak his proposals many times, but the overall direction still remained the same.

It wouldn't be long before the clan would embrace the final parts of the reform plan and welcome a new governance structure.

One of the reasons why Shederin paid a visit to the Graveyard was to ask an important question.

"Have you decided on who to put forward as one of the three vice patriarchs of the Larkinson Clan?" The former ambassador asked.

The military officer didn't respond right away. If he had a choice, he would have wanted to nominate himself, but he could do more for the Larkinson Army if he retained his military rank.

Though the vice patriarch nominated by the military wing of the Larkinson Clan was able to exert power outside of military-related matters, General Verle had no desire to become a politician.

That left him with a conundrum. The Larkinson Army was too young and too slanted towards younger soldiers to have anyone that was suited to assume such a powerful and important leadership position.

"Do you require assistance in nominating a suitable candidate?" Shederin prodded.

"I can decide on my own, sir." Verle bit back.

As long as he was in charge here, he would not allow another politician to influence his decisions. Only Ves had the right to command him directly.

He quickly went over the names of the many officers within the Larkinson Army.

Not a lot of them stood out. The Larkinson Clan's bias towards recruiting younger soldiers and officers meant that there were too few who possessed the age, experience and maturity to occupy a high position of authority.

It was too reckless to appoint someone younger to such an immense position of responsibility. The power could get to them as they lacked the life experience to cling to their original purpose and ideals.

Only those who had tempered both their hopes and expectations and experienced the realities of life would have his trust. It wasn't enough to have the right intentions. Power corrupted and the position of vice patriarch granted far more power than anyone in the clan should ever possess.

In fact, it was quite a wonder that Ves had shown a lot of restraint, though much of that had to do with his other preoccupations.

After dredging up a lot of names, he suddenly paused when a name came up. The person he was considering was certainly not ideal, but she was one of the few officers that he had confidence in. Others might not agree, though.

Shederin detected the change. "Who do you have in mind right now?"

"Major Magdalena Larkinson. She's one of my staff officers."

"I've... heard about her. She was the first commander of the Living Sentinels if I recall. She resigned from this post after her men suffered disproportionate losses in a previous battle."

General Verle looked grim. "We lost a lot of good brothers and sisters that day. To be honest, I never blamed Magdalena for the losses, and neither has the patriarch. However, someone had to take the fall, and we all decided it was best for her to take a step back in order to move the Living Sentinels forward."

The plan succeeded and the ascension of Commander Casella Ingvar had thoroughly transformed the Living Sentinels.

These days, the only non-elite mech troop of the Larkinson Clan had regained its pride and confidence despite its humble nature. Its members were all motivated and were more than willing to fight to protect their clan and family.

As for Magdalena, her quiet promotion to the rank of major reflected his trust and reliance on her. She was much more suited to supporting the Larkinson Clan from the back instead of from the front.

Now, he was considering whether she could do an even better job if she aided the clan from the top.

"Major Magdalena is... a controversial figure." Shederin pointed out the obvious. "She is branded by the stigma of failure. That will hardly inspire trust and confidence in her ability to stand up for the soldiers of the Larkinson Clan. You need to put forward a leader who your troops will love."

"That is not an easy request to fulfill."

General Verle realized that the Larkinson Army was lacking in senior officers. While there were plenty of competent soldiers and officers in the middle and bottom parts of the hierarchy, the upper end was relatively barren.

"What about Fleet Coordinator Ophelia Kronon?" The diplomat suggested.

"I've already considered her." Verle shook his head. "Ophelia is a good manager and advisor, but she is not suitable for this responsibility. She's a Kronon, and that means

she was a born soldier in her former state. Even if we have left the Ylvaine Protectorate far behind, Ophelia is still a product of her old environment."

She was also unable to keep up with the growing scope of her job. The fleet had turned into a complex machine that incorporated several immense capital ships that possessed a lot of individual quirks. Trying to coordinate all of their movements on and off the battlefield was becoming an increasingly more complex responsibility.

Though General Verle hated to think about it, he planned to replace a large number of officers that had been with the clan early on but could no longer perform their jobs as well as before. The clan recruited plenty of talented clansmen with second-class backgrounds that received sufficient systematic training to hold important responsibilities.

It didn't matter whether they came from the Life Research Association, Grand Loxic Republic or the Ivena Federation. Once they entered the clan, they became a Larkinson. Their qualifications were much more important than their past.

After Shederin and General Verle went over a couple more names, the latter eventually paused when another woman came to mind.

"Who are you considering at the moment?"

"Commodore Abigail Evern."

"The Penitent Sister fleet commander?"

General Verle nodded. "She checks the most boxes out of all of the candidates. She is old enough, but not to the point that she is no longer open to change. She enjoyed an upper-class upbringing and received the highest standard of systematic education and training that a powerful second-rate state is able to provide. She was raised to lead and should probably know what to do once she becomes vice patriarch. Vice matriarch. Whatever."

"The term 'matriarch' appears to have negative connotations among the Larkinsons." Shederin coughed. "We are considering alternatives in order to avoid signalling the wrong connotations. I believe this is especially important considering we are talking about a former Hexer."

General Verle smirked. "Commodore Abigail and the rest of the Penitent Sisters might have come from the Hegemony, but they have already diverged from their Hexer roots. They're becoming more like the Swordmaidens in a sense. In any case, they don't get along with the Glory Seekers, and that is enough to prove their loyalty to the clan."

"Still, that will not convince every clansman that Abigail will stand up for the Larkinsons as opposed to the Hexers."

"I'm confident in her. Let the patriarch decide once he meets with her. I am sure he will be able to transcend his own bias and see that nominating Abigail is the right choice."

General Verle was confident that this was the right decision to make... To him, Abigail wasn't a Hexer. She was a Larkinson and someone who wholeheartedly committed to a different cause!