

## Mech 3161

### *Chapter 3161: Relative Boost*

Ves always knew that luminar crystals held a lot more potential that he had never managed to tap. His fundamental understanding of this tech was too shallow and his reliance on external help was too great.

This caused him to hit walls fairly early. It was quite frustrating to know that he could easily improve his implementation if he mastered the tech a little more.

He was sure that all of those ancient luminar engineers would have laughed at him if he presented his work to them. He was an outright amateur compared to what the luminar race had pushed their signature tech!

This was why the Superpublished version of the Sentry Project was so precious. The overall improvement of the mech was 10 percent, but there was more to this proportionate boost than met the eye.

In the aspects where the Sentry Project was weak at, this little boost was extremely interesting to Gloriana but not so much to Ves.

If the different parameters of the original expert rifleman mech design was graded into standardized numerical scores, then if its offensive capabilities was set at 100, its defensive and mobility capabilities would roughly fall at 13 and 25 respectively.

Of course, these numbers could change drastically depending on what kind of scoring criteria Ves adopted, but the general range shouldn't deviate too much.

The point was that a 10 percent boost in defense would only effectively increase the Sentry Project's defenses by just over 1 point.

1 point.

In relative terms, this was a huge change. In absolute terms, an enemy expert mech that tried its best to smash the Sentry Project to pieces would hardly notice any differences!

An attack that was powerful enough to penetrate the armor of Venerable Stark's expert mech would punch through regardless if it was just a bit stronger!

The boost in mobility was a little more significant. With an increase of 2.5 points, the mech became a bit faster and more maneuverable. The greater performance was just significant enough for Venerable Stark to clearly benefit from it in desperate battle situations.

"Yet... it's the boost in offense that is truly remarkable!"

The Sentry Project was an expert mech that was designed with extreme offense in mind. Ves and the rest deliberately made a lot of tradeoffs that made the expert mech slower and easier to break relative to other expert rifleman mechs. They did not hesitate in doing so because these sacrifices enabled them to push the offensive capabilities of the precision-oriented expert mech to become the ultimate sniper machine of the Larkinson Clan!

With an offensive score of 100 points, a 10 percent boost took on an entirely different meaning in this area. Ves had already done his best to pile up as much power and efficiency as possible in the rifle. He also worked together with Gloriana to adjust the mech frame so that it offered much greater support for its luminar crystal weapon. They pushed until they were no longer able to squeeze any more performance out of the whole design.

Now that someone — or something — else casually strolled in and made a few incredibly advanced changes that easily pushed the limits upwards by a whopping 10 points, the end result was much more impressive!

As mech design was a discipline where greater performance was often subject to the laws of diminishing returns, the adjustments made to the expert mech design effectively elevated it from a Journeyman-level design to a Senior-level design!

Ves wasn't sure how close the firepower boost was to reaching Master-level, but from a technical perspective the Superpublished expert mech design was a substantially more dangerous combat asset due to this concentrated improvement!

After the Journeyman slowly realized how much had changed, they couldn't wait to study the adjustments in detail in order to figure out the effects and underlying theory why they worked.

It was not enough for them to enjoy the Superpublished mech design as a single work. If they wanted to apply all of these solutions to the mech designs going forward, then it was crucial for them to reverse engineer all of the changes down to the last details!

This was why they quickly split up and moved to their respective workplaces in order to puzzle out the answers they wanted to see the most.

When Ves settled down in order to study all of the improvements made to the crystal luminar rifle, he soon realized that deriving useful insights from the design was far from simple.

"Some of the effects of the improved crystals can't be described in words and numbers. I have to see how it performs for real."

This required him to reproduce the improved crystal luminar weapon for real, but that was a bit of a problem as the complete rifle design was not only huge, but also extremely expensive and difficult to make. The Opticonium integrated in the design also made it prohibitive to make a weapon just for study purposes.

"I should wait until I am truly ready to fabricate the Sentry Project before I make this powerful rifle."

Ves decided to take a step back and simply apply some of the new and improved methods on a smaller infantry-grade crystal luminar rifle. Even though the hugely reduced scale meant that he had to adopt a substantially different design approach, the general principles remained the same.

Thus, when Ves quickly fabricated a crystal luminar rifle that incorporated at least 70 percent of the new and improved implementations, he eagerly handed it over to a bot in order to witness it in action.

"Fire!"

When a bright and searing beam struck the target dummy at the other end of the reinforced test firing range, Ves paid close attention to the sensor readings.

"A 5 percent increase in maximum firepower! The efficiency is a little higher as well!"

Though this improvement was only half as much as the original boost, this was still a huge difference considering that only a couple of hours had passed since Ves first studied the new design.

With more time and effort, Ves could easily derive further gains from the Superpublished design and push himself closer to the standard of the newly-updated version of Sentry Project!

He frowned a bit. "The only problem is that I need to master the theory behind these changes as soon as possible if I want to maximize the quality of the Sentry Project."

The key to making a good mech was to understand how it worked. The more he comprehended what made it good, the more he was able to ensure the physical product was as ideal as possible.

Ves decided to try out an unconventional approach. He retrieved the crystal cube and settled in to perform a rigorous comparison between the normal and Superpublished versions of the Sentry Project.

"Illustrious One! I need your help!"

He expended a lot of spiritual energy in order to merge with the luminar design spirit and study the altered crystals from an alien perspective.

As his entire aura and demeanor became more radiant, his eyes glowed with light as they blazed at all of the intricate design details that held his interest. The crystal object in his hands glowed as well as it became partially active.

Hours went by as Ves slowly gained more insights. He did not focus that much on the improvements in material composition. There was hardly any mystery behind them, though he had a feeling that the MTA would be really interested in how to make better second-class luminar crystals.

No. What Ves truly tried to study was the more esoteric aspects of the improved crystals. He regularly referenced the hastily-improved test rifle that he made and studied it in detail with his spiritual senses.

Though a mech design only consisted of a blueprint of a complete product at its basic level, this was actually not the complete package. A proper design always included essential documentation which may or may not include design logs, clarification, a fabrication plan and so on. Though the System hadn't really added a lot of extra material, the handful of pages of essential information needed to fabricate the improved luminar crystals were extremely crucial.

They were free instructions that came as a side effect of Superpublishing an expert mech that centered around a luminar crystal rifle!

Through these clues and more, Ves and the Illustrious One were able to combine their respective know-how to deconstruct or decipher the majority of the changes. While they hadn't yet figured out the knack behind the more abstruse but impactful design tweaks, Ves was quite happy with the progress he accomplished.

If I design a new luminar crystal rifle, then its performance will probably be 8 percent better than normal!"

Much of it was because he was able to implement more efficient and effective internal circuitry patterns. While their fundamental workings were still unclear to him, he felt as if he had taken one step closer to the truth.

"They're not just transforming energy from one form to another. They also seem to distort reality to an extent. This is why the output of these luminar crystals are so disproportionately powerful or abnormal."

He still had a long way to go before he became an expert in this field, but at least he was able to move past an obstacle in his research.

What Ves really appreciated was that he had managed to achieve a couple of minor breakthroughs in how to utilize the spiritual properties of luminar crystals!

As he performed some impromptu experiments by making a couple of luminar crystals, he began to infuse his spiritual energy into the developing product in different and more intricate ways.

Not all of his experiments succeeded. He still had to employ plenty of trial and error in order to achieve a result that was closer to what he knew was possible.

In truth, Ves hadn't gained as much as he hoped from this study. The marginal increase in how to employ spiritual energy more effectively in the production of luminar crystals did not teach him a lot of useful new insights. His theoretical framework on luminar crystals hardly budged.

That didn't mean he thought that this was a wasted moment. The new directions that the Superpublished design was pointing towards gave Ves a lot of useful hints. If he chose to go deeper in a specific direction, then he would probably be able to make more substantial gains sooner than later.

Ves was still in the dark as far as luminar crystal technology was concerned, but at least he was able to spot some lights in the distance!

A few days quietly passed by as every Journeyman spent so much time on researching the improved mech design that the Larkinson fleet had already dropped out of FTL some time ago. Given that Ves had instructed the fleet to stay put in realspace, he could not delay the fabrication of the Sentry Project any further.

All four Journeymen gathered together again. They exchanged happy and knowing looks as they were already able to tell that each of them made substantial gains. Even Ketis learned a few profound lessons.

"We have to decide how to go forward with this project." Gloriana stated. "Should we experiment more with the improved expert mech design or should we proceed with fabricating it straight away?"

"I doubt we can improve it any further than that." Ves voiced his skepticism. "I know you want to build up on the better design, but it has already reached a level that is way beyond our ability. Any changes we'll make have a greater chance of disrupting the highly optimized arrangements than producing actual gains. I say we just move forward and fabricate it as is. Don't forget that it is an expert mech design that we already possess a limited understanding of its workings. Now that it has become more opaque, our ability to control its factors has decreased."

"Ves... is right. Let us trust in the mech designer who presented us with this improved design... The last thing we should do is to despoil this great design with our lack of vision."

#### *Chapter 3162: Altered Timetable*

The team of Journeyman solemnly prepared for their fabrication run.

Ves wanted each of them to take advantage of the exceptionally good mood they were in right now. The optimism that Gloriana and the others had held while they designed the mech along with the powerful rush of excitement from receiving a Superpublished version of their work produced a powerful effect that made everyone feel incredibly eager about their upcoming attempt to make the expert mech!

Of course, not all of the circumstances were perfect.

The technical fluency required to fabricate an expert mech was still daunting to mech designers at their level. Even if they poured more effort into studying more advanced fabrication techniques, they didn't know if they were able to handle the volatile resonating materials better this time.

Their understanding and sense of ownership in the Sentry Project was already less than ideal due to incorporation of the essential contributions of Master Willix. Now that a second external influence had made a pass on the expert mech design, Ves and the rest were not doing any better in this regard.

They couldn't do much about this, though. Not without spending a lot more time on preparation, but that was unfeasible. The Larkinson Clan needed its expert mechs sooner than later and Gloriana was eager to finish them before she was ready to give birth.

Therefore, everyone gathered at her personal workshop the next morning while looking eager and raring to go. Just like before, they had to work on the mech design for at least five days straight in order to complete the second major mech of their lives.

Despite their optimism and eagerness, there was yet another complication that threatened to disrupt their attempt.

"I can't stay awake for five days straight while expending my full concentration during this entire time." Gloriana told her husband. "I especially can't do so while injecting my bloodstream with a cocktail of stimulants that are designed to artificially keep me awake and in a hyperactive state."

She rubbed her belly as she did so. Enough time had passed by now for her normally-flat stomach to show the beginnings of a bulge.

Ves briefly concentrated his mind and swept his spiritual senses across Gloriana's body.

The constant effort he had put into feeding his unborn daughter with spirituality had made a substantial difference in her spiritual growth. Already his daughter's spirit had surpassed the average strength of a norm and was already on its way to reaching the level of someone who was spiritually active.

Ves did not spend a single second on thinking whether it was wise, safe or even desirable to make someone so spiritually powerful at such an exceptionally early stage. His daughter wasn't even born yet, but already her spiritual development surpassed most of humanity!

All he cared about was letting his daughter enter the cosmos on the strongest footing possible. The ideal result he was aiming for was to implant her with a companion spirit seed before her birth.

From what it looked like, his unborn daughter's current rate of spiritual growth was not fast enough for him to achieve his goal in time, but he wasn't worried. With each day that passed, her tolerance and capacity became a little greater.

She was growing more and more adept at handling spiritual energy. By the time his little baby was born, she should definitely give him a pleasant surprise!

Ves smiled and approached his wife in order to place his hand on top of hers. Pure warmth flowed between them as they both sensed their child in their own ways.

"I understand." He said. "I don't want to risk the health of our baby either. We'll have to adopt a different approach to our design work."

"I've already reshuffled the timetable and set up a rotation so that we can each take extended breaks where we can take naps and rest our strained and overburdened bodies. I won't be able to stay on top of the ongoing process as much as I want, but this is the only way I will be able to ensure the health of our daughter."

She had extensively consulted with Dr. Ranya and the other medical specialists before she settled with this decision. Though they were mech designers who were highly passionate about their work, the quality of a single machine could never trump the importance of their own flesh and blood!

As long as they invested enough time, they could easily design a lot of mechs. Birthing and raising a child with loving care was something different. Children were not products that should be discarded if they were defective somehow. Parental love didn't or shouldn't work that way.



Though the genes of their designer baby was substantially better than that of a baseline baby, at this early stage both of them were equally as vulnerable to negative external influences.

In fact, designer babies were even more sensitive because even a minor deviation from their design could ruin their ideal biological arrangement!

When they announced the modified schedule to Juliet and Ketis, neither of them reacted too strongly about it. They had never fabricated a masterwork mech before, so how could they possibly know what they were missing?

All of the changes meant that the fabrication time would likely be extended to six whole days. This was quite a difference but there were other expert mech designs in the pipeline that likely required even more days. Ves feared how much time he would have to spend in order to upgrade the huge Shield of Samar to its expert mech incarnation.

"I think you have made the right choice." Juliet gently said. "You are a mech designer, but you are also a mother. Between the two, the latter responsibility is much more important because you have only one chance to nurture and raise your current child properly. The Superior Mother will be pleased with your dedication. You carry her grandchild, after all. If you insisted on keeping yourself awake by pumping your body with chemicals, then I would have said something myself."

The two didn't always get along with each other, but ever since Gloriana had become pregnant, their relationship had mellowed out a bit more.

"Let's pray for the Superior Mother's blessing before we start." Gloriana suggested. "We worked hard on the Sentry Project not just because we want to protect ourselves, but also because we want to secure the future of our children. My daughter and the many children that follow will grow up under the protective shadow of our expert mechs. Each of them employ their great strength to guard all of our offspring on our behalf so that we can raise them in peace and without fear of death."

After sounding noble for a moment, Gloriana and Juliet both moved to the giant statue of the Superior Mother and fell to their knees in order to begin their ritual worship.

Ves simply shrugged at the nonsensical sight and turned his back to the display. "So, Ketis, are you excited?"

"Surprisingly, I am." She said. "It's strange. I'm only really interested in working on sword-wielding mechs, but there's just something about this expert rifleman mech that interests me. I'm quite fascinated by all of the improvements. The stronger this machine, the more support it can provide to my fellow Swordmaidens who will have to rely on support from the rear."



"In the ideal case scenario, the Sentry Project should be capable of sniping critical leader figures among the enemy ranks. Its ability to bend its beams will likely come as a nasty surprise to those who think they are well-protected behind their barriers."

The two chatted for a time as they waited for the Hexers to be done with their silly prayers.

After roughly half an hour, his wife and her colleague returned from the statue looking a lot more refreshed and ready to fabricate their second expert mech.

"Let's begin!"

The mech designers all headed towards different production equipment in order to start with the fabrication process.

This time, the division of labor was different. While Gloriana was still in charge of the main structure, Ves had taken complete responsibility over the luminar crystal rifle. His affinity with the tech along with his reliance on his unique methods to create the weapon did not give his wife a lot of opportunities to contribute to its creation.

Juliet focused on the flight system but also took responsibility for the expert mech's extremities in order to make the best use of her time.

As for Ketis, she was relegated to a lesser role. She performed odd jobs as well as tedious, time-consuming assignments that didn't require as much brainpower to complete.

They all started picking up steam after an hour. Their excitement and energy had accumulated to a degree where they were not ready to put down their work anytime soon.

"Ves." Gloriana called. "Bring out Blinky. It's time for him to do his part!"

"Got it, honey."

The purple spiritual cat emerged out of his head after Ves called him out. The companion spirit took one moment to look at his surroundings before he began to poke his black-tipped tail into the heads of all of the Journeyman.

This was a familiar process to the mech designers so they easily accepted the connection that had formed between them and the remarkable cat.

Mrow!

It was only then that the mech designers truly started to pick up the pace!

Every Journeyman shared a piece of themselves while the design network was active. As could be expected, Juliet and Ketis didn't bring anything useful to the table this time.

Ves' contribution was always useful as it was helpful for the others to become a bit more sensitive and aware of the life they were creating. Though the effect was not that useful at the very start of the fabrication process, it would become a lot more vital at the latter stages when the expert mech finally started to take shape.

This meant that Gloriana's contribution dominated the design network at this time. The need to fabricate powerful components at exceptional quality was extremely important at this early stage, and she was able to encourage others to pay much more attention to the potential flaws and mistakes that they made or were about to make while they worked.

The quality of their output noticeably increased right after the design network took effect. While the difference wasn't drastic, every little difference helped.

As time continued to pass, Ves gradually realized that the design network was slowly shifting. With his sensitivity, he was able to perceive a small abnormality that somehow altered the character of the network but did not disrupt it in any way.

Instead... Ves instinctively felt more relaxed and sublime when he focused on this subtle but peculiar influence.

He quickly finished the luminar crystal that he had been synthesizing with the help of the crystal cube and threw a brief glance at his wife.

"What the...?"

His wife looked a lot more enthusiastic than normal. She boasted a wide grin as she churned out small and delicate parts with greater speed than ever before.

When he swept Gloriana with his spiritual senses, he sensed that the temporary bond that Blinky had formed with her did not just tie her into the network. It turned out that this spiritual operation inadvertently brought along a hitchhiker!

"Our daughter!"

Both his wife and child came together in the design network. Even though Gloriana was highly focused on her current work tasks, there was an unconscious part of her that instinctively embraced and drew strength from her unprecedented intimacy from her child.

As a result, her motivation skyrocketed and her energy grew more vigorous!

Yet that wasn't all. Just as Ves detected this highly abnormal interaction, something even more drastic happened.

The statue of the Superior Mother that was resting at the side of the work hall suddenly glowed with a spiritual intensity. Ves could feel the design spirit becoming more active.

Suddenly, he noticed that his mother was forming a vague connection with Gloriana.

No. This connection already existed. What the Superior Mother actually did was activate this connection!

Pure energy flowed from the powerful design spirit and poured straight into Gloriana. Where it went after that, Ves wasn't sure, but in his spiritual vision, his wife started to glow as if she had become the incarnation of a perfect mother!

Not only did this unexpected influence invigorate his wife beyond reason, much of her excitement along with the additional energy began to spill over into the design network!

"What the heck are you doing, mother?!"

#### *Chapter 3163: The Meaning of Sentry*

With the surprising descent of the Superior Mother, the entire workshop became charged with energy!

Every mech designer sensed a strong and firm presence watching down on them all. Despite the Superior Mother's oppressiveness, her sharp edge was not present today.

Instead, everyone felt the enormous presence exude a glow that could only be described as maternal joy and love. The womanly and motherly aspects of the Superior Mother had come forth, drawn by a pregnant woman's own love and devotion!

What made this moment even more remarkable was the strong family relations between them all. Gloriana was her daughter-in-law and the child in her belly could be considered the Supreme's directly related granddaughter in a way!

As the model of a good mother, how could the ancestral spirit be any worse as a grandmother?

"She's really spoiling her granddaughter though." Ves muttered.

The Superior Mother did not stage this grand appearance to impress her majesty to the mech designers. She had a definite purpose in mind. For whatever reason, she chose to descend and pass her blessings when the carrier of her grandchild was in one of her best states.

Ves recognized that it was easier for the Superior Mother to connect with Gloriana when the latter was emotionally and spiritually excited. It also helped that she was in the same room as the giant lightning-struck statue that originally birthed the ancestral spirit!

All of these circumstances provided the Superior Mother with a fantastic opportunity to check up on her future granddaughter and provide her own blessings!

The final condition that enabled her to intervene was that Gloriana's unborn child already possessed an absurdly strong spirituality. Ves had constantly accelerated her spiritual development by feeding her with his own purified spiritual energy. Even though he felt that much of it either went to waste or got converted into something else at extremely low efficiencies, there was no doubt that his daughter took at least some of his energy as her own. Day by day, the drops of energy had already accumulated to quite a potent reserve for a baby that hadn't even left her mother's womb!

For a moment, he grew worried whether the Superior Mother would ruin his arrangements. The reason why he constantly empowered his upcoming child was because he wanted to bestow her with a companion spirit seed. This took up a lot of spiritual capacity, which made it all the more important that it wasn't taken up by something else!

So far, Ves did not see anything that suggested that she was ruining his original plan. He wasn't sure what the Superior Mother was doing, but most of the Superior Mother's energy flowed through Gloriana and directly entered the cells that made up his daughter's body.

Ves vaguely sensed a strange reaction taking place. According to his perception, the Superior Mother was acting on the residual life-attributed spiritual energy that his daughter's tiny body had absorbed, empowering it and using it as a channel to transform the unborn child's flesh in some mysterious fashion!

The remarkable event seemed to take hours, but ended just a minute later.

His tiny daughter's body and spirit were both tiny and malleable in their unborn state, so the Superior Mother could easily apply her blessings. Once the fetus no longer experienced any further changes, the grand presence receded a bit and seemed to give the little girl's pristine spirit a gentle caress before drawing away.

Though Gloriana didn't receive any direct gifts herself, the fact that she acted as a willing and eager channel for the idol she worshipped the most was definitely a boon in itself!

When the Superior Mother finally receded completely, the statue no longer surged with energy and the workshop was no longer graced by her exceptional consciousness.

A long silence ensued. The current fabrication tasks that everyone had previously been working upon had all been paused with one notable exception.

Though Gloriana no longer hosted a powerful entity, the residual energy of the Superior Mother still clung to her form, attracted by his wife's own maternal desires!

This extra byproduct seemed to invigorate her as if it was a powerful stimulant. Her eyes shone with more brilliance than ever while her spirit had become so elevated that it seemed as if it was about to ascend!

If her earlier mental state was already good, now it was as if she was on fire!

Her hands whizzed across the controls as she fine-tuned the fabrication of an extremely delicate component. Her judgement, intuition and mental processing speed had all been raised to their limits.

Though it was quite burdensome for Gloriana to work at such an extreme load, the energies that flowed through her body and spirituality perfectly propped her up and gave her the strength she needed to maintain her peak state!

There was no way that Ves wanted to waste such a good turn of events. While he had lots of questions and wanted to examine his unborn daughter's altered state in detail, this was not the time to interrupt the fabrication attempt.

No matter what, Ves trusted the Superior Mother not to harm or screw up his future daughter. His spiritual sweeps did not detect anything amiss and his intuition was completely convinced that his daughter came about better after this experience.

"That's good enough, I guess."

He discarded all of his worries and fully embraced the moment. Just like Gloriana, Ves also gained a rush from witnessing his mother bless his child.

Both of their excellent moods bled over through the design network, filling it up with love, joy and an unprecedented degree of motivation towards finishing their expert mech!

Of the remaining two mech designers, Juliet had gotten caught up in the excitement as well. Even though she was not a direct beneficiary of what happened, witnessing and feeling the Superior Mother take concrete action in the strongest fashion was an unforgettable moment for her. After knowing that the Supreme was paying attention to them somehow, she wanted to appear at her absolute best. Anything less would be a disgrace.

"I'm a Penitent Sister! I must prove myself worthy to the Superior Mother so that my child will also receive a blessing one day!"

Compared to Ves, Gloriana and Juliet, Ketis maintained her composure. Though she was happy for her mentor and his wife, as a swordmaster in her own right she always believed in her own strength. Her will was solid and her attitude towards the Superior Mother was one of respect, not worship.

"Well, whatever is going on right now, I'm not complaining."

Her contribution to the Sentry Project was a lot less than customary, but Ketis still identified herself as one of the designers and makers of this expert mech. She did not reject the buoyant influence from the design network even though she could easily block it out. Just like the rest, she fully embraced the moment and immersed herself in the rising tide.

Roughly an hour went by until the high tide had finally faded. Blinky's ability to maintain his design network was still limited, and all of the excitement that previously took place did not change this basic quality.

Mrow...

"You've done a good job, Blinky. You can rest now." Ves gently stroked his companion spirit's head before allowing the cat to enter his mind.

Everyone already expected the design network to go offline, so the Journeymen had all been ready for it to happen. Everyone's productivity immediately dropped by a noticeable margin, but not as much as Ves had feared.

Even without the benefit of Blinky's helpful ability, the mech designers were all pumped up. The realization that this day was special caused them to hold on to their fantastic moods.

With their overflowing morale, they did not even feel tired despite working intensively for several hours.

Under this combined influence, the parts they churned out were not only consistently high in quality, but came with their own unique charm that carried the hopes and dreams of their creators.

The Sentry Project was called this way because the expert mech was meant to act as a vigilant soldier who stood guard in front of the Larkinson Clan. Any enemy that approached and threatened the fleet and the people aboard them had to be shot down before any Larkinson came under threat!

This meaning also harkened back to the Battle of Reckoning where an enemy expert mech came extremely close to reaching the Spirit of Bentheim, threatening the entire vessel and everyone aboard including innocent civilians such as mothers and children.

Since the Larkinsons were nomadic and lived on starships, the people who resided on them constantly had to fear for their own lives when battle broke out. It was the job of the mech legions to shield the Larkinson clansmen from harm, but as the aforementioned battle already showed, this was not enough sometimes.

Each and every expert mech of the Larkinson Clan played an important role in defending the innocents, but none were more critical than the Sentry Project.

The other expert mechs needed to spend a lot of time and find a good opportunity to close in on a threatening opponent. As much as Ves appreciated the speed and power of the Dark Zephyr, it could not come to the fleet's assistance if it was stuck on the other side of the battlefield!

This was where a ranged expert mech was able to show its value. In a battle in open space, such a mech was able to attack at nearly every target at every position at very long ranges.

It did not have to move forward in order to attack a distant target, which meant it was always ready and always poised to shoot down a powerful mech that had somehow managed to outmaneuver or break through the lines of existing Larkinson mechs.

Paired with the Shield of Samar, the Sentry Project was meant to serve as the final line of defense against other expert mechs.

This was the driving motivation behind this expert mech design project, but now it had taken on an extra meaning. Ves and Gloriana wanted to do their best to create the strongest possible expert rifleman mech so that it could become a guardian against any enemy that could threaten their child!

This slight change in nuance was a deviation from the original design of the Sentry Project. Yet instead of leading the fabrication run astray, it empowered it because this additional intention was fully compatible with the original intention of the expert mech!

In a way, the Sentry Project had taken on a more personal meaning to Ves and Gloriana. As future parents, their interest in seeing this expert rifleman mech did well was significantly higher than before.

"I am not a mech pilot." Ves spoke as he accumulated his own intensity as he shaped the most exquisite luminal crystals that he had made so far. "I can't go on the battlefield and defend my children in person. The only way I can keep my babies safe is to do the best I can on a different battlefield!"

He readily channeled the Illustrious One as he manipulated the crystal cube, causing him to appear as if he had become an embodiment of light, crystals and perhaps even more.



His recently-acquired insights along with his strong motivation caused him to develop an even greater feel for the crystals he was making. The rifle parts he made became more lustrous as Ves not only refined his method of infusing them with spiritual energy, but also made small spontaneous tweaks to their physical design by following his instincts and intuition.

This rifle was about to become something special!

Several more hours went by as Blinky enjoyed enough rest to activate his design network once again. The four Journeymen worked with gusto for two straight hours before they were finally beset with fatigue at the end.

While the other mech designers could go on for a time, Gloriana had no choice but to take a break in order to preserve her health and the health of her baby.

#### *Chapter 3164: The Second Expert Mech*

The altered work schedule led to a different dynamic in the workshop.

The Sentry Project was far from done. The Journeymen still had to fabricate a lot more parts before they were even ready to begin the crucial assembly phase.

Previously, Ves and Gloriana always insisted on working day and night for several days in a row in order to preserve and maximize their momentum.

This did not come without a cost as they needed to rely on stimulants to artificially keep their mentalities at their highest levels. While Ves was a lot more able to cope with these strenuous demands, Gloriana was not able to match his physical and mental endurance.

Previously, this was still a circumstance that she could cope with, but this time was different.

The Sentry Project was already a little larger and more voluminous than the Dark Zephyr, which meant it took significantly more work to put it together.

Gloriana's pregnancy also ruled out most if not all options to stimulate her body and mind. After all, a lot of influences acting on her body was also capable of affecting the fetus as well. This was an extremely delicate matter as the wrong chemical could easily cause the unborn baby to develop unnaturally.

From the moment Gloriana had reached her time limit, she quickly finished her current fabrication job before reluctantly stepping back.

Her instincts as a mech designer urged her to go back to the 3D printer that was still hot and ready to fabricate another mech component.

However, her instincts and mentality as a mother easily won out this time. She retreated from the production equipment. Instead of leaving the workshop, she remained in it but moved away until she reached a special room that had been prepared for anyone needing a rest.

The hastily-fabricated room resembled a thick metal ledge that was luxuriously furnished and completely isolated from the hustle and bustle in the rest of the workshop.

At least, that was supposed to be the case. Gloriana kept the hatch a little bit open so that the noise of active machinery was still able to reach the bedroom. Once she slipped into her bed, she quickly fell into slumber, dreaming of both mechs and motherhood.

Ves and the others were still at their stations. They continued to soldier on as they tried their best not to cause any undue delays.

The absence of a strong and powerful motivating presence caused the workshop to become a little more subdued. However, that did not affect the mech designers too much as they still had plenty of compelling reasons to maintain their high state.

"Fabricating a mech isn't a sprint. It's a marathon. It's not enough to build up momentum. We need to sustain it in order to achieve a comprehensively better result!"

This was not an unfamiliar problem in the mech industry. Those who worked hard to make the most exquisite mechs came up with a lot of theories and approaches to maximize their chances.

Ves had taken a look at these materials. Much of it was garbage, but he had also managed to gather some good tips.

One of them was setting up a rotation so that only a portion of the fabrication team should go off-duty at a time. As long as there were still enough mech designers on duty, the momentum of the fabrication team would not recede too much.

Still, certain mech designers left behind a major void when they left. Gloriana and Ves disproportionately fueled the current momentum, so anytime that either of them pulled away, the mood in the workshop dropped by a noticeable margin.

"It's not all that bad, though."

Ves had decided to follow suit and take breaks as well even though he could have opted to take a lot of stimulants in order to keep himself awake and sharp for six whole days.

He recognized that continually pushing himself to work day and night was ultimately detrimental to his health and to the health of the rest of his team. Humans weren't meant to work in this fashion.

Just as he expected, Ves wasn't able to maintain his focus after he retreated from his work. He didn't feel so bad about it. After forcing himself to work at his peak for so many hours at a time, it was inevitable for him to slide a bit. By taking a short but well-earned power nap, he woke up almost completely recharged.

When he woke up and quickly freshened himself up, he left his temporary abode and returned to his station with a bit more clarity in his mind.

It was a bit difficult at first for him to get back into the groove. In fact, Ves doubted that he would ever be able to return to his previous mental state.

"Blinky!"

Mrow!

However, the moment Blinky emerged again and reestablished his helpful design network, a rush of love, desire, expectation and many other notable influences poured into his mind.

While this external influence wasn't strong enough for him to get subsumed by it, Ves was readily able to take advantage of it to stoke his dormant engine.

He became increasingly more fired up and soon regained his older peak state!

After another day of long work shifts interspersed by periodic breaks, it became clear that Blinky played a crucial role in keeping the flames of passion alive.

The companion spirit's ability to pass on the sentiments of one mech designer to another enabled everyone to return to their peak conditions and go back into the flow.

Even Gloriana acknowledged how essential Blinky had become to this fabrication. It also didn't hurt that his design network inadvertently brought her closer to her developing baby.

After Superior Mother 'blessed' her granddaughter, the unborn child's spirituality had become noticeably stronger and more defined.

Surprisingly, despite being affected by two strong Hexer influences in the form of Gloriana and the Superior Mother, the baby's spirit still retained its pure nature.

Part of it was because the child was still too young to develop any actual thoughts, but Ves also noticed that it possessed a resiliency that made it remarkably difficult to influence or contaminate.

He wasn't sure why this was the case and whether it was normal. It reminded him a bit of the stubbornness of expert pilots, but there was no will component behind it. Odd

developments like these showed that there were still a lot of facets about spirituality that Ves did not understand.

"It doesn't appear to be bad, though."

Ves derived a lot of joy and comfort in his future daughter's growing strength. As an upcoming father, all of this was quite new to him, so his recent fatherly desires heavily affected his composure.

With the driving force of two eager and highly-motivated parents, the days continued to pass by while everyone constantly remained in high spirits.

Progress on the mech design project hadn't actually slowed down as much as Ves feared. Though there were hours where mech designers were resting instead of working, once they went back to work, they became remarkably productive again.

Their rested states enabled them to accomplish more work in less time. It was a remarkably pleasant pattern which continued to push them forward with unceasing optimism.

Finally, the mech designers fabricated all of the powerful and sophisticated components for their next expert mechs.

Though a large amount of parts were incredibly difficult to make correctly, the mech designers were a lot more prepared than before. They studied up on how to fabricate components with volatile and abnormal materials and possessed a considerably greater proficiency in all of the production equipment.

Whenever they worked on a component that incorporated resonating materials, they made sure to wait until they were connected to Blinky's design network so that everyone could take advantage of Gloriana's design philosophy.

In turn, the soon-to-be-mother also benefited from the connection. The contribution made by Ves enabled her to feel the life in each and every component she created. She became more attuned to the Sentry Project design and was able to make sure that each critical component aligned with each other in a more ethereal fashion.

Once the four Journeymen inspected all of the parts, they soon proceeded to the assembly stage.

This was a less critical phase, but that did not mean they were allowed to slack off. They needed to take great care and fit everything together because the Sentry Project packed a lot of delicate components together.

Slowly but surely, the mech was being pieced together. Starting from the internal frame, heavy bots along with powerful robotic arms and lifting systems attached more parts to the expert rifleman mech.

It slowly gained more definition at the fleet which was meant to support the rest of mech. Over the span of several hours, the legs became solid before it was the torso's turn to get covered up by solid armor plating.

While Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis worked on the mech frame, Ves devoted much of his time to assembling the crystal luminar rifle.

Compared to the experimental products he crafted before, the weapon he was working on was the Sentry Project's real weapon. It incorporated a sizable amount of Opticonium, a remarkable material that was already giving the crystal components a different feel.

Putting them together was not that hard, but Ves had to be careful and make sure that everything remained congruent with each other. The key resonating material was spread out among different components, but they all had to come together in a way for the Opticonium to act as a single whole.

Ves enjoyed assembling the rifle. Compared to his previous luminar crystal weapons, this one was more powerful and significant than any mech-sized rifle he had made so far. It would likely remain as the premier ranged weapon that he had the pleasure to design and make for a very long time.

Only an artillery cannon would be able to surpass this potent rifle in firepower, but Ves didn't think an opportunity to design a mech with such an exaggerated gun would come so soon.

At the final day, the workshop received a small group of visitors in the form of expert pilots.

Venerable Joshua, Jannzi, Tusa, Orfan, Dise and Stark had quietly entered in order to watch the second expert mech of the Larkinson Clan take shape.

They stood close to the entrance and well away from the assembly section in order to avoid disturbing the mech designers. They all did their best to retract their force of wills to keep their presence to a minimum.

"There's something different about this expert mech." Venerable Joshua commented.

"How so?" Venerable Orfan asked. "Isn't it just an expert mech?"

"It's not 'just' an expert mech. Although I don't know a lot about how mechs are put together, something about this machine reminds me of the Quint..."

Now that Joshua had mentioned it, the expert pilots scrutinized the increasingly more complete Sentry Project in a different way. Each of these remarkable individuals possessed a special sense for mechs. The others soon noticed the extra weight that the expert rifleman mech carried.

"What do you think, Venerable Stark?"

The only guest expert pilot of the Larkinson Clan remained impassive. "I do not trust many people, but I trust that Ves will always deliver a good mech."

Her eyes gradually turned hot as she was able to see her first true expert mech come to life. The prospect of gaining a lot more power than before put her a lot closer to fulfilling her own goals!

As the expert pilots continued to admire the work taking in front of them, the Journeymen had almost finished their work

The mech was fully put together except for one final touch.

Everyone put their signature looks onto the mech.

Ves did so first and applied his third eye in the form of a high-quality luminar crystal to the forehead of the expert mech.

Juliet came next and applied a pair of stylized six-sided wings coated in red onto the upper center of the flight system.

Ketis did not contribute as much as the other Journeyman, so she settled with carving a small imprint of a greatsword on the side of the Sentry Project's waist.

Once the three were done, Gloriana finally came forward and personally affixed the crystal rods around the third eye that Ves had already applied.

From the moment she was done, the Sentry Project finally became a single whole.

Every Journeyman paid rapt attention as the expert mech seemed to transform before their eyes, though its physical form did not change at all. This contradictory reaction only took place under specific circumstances.

Ves quietly reacted to his hand from his hidden pouch. He had already guessed that they would come close, but even he was surprised that all of their hard work allowed them to push through the threshold.

"Masterwork..." He whispered.

Though he already had several masterwork certificates under his belt, this was a different matter.

The probability of making a masterwork was much smaller when the complexity and difficulty of a mech went up. Yet due to a confluence of factors, the Journeyman of the Larkinson Clan managed to birth their first masterwork at the expert mech level!

The implications of what they had accomplished barely entered their minds before each of them became utterly engrossed in the subtle transformations. Their design seeds bloomed with excitement as the incredible end result made them feel a lot more accomplished in their careers!

#### *Chapter 3165: Double Rule Breakers*

Unlike Ketis and Juliet, Ves was already familiar with the benefits of completing a masterwork mech.

Though he did not expect that they would succeed naturally without requiring him to cheat, he fully embraced the moment and opened up his entire mind and spirit to earn his just rewards.

"It's been too long since I last completed a successful masterwork." He whispered.

Unlike the previous time where he and his wife created the Little Angel, the finished and realized version of the Sentry Project was an authentic masterwork mech.

It did not come 'close' to the masterwork threshold. It firmly passed through this barrier and achieved greatness on its own merits!

The spiritual satisfaction that Ves was able to gain from that was considerably greater than if he created an 'artificial' masterwork by using one of Lucky's gems to push it over the threshold.

He was incredibly happy that he was able to make a masterwork mech under much more difficult circumstances than normal.

Despite the fact that they were working on an expert mech that they weren't entirely qualified to work with, they were able to maintain a consistently exceptional quality by relying on their fantastic moods and Blinky's design network.

It didn't even matter that their sense of ownership in the Sentry Project had dropped twice due to the contributions made by Master Willix and 'Mr. S.'. The overwhelming drive to provide the greatest possible protection to their upcoming daughter drove the Miracle Couple to do their best!



A circumstance like this was difficult to replicate in the future. What worked once would probably not work twice because the novelty was already over. All of the coincidences that went into enabling them to succeed in creating their first masterwork expert mech were so exceptional that it was impossible to make them all happen at the same time again!

Ves did not think so much at the moment. Instead, he kept observing the Sentry Project as it completed its indescribable transformation. He just knew that its performance had not only exceeded its theoretical maximum, but also gained an indefinable quality that was extraordinary by nature.

This was one of the ultimate goals of many mech designers! Too many had tried and failed to make a single masterwork mech in their career, but a small group of young Journeymen managed to do the impossible.

It could not be overstated how remarkable it was for four young Journeymen to violate two huge assumptions.

First, Journeymen weren't capable of developing expert mechs.

Second, Journeymen weren't capable of making masterwork mechs.

While there were always freaks of nature who managed to be the exception rather than the rule, even Ves was surprised that he managed to break both of these rules at once!

Though he did not dare to bet that he and his colleagues were the only Journeymen so far to accomplish this incredibly improbable feat, the amount of mech designers who managed to make an actual masterwork expert mech was probably a miniscule number!

The value and profoundness of a masterwork mech was directly proportional to its power, class, capabilities and other factors.

A masterwork version of a budget third-class mech like the Desolate Soldier was incomparable to a masterwork second-class mid-tier expert mech!

If not for the fact that Ves wasn't able to allocate any Unending alloy to the Sentry Project, this remarkable masterwork expert mech could have been a lot more significant!

Even so, its more standard armor system was already fit for the purpose. The Sentry Project would have never been able to produce a masterwork mech if the mech design itself was not sufficiently good.

More than ten minutes passed by in absolute silence as the Journeymen were calmly absorbing and internalizing all of the invisible gains they made. The invisible

transformation that had acted upon the completed masterwork mech provided all of them with a lot of revelations.

To Juliet and Ketis, these benefits were entirely new. Thus, the impact of this wave was disproportionately high to them. The two women had become completely immersed as they gained inexplicable insights and truths that would definitely allow them to design significantly better mechs going forward.

Ves and Gloriana were old hands at this, but the significance of creating a masterwork expert mech was substantially different from that of creating a regular mech.

Some of the insights they gained were deeply intertwined with how resonating materials enabled expert mechs to align with their expert pilots. Gloriana's interests roused to the extreme as this was highly relevant to her future work!

As for Ves, he was much more interested in another aspect of the Sentry Project.

He directed his gaze towards the luminar crystal rifle.

The Sentry Project was not only an expert mech, but also a prime mech. He strategically embedded several P-stones into the rifle so that it could carry the Illustrious One's spiritual energy.

The remarkable transformation that affected the entire mech did not skip over the luminar crystal rifle. The weapon was part of the design, so it also experienced subtle changes that affected the functioning and soundness of this potent gun.

What Ves found most relevant was how the masterwork transformation caused the rifle to become even more whole and unified than he had previously managed. He thought that he had already done a good job, but evidently he had overlooked numerous shortcomings in the integration of resonating materials and prime materials in the rifle.

He even saw hints of a connection between the two! Though they were responsible for different forms of resonance, they shared a lot in common. This was why Ves had always speculated that it was possible to combine true resonance with prime resonance and achieve a result that was much more transformational than overlapping their effects!

Soon, Ves would be able to see whether his assumption was accurate. The Sentry Project's design spirit was a lot stronger than Trisk and Arnold.

The best was yet to come.

Eventually, the mech designers pulled themselves out of their obsessive fascination. Each of them shared knowing glances at each other. The insights they learned were unique and difficult to describe. Their design philosophies had all advanced in some

mysterious fashion and they just knew that the quality of the mechs they developed next would inevitably be better than if they never went through this profound experience.

"We... should take a break." Ves suggested.

"No!" Gloriana shook her head. "I need to see our new baby in action! I can't wait that long to see what we have made. Look! Venerable Stark has already changed into her piloting suit. She's already eager to experience what it is like to pilot our first masterwork expert mech!"

To be honest, Ves was incredibly eager to see the results as well, so he did not resist her suggestion. He quickly made the arrangements, though he did not go out of his way to tell everyone that he had made another masterwork mech.

Those who possessed the right vision for mechs would understand the implications of what they were looking at. Those who did not possess the ability to discern a masterwork mech did not need to know what kind of superweapon that the Journeymen of the Larkinson Clan had inadvertently made.

A sense of exhaustion soon settled over the foursome. Even after enjoying periodic rests, the mech designers had spent almost a week on doing nothing except making the best expert mech possible. There was no way for them to cure their mental fatigue so easily.

Despite that, they did not consider this session to be truly complete without witnessing the performance of their precious work.

While the masterwork expert mech was slowly being moved to the hangar bay, Ves briefly met up with the expert pilots.

"Well, I'm sure you know what happened." Ves lightly said.

"I knew you were good. I have always believed that you're the best mech designer. This is one more piece of evidence that following you was the best decision that I have ever made." Venerable Joshua smiled as if he was as farsighted as Prophet Ylvaine.

Venerable Jannzi was not as blind as her ex-boyfriend. The mild frown on her face caused her to experience a rare moment of puzzlement.

"This is supposed to be impossible. You can't just make a masterwork version of an expert mech. I wouldn't bat an eyelid if you managed to succeed in making one if you were a Master, but you're barely old enough that you need to shave your chin! How is it possible that you've managed to break so many rules?!"

From the way that Jannzi was pinning her gaze at him, Ves had the feeling that she was speculating whether he owed his success due to blood sacrifice. What did she think he

was, a cruel and greedy man who revelled in blood and did not hesitate to slaughter hundreds if not thousands of hapless humans just so that he could design and make better mechs?

"Look, I've always been exceptional from the start." Ves shamelessly boasted.

"Common sense doesn't apply to me. Besides, I couldn't have done all of this without the help of Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis. They have all poured their entire passion and devotion into this expert mech. The outcome should not be so surprising once you hear how much effort had been put into making it the greatest rifleman mech that we have developed up to this point."

The designated pilot and the eventual recipient of the Sentry Project lifted her arm.

"Enough, Jannzi. The process is important, but this discussion is a distraction. We should celebrate this result, not question it. I can already feel that this expert mech is alive and eager to show its light."

The other expert pilots quieted down at that. This was her moment now. After a tormented journey, Venerable Davia Stark would finally be able to become an expert pilot for real.

Ves asked an important question.

"How do you wish to name your expert mech?" He asked. "We designed every aspect of this remarkable machine for you. Just like with Tusa, bestowing it with a name that you fully agree with helps a lot in bringing you closer to your partner."

Venerable Stark fell silent for a few seconds. "I had some names in mind, but... now that I have seen and felt my expert mech, I don't think they fit what you have brought into existence. Let me give you an answer after I've piloted my expert mech. I think it has the right to pick its own name."

"...Okay. Whatever you say."

A name held a lot of meaning. Ves didn't want to pressure her into bestowing the masterwork expert mech a name that would ultimately detract from its majesty.

"I'll head over the hangar bay." Stark stated. "Tusa, come with me, and don't forget to don your suit."

Venerable Tusa began to have a bad feeling about this. "You don't need my help. If you want to exercise your marksmanship, you can just tell the Larkinson Army to set up a lot of practice targets."

"My role on the battlefield is to snipe down expert mechs. What better way to test my accuracy than to put my skills to the test against your Dark Zephyr?"

This argument was irrefutable.

Ves slapped Tusa's back. "Just go already. You've been complacent for far too long. It might be fun to bully around your fellow expert pilots, but that's no way for you to become an ace pilot. If you truly want to go forward, then you need to face a true challenge."

"I..."

"Would you rather test your skills against Venerable Stark, or wait for later when an enemy expert mech tries to take you down?!"

Tusa was still an expert pilot, so he did not hesitate for long... He was just concerned that this test might not proceed as well as everyone hoped. Not only was Venerable Stark piloting a brand-new expert mech with untold power for the very first time, she also possessed considerably greater resonance strength than him! Her damage output would definitely be astonishing!

#### *Chapter 3166: The Pinnacle*

The significance of creating a masterwork was always great.

Though no one was able to offer a truly precise definition of a masterwork, those who lived for their craft were always able to recognize the pinnacle of what an object could be. The appreciation that mech designers and other knowledgeable people exhibited towards works of supreme quality could not easily be passed on to those who lacked the requisite depth.

In fact, whether a masterwork actually performed substantially better than a more 'normal' copy was still a hotly-debated question. Too many people who did not understand anything about craftsmanship could not fathom why the value of a masterwork copy was a hundred, a thousand and in some ridiculous cases even a million times more expensive than a normal version of the product!

The materials were the same. The design was nearly identical. While there were certainly minute physical differences between a masterwork mech and a non-masterwork mech, these tiny shifts and adjustments were extremely crucial. They did not only optimize a design a little bit further, but also adjusted to the individual properties of the actual materials used in a design.

Not every material was the same. Two identical bars of Breyer alloy might look and weigh the same, but when put under a detailed scanner, it was always possible to detect slight imperfections and natural variations.

One of the reasons why the high-tech industry sector developed the fabled and incredibly demanding materialization process was to control for these difficult variables!

By breaking down raw materials into individual atoms and molecules, a sophisticated production machine could select the most standard and suitable ones to piece together into a solid work.

Any mech produced through materialization was theoretically identical to a given design.

Yet the automated materialization process was not smart and adaptable enough to work with the natural imperfections and variations of different materials.

Usually, these deviations were considered flaws, but in the right hands, the unique materials could be shaped and combined in a way that delivered greater performance than before.

Masterwork mechs were intricately tied with synergy. They were put together in an exceptionally exquisite manner that somehow allowed them to make a collection of average components perform well and a collection of excellent components perform to an unreal degree!

There was a lot more to masterwork mechs than just these simple effects. The mysterious transformation that masterwork mechs always undertook was largely metaphysical in nature. A single whole product that had reached an ideal state of a given design was such an astonishing creation that reality itself seemed to take a bow in front of it. This was the least that it could do after welcoming a work that deserved to be immortalized throughout the ages.

"We need to implement more safety precautions. The damage output of this mech should not be small." Juliet suggested as the mech designers all stood behind spare work stations on the bridge of the Spirit of Bentheim.

An occasion as memorable and important as this had to be witnessed from the throne room of the factory ship.

"Should we deploy extra interference measures in order to hide the Sentry Project even further? The more people know about it, the more it will be coveted."

"That's not necessarily the case." Gloriana shook her head. "Don't forget that proper expert mechs are tailored to an individual expert pilot from the ground up. While there are lazier methods that simply take an existing template and make some hasty adjustments to an expert pilot, that is not what we have done. I have done my utmost to meet each and every need of Venerable Stark. I can guarantee you that if another expert pilot like Venerable Joshua or my brother attempts to pilot the Sentry Project, they will never be able to do it justice."

She was absolutely confident in her own judgement. Designing an expert mech was one of the few times that she could truly stop bothering with trying to make a machine

compatible with a range of users. By adopting a bespoke approach, she could maximize the compatibility between her product and her intended customer, which would hopefully result in a unique experience that also delivered much greater performance without resorting to more expensive parts and materials.

This was her way of making a mark in the mech industry.

"We don't need to bother with confidentiality too much." Ves remarked as he set up his own workstation. "The MTA probably already knows about it and it will be difficult to hide our new creation from our allies. I believe it is better to briefly show it off to the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan so that they know that we have taken another major step. Perhaps in time news of our incredible accomplishment will spread through the mech community, but as long as the exact performance parameters of our expert mech remains vague, we can still surprise any enemies we come across."

Ketis snorted. "I'm not sure if many people will even want to provoke us after they learn what we can do. I might not pay much attention to the greater mech community, but I'm certain that we can become galactic celebrities if we wish! People throughout this galaxy and the next will soon knock on our doors in order to request a custom mech from us. Although the chance of producing a masterwork for them is too small to bother, I don't think we'll be able to remain as incognito as before."

Were masterwork expert mechs rare? Not necessarily. The greatest of Masters and Star Designers were able to make them at a decent rate according to articles that Ves had read. He wasn't sure whether this statement was true, but those who were willing to pay unlimited sums or grand favors were able to get the absolute best expert mechs one way or another.

Yet for most people, such works of art were absolutely unattainable. They could forget about approaching such supremely accomplished mech designers.

Compared to trying to request a mech from a powerful and unreachable figure, it was a lot easier to approach a bunch of Journeymen who somehow lucked out and produced a miracle!

Ves already felt the onset of a headache. He even entertained the radical idea of destroying the masterwork that had just been born into this cosmos, but he immediately strangled it a second later.

Deliberately destroying the realized Sentry Project was one of the greatest blasphemies that a mech designer like him could ever commit! His own design philosophy recoiled at the thought and his professional standards simply couldn't tolerate the thought at all. No matter what consequences a masterwork mech produced, it should never be despoiled!



"Ugh." Ves rubbed his palm against his face. "I'm too tired to figure out what we should do next. All I know is that hiding it will never work in the long run. The best we can do is to control how we release our information."

To be honest, he had no other ideas on what to do besides that. He was not a well-connected mech designer who was part of any greater industry-oriented clubs and communities at the moment.

If he was still aligned with Master Olson or part of the Clifford Society, then he could easily shelter under their wing and have them handle the aftermath of what he had done.

"It's too bad I cut ties with them. I don't have any choice but to go directly to the MTA."

In fact, he was already counting down the time it took for a familiar dignitary to show up. He was sure that this annoying frequent visitor would present him with a firm recommendation.

The only question was how much leeway he had in refusing her suggestions. Her attitude was an extremely important indicator to how much she, her faction and the rest of the MTA valued him at this time.

"Well, she hasn't treated me wrong so far. The MTA always indulges in people who contribute to the industry."

He briefly threw a glance at Gloriana. His pregnant wife was happily humming behind her own workstation as she projected over fifty different data projections.

Ves did not forget that one of Gloriana's driving motivators to do well was to ask a favor from the MTA! With an accomplishment as amazing as this, she was bound to get her wish and even more.

The Sentry Project is about to launch!

The entire bridge became a lot more quiet as many Larkinsons who heard that they were about to try out a new expert mech became incredibly curious to what they were about to behold.

The Dark Zephyr had already exceeded their expectations. This next expert mech should at least equal the splendor of the Larkinson Clan's first expert mech!

The Larkinson Army was already in the process of implementing an exercise region in open space.

Due to the potential dangers of testing an expert mech that was noted for its firepower, Gloriana decided to hold the examination at least a hundred kilometers away from the

main fleet. This meant that it would take a lot of time to move all of the bots, mechs and hardware to a patch of open space.

The increased activity emanating from the Larkinson fleet had already caught the attention of the Glory Seekers and the Cross Clan. The sensors aboard their ships and mechs were already paying extra attention towards the Larkinson assets.

Marshal Ariadne Wodin and Patriarch Reginald Cross already received a brief and not very helpful notification of what the Larkinson Clan were about to do. Though it shouldn't be too unusual for the Larkinsons to make a big movement in order to put a new expert mech to its paces, the activity taking place in their fleet was a lot more exaggerated this time!

"It seems the Larkinsons believe their next expert mech to be quite special." Professor Benedict Cortez noted as he entered the bridge of the Hemmington Cross and walked next to the leader. "The Dark Zephyr the brats managed to design is quite a stellar package. I would love to get my hands on the materials used to make its armor system. Those damn Journeymen are so wasteful!"

"I have a feeling this mech will be different." Patriarch Reginald spoke.

The Senior Mech Designer frowned. "That's strange. I feel the same way. I couldn't concentrate on my design work at all in the last twelve hours. Those Larkinson Journeymen must have been working hard if they can affect my concentration from such an extensive distance."

While numerous people began to speculate on what the Larkinsons were about to show, the expert pilot who had the privilege of piloting the most remarkable mech produced by the Larkinsons was just about to interface with it for the first time.

The long amount of time she spent with the Larkinsons had calmed her down and made her appreciate her new life, but this was not what she was all about.

"I'm not a Larkinson. I'm a survivor of the Vindmar Republic."

She recalled all of the sights she had seen when Brutus took her on a tour to the sandscoured remains of her former state.

The desolate planets. The sandblasted landscapes. The cities submerged in soil. All of these tragic sights and more reminded her of what she was truly trying to accomplish.

"Those responsible... must pay!" She softly hissed!

Her force of will roared to life as the fires of retribution burned in her eyes. She resolutely activated her expert mech, causing her to interface with a new and completely different machine!

The mech technicians standing far away in the hangar bay all skipped a breath as the expert rifleman mech flared to life! The red-coated mech lit up as its third eye along with several other elements began to show off an attractive luster.

However, these luminous elements were incomparable to the rainbow patterns emitted by the rifle carried by the Sentry Project.

Even though it was not fully active, the weapon already surged with so much life and energy that the mech technicians felt as if they were going blind if they kept staring at this exquisite weapon!

"This expert mech is completely opposite of the Dark Zephyr!"

Whereas the Dark Zephyr was the epitome of a shadow, the Sentry Project was the pinnacle of light!

#### *Chapter 3167: Rumbings*

The moment that many people had already been waiting for had finally arrived. The first masterwork expert mech that the Larkinson Clan had ever produced was about to step out into the field for its inaugural deployment.

While expert mechs were always game changers to organizations, the ones developed by the Larkinson Clan were much more significant than usual.

Whether it was the unique mix of mech designers who developed them, the remarkable advantages that allowed them to stand out from the crowd or their great significance in the Larkinson Army, every expert mech designed by the Larkinsons in-house was definitely worthy to be put into a mech museum!

When the Sentry Project activated for the first time, those who were more sensitive than others were able to sense elevated activity from the hangar bay.

A bright source of light appeared to shine through every physical barrier and blind anyone sensitive enough to perceive this phenomenon!

Of course, much of it was an illusion. The Sentry Project did not literally release any strong flashes of light, though people like Ves were still able to figure out that something remarkable took place.

A strange thought entered his mind. "The Sentry Project is already remarkable in that it is both an expert mech and a prime mech. That latter part actually matters this time because the Illustrious One is a lot stronger and more developed than Arnold and Trisk. How much stronger will it become now that it is also a masterwork?"

Though the Dark Zephyr already showed some promising signs in how it was able to leverage its prime mech attributes, for now it largely revolved around true resonance.

The Sentry Project had the potential to present a more balanced package. Though Venerable Davia Stark was a much more developed expert pilot than any of her peers in the Larkinson Clan, the Illustrious One possessed a rich background as well.

Combining these factors with the fact that they were put together in a masterwork, then the expected power level of the Sentry Project should definitely surpass the Dark Zephyr by a significant margin!

Out of everyone involved with the expert mech, no one else possessed a better inkling of how much power it had at its disposal than its pilot!

Venerable Stark almost controls herself. One of the reasons why the Sentry Project exuded so much power at the beginning was because she did not expect to get swamped by the overwhelming amount of power she was able to harness.

She gritted her teeth and imposed her will on her overactive machine. "Calm down!"

Both Stark and her expert mech had trouble getting along at first. Gloriana had done a great job at making the physical mech fit her nature, but there were other influences that did not quite get along with a pilot like her. The design spirit of the Sentry Project was out of alignment with the mech pilot!

Venerable Stark and the Illustrious One had little in common with each other. While this was not a critical flaw, it nonetheless produced several compatibility issues that caused the pilot to experience greater difficulties in taming her unruly expert mech.

Yet she never gave up in trying to master her new machine. Even though the mech was standing inside the hangar bay for several minutes now, she steadfastly concentrated her will and tried to find a way to get along with the Sentry Project.

It was absurd for her to be unable to tame her own expert mech at the first try! Even though she did not care too much about her pride, her self-image as a soldier would surely take a hit if she was unable to succeed in showing off the strength of her new machine on the very first attempt!

"You're powerful and aggressive. I like that." She whispered to her mech as sweat began to pour from her brow. "Yet there is a time and place for you to show off your might. You're being too feisty right now! Calm down and control yourself before you harm our own allies!"

Compared to the Bright Beam Prime which had been disassembled in order to reuse some of its parts, the Sentry Project was much more alive. This was normally a happy

occasion, but Stark had the impression that she was tasked with taming a new and overeager dog!

She was pretty certain that this was not how it was supposed to go. Venerable Tusa never exhibited so many difficulties from the start. Then again, his expert mech was not as strong at the start.

Despite the difficulties she was facing, she tried her best not to impose her will too harshly on the mech. This was her battle partner going forward and it was essential for them to trust each other to the greatest degree.

In order to further their mutual understanding, she did not hesitate to open up her mind and expose her will and intention to the powerful machine.

Eventually, the first presence to accept her was not the expert mech itself, but the design spirit that watched over it. When the Illustrious One was able to learn more about what kind of person Venerable Stark was like, he managed to find common ground with her past.

Though the Illustrious One was not a direct survivor of the downfall of the ancient luminar race, he was derived from at least two of them. He was the successor of both the crystal golem along with the Blinding One, two very different luminars who took up radically different paths as their race had begun to fall many eons past.

Nowadays, the Illustrious One was probably the only surviving member of this nearly forgotten race. Perhaps he wasn't technically a luminar, but in spirit he fully considered himself to be a part of the extinct race's legacy.

"So... you are carrying the dead of an entire nation on your back as well..." Stark realized as she began to deepen her bond with this mysterious alien entity.

She was reluctant to associate with the alien at first, but as she deepened her exchange with the Illustrious One, she realized that he was not an evil villain. As long as he did not have innocent human blood on his hands, she was willing to further her contact with this lonely spirit.

Though their race, backgrounds and nature were radically different, the few things that they had in common allowed them to resonate with each other on an emotional level.

Venerable Stark spontaneously decided to swear a pact.

"I vow that I will destroy the killers of your people if they still exist. In return, I hope to receive your help if I ever need to borrow your help in wiping out the ones responsible for letting the Vindmar Republic and its people die!"

The moment the Illustrious One agreed with the pact in his own way, the Sentry Project lit up again as its rifle began to exert a powerful influence that dampened the excessive activity emanating from the masterwork mech.

It was remarkable how easy the Illustrious One managed to calm down the expert mech. It was as if it was made to act as a mediator between the mech and the mech pilot from the start.

Once the expert mech no longer rioted due to its excessive strength, Venerable Stark was finally able to forge a proper understanding with her machine.

The two came to an accord, in large part because the Illustrious One supported the expert pilot. It was only then that Venerable Stark began to feel that the Sentry Project was truly made for her. The will she projected no longer encountered any resistance and seamlessly merged with the physical frame of her expert mech. The resonance between the rapidly grew as Venerable Stark was finally able to leverage her sizable resonance strength!

A soft corona swelled around the mech.

"It's stepping out!"

The Sentry Project no longer glowed as brightly as before. It gave off a calmer and more controlled impression, but it was not weak by any means. It was unnecessary for it to display its might and waste its power when it wasn't firing its gun.

The mech slowly moved to the hangar bay hatch before launching out at moderate speed.

From the moment the Sentry Project appeared in space, a lot of gasps were being uttered.

"Have I gone blind?!"

"That's a masterwork mech!"

"How is this possible?! Only Masters should be able to create such machines!"

The reactions from those who possessed the technical acumen to judge the quality of mech were just as exaggerated as Ves had predicted.

He switched through the feeds of the monitoring system throughout the fleet and observed plenty of looks of astonishment. Those who studied to become a mech designer were the most shocked of all. The assistant mech designers of the Design Department had no idea that their bosses succeeded in accomplishing the impossible!

Both old and newer assistants had become more fervent about working in the Design Department than ever. Compared to many other mech designers at their level, they were extremely fortunate for being able to work and study under the auspices of young but extremely talented masterwork mech designers.

"My friend who stayed behind in Talulah Silver will probably regret his decision to work for another company after he hears of this. He missed out on the opportunity of a lifetime!"

"Do you know what it means to make a masterwork expert mech? It's practically a certainty that Patriarch Ves and his wife will become Master Mech Designers."

"I need to work harder and break through so that I too can make a masterwork mech design alongside the patriarch. I bet that Miss Ketis got a free ride this time!"

Ves chuckled as he overheard the speculations from the cute little assistants. At the very least, this accomplishment had certainly lit a fire under their butts.

However, the strongest reaction did not come from the Larkinsons. Instead, the reaction was much greater from the allies of the Larkinson Clan!

"So this is why we were able to feel closer to the Superior Mother in the last few days. She has personally blessed this great mech!" A devout Glory Seeker speculated.

Marshal Ariadne Wodin was not so certain about this theory. As the head of the Glory Seekers, it was important for her to maintain her composure at all times.

Inwardly, her mind was already buzzing with thoughts. It seemed that the relationship between the Glory Seekers and the Larkinson Clan had to be adjusted once again.

She threw a brief glance over at the projection that displayed the flagship of the Cross Clan. "I bet the reaction over there is stronger."

She wasn't wrong.

The Cross Clan placed a high importance on mech pilots. This also caused them to possess a lot more appreciation for good mechs than normal.

Now, thousands of Crosser mech pilots were looking at the Sentry Project with stars in their eyes. Even if they weren't able to appreciate the true splendor of a masterwork, just being told that this machine was the pinnacle of what a design could be was enough for them to worship the expert rifleman mech for a long time!

Though Patriarch Reginald and Professor Benedict did not explode in excitement, the implications of what they were seeing had absolutely come as a bombshell to the two Crosser leaders.



"The Larkinsons have exceeded my expectations once again." Professor Benedict mildly said, though he wasn't able to hide his jealousy. "I was already aware that common sense doesn't seem to apply to these kids, but this is something else! Even I have never been able to make a masterwork expert mech!"

His desire to collaborate with Ves increased even more. It was as if he saw the hope of breaking through to Master Mech Designer in front of his eyes!

As for Patriarch Reginald, his body was completely still but his will was roiling like an earthquake.

If his next expert mech could become a masterwork as well... then he had a strong hunch that there was no way that he could fail to become an ace pilot!

"What... a waste..." Reginald painfully squeezed from his lips. "That should have been my expert mech..."

#### *Chapter 3168: Blinding Flash*

A hundred kilometers was a large distance on land, but only a brisk flight in space.

Thousands of additional Larkinson mechs had deployed in space, but not because they needed to escort the second expert mech of the Larkinson Clan to its destination.

They weren't needed to protect the Sentry Project. The chance of the expert mech malfunctioning was virtually zero at the moment. If the mech contained any major flaw that could cause it to deviate outside of its optimal performance standards, then it wouldn't have become a masterwork in the first place!

A lot of bots went ahead and prepared the large region of space instead. While it was impossible to hide any laser beams that surged past the interference envelope and continued to soar into the distance, the Sentry Project itself would at least maintain some privacy.

The Dark Zephyr had already launched ahead and was hovering patiently in the middle of the interference zone. When Venerable Tusa was able to see and feel the approach of the masterwork expert mech, his face turned a little sour.

Any expert pilot would feel jealous when they saw such a fantastic mech. The probability of any of them receiving a masterwork was low. The few who were able to pilot them had won the lottery as far as everyone was concerned.

He soon calmed himself down. It was natural for a human to experience envy, but expert pilots like him were not supposed to be shaken by these weaknesses.

While this was not a real battle, it was still important for him to be in his best form.

When the expert mechs flew close enough to each other, the domains produced by their resonance overlapped with each other.

Venerable Tusa immediately had the illusion that a portion of his territory was being taken over by a more powerful presence.

He mentally inspected the resonance strength meter in order to see what it had to say.

"Damn! Wasn't she just below 19 laveres previously? How come she jumped to 23.58 all of a sudden?"

The sudden increase in strength signified that Venerable Stark had not only managed to harness her new expert mech to a high degree, but also experienced a minor breakthrough after a long time of not being able to pilot a mech that could fully accommodate her strength.

The lavere scale was not linear. An expert pilot who possessed a resonance strength of 5 laveres was not literally that many times stronger than an expert pilot who measured at just 1 lavere.

Even if this was the case, there were many other factors such as mech class and mech type that determined which one was more likely to defeat the other.

In general terms, a light skirmisher possessed a modest advantage against a rifleman mech.

Every child knew that if a light skirmisher ever got into point-blank range of a ranged mech, the latter was almost certainly doomed.

The only hope for the rifleman mech was to take an approaching light mech down before it closed the distance, but that was easier said than done. Many light mechs were primarily designed to thread through enemy fire, and the Dark Zephyr exemplified this archetype.

"Yet why do I have the suspicion that I am in trouble?" Tusa whispered.

Just the confrontation between their resonance fields already revealed a remarkable difference. Venerable Tusa was still young and had a lot of time to develop his potential, but that also meant that his current level of strength was still in the early stages.

Venerable Stark was different. Despite her lack of experience in piloting actual expert mechs, her age and life experiences had molded her will into a strong flame that allowed her to persist despite the long delay in obtaining an appropriate machine.

She had already experienced the lowest that an expert pilot could go. Every other challenge and difficulty seemed trivial in comparison.

Even so, that did not stop her from becoming more and more excited at the prospect of finding out how much power she was actually able to wield this time.

After a brief delay, a reinforced communication bot relayed a command from the Spirit of Bentheim.

"Before you can begin to test fire your weapon, let us make sure your mech is able to maneuver correctly. Please perform the following movements."

The Larkinsons rushed through the basic maneuvering tests. Unlike the Dark Zephyr, the Sentry Project was not a mobility-oriented machine.

The only reason why Gloriana and the other Journeymen wanted to see the expert rifleman mech move was to record the improved performance of a masterwork version of the expert mech.

The maneuvering tests proceeded without any problem. The Sentry Project wasn't capable of performing any extravagant moves, so Venerable Stark and everyone else was quickly able to ascertain how it moved.

"It's not a dancer, that's for sure." Ves muttered. "The improvement in mobility is so slight that there is no need for us to study it any further."

"Let's proceed with testing its defensive parameters." Gloriana instructed.

This was fairly simple. The Sentry Project flew back to the middle and maintained a stable position relative to the interference envelope.

A single bot warmed up its energy gun and fired a weak second-class laser beam onto the surface of the expert mech.

"The armor is holding."

The bot began to fire successively more powerful laser beams at different parts of the mech. Although rifleman mechs were not known for their defensive prowess, their expert mech counterparts were still a lot better protected.

The bot stopped firing when the Larkinsons gathered enough data to figure out how the Sentry Project reacted against laser attacks.

Another bot began to fire solid rounds at the Sentry Project. The mech endured increasingly stronger impacts but its armor held remarkably well.

These tests repeated several times until Ves and the others gathered enough data to figure out exactly how much conventional damage the expert mech was able to take.

"Let's proceed with testing its resonance shield."

This was a much more interesting test. Every expert mech incorporated resonating materials that were able to project such a useful ability. The ones incorporated in light mechs and slimmer rifleman mechs were substantially weaker, but as a different set of bots began to stress the glowing barrier, it remained incredibly strong!

The Larkinsons did not plan to test the limits of the Sentry Project's resonance shield in this specific test. It was too dangerous, especially considering that this work of art was not covered with Unending alloy.

Still, the data that they have managed to gather already allowed Gloriana to estimate how much damage the masterwork expert mech could take before breaking.

The results weren't precise, but the numbers were already a lot greater than those of the Dark Zephyr.

The ranged mech was actually able to fend off a lot more attacks than a mech that was much more likely to be in the line of fire!

None of the mech designers were surprised at this observation, though not all of them predicted this big of a gap.

"The amount of damage that a resonance shield can withstand under normal circumstances scales with the resonance strength of an expert pilot." Gloriana said. "Venerable Stark is a lot further ahead than the rest, so it is expected that her expert mech can take a lot more hits than the Dark Zephyr."

What they were really wondering was how its status as a prime mech and a masterwork strengthened the resonance shield. When Ves studied the projection of the Sentry Project, he wasn't able to figure out how much stronger its resonance shield had become due to these extra influences.

It didn't help that the machine in question was way too far away for him to sweep the machine with his spiritual senses. He would have to witness the mech up close in order to discern more details.

He instinctively judged that the Sentry Project's resonance shield was strong enough that it could give any attackers an unwelcome surprise.

"Alright, now that we got all of the chores out of the way, let's begin the fun stuff! Venerable Stark, please arm the rifle. We'll begin with a simple test shot."

A sacrificial bot flew forward and occupied a conspicuous position. There was nothing behind it except for empty space that led away from the star system. In fact, it was pointed directly below the orbital plane.

This ensured that if some other ship coincidentally transitioned into the star system, the chances of it getting struck by an errant energy beam would be so low that it was virtually zero!

Before they commenced the first test, Venerable Stark suddenly issued a request.

"I would like permission to fire my rifle at maximum strength. I think I will be able to get a better feel for what I can do if I can see how much power it is able to unleash at a single time."

Ves threw a look at Gloriana. Originally, they planned to follow the previous pattern and start out low before slowly ramping up the damage output.

She shrugged. "I suppose we might indulge her. It is extremely unlikely for the luminar crystal rifle to blow up considering it is a masterwork weapon in its own right."

This didn't exactly conform with all of the safety rules, but they were willing to make allowances for the expert pilot of their first masterwork mech.

In truth, Ves and the other Journeymen were just as eager to know how powerful the Sentry Project's single shot could be. Which mech designer didn't like to see things go boom in the most violent way possible?

"Permission granted, but make sure to pay attention to your safety."

Venerable Stark finally began to grin. "It's time. Let's try and see what we can do!"

For the first shot fired by the Sentry Project, she opted to stick with the standard laser beam. It was the simplest and most basic form of energy attack that the luminar crystal could fire, but light was the essence of her expert mech.

In order to unleash the most powerful laser beam that the Sentry Project could unleash, Venerable Stark took her time to charge up the attack. The crystalline rifle began to glow increasingly brighter as it began to accumulate more and more energy.

Not only that, but the expert pilot also tried her best to leverage other ways of empowering the attack.

She resonated with her mech and more specifically its rifle to an increasing degree. The weapon quickly began to radiate more and more light as several different energies coursed across its lustrous crystals!

At least three different sources charged up the rifle.

The expert mech had supplied a lot of conventional energy to the weapon. In fact, the rifle absorbed so much of it that it couldn't take any more.

The true resonance generated by Venerable Stark exerting her force of will upon the weapon not only empowered the attack in a mysterious way, but also stimulated the Opticonium that was seamlessly embedded in the rifle body.

What made the Sentry Project different from many other expert rifleman mechs was that it was also a prime mech. At this time, Venerable Stark resonated with the abundant amount of spiritual energy taken from the Illustrious One and dumped into the P-stones embedded into the rifle!

For a moment, it seemed as if the armament turned into an avatar of the Illustrious One.

If the weapon already glowed like a rainbow before, now it blazed like a sun!

Signs of instability finally emanated from the luminar crystal rifle. It was trying to contain so much power from different sources that it could not physically bear the enormous strain for long!

"Enough, Venerable Stark!" Ves shouted into the communication channel. "Pull the trigger already!"

The projectors that displayed the Sentry Project all flashed white as the bots observing the expert mech were momentarily blinded without exception!

The entire star system seemed to have turned into a bunker as a thick laser beam that was as wide as mech surged directly out of the interference zone and flew straight downwards relative to the orbital plane for many light seconds!

It didn't take much time for the various sensor and observation systems to regain their normal functions, but the fact that they failed in the first place was already a sign that the attack was extremely remarkable.

The white beam of death had not only vaporized every atom of the sacrificial bot, but also contained plenty of power to punch through the armor of a typical second-class expert mech!

In fact, the exaggerated power of the Sentry Project also had even greater implications.

"This... is the perfect ship killer!" Gloriana exclaimed!

As the expert mech dimmed back to normal, Venerable Stark had become a bit more fatigued. It wasn't easy for her to leverage multiple forms of resonance to launch such a powerful attack.

It was only now that she finally found the right name for her combat partner.

"We will fight side-by-side until one of us falls apart, Amaranto."

The third eye of the masterwork expert mech flashed in red for a brief moment of time.

### *Chapter 3169: Easy Targets*

The firepower of the Sentry Project, now named the Amaranto, did not disappoint!

Ves, Gloriana, Juliet and Ketis did everything they could to maximize the firepower of their first expert rifleman mech design. They gave up so many useful features and gave up the opportunity to strengthen many different parameters in order to specialize it to the extreme.

Despite its stronger-than-average resonance shield, it was poorly suited for mid-range flanking and skirmishing action. Its flight system and other mobility systems were solely meant for positioning and repositioning, not dodging and weaving through enemy attacks. Just because it was able to move faster than a heavy mech didn't mean it could dogfight!

Its defenses were also rather lackluster. Due to the scarcity in Unending alloy, Ves was forced to resort to a more generic expert mech-grade armor system that was relatively light, coped well with heat, stable and dampened vibrations. All of these design choices were meant to increase the Amaranto's offensive actions first and defensive needs second.

"All of it was worth it, though." Ves grinned.

After Venerable Stark fired her first fully-charged laser beam, the remaining tests became a lot more routine.

This was just a familiarization session for the expert pilot and an initial technical review for the Design Department.

The more data the mech designers gathered on the Amaranto's performance, the more they were able to revise their models and accurately map out the expert rifleman mech's actual performance as opposed to making educated guesses based on dubious calculations.

This was not something that could be completed in a single session. The Amaranto was unprecedentedly powerful, but that also made it exceptionally lethal. If the expert mech ever suffered an accident and inadvertently unleashed its full-powered attack on one of the vessels of the Larkinson fleet, then that would have been an absolute tragedy that could have easily been prevented if the Larkinsons implemented additional precautions!

Stress testing could come later. The masterwork expert mech was in their complete control so they could deploy it anytime the fleet was not travelling through FTL.



In fact, if the expert pilots didn't mind the limited maneuvering space and heavy firepower limitations, they could even train in a landbound environment in the large biomes aboard the Discentibus and the Dragon's Den.

The Amaranto no longer fired any full-powered shots. Instead, it stuck with the laser beam but began to vary its attack in different ways.

The masterwork expert mech fired its weapon at various disposable target bots at once by splitting the laser beam.

It fired its weapon in a rapid staccato pattern as it intercepted over a hundred different dummy missiles.

It fired moderate resonance-empowered laser beams that looked deceptively weak but could easily burn a hole through any typical second-class mech.

As the Amaranto slowly churned through its energy reserves, Venerable Stark already looked a bit exhausted.

Ves had been paying attention to the piloting telemetry when the red-coated expert mech unleashed its initial attack. Several indicators dropped by quite a margin, signifying that such extreme attacks took a lot out of Venerable Stark. She probably wasn't able to fire too many ship-killing laser beams in quick succession before she exhausted herself.

He expected something like this to occur. The pattern was not that much different from before when Venerable Stark was still stuck with the Bright Beam Prime. The Design Department deliberately reused the same approach of her prime mech to her current machine.

"The Amaranto can't fire too many times against powerful opponents, but it doesn't have to do so." Ves remarked with a smile on his face. "As one of our trump cards against enemy expert mechs, a singularly powerful attack launched at the most inopportune time can either instantly take down an enemy expert mech or at least break open its defenses."

Launching a lot of weaker attacks was not as effective against powerful and well-protected mechs. The resonance shields and high-quality armor systems of most expert mechs were expressly designed to minimize the threat posed by lots of conventional mechs. This was what allowed these expert mechs to sow terror on a large-scale battlefield!

The best way to penetrate the armor of these resilient expert mechs was by moving as far away from the attack profile of conventional mechs as possible. This was why the Amaranto excelled so much at single target, single shot attack power.

It was like a Sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of unsuspecting enemy expert mechs. The weapon only needed to drop down once in order to claim another head!

"I'm glad its performance against regular opponents is decent as well." Gloriana commented. "It won't be as good as Brutus' upcoming expert mech in this area, but it can offer plenty of support when it doesn't need to guard against powerful opponents."

The luminar crystal rifle designed by Ves was optimized for maximum firepower, but energy weapons were much more adaptable than their physical counterparts. Just dialing down the power setting and making a few other adjustments was enough to turn it into a rapid-fire turret.

Of course, since the mech and rifle wasn't designed for these firing modes, the overall power and fire rate would never be as good as a more appropriate weapon model.

Ves contemplated whether he should develop a second luminar crystal rifle that could give Venerable Stark an additional choice, but he soon gave up on that. He doubted that his subsequent weapon would be able to reach masterwork quality. Handing over an inferior weapon would only diminish the Amaranto's splendor.

"There are hardly any battles where too much firepower is a detriment." He figured. "If the firepower of the Amaranto is wasted against mechs, then it should just point its muzzle at the enemy starships instead."

According to the measurements of the full-powered laser beam attack, the Amaranto was capable of burning straight through multiple layers of thick hull plating.

That didn't mean it was capable of drilling through big or heavily-armored vessels such as the Graveyard or the Indigo Tremor. Both ships were clad with thick armor that only capital ships could bear. While the former was just a big wall, the latter was designed with military standards in mind, which meant she had to carry enough armor to resist long-ranged harassment from several powerful ranged expert mechs.

Therefore, the Amaranto wasn't necessarily a vessel that was capable of crippling a capital ship on its own. Even with several targeted shots, at most it was able to damage an important module or two. That was far from enough to take down a typical fleet carrier since they possessed plenty of redundancies.

The Cross Clan's Antonio Cross was especially good at dealing with enemy expert mech fire. Though her mech capacity was disappointingly low for a capital ship, she was not only highly self-sufficient, but also possessed a clever hull plating arrangement that increased her redundancy factor and compartmentalization factor to an excellent degree.

That didn't mean that a much larger but more fragile fleet carrier like the Hemmington Cross was easy to cripple. Her sheer bulk and size automatically granted her a lot of

buffer. Her density was lower, but there were so many compartments that a typical penetrating attack was unlikely to drill all the way to the most deeply-nested sections where all of the power generators and armored bridges were typically situated.

"The Amaranto is fair game against anything smaller and lighter, though. Most sub-capital ships should not be able to remain operational when struck a couple of times."

Ves already estimated that the Amaranto was sufficiently capable enough to cripple the sub-capital support ships of the Larkinson fleet. The various cargo haulers, mech repair vessels, tugging vessels and so on boasted thin hull plating and lightly-reinforced structures in order to lower their costs.

This made them prime targets for any mech that could precisely locate their critical modules such as their propulsion systems, power generator or FTL drives and punch through all of the hull materials in between!

"What makes the Amaranto particularly suitable to assassinate starships is if it can employ its Beam Bending resonance ability!"

The Amaranto came with two key resonating materials, which each bestowed the mech with two different resonance abilities.

The expert mech already demonstrated the Overcharge ability bestowed by integrating Electricium in its power reactor and energy transmission system. This was just a straightforward power boost that was primarily responsible for scaling up the Amaranto's full-powered attack to a ridiculous level.

Ves had no intentions of testing out the Beam Bending resonance ability granted by the Opticonium incorporated in the luminar crystal rifle. This was a strategic advantage that Ves did not want to show off in front of too many people. He would have to arrange a suitable test site in order to properly test how much Venerable Stark and the Amaranto were able to curve the beam attack.

The more the beam was able to bend, the easier it was for the masterwork expert mech to target the weak points of both mechs and starships!

In the most ideal case, this Beam Bending effect would not only allow the Amaranto to take out a combat carrier, but also immobilize a capital ship by crippling her normally-inaccessible propulsion system!

The existence of the Amaranto was so significant that it opened a lot more strategic options for the Larkinson Army. The expeditionary fleet had much less to fear against large enemy fleets!

Gloriana eventually wanted to move on to the final phase of the testing session. "Alright, we've gained a good idea on the Amaranto's firepower. Before its power runs out, I want to test its accuracy."

Ves smirked and switched to another communication channel. "Tusa! You're up now! Go and build up some speed. You'll need it soon. Oh, and make sure to keep your Dark Zephyr within the designated zone."

The expert pilot in question cursed for a moment, but did as he was instructed.

While the Dark Zephyr began to accelerate in a circle, the Amaranto patiently waited. The red-coated mech still exuded a reddish glow due to all of the power it had expended. Its crystalline rifle was an especially eye-catching element. All of the different energies coursing through its crystal components had caused it to light up like a rainbow dancing in a nightclub.

The masterwork expert mech presented a notable contrast to the Dark Zephyr. Whereas the latter was coated in black which psychologically made it a lot harder to track in the dark of space, the Amaranto not only created a light show, but also possessed a substantial energy signature as not even its luminar crystals were able to absorb all of the excess heat that its weapon had generated!

All of this meant that most targeting systems would have a much easier time at locking in the Amaranto than the Dark Zephyr.

"The Amaranto definitely needs to rest behind a solid barrier." Ves noted. "We can't afford to expose its entire frame to an enemy force."

Gloriana grinned. "That won't be a problem. When we finish the Shield of Samar, the two expert mechs will be able to pair together. Won't it be great if we can transform it into a masterwork as well? It will be the perfect combination!"

Ves rolled his eyes. That was an extremely unlikely possibility considering they needed to build on top of an existing mech. The inability to start from scratch meant that the upgraded revision would always contain some flaws that would detract from its overall quality. This was a huge handicap that made the challenge of building a masterwork expert mech even more impossible!

At this time, the Dark Zephyr built up a sufficient amount of speed relative to the Amaranto. Venerable Tusa had even opted to resonate his expert mech and activate its Perception Distortion ability on his own accord!

The Dark Zephyr became a lot harder to pin down because its visual coordinates did not match its actual coordinates.

Without the help of a few hundred ranged mechs saturating an entire area with ordnance, it was impossible to guess where the Dark Zephyr was located!

Venerable Stark did not exhibit any doubt, though. Even though she was no longer in her prime condition, she was determined to land at least one hit against the elusive expert light mech!

"Begin!"

*Chapter 3170: New Trick*

The first two expert mechs developed and employed by the Larkinson Clan were about to test their mettle against each other.

Every Larkinson who was able to watch the feed of the test session paid rapt attention to the coming confrontation. Even though both mechs were subject to numerous restrictions in order to prevent any accidents from occurring, this was still a tense moment as the winner of this scenario would definitely affect the ranking of expert pilots in the Larkinson Clan.

Joshua, Jannzi, Orfan and Dise had all gathered in a private observation room. They studied the expert mechs displayed on the large projections with a great amount of attention.

"Who do you think will come out on top?" Orfan grinned as she lazily placed her hand on Jannzi's shoulder and pulled her closer. "Do you think that flighty little Tusa will be able to remain untouched or do you think that big bad Stark will be able to nail him down?"

Venerable Jannzi emphatically shoved Venerable Orfan's arm away. "I can't tell for sure. On the one hand, Tusa already spent several months with his expert mech. He knows all of the Dark Zephyr's nuances and is able to push it exactly as far as he needs it to go. On the other hand, the Amaranto is a masterwork. That gives Venerable Stark an immediate advantage."

"I don't think the power of the two mechs have much to do with who will win." Venerable Joshua said. "Just look at the mech types. Masterwork or not, I doubt the Amaranto is equipped with sensors that are good enough to uncover the Dark Zephyr's true coordinates."

He was right. As much as the Design Department tried to equip the Amaranto with good sensor systems, sophisticated data processing systems and advanced target acquisition systems, the Dark Zephyr's resonance ability was not something that pure technology could easily solve.

Venerable Dise nodded. "The only way for Davia to win is if she can figure out the Dark Zephyr's coordinates without relying on what her mech is telling her. The ability to go beyond the limitations of a mech is what separates good pilots from the bad ones."

This was the principal reason why piloted mechs continued to remain popular even when there were pilotless alternatives out there. Humanity's technology had advanced far enough to make battle bots viable enough to deploy on the battlefield.

Yet aside from the fact that their programming was always vulnerable to subversion, the fact that battle bots were never able to exceed their technical parameters made them a lot less exciting.

Mechs piloted by real human beings possessed an undeniable allure that humanity simply couldn't resist!

The emergence of expert pilots, ace pilots and god pilots breathed a lot of life in this seemingly idiosyncratic concept. This was why Joshua and his fellow peers did not completely count Venerable Stark out despite all of the odds stacked against her. They knew most of all that expert pilots were quite proficient in breaking the rules.

That also made every confrontation between expert mechs such a pain to predict. Striker mechs might not necessarily be able to beat light skirmishers and there was always a chance that knight mechs could defeat lancer mechs.

"It's starting."

Back inside the interference zone, the Amaranto finally began to fire its gun. Venerable Stark had kept the weapon warm, so from the moment she received permission to begin, she immediately fired a couple of light ranging shots.

Just as predicted, the thin red lances hit nothing substantial. Even if a couple of beams struck the visual shape of the Dark Zephyr, it was nothing but a distorted image that was able to fool nearly every method used to ascertain the position of an expert mech!

Despite the clear and obvious misses, Venerable Tusa did not relax in the slightest. Venerable Stark surely knew what the Dark Zephyr was capable of. This was just the start.

After firing dozens of low-powered single beams without accomplishing anything, Venerable Stark started to split the beams up. This was a special feature that was standard in many advanced laser weapons.

By using extra components to split the beam up and minutely angle them away from each other, it was possible for a single weapon to fire multiple beams that were spread in an expanding cone.

This was quite a difficult weapon system to handle proficiently. It was extremely difficult for both a mech and a mech pilot to precisely angle the splitting laser beams in a way that allowed them to accurately intercept multiple targets or hit multiple weak points of a mech or starship at once.

"Heh, it's too bad you aren't an Ylvainan, Davia!" Tusa couldn't help but grow cocky as the actual Dark Zephyr always managed to stay far away from the split beams. "If this is all you've got, then you can forget about laying a hand on my mech."

Each time the Amaranto fired a split shot, the Dark Zephyr danced and dodged an instant before as if it was just about to get hit. Even if that wasn't the case, Tusa diligently kept up the charade in order to give away as little clues as possible.

Venerable Stark maintained an impassive expression as she continued to pepper the spaces in front of her with laser beams.

She paid careful attention to the sensor and targeting data that her new expert mech fed to her. As much as the Amaranto tried to nail down the Dark Zephyr's actual coordinates, the data it supplied to her continued to miss the mark by at least dozens of meters.

No matter whether her mech tried to judge the Dark Zephyr's position by analyzing visible light, heat trails, gravitic positioning or anything else, the results were fundamentally skewed in different directions and different magnitudes.

Venerable Stark had already attempted to decipher some sort of pattern in the Dark Zephyr's deviation from its perceived coordinates, but Venerable Tusa already had months to work out a sophisticated system in which he made his actual hidden position as dynamic as possible.

Perhaps in one second his actual expert mech was a little bit to the right, while in the next second it had pivoted as far to the left as it could go. Tusa had also become quite good at reading the firing patterns of enemy ranged mechs after challenging himself in so many practice sessions. An average approach would never work against his expert mech!

The Amaranto was beginning to run low on energy. Though the mech came with additional energy cells, it had already fired its weapon plenty of times during this entire session.

While the luminar crystal rifle was currently firing its beams at the lowest power setting, the sheer number of times that Venerable Stark pulled the trigger was taking a toll on the energy her expert mech had left. Not even a masterwork was able to generate an infinite amount of energy!



"Hmm, it's a pity. My intuition and judgement hasn't improved to the point where I can pin this fast mech down." Venerable Stark frowned.

She was hoping that piloting an expert mech would improve her battle sense and make her more sensitive towards the Dark Zephyr's actual coordinates.

While she did experience a lot of improvements, she never excelled in this skillset. She was still dependent on the data that her mech provided to her. If the Amaranto made a misjudgement, then Venerable Stark wasn't easily able to correct for such a mistake.

Still, if Venerable Tusa thought that she was unable to strike his mech without converting to the Ylvainan Faith, then he was sorely wrong!

"Amaranto! Let our light dispel the darkness that clouds our eyes! ILLUMINATE!"

This was not a resonance ability that the mech designers had incorporated into the expert mech design. Instead, Venerable Stark leveraged the prime mech aspect of her machine, something which she had always been able to explore back when she piloted the Bright Beam Prime.

Different from her former prime mech, the Amaranto was much more intricately tied to the Illustrious One, which had been designed to accommodate the design spirit from the ground up. She was able to make a much more substantive connection to the alien entity.

The Amaranto's red glow began to grow brighter. At the same time, it began to light up in different shades.

Back on the Spirit of Bentheim, Ves was perhaps the only other person who knew what was taking place.

"Prime resonance! She's calling upon the Illustrious One!"

Through Venerable Stark's unceasing efforts, the design spirit was able to descend a lot closer to the Amaranto than what should ordinarily be the case. Even though the strain was taking a greater toll on her already weary mind, her will did not allow her to return in failure!

"We'll be facing far more difficult opponents in the future, so we cannot accept weakness! Dispel the darkness and light our way forward!"

After the Amaranto glowed so bright that it had turned into a rainbow, its third eye projected a broad and expanding field of subtle white light that instantly illuminated an entire section of space!

The false Dark Zephyr's black-coated surface grew a little brighter when shone with this constant flood of light, but that did not necessarily mean anything.

A few seconds passed before the Amaranto shifted the aim of its rifle and snapped a single, straight beam that unerringly hit a seemingly empty patch of space!

Unlike the previous times, the beam did not continue to course into space. Instead, it halted abruptly and seemingly disappeared. At the same time, the false image suddenly showed that it had been struck by an invisible attack!

Though the effect sounded complicated, the simple fact was that Venerable Stark successfully managed to identify and strike at the true coordinates of the Dark Zephyr!

Even when the light skirmisher activated its boosters in order to jerk aside, Venerable Stark was still able to read Tusa's actions ahead of time!

"That's cheating!" Tusa shouted over the communication channel! "You cheated! It's gotta be Ylvainans, right? Did you ask them for tips or something?!"

Venerable Stark shook her head as her expert mech slowly grew dimmer. As far as she was concerned, she had passed the challenge. Now that she came up with this trick, she could rely on it to identify the Dark Zephyr's actual coordinates at any time.

"You just don't use your expert mech well enough, Tusa." She calmly replied, though she wasn't able to hold back her sense of superiority. "There is more to your expert mech than meets the eye. What I just did was activating some of the hidden potential of my machine. I suggest you explore your own a little more thoroughly instead of sticking to your usual routine. Who knows, maybe you'll be able to block me next time."

In truth, the trick she employed was not flawless. One of the factors that allowed her to find the real Dark Zephyr so easily was the limited range between the two mechs. Due to the inverse-square law, at greater distances the illuminating light became more and more feeble. At longer ranges, it was unlikely for it to detect anything hidden.

Still, Venerable Stark was already satisfied with what she got. She judged that she could cooperate with the Illustrious One in more ways than just this improvised ability.

The session had finally ended. The two expert mechs flew side by side and returned to the Spirit of Bentheim without any incident.

The bots deployed by the Larkinson Clan all returned to their respective berths as well. However, in order to prevent any third parties from figuring out any sensitive clues about the Amaranto's performance, the Larkinsons dispatched a large salvaging party to scoop up all of the loose debris that could give away certain clues.

Once everything was cleaned up, the fleet transitioned back into FTL and resumed its journey across the Bardo Star Cluster.